

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## We Believe in the Forgiveness of Sins

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Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45

Why did Jesus have to die a brutal death so that God would forgive us? If you struggle with that question or know someone who does, this message is for you.

Today we focus on one of the hallmark beliefs of our faith – the forgiveness of sins. All Christians believe that the cross represents God’s redemptive act in Christ forgiving us of sin and reconciling us to Him.

Ironically, it is also the one belief that turns many people off to the Christian faith. A bloody cross is where many people get stuck.

I have a friend who is an agnostic. One time he said to me, “Why are you Christians so obsessed with a bloody execution. It’s macabre and disturbing. And if you are not talking about blood and guts, you are laying guilt trips on people. Every time I go to church, it feels like another guilt trip. What a depressing religion.”

Maybe you can relate? Maybe you have friends who say something similar to you when you talk about church. Or, maybe, you are not a Christian and you are thinking, “That is why I am not a Christian! I just don’t get the whole sin and guilt thing. Why are Christians so bent on making people miserable? I also don’t get the whole bloody cross. Why was that necessary for God to love us?”

Many people can accept Jesus as a great teacher, healer, and radical and lover of sinners. Many people can take Jesus as the forgiver and encourager. And many people can take Jesus as the personification of God. But God needing blood, guts, and sacrifice to save us, to relieve his wrath and anger toward sin? Many folks can’t go there. They can’t believe in a God like that. Ever been there? Are you there today?

If many of you are honest, you struggle with what you have been told about the meaning of the cross. Perhaps it has been the one hurdle preventing you from following Christ. Perhaps you are a Christian, but it is still so difficult for you to accept what you have been told about the cross. Maybe you like everything about the Christian faith except this particular idea of God needing a bloody execution in order to love and forgive.

Let me just name the elephant in the room. What so many people have a hard time with is called *The penal substitutionary theory of atonement*. Basically, this understanding of the cross means that in order for a holy

God to forgive sin, He demanded and needed a blood sacrifice of a sinless person. So God sent His son as our substitute to get beat up and murdered so that His wrath would be satisfied. After that, God’s anger was relieved and he felt better about sin and forgave the world. This bloody execution made everything right for God. The shedding of innocent blood calmed God down. So we sing about the blood of Jesus and how it makes us righteous. Through Jesus’ shed blood we are made right with God.

Let me just say it for so many of you probably thinking it: What kind of a God is that, right? “I am a loving and forgiving God, but before I love and forgive you, I need my son brutally executed so my wrath for you will be relieved.” As Benjamin Corey asks, “Why would God demand a blood sacrifice? Why does God need blood in order to forgive us? Why does the execution of an innocent person save the guilty? How does that work? Is there a better way to understand the cross?” In short: yes!

Raise your hand if you have struggled with these questions about the cross. Be honest. You’re in church! I’ll raise my hand because I don’t believe in that kind of God, and I don’t believe in that understanding of the cross. It’s abuse! It’s sadistic and cruel. It sounds like an ancient god of myth who needs a virgin thrown into a fire. It is not the God I know and love, nor the God who knows and loves me.

Now, I know there are many who hold true to this idea of the cross. And I know I may get letters about what I have just said. If you disagree with me, that’s fine. I’m okay with that. We can still love each other. And, by the way, if you agree with everything I say up here, I am not doing my job. But if what I have just said upsets you, please listen to the rest of this message before you decide to send me your email or letter. If after the message you still disagree with me, please set up an appointment with me, and let’s talk about it. My door is always open.

What I am about to share may be a game changer for many of you. When you hear this message, you will truly understand the power of the cross. Some of you may finally decide to accept Christ as your Lord and Savior and follow Him because of what I am about

to tell you. Some of you are going to feel liberated about your faith for the first time in your life. Some of you are going to see the cross in a new way, and Holy Week will take on a completely different meaning for you. Some of you are going to see God in a completely different way. This message may just change your life.

Before I go any further, I want to thank Benjamin Corey for his ideas as I prepared this message. Corey is a very insightful theologian who has a blog on patheos.com. I encourage you to check it out. You may not agree with everything he writes, but he is worth reading. Corey's ideas were very helpful to me as I prepared this message. Most especially his series on rethinking the atonement was helpful.

Let's get to it. Why don't I believe that God needed a blood sacrifice in order to love and forgive us?

### **God Did Not Like Blood Sacrifices**

That's pretty clear. Look at what David said in Psalm 51:17

**“You do not like sacrifice, or I would bring it. You do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.” –Psalm 51:17**

Animal sacrifice may have been part of the Law of Moses as object lessons, but God took no pleasure in them. He did not like them at all. What did God like?

**“For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgement of me, not burnt offerings.” –Hosea 6:6**

Mercy. That's what God wanted. God wanted acknowledgement and faith in Him. In fact, Jesus actually quoted this verse to the religious leaders and told them, “God said ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ Go and learn what that means.”

Oh, and not only did God not take any delight in animal sacrifice, he detested human sacrifice. The Old Testament condemns human sacrifice multiple times. In Deuteronomy, it is called an abomination, and Leviticus says that it profanes the name of God.

### **The People of the Old Testament were Reconciled to God**

You know all those heroes we have studied in this series? Jacob, David, Moses, Gideon, Esther, Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and all the others? They believed in God, trusted God, and followed God. They were justified by their faith without the cross. We see this as early as Genesis 15:6 where it says:

**Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. –Genesis 15:6**

Abraham and all the others were reconciled to God the same way that we are, by faith. I am reminded of this as we mourn the loss of lives through the shooting at Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh. I mentioned in a Facebook post that they are our brothers and sisters. Someone asked me why. I said, “Because we are loved by the same God.”

### **A God Desiring a Human Sacrifice is Not the God Revealed in Jesus Christ**

Let's start with Christmas. If God was so blood thirsty to calm his wrath, why didn't God just allow Herod to kill Jesus when he was born? Remember when Jesus was born, Herod thought Jesus was a threat, so he sent the Magi to find him so that he could kill him. If God needed Jesus to die in order to satisfy his anger, why didn't he just allow Herod to kill Jesus in the beginning?

Look at the life of Jesus. As Christians, we believe in the incarnation of God. In other words, we believe Jesus was God in the flesh. If God hated sinners so much and needed a sacrifice for them to be in his presence, then why did he hang out with sinners all the time? Sin is bad and leads to death, but to say that God needed a blood sacrifice to be in the presence of sinners is ridiculous. When Jesus walked the earth, he preferred being with the worst in society. In fact, he hung out with sinners so much that he was accused of being a party animal!

If God cannot bear the presence of sin without the blood of Jesus, then the ministry of Jesus Christ is invalid. God put skin on and walked with sinners, cared about them, and lovingly invited them to repent. More than that, if you just read the gospels, you see Jesus forgiving people left and right. If God can't forgive us without Jesus' blood, then it makes no sense that Jesus forgave people on the basis of faith alone. This is what got him in hot water with the religious people. Take a look:

**Jesus stepped into a boat, crossed over and came to his own town. Some men brought to him a paralyzed man, lying on a mat. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the man, “Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven.” At this, some of the teachers of the law said to themselves, “This fellow is blaspheming!” –Matthew 9:1-3**

I could bore you to tears with more details, but I think these three points will suffice. So all of this begs

the big question: Why, then, did Jesus die on the cross? Why was that his ambition? Why did he struggle with it so much in the Garden of Gethsemane? Why did he go through with it? Why is the cross so important?

I answer those questions with one question: *What did Jesus actually say about his own death on the cross?* You see, that's what people miss when they talk about the cross. They debate and argue but they never actually read what Jesus said about why he had to die. This is exactly where we find the answer – from the lips of Jesus. What Jesus has to say has the power to transform your understanding of the cross. More importantly, it has the power to transform your life.

In Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45, Jesus described his upcoming work on the cross this way. As giving his life... **“as a ransom for many.”** Corey reminds us that Jesus never described his upcoming death on the cross as a sacrifice to God. Just read the gospels. You will never find it. If Jesus thought so, he would have said so. Instead, he used a very significant word, and I don't want you to miss it: “ransom.” His death was the paying of a ransom. When a person is kidnapped, who are the people who demand a ransom? The bad guys, not the good guys! Ransoms are paid by the loved ones of the kidnapped. Ransoms are not demanded by those who are good, but rather by those who are bad.

So why was it Jesus' ultimate goal and ambition to die on the cross to pay a ransom for us? Who would be so cruel, twisted, sick, and demented to enjoy watching Jesus die a brutal death? Evil. That's right. Satan. He is the missing person in the event of the cross. So, here is what I want you to understand:

**“The cross was not a ransom demanded by God but paid by God.”** –Benjamin Corey

We see this understanding of the cross in the very beginning of scripture in Genesis 3:15. When sin entered the world, take a look at what God says to the serpent:

**“You will bruise his heel, but he will crush your head.”** –Genesis 3:15

This is a reference to Jesus' death on the cross! God is saying, “Yeah, you may hurt Jesus and kill him for a time, but you will be destroyed. Your head will be crushed!”

After Jesus' death and resurrection, we see it confirmed in the New Testament:

**The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. –1st John 3:8**

Folks, there are other beautiful and profound ways to see the cross. I could preach many sermons on the cross, but I want you to look at that cross right now. What happened on that cross 2,000 years ago? Jesus faced the wrath of evil “head on,” as Corey puts it, and defeated it with his transforming love. The only thing that could destroy the force of evil is the force of God's love. All the sin, hate, prejudice, death, and perversion that evil wanted to ruin this world with collided with the love and grace of God on our behalf on the cross, and Jesus stopped it once and for all. Evil came at this world with everything it had, and God in Christ stopped it in its tracks. When the cosmic bullet of evil came at us, Jesus jumped in front of us to save us. The cross was the climax of the cosmic war between God and evil, and God's love in Christ won.

Here is the message I want to leave you with today: **The cross is not about satisfying the wrath of God, but about the love of God overcoming the wrath of evil.** The cross means the love of God wins. The love of God is the most powerful force in the world. It is the one thing that changes everything. God defeated evil on the cross and everything that goes with it – death, fear, and hopelessness. So why is there still evil in the world? Because evil is a sore loser! It is just a mopping-up effort now. Everything evil, everything that goes against the force of God's love will be mopped up and discarded when the Kingdom of God comes in all of its glory.

One thing that remains is the overcoming power of God's love revealed on the cross. And that love is something that is available to each of us. It is available to you right now. Remember, the only thing that can stop the force of evil is the force of God's love. It is the one thing that changes everything.

Now that you know that the cross is not about the wrath of God, but about the love of God overcoming the wrath of evil, perhaps your heart is opening up to God's love. God's love is always available to you and can give you the power to overcome sin, hate, prejudice, pain, and anything else that is keeping you from wholeness in your life.

A colleague of mine used to play basketball with his friends in seminary. They would always play in the same gym. There was a kind janitor who would wait patiently for them to finish their game so he could lock up. One day, my colleague noticed the janitor reading the Bible as he waited. In fact, he was reading the book of Revelation, a book not even seminary students understand. My colleague approached the janitor and said, “I see you reading Revelation. Do you understand

that book?” “Sure,” he replied. “It’s pretty easy to understand.”

My colleague was intrigued. Revelation is a book that has confounded scholars and theologians. It is the source of countless conspiracy theories. Yet, here was an uneducated man who understood it. So he asked the janitor, “Well, what does the book mean?” The janitor looked up at my colleague and said, “It means Jesus is gonna win!”

You know what it means to be a Christian? It means letting Jesus be your hero. It means allowing his love to save you from all the things that are holding you back in life. It means allowing the power of his forgiveness to make you new. It means following him and reflecting his love in the world. Jesus already loves you. He has already forgiven you. He has already won the fight against evil. Just give yourself over to God’s love and follow Jesus. Your life will never be the same. You will find all the things you have been longing for.

If you want Jesus to be your hero and desire to become a Christian, here is a prayer that may help you make that decision: Jesus, I want you to be my hero. I need your transforming love. I accept and receive your forgiveness of my sins. I open my heart to your grace and the power of your Spirit. Make me new. Make me whole. Guide me so my life may be a vessel of your love that overcame the power of evil on the cross. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer, we want to hear from you. Please call or email us and let us know how we can help you as you begin your journey as a follower of Christ.



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