

Cross Purposes Sermon Prompts

Dear Pastor,

Thank you for taking an interest in Cross Purposes. I pray that this series will be life-changing for the people in your congregation.

Each chapter has three sections, approaching the weekly theme from different angles. For example, redemption is considered as freedom from slavery, release by a kinsman, and conveying value by the price paid. A sermon that focuses primarily on one of those perspectives is probably ideal, as it will allow you to explore a biblical text in detail, customize applications for your congregation, and speak to the heart as well as the mind.

In beta-testing Cross Purposes, I found that the chapters were a little long for our life group. I reduced the amount of reading and eliminated some questions, but groups with limited time will need to focus on the sections that are most relevant for their group. If you inform group leaders of your preaching plan, they will be able to coordinate their conversations with your message.

Your partner in the gospel,

Vic Folkert

Week 1: Love

When I first preached on *Cross Purposes*, I introduced the series in the first sermon. Some ideas:

- The introduction of the book begins with, “Crosses are everywhere...”
- “What does the cross mean to you? Do you think about it much? Is it at the center of your faith?”
- Michael Green says, “The atonement of Christ is as deep as the heart of God. We can never get to the bottom of it.” (*The Empty Cross of Jesus*, 69)
- Imagine a group of people, brainstorming a symbol of a new religion. Buddhism has a statue of serenity, Islam has a book, and Hinduism has meditation and yoga. As the group writes ideas on a marker board, would anyone suggest the cross as symbol of how the leader of their religion died a shameful, gruesome death? Who would think that would be a good idea?

Preaching Option 1: What Kind of God Loves Like This?

Suggested texts (not in the book): Eph 3:14-19, Psalm 35:9-10.

“What Kind of God Does This?” If you decide to talk about other religions, you might say, “Many religious or spiritual people vaguely identify God with love, as an impersonal force or principle. The love of their ‘god’ is like a hug from the universe: a warm feeling, blessings to enjoy, or a sense of affirmation. The idea or sensation of love is their god.”

A vague, impersonal god is incapable of love. See Psalm 135:13-18.

Quote from Frederica Mathewes-Green: “What’s wrong with us required much more than a hug. It required a cross.”

Some people have a harsh view of the cross, perhaps because of previous church experience. I like this story to uncover that. (It fits with John 3:16-17.)

- Little Tommy was not doing well in school — especially in math. He just didn’t seem to care. In desperation, his parents moved him to a Catholic school. After the first day, he came home with a serious look on his face, and he headed to his room to study. Night after night he was hard at work, scarcely taking time to eat. When the next report card came from the school, his grades had improved, and he had an “A” in math! His mother was thrilled, and she asked him what had happened. Was it the nuns, the uniforms, or the structure of the school? Tommy shook his head and solemnly replied, “No. On the first day of school, when I looked at the wall and saw the man nailed to the plus sign, I knew they were not fooling around.” (source unknown)

Preaching Option 2: Embodying God’s Love

Christians agree that God loves us — but are we firmly grounded in God’s love? (See Eph 3:17-18.) Are we strong in his love in times of doubt, discouragement, fear, temptation, pressure,?

What would convince us of God’s love? (Illustration: deeds of a spouse or parent, a kidney transplant, or a soldier who risks life)

False love costs little or nothing. The measure of love is how far a person will go. How far will God go? “He who did not spare his own Son...” (Rom 8:31-39)

Illustration: A man tells his wife how much he loves her. She asks him to load the dishwasher. He says, “Don’t take advantage.”

If we doubt God’s love, because of our circumstances or false expectations, the cross provides irrefutable proof of God’s love for us. (See Malachi 1:2 and pages 4-5.) “Does your relationship with God depend upon whether he is meeting your expectations?”

(An illustration focused on the incarnation as well as the cross: I love my grandchildren who live far away, and I show love to them from a distance. Spending a week in their house is a little more challenging. In fact, a long visit is exhausting and sometimes hard. When Jesus came to earth as a man, his love took on new dimensions. In fact, not everyone appreciated his love, and some resisted it, even to the cross.)

Application: In Christ, we (individually and the body of Christ) embody Christ’s love for others. (See pages 7-8.)

Enrichment Option for either of the above:

For an Old Testament perspective on God’s love (looking forward to the love of the cross), skip down to page 13 of this document, “God’s Passionate, Persevering Love.”

Week 2: Justification

Preaching Option 1: Just and the One Who Justifies (Romans 3:21-26)

When I preached this, I had a children's sermon before: "There are two kinds of 'can't': I can't dunk a basketball—at least, not on a ten foot basket. I lack the height and strength to do that. The other kind of 'can't' is different: If you ask me to beat up your brother, I will say, 'I can't do that.' I might be big enough and strong enough, but my character does not allow me to do that. Also, if I did, there would be unavoidable consequences that would not be good for anybody." (I think this can work for adults as well.)

One approach might expand on ways people try to justify themselves. (There are lots of ways.) Some think God should grade on a curve. I like this illustration: "Of course, we would all be on the upper end of the curve! A man was meeting a friend at a bar. As he walked in to meet his friend, he noticed two attractive women looking him over, and he was pleased to hear one of them whisper, 'Nine.' Feeling good about himself, he joined his friend, and spilled the news that the women had rated his attractiveness as nine out of ten. His friend replied, 'I don't want to ruin it for you, but when I walked in, they were speaking German.' (In German, of course, 'Nein' is 'No.')

The cross "confronts us with the seriousness of our sin" (page 13). In this option, you might explore the personal implications of refusing to confront one's sins and failings. Denying the seriousness of sin blocks growth, causes pain to others, leads to pride, etc.

Sometimes, when people get their just desserts, we say with satisfaction, "There is a God." How is the justice of God a source of hope when the world seems out of control or unfair? What happens to the moral foundation of a culture when people no longer believe in God's judgment?

Illustration: Miraslav Volf is a Christian theologian, a native of Croatia. Dr. Volf lived through the horrors of the Balkan Wars, after the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990's. In his book, *Exclusion and Embrace*, he says, "My thesis is that the practice of non-violence requires a belief in divine vengeance...[That is] unpopular...But imagine speaking to people (as I have) whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned, and leveled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit...Your point to them—We should not retaliate? Why not? I say—The only means of prohibiting violence by us is to insist that violence is only legitimate when it comes from God...If God were not angry at injustice and deception and did not make a final end of violence, that God would not be worthy of our worship."

Preaching Option 2 The Cross: The Only Way to Righteousness

A different slant on Romans 3:21-26 is to focus on "righteousness," as in making things "right," more than "justice," as in dealing with consequences.

- Paul wrote Romans in the Greek language, and Greek uses the same word for justice and righteousness. In today's text, translators must choose whether to translate the Greek words (*dikaios/dikaioσύνη/dikaioō*) as just/justice/justify, or righteous/righteousness/make righteous. You can see what the translators of NIV2011 [not NIV1984], did with Romans 3:21-26 "But now apart from the law the RIGHTEOUSNESS of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This RIGHTEOUSNESS is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the

glory of God, and all are JUSTIFIED [made right?] freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his RIGHTEOUSNESS, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his RIGHTEOUSNESS [justice too?] at the present time, so as to be JUST and the one who JUSTIFIES those who have faith in Jesus.” The words in capitals are all the same Greek word group (dikaios/dikaiosyne/dikaioō), and the translators are trying to convey the two aspects of God’s justice or righteousness.

- In this theme, an introduction might be:

Victorian poet Robert Browning portrays an innocent angel-child in *Pippa’s Song*:

The year's at the spring,
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hill-side's dew-pearl'd;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in His heaven,
All's right with the world!

Yet as Pippa arises and wanders through the town, she finds that all is not right with the world. She sings, and her song reminds misguided souls that there is a moral order and they should seek a better life.

We recognize, of course, that all is not right with the world. God revealed a moral order through his law, and he revealed the way of righteousness to his people. Yet it would take more than a song or a hug to make the world right.

Romans 3:21-26 describes the purpose of the cross in terms of righteousness — being right with God and getting life right.

- In this approach, the focus might be on, “What kind of eternal life would we have if God merely opened the gates to let everyone in?” God not only declares us “not guilty”; he makes us “right.” Application: How is God making you “right” now?

Week 3: Reconciliation

You might combine elements of these three options.

Preaching Option 1: Overcoming Shame and Alienation (Romans 5:1-12)

Although people might not admit that they are ashamed of their actions, many feel a vague sense of not measuring up to their ideals or potential. Others carry a load of shame, placed on them by parents, society, the media, or peers. (Several helpful articles on shame can be found at christianitytoday.com.)

Shame leads to alienation:

- Some people have a hard time forgiving themselves, causing self-hatred, hopelessness, withdrawal, or acting out their low view of themselves
- Some try to hide their faults and failures from others, becoming hypercritical or judgmental to bring others down to their level. Some project their faults onto others.
- Some hide from God or try to justify themselves to become worthy of God's love.

The shame of Adam and Eve after their sin graphically illustrates the human condition. Note that they were ashamed of their bodies *before* God confronted them about their disobedience. Even people who deny God and deny their guilt may have an unexpected sense of shame.

The cross confronts human shame head-on. Jesus hangs nearly naked on the cross, between two thieves. The Son of God takes his place in solidarity with humanity (p. 21), "scorning the shame" (Heb 12:2) and overcoming it. (Only Christianity has a Savior like that. See Isaiah 53 through the lens of shame.)

Illustration: Kairos is a weekend experience, in which men from "the free world" empty their pockets, abandon their phones, and go through two gates to enter a prison and share a weekend with prisoners. Many of the men inside are overwhelmed by shame, alienation, rejection, and abandonment. The volunteers join the prisoners to share meals, tell their stories, and share a common humanity. By meeting the men in a shameful place, they bring hope and the good news that no amount of shame is an insurmountable barrier to the love of God.

Preaching Option 2: Alienation and Reconciliation

Many people feel a vague sense of alienation. The world is a mess, the culture is unfriendly, and many people are hard to live with. Is that a symptom of a deeper alienation from God?

The root cause of alienation is the alienation of humanity from God. (See Romans 1-2.) Examples: James 4:1-4, Saul's anger toward David when God rejected him as king. We see this in our own lives...

Evangelistic booklets from both Cru (Campus Crusade) and BGEA used the cross as a bridge between God and humanity. Although their focus was on justification by a holy God, page 19 has a more personal slant. Reconciliation brings together the previous two themes: love and justification. (This is a chance to review the themes of the previous two weeks.)

The book focuses on the shame of the cross, but another way to approach the cross could focus on the alienation of the Son on the cross. "Jesus enjoyed an intimate relationship with his Father, which was the foundation of all he did as a man. As he hung on the cross, a cloud of separation enveloped him, hiding

his Father's face. His anguished cries were not answered, and his Father did not rescue him" (*God through Cosmic Lenses*, 143). That was the most extreme alienation imaginable. Yet don't we sometimes feel the same way? How does the cross help us deal with our sense of abandonment or separation from God?

Reconciliation with God helps us seek reconciliation with other people.

Illustration: A man in our life group told us that his wife filed for divorce. He leans on his reconciliation with God in the last year as a path to reconciliation with her, even as the divorce proceeds.

Pages 24-25 provide the bones of an application for this sermon.

Option 3: The Cross Reconciles through Truth and Grace (See pages 22-24.)

The focus of this sermon would be on the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. It might also focus on false equivalents of reconciliation, such as tolerance, acquiescence, avoiding truth, or excusing bad behavior.

Other titles might be "Beyond Forgiveness" or "The Hard Truth of Reconciliation," depending on the direction you take this.

Illustration of truth and grace: In Dallas, Texas, an off-duty police officer killed a man who was sitting on the couch in his own apartment, watching TV. She was convicted of murder, and after her sentencing, the 18-year-old brother of the man who was killed was given a chance to speak from the witness stand. The young man said he was willing to forgive her, and he pleaded with the judge to allow him to come down from the stand and give her a hug. The emotional hug lasted for 30 seconds. The story made national news, and some questioned whether forgiveness was too easy, for such an odious crime. Some sources neglected to report how the young man began his statement in the courtroom: "I don't want to say twice or for the hundredth time what you've taken from us. I think you know that. But I just—if you are truly sorry...I forgive you. And I know if you go to God and ask him, he will forgive you."

Week 4: Redemption

Preaching Option 1: The Cross and Freedom from Sin

On page 28, the focus is on John 8:31-36, which is profoundly true in today's world. We are enslaved, not only by our own sins and addictions, but by conforming to sinful cultural influences, peer pressure, business ethics, and learned personality traits.

The impact of the cross on freedom from sin is explained in Romans 6:1-14. I like verse 11, which enables us to say, "Sin, you are dead to me!"

A question in the book references Romans 6:16-22. To put it another way, "No one can serve two masters, but everyone must serve one.")

For a different approach, you might expand on deliverance from slavery in Egypt (pages 29-30) through the blood sacrifice of the Passover lamb, leading to Jesus, the Lamb of God. This connects well with communion as redemption from slavery to sin.

Preaching Option 2: Jesus Our Kinsman-Redeemer

The idea of Jesus as *goel* (Lev 25:47-49) speaks to me. Boaz is a prime example. NIV 1984 translated Ruth 2:20 as “kinsman-redeemer,” while NIV 2011 translates “guardian redeemer.” Other translations vary: some have merely “kinsman,” while others have “one of our redeemers.”

Notably, Boaz *voluntarily* takes on the role, even though he is not the closest relative. He displays *hesed* (faithfulness to a covenant relationship) toward Ruth, going beyond the requirements of the law to act in love, bringing “salvation” to Ruth. The connection of Boaz and Ruth through the lineage of David (emphasized in Matthew 1:5) could be expanded upon.

This theme is picked up in Hebrews 2:10-18, which offers a slightly different perspective on the suffering of our kinsman-redeemer.

If you focus on pages 31-32 in a sermon, a group could skim over those pages and focus on the other two sections.

Preaching Option 3: The Cross and Our Value to God

Where do people look to prove their worth? They might try to prove their value in a career, sports, popularity, or making others dependent upon them. If they are insecure, they might become controlling, clingy, or spineless. Some people seek validation in groups, good or bad. Some are needy, demanding constant affirmation from a spouse or other people.

The blood of Christ as the basis of self-worth is a powerful theme. Our worth does not come from our own goodness or achievement, but from the value God places on us in our ransom by the blood of Christ (1 Peter 1:19-20).

The most practical application is that “our asking price is too high” (page 33).

Illustration: My friend was a large-animal veterinarian. One day, he was working on a dairy, when the owner began to lay into his stepson, using language I probably shouldn't repeat, to tell him how worthless he was. When the man was finally done, my friend quietly said, “I'll give you a dollar for him.” The place got pretty quiet for a while.

Week 5: Rehabilitation

Preaching Option 1: A Fresh Start (or, Do We Need a Do-Over?)

If you haven't preached on Genesis 2-3 recently, a review of Adam and Eve in the garden might be helpful. Romans 5:12-21 is the key text. (See pages 36-37.)

The theological concept is sometimes known as "inherited sin" or "original sin." A deeper discussion of this might focus on Romans 8:1-17.

Illustration: "One of the most fearsome diseases known to humanity is Ebola. The virus is deadly, and death is hideous and gruesome. There is no known cure, but one of the most promising approaches is based on one man who survived an Ebola outbreak 25 years ago. The man, identified as 'Subject 1' in the respected journal *Science*, contracted the virus in 1995 in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. He survived, and one of the antibodies in his blood was identified as effective in saving his life. Scientists are now trying to determine whether that same antibody might save the lives of others infected with the disease." (*Nature*, 25 February 2016)

Preaching Option 2: A New Way of Being Human

Paul's contrast between flesh and spirit in Romans 7:21-8:17 is another way of contrasting natural life in Adam with spiritual life in Christ. (Adam is not mentioned. Instead, Paul refers to "the flesh," which is the common humanity we share with Adam and Eve. The Spirit is "the Spirit of Christ.")

This is a profound text that receives only passing attention in the book. The connection to the cross is not obvious, but it is implied in "sin offering" (verse 3) and "share in his sufferings" (verse 17).

This theme could merge with "A Fresh Start." (See above.)

Preaching Option 3: Spiritual Rehabilitation

"The Cross Reboots Humanity" (pages 40-42) emphasized the need to accept what Christ has done for us and live into the new life he obtains for us through his life and death. The Holy Spirit (that is, the Spirit of Jesus) is the key to spiritual rehabilitation.

See the above options for scriptural details.

Week 6: Confronting Darkness

Preaching Option 1: God's Answer to Suffering

Many people struggle with why God allows suffering, and a good way to begin might be to explore some of the “dead end” explanations. If you wish, you could go into what other religions (and atheism) offer, and their implications for life.

The ultimate theodicy (that is, justifying God in the face of suffering and evil in the world) is the cross. Every other attempt to address the problem of suffering leads to denial of either God's goodness or his power.

A good application might focus on Romans 6:6-14. (The quotation in the book ends with verse 12, and the last two verses drive home the point.)

Preaching Option 2: The Cross and the Powers of Darkness (pages 48-50)

See Luke 22:53. “This is your hour — when darkness reigns.”

You might expand upon the many ways that the powers of darkness are evidenced in the world today, such as structural injustice, corrupt political leaders, economic greed and abuse of power, addiction, deterioration of values, family discord, etc.

It is important to emphasize that Christians are not immune to evil influences. Jesus experienced the greatest resistance from pious Pharisees and dedicated teachers of the law. (They were misguided, but many thought they were doing God's will.) Jesus was sent to the cross by people who believed they were doing God's will! (John 11:48 is an example of the subversion of religion for power or national goals, which is quite relevant to today.) **Possible text:** Luke 20:9-19 (Parable of the Tenants)

At the cross, evil did its worst, while Jesus was at his best (in love, obedience, faithfulness, trust, etc.)

For an application, you might explore Revelation 12:10-11, “They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb . . .” (Revelation 12

This theme, of course, anticipates the triumph of the resurrection, which is celebrated at Easter. Death is the last enemy to be destroyed (1Cor 15:26), and Christ is “the firstfruits” of those who overcome death.

Preaching Option 3: The Cross Shines in the Darkness

Based on the last section in the chapter, this option emphasized the relevance of the cross for us. You would, of course, want to fill in some of the earlier concepts. For example, sin is a power that can only be defeated by the cross. The powers in Romans 8 needed to be defeated at the cross.

Easter Sermon Suggestion

Week 6 might set the stage for a powerful Easter sermon on the theme of *Christus Victor*. Some texts: Acts 2:24, Ephesians 1:18-23, Revelation 5:1-13

For a fresh perspective, I am offering here an excerpt from my book, *God through Cosmic Lenses: Quantum Mystery and Infinite Personality* (Wipf and Stock, 2022), 134-145.

A Cosmic Drama

The awful thing is that beauty is mysterious as well as terrible. God and the devil are fighting there, and the battlefield is the heart of man. —Fyodor Dostoevsky, The Brothers Karamazov

Beyond the dramatic beauty of the universe and the drama of human history, Dostoevsky recognized a larger drama—a struggle between God and the devil. Humans have key roles on earth, but the drama extends beyond the bounds of the universe.

Evil Powers

Then war broke out in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down—that ancient serpent called the devil, or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him. —Revelation 12:7-9

The backstory of the earthly drama is in heaven, with heavenly beings in key roles. One of those is an Evil One, who is variously described as a dragon, Satan, the devil, Beelzebub, or the great serpent. In the apocalyptic imagery of Revelation, he and his angels fight against the archangel Michael and his angels, causing some to identify Satan as a powerful, evil archangel.

The origin of the Evil One is unclear. If God created him, he rebelled against God, and it is likely that angels joined in his rebellion. The Bible hints of the essence of evil as hubris, leading to rebellion against God.

The Evil One is not a god, and his power is limited by God. Still, he creates mayhem on the earth: hatred, discord, suffering, pain, injustice, abuse, and death. He is an enemy of humanity, a liar who leads people astray, and their accuser when they fail to do right (Job 1:1:6-11; Revelation 12:12).

The Evil One challenges God's power and authority. He relentlessly seeks to find fault with God, attempting to undermine God's perfect righteousness and justice. If his attacks on God were to succeed, the moral foundations of heaven and earth would crumble, and evil would prevail.

A Stage for Good and Evil

God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. —Genesis 1:31

*Who trusted God was love indeed
And love Creation's final law
Tho' Nature, red in tooth and claw
With ravine, shriek'd against his creed.¹ —Alfred Lord Tennyson*

Genesis asserts that the world God created was “very good.” Yet science indicates that the earth has always been a place of violent struggle and death. How can a world of violence and death be good?

Our friends traveled to Africa, and one of the highlights of their trip was a safari into the bush country, where they observed lions stalking a large herd of wildebeest. My friends said that a lion killing a wildebeest is a wonderful sight to behold.

Lions are made to kill and eat, and a pride of lions hunting in the wild is a beautiful thing, as Psalm 104:21 celebrates: “The lions roar for their prey and seek their food from God.” Yet while lions stalking their prey can be good, a mass murderer stalking and killing is not beautiful, but ugly and evil.

The world God created is good, in the sense that it is perfect for a cosmic struggle between good and evil. In a world open to both good and evil, the goodness and glory of God can be seen, while the Evil One can sow destruction. In a world like that, humans can choose between good and evil.

A Human Choice to Participate in the Battle between Good and Evil

The LORD God said, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.” So the LORD God banished him from the Garden of Eden to work the ground from which he had been taken. After he drove the man out, he placed on the east side of the Garden of Eden cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life. —Genesis 3:22-24

Genesis does not say the entire earth was a nonviolent paradise before Adam and Eve. It describes the Garden of Eden as a sheltered environment, where the trees bore perfect fruit and the animals were not dangerous to humans.

God gave Adam and Eve the option of remaining in the sheltered environment of the garden, where evil was excluded. Instead, they chose to “know good and evil,” and the natural consequence of their choice was expulsion into a world in which good and evil were in a constant state of conflict. The world outside the garden was open to weeds, pain, and death, and Adam and Eve got their wish: They knew good and evil.

Their choice is archetypal: They represent all of humanity, who choose to know both good and evil. Although some might think they wouldn’t choose to know evil if they had a choice, the history of humanity shows solidarity with Adam and Eve.

When Adam and Eve left the protection of the garden, the stage was set for an arduous battle between good and evil, in which there would be casualties. What would be God’s role in the battle? Would he abandon the stage, leaving humanity to fight for the triumph of good over evil? Would he watch from a safe distance, avoiding the pain and distress of the struggle? Would he swoop down to make things right on the earth, or would he blow up the stage as a bad experiment?

The Plot

Once you assume a creator and a plan, it makes humans objects in a cruel experiment whereby we are created [to be] sick and commanded to be well. ⁱⁱ —Christopher Hitchens, as quoted by Lawrence Krauss

In one concise sentence, Hitchens gives a devastating critique of his understanding of the divine-human drama. As he sees it, God is a detached observer of an experiment, in which weak and sinful humans try

to heal themselves. God set up humans for failure, and then, instead of helping them thrive, he condemns them for their weaknesses and mistakes. Unsurprisingly, Hitchens cannot accept a God that would do that!

However, the biblical drama is not as Hitchens imagines. God is not an uninvolved observer of the drama; he has the lead role. Humans are not objects or pawns, but key actors. Humans were created to be well, and when they are not well, God's commands and actions are intended to help them be better.

The Battle within Humanity

Then the LORD said to Cain, "Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it." —Genesis 4:6-7

After God banished Adam and Eve from the Garden, Eve bore two sons, Cain and Abel. Despite her pain in childbirth, Eve felt blessed by God as she brought new life into the world. Yet jealousy and rage overcame Cain, and he murdered his own brother.

As Genesis progressed, the battle between good and evil played out in the lives of the characters. Adam and Eve were blessed with another son, Seth, who worshipped God. Cain's descendants were violent, but they were clever enough to raise livestock, create music, and forge metal tools.

Noah was a descendant of Seth, a good man in a world that had become corrupt and full of violence. God destroyed the people around Noah in a massive flood, while righteous Noah and his family were saved in an ark God had instructed him to build. Yet when Noah got drunk and shed his clothes, his youngest son disrespected his father, leading Noah to curse his son, even condemning him to be his brother's slave.

The technology that enabled Cain's descendants to create music and tools, and Noah to build an ark, could also be used for rebellion against God. The people of Babel used technology to build a tower to reach toward the heavens, creating a cultural and religious center without God. Technology, culture, and even religion were infused with both good and evil.

God's Commitment to Make Things Right

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." —Genesis 12:1-3

God's plan to renew the world began in the smallest possible way: God chose a man named Abraham, who would be the father of a great nation. God promised to bless Abraham's descendants, with the intention that all peoples on earth would be blessed through them. It was not at all clear how that plan would work, but Abraham and his descendants would play key roles in the divine-human drama.

God committed himself to a covenant relationship with Abraham and his descendants, and he held fast to his covenant promises, even when people did not fulfill their obligations. As decades and centuries passed, God renewed and extended his covenant, adapting it to the circumstances of his chosen people. When the people became slaves in Egypt, he sent Moses to lead them out of Egypt into a land where

they could thrive. When they became a nation, God promised to establish a kingdom for David and his descendants that would never end. When they fell into sin, he sent prophets to call them back to his righteous ways of obedience and justice.

Much of the Old Testament is hard to understand from within a modern cultural perspective, but clearly, God was always on the side of good and opposed to evil. He gave the Ten Commandments as a guide to freedom for the slaves released from bondage (Exodus 20:1), and in the sometimes legalistic rules that followed he gave instructions for promoting hygiene and health, providing for the poor and powerless, and establishing a just society. Later, God established a monarchy in which the king should not oppress his subjects, but uphold God's justice.

God's sacrificial system was unlike the other religions of its time, which tried attempted to appease or manipulate deities by ritual prostitution, child sacrifice, or self-abuse. Sacrifices provided ways for people to be relieved of guilt and shame, while fellowship offerings and festivals allowed them to celebrate God's goodness and grace.

God had chosen a people, and he was committed to guiding them to a good life. Still, the battle between good and evil continued, and evil sometimes triumphed. Laws became burdensome, religion was perverted, kings became tyrants, and false prophets led people astray.

God's Passionate, Persevering Love

They broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. —Jeremiah 31:32

The words used to describe God's role in the biblical drama are shocking: He is like a father, a husband, a nursing mother, a lover, a jilted suitor, even a mother hen. Shocking, because most of the gods people worship are aloof, immune to hurt or rejection.

God's interactions with people in the Old Testament are described in Hebrew words of relationship: *hesed*, the untranslatable word that describes a bond between friends, lovers, and people who need love; *emeth*, faithfulness to relationships, even when grace is required; and *'ahab*, the choice to be joined in a relationship of love and commitment.

Passionate love is jealous—not in a selfish way, but in a protective way. The Old Testament exhibits God's jealous anger and even his wrath. Readers are sometimes shocked to find God getting the attention of his people through illness and plague, military defeat, oppressive kings, or exile to a foreign land. Sometimes, it seems that God allowed evil full rein, to reveal the consequences of evil choices. Still, God's passionate love persisted:

When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son . . . It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms; but they did not realize it was I who healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love. To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them . . . How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? . . . My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. —Hosea 11:1, 3, 8

The Battle Rages On

*(Zion's) gates have sunk into the ground;
their bars he has broken and destroyed.*

*Her king and her princes are exiled among the nations,
the law is no more, and her prophets no longer find visions from the LORD. —Lamentations 2:9*

By the end of the Old Testament era, the outcome of the divine-human drama seemed far from certain. God's chosen people had repeatedly rejected his ways and fallen into sin. Evil had often triumphed over good, and the law, temple worship, and justice had been perverted. Only a small remnant of God's chosen people remained, and they were oppressed by evil forces of politics, war, and religious intrigue.

The outcome of the drama seemed uncertain, until God did something unimaginable.

God Takes to the World Stage

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. —John 1:14

God had never been absent from the human drama, but in the person of Jesus Christ he joined became vulnerable, joining humanity in its struggle against sin and evil.

Jesus was born into a corrupted political and social environment. His parents were forced to flee to Egypt, as jealous King Herod massacred the babies of Bethlehem. The people of his hometown rejected him and tried to push him off a cliff.

He faced evil at every turn. He overcame a frontal attack in the wilderness, where Satan tempted him for forty days. In his three years of ministry, he continually encountered sickness, demonic oppression, and toxic religion. Even his closest friends were not immune to evil influences. He reprimanded his disciples for their power struggles, and when Peter tried to dissuade him from his mission, he said, "Get behind me, Satan." In the end, Satan entered into Judas, one of the twelve disciples, who betrayed him.

At the cross, evil ruled. Jealous and power-hungry Jewish leaders arranged for Jesus to be arrested and brought to an illegal trial in the dead of the night. A Roman governor, who declared Jesus innocent, yielded to pressure and sentenced him to death. Sinners mocked the sinless Son of God as he hung on a cross for their sins. Even a Roman centurion supervising the crucifixion recognized that a righteous man was crucified that day.

As his death approached, Jesus recognized the forces of evil descending upon him, and he said to the authorities coming to arrest him, "This is your hour—when darkness reigns." (Luke 22:52-53)

The Crux of the Drama

Crux [Latin, cross]: A central, pivotal, or decisive point.

The tragedy of the cross is profound and troubling: God the Son dies, and God the Father does not intervene. Evil does its worst, and if it emerges victorious, all hell will break loose. Evil will reign, people will be forever alienated from God, death will be stronger than life, and humanity will be destined for the ash heap.

Why does God allow this to happen? Jesus, the Son of God in human form, represents humanity on the world stage. Evil will do its worst, as the drama reaches its pivotal, decisive point.

.....

At the cross, the drama intensifies. Jesus dies, and with his death, all hope of defeating the powers of evil seem to be dead. Will God allow the story to end this way?

The Twist

You, with the help of wicked men, put Jesus of Nazareth to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. —Acts 2:23-24

As the tragic drama reached its lowest point, it took an astounding twist: Jesus appeared to his followers, very much alive! He spoke, broke bread, and ate some broiled fish with his disciples

Jesus had told his disciples that he would die and rise from the dead, but they had refused to accept it. When the women found that his tomb was empty, the apostles “did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them as nonsense.” Yet they were convinced he was alive, as he appeared to them in the next forty days—one, two, a handful, twelve, even five hundred at one time. Their encounters with the risen Christ Jesus transformed their lives.

Christus Victor

Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. —Colossians 2:15

In Paul’s verbal picture, Christ Jesus, a man embodying the fullness of God, enters a coliseum on the world stage. The powers of darkness—sin, death, and a plethora of evil forces—attack from every side. Christ goes down, the forces of evil swarm around him, and the crowd gasps in fear, as evil prevails. Then their hero rises from the dead to vanquish his enemies. He binds them and leads them in a victory parade around the coliseum, while the crowd roars and his followers swarm into the streets of the city.

The victory of the Christ, the Messiah, is a decisive victory for all who identify with him in his death and resurrection. As Hebrews 2:14-15 says, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.”

Cosmic Impact of the Cross and Resurrection

Our object . . . is to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the life of the world as against selfish and autocratic power . . . The world must be made safe for democracy. —Woodrow Wilson

World War I was fought mostly in Europe, but it became a world war because other nations believed the war would have a global impact. President Wilson argued that if democracy and justice were not preserved, autocracy and injustice would prevail throughout the world.

The death and resurrection of Jesus took place on the world stage, but they profoundly transformed the entire cosmic order.

ⁱ Alfred Lord Tennyson, *In Memoriam A.H.H.*, Canto 56.

ⁱⁱ Lawrence Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why There Is Something Rather than Nothing* (Free Press, 2012), p. 121.