

# The Cross of God: God-Forsaken and God-Grieved

by the Rev. Dr. J. Ted Blakley



## GOOD FRIDAY

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Isaiah 52:13–53:12 • Psalm 22 • Hebrews 4:14–16, 5:7–9 • John 18:1–19:42

## HISTORY

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A. D. 2014, Good Friday, April 18th

☞ 6:00 p.m. • St. John's Episcopal Church; Wichita, Kansas

## The Sermon

1500 words • 15 minutes

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from helping me,  
from the words of my groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer;  
and by night, but find no rest.

— *Psalm 22:1–2*

## COULD JESUS HAVE COME DOWN FROM THE CROSS?

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When I was in seminary in Pasadena, California, I took most of my core theology courses from Ray Anderson, who not only taught as a fulltime, graduate-school professor, but who also served as the pastor of a church. Dr. Anderson was something of a maverick theologian. He would often begin class with a provocative question. Then, after a bit of discussion, he would offer his own response, which tended to be even more provocative than the question itself.

I remember one question in particular. We entered the class and got ourselves settled, and after leading us in prayer, he posed this question, “Could Jesus have come down from the cross?” The class became instantly animated as various people offered their passionate responses, most of which amounted to, “Yes, Jesus could have come down from the cross, but he chose not to.”

To my way of thinking, that seemed right. After all, on the night of Jesus’ arrest, when Peter attempted to rescue him, by cutting off the ear of the high priest’s servant, Jesus said to Peter

Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.  
Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more  
than twelve legions of angels? (MATTHEW 26:52–53)

So, yes, Jesus could have come down, but he chose not to.

## **WE CANNOT SEPARATE POWER FROM CHARACTER**

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After the class discussion died down, Dr. Anderson offered his own response. He said, “No. Jesus could not have come down from the cross.” And here was his explanation as best as I can remember it. Jesus could not have come down because it was his love and that of his Father’s that held him to the cross. It wasn’t the nails, but God’s love for the world that held him there. If Jesus had come down from the cross, then there would not have been God’s love for the world.

You see, we tend to think that Jesus had the power to come down, but chose not to, because we often separate power from character. But we can’t do that. According to Anderson, we often use terms like omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence to describe God. We characterize God as all powerful; and we think of God as having the ability to do anything, which isn’t quite how the Bible portrays God. When we describe God in these generic ways, we aren’t deriving our language from Scripture. Instead we are applying alien philosophical concepts to God.

Moreover, when we speak of omnipotence, we are only speaking in terms power, not character. This is dangerous. After all, an omnipotent, all-powerful god could be pure evil. When we divorce power and character in our thinking, in our words, and in our actions, then we inflict great violence on our world.

God is love. And as the incarnate, eternally-begotten Son of God, Jesus’ death on the cross is an enactment of that love, a revelation of who God is and of who God is for the world. You cannot separate power from character; you cannot divorce power and identity. So, Dr. Anderson concludes, Jesus could not have come down from the cross, because God’s power and character is love.

## **GOD CAN’T HEAL YOU**

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He then offered up a story to illustrate his point. One day, while he was doing hospital visitation, he was asked by the staff to look in on a woman he did not know. She was dying of cancer. He entered her room and spoke with her. During the course of their conversation, he asked her, “Has anyone talked to you about the fact that you are dying?” And she said, “No. Nobody will.”

You see, the woman was a Christian, and she belonged to a charismatic church, one that believed in healing. And she had had many visits from church members, and they had prayed and prayed for her. They had prayed for a miraculous recovery. So the woman said, “No, nobody talks about the fact that I am dying. They just keep praying for me, and I keep wondering why God won’t heal me.”

Without missing a beat, Dr. Anderson looked at her and said, “God can’t heal you.” She said, “What?” “God can’t heal you,” he repeated. As he said this, he pointed to a crucifix that hung above her bed. “God couldn’t even take his own Son down from the cross. So he can’t heal you.” “So where is God?” she asked. He said, “God is here. He is present with you in your suffering and dying.”

The woman took great comfort in these words, and in the reality to which they pointed. Dr. Anderson prayed with her, and then he left. But as he left, he began to wonder whether he had said the right thing. You see, he hadn’t thought it out in advance. To tell this woman that God couldn’t heal her was simply one of those flashes of theological intuition that often occurs on the front lines of

pastoral ministry. What he recognized in that hospital room was that this woman was suffering, and that all of the prayers for healing, being offered by her sincere and well-intentioned friends, were simply increasing her suffering. This dying woman was being tortured by the thought that God had the power to heal her, but for some reason, was choosing not to. His words brought healing and comfort to her troubled soul.

Now I don't know what you think of that story. I'm not too sure myself. I have the same reaction to it today, that I had 16 years ago when I first heard it. I keep wanting to say, "Yes...but..." Yes, God is present with us in our suffering, but doesn't God have the power to heal? "Yes...but..." There is a tension in that story that I have never been able to resolve. But I continue to reflect on it, and I continue to tell it, because it points to the tension that is revealed in Jesus' cry of God forsakenness as he hangs upon the cross.

### **GOD-FORSAKEN AND GOD-GRIEVED**

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As Christians, We don't always appreciate what Jesus' crucifixion meant for God. We talk about what it means for us, but what did it mean for God? What did it do to God?

Despite everything that has been revealed to us about God through the life and death of Jesus, we still tend to think that God does not suffer, that God is not affected by the world, that God is somehow above it all, above all the violence and chaos, the suffering and death. After all, God is God. God doesn't have to choose; God can have anything God wants.

But that's not quite true. God doesn't get everything that God wants. God doesn't get to have his cake and eat it too. Sometimes, even God has to choose.

And why can I say all of this? Because that's what gets revealed to us in the cross of Christ. God could not have his beloved Son *and* the redemption of the world at the same time. God had to choose. The Son or the world. That's the choice. Now I don't fully understand *why* that's the choice, but that's the choice. God couldn't have both.

However, and this is a very important point, the Father and the Son were in it together. God did not send the Son into the world against his will. Neither did the Son go to the cross kicking and screaming. As we heard in Isaiah,

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,  
yet he did not open his mouth;  
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,  
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,  
so he did not open his mouth.

The Father gave up his one and only Son for whole world, and the Son willingly sacrificed himself for the sake of that same world. The Father and the Son were in it together, yet it cost them dearly. For during those three hours of darkness, as Jesus hung on the cross, something happened, something happened within the very being of God. God suffered as only God can. The Father and the Son who, up to that point, had enjoyed unbroken communion for all of eternity, experienced a rupture in their relationship. The Son experiences abandonment, and the Father experiences grief.

With his penultimate breath, Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Yet, he never hears the anguished cry of his Father, "My Son, My Son, why have I lost you?"