

VOICE OF HOPE

What if Jesus had said No?

Carmen Seibold reflects on the implications if Jesus had chosen not to go to the cross.

Ever wonder what your life would be like if you'd made different choices? What if you'd chosen a different career? What if you hadn't gone on that first date? What if you'd moved to Paris? What if you'd made different friends? What if you'd had more, fewer, or no children? And what about that job or investment you passed up? Maybe you'd be happier or wealthier or somehow better off if you'd done things differently. What if?

Frank Capra's classic film *It's a Wonderful Life* portrays one man asking the "what if" question about his life—and experiencing the answer. George Bailey is an all-American guy who longs for adventure. But whenever he's about to follow his dream, he's held back by a family or national crisis. Each time he gives up what he wants to do in order to do the right thing.

George watches his brother and friends achieve the things that he's wanted, and chafes against his own mundane existence. Finally, feeling trapped by responsibilities, George wishes that he'd never been

born. In answer to his wish, an angel comes to show George what life without him would have been like for his family and community.

If George had never lived he wouldn't have been around to save his little brother's life, so the boy would never have grown up to become a war hero. George wouldn't have been there to encourage the town floozy to do better, so she would have done worse. He wouldn't have gotten married to Mary and had a family, so she would have ended up sadly alone. And if George hadn't been there to fight the greedy banker, Mr. Potter, their hometown would have lost its wholesomeness and many hardworking families would have lost their homes. George Bailey's life, it turns out, was crucial to the town of Bedford Falls.

George Bailey is just a character in a story. But he provides us with a pretty good analogy for understanding the most important life of all. Jesus Christ's life was crucial to our planet. And because of His choice, the world has never been the same.

The setting for Jesus' greatest conflict was Jerusalem at the time of Passover. The holiday—the festival of freedom—evoked both celebration and mourning. God had freed His people at one time, but now they were under foreign rule again. Every Jewish man, woman, and child prayed at Passover that God would save them once more.

The disciples had arranged the Passover ritual meal commemorating the Exodus. As twilight tossed out its first star, Jesus sat down to eat that last supper with His twelve disciples. At the center of the table was the roasted lamb, sacrificed as a substitute for human death. Jesus appropriated the bread and wine, over which every Jewish holiday blessing is still said, as symbols of His sacrifice and the forgiveness of sin. Threads of meaning were winding and weaving themselves together. This Passover there would be deliverance again—a deliverance even more central to human hopes and fears than release from slavery. In fact, the first Passover, glorious as it was, gave a mere foretaste of this new freedom that God was shaping.

When Jesus and His disciples had finished eating, they walked out of the city gates to an area called Gethsemane, which was probably an orchard rather than our notion of a garden. There, Jesus had to finalize His choice to go to the cross. That choice took Jesus through the loneliest, most severe anguish anyone has ever experienced. In their most poignant scenes, the Gospels describe Jesus as truly struggling

on that fateful night. His struggle proved that His humanity was not merely a disguise for His divinity. If it were, the decision to become the substitutionary Sacrifice for our sins would not have been so crushing.

You see, suffering and dying are common to human beings. A divine Being could have faced these challenges unscathed and unshaken. But somehow in this mysterious, glorious blend of humanity and divinity that is Jesus Christ, the Divine could only serve as the currency for forgiveness, while the human must bear the cost.

At the Passover meal, Jesus was clear about His mission. He knew what His death would mean. But that night He needed to pray for the strength to say Yes to it. The enormity of bearing all the sins of humanity filled Him with anguish and dismay, and He asked Peter, James, and John to stay awake and pray while He struggled. *“He went on a little, [and] fell on His face in prayer.”* One inspired writer described Jesus’ agony at Gethsemane this way: *“The guilt of fallen humanity He must bear. Upon Him who knew no sin must be laid the iniquity of us all. So dreadful does sin appear to Him, so great is the weight of guilt which He must bear, that He is tempted to fear it will shut Him out forever from His Father’s love. Feeling how terrible is the wrath of God against transgression, He exclaims, ‘My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death.’”* In the updated language of a modern Bible translation, His expression of pain is even more sad: *“My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.”* (Matthew 26:38).

He who had always acted and spoken with confidence of His oneness with God is now overcome with human anguish. He pleads for His own deliverance, His own exodus: *“Oh My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless not as I will, but as You will.”* (Matthew 26:39). In his Gospel, Luke the physician reports that Christ’s sweat *“was like drops of blood falling to the ground.”* (Luke 22:44). Desperate for some support, He goes to Peter, James, and John, but they’ve abandoned Him for sleep.

Three times Jesus prays His heartbreaking prayer, shrinking from the unimaginable sacrifice. Again, in the words of one writer: *“The awful moment had come—that moment which was to decide the destiny of the world. The fate of humanity trembled in the balance. Christ might even now refuse to drink the cup apportioned to guilty man. It was not yet too late. He might say, ‘Let the transgressor receive the penalty of his sin, and I will go*

back to My Father.' Will the Son of God drink the bitter cup of humiliation and agony? Will the innocent suffer the consequences of the curse of sin to save the guilty?'"

A third time according to Matthew, He searches out His closest companions and finds them oblivious to His suffering. But now time has run out. A mob gathers about them, and Judas betrays his Lord with a kiss. In this moment of turmoil and danger, Jesus makes His final choice. Peter whips out a sword to defend Him, but He objects. "*Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?*" (Matthew 26:53; John 18:10). He has made His decision. He is the Sacrifice, the Passover Lamb to be slain for sinners. Escape is only a prayer away, but Jesus stays to undergo death for every man, woman, and child. "*Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given Me?*" (John 18:11).

From this decision follow the terrible events of the rest of that night and the following day. And from it also follows the miracle of the Resurrection, for "*by him [God chose] to reconcile all things to Himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross.*" (Colossians 1:20).

What if Jesus had said No? Without the salvation He provided, we'd be captives to sin and its wages. There would be no promise of eternal life. Our lives would have no ultimate meaning, nor would our relationships. Grief and suffering would be unrelieved by hope. Essentially, we'd have no irrefutable evidence that God is a loving God.

In *It's a Wonderful Life*, George comes to see that the choices he made have paid off. His life, though hard at times, has contributed to the happiness of many others. In Gethsemane, Jesus could have chosen an easier path. He could have said No to suffering the penalty for our sins. But He said Yes, and it will take us all eternity to begin to grasp why He considered us worth the pain He suffered. Truly, though, with His death the universe became wonderful.

What would your life be like if you had made different choices? I don't know that about my own life, but I do know one thing: the details we wonder and worry about are much less important than we sometimes think, because Christ has taken care of the big picture. Because of His death, the "what if" questions about our own lives have an incredibly

wonderful answer—“*all things work together for good to those who love God.*” (Romans 8:28). Christ promises us a happy ending, one He’s already purchased with His blood. Knowing that—and believing it!—doesn’t just tell us about the future. When given to Christ, our lives begin to take on the colors and flavors of eternal life now. “*Taste and see that the Lord is good.*” (Psalm 34:8).

When we are Christ’s people, our joys need not be clouded by the knowledge that they won’t last. Instead, they can soar because we know there’s even more joy ahead. Our grief need never be the grief of despair, of those who have no hope. We can live abundant lives because there’s a safety net under us. We can live joyful lives because with God there are second chances.

What if Jesus had said No to giving us all this and heaven too? We needn’t let the alternative trouble us, because He said Yes. That’s reality.

It really is a wonderful life!

Reprinted from Signs of the Times, April 2011

How Does the Cross Provide Forgiveness?

How does Jesus death make it possible for Him to forgive? What does His dying have to do with His forgiving? These are age old questions that have been asked in every generation since the cross.

To understand the cross and forgiveness, one must understand a very important principle first. The principle states that **forgiveness is rooted in substitution**. Whoever forgives another person must actually substitute himself for the one he forgives. This does not come naturally. The human reaction to being hurt is anger, bitterness, and revenge. As sinful human beings we resist the thought of forgiving someone who has hurt us. Yet through prayer and a relationship with Jesus we can experience that forgiving peace. Jesus said, “*pray for your enemies,*” and “*pray for those who spitefully use you.*” He said this because He knew that the greatest change would come to us who are doing the praying. Forgiveness is a special gift that God is just waiting to give to those who ask. Let’s get back to our principal again. Forgiveness is rooted in

substitution. Whoever forgives another person must actually substitute himself for the one he forgives. An example will make this easier to understand.

If you hit me, justice demands you be hit back (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth). I could exercise my human feelings of revenge and hit you back, or I could choose to forgive you. If I choose to forgive, I must be willing to suffer the pain of your blow in order to forgive you. In other words, I suffer your wrong. Forgiveness is rooted in substitution.

Let's look at another example. If you owe me money and can't pay, justice demands that the courts force payment. But if I choose to forgive the debt, I must be prepared to suffer the loss of the money in order to forgive you. In other words, I suffer your wrong. Are you beginning to get the picture? Forgiveness is rooted in substitution. Justice says, "you did wrong, you suffer." Forgiveness says, "you did wrong, but I will bear that wrong so that I can help restore you through forgiveness."

If the state pardons a debt, society bears the burden of that debt. If I break your priceless heirloom and you forgive, you must bear the loss. James Buswell wrote: "No one ever really forgives another, except he bears the penalty of the other's sin against him."

What does any this have to do with Jesus dying? Well let's look at the very best example of the substitution principle yet. Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death. Romans 3:23 tells me that I am a sinner. Sin hurts God. Sin is an attack on the character of God. Justice demands that I die, but Jesus has chosen to forgive me. But in order to forgive me, Jesus must be willing to bear the same punishment that the broken law would demand of me. He must be willing to die in my place. Is it making sense now? Forgiveness is rooted in substitution.

Jesus suffered my death penalty for me so He can freely forgive me. Isaiah 53:4-6 says: "*Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes (flogging) we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, everyone, to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.*"

God understood the substitution principle all along. He understood that without a substitute, I would always doubt His forgiveness. That is the ultimate act of love. The first text I memorized as a child was John 3:16.

It reads: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Verse 17 continues: “For God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.”

The Message of the Cross

The death of Jesus on the cross is indeed the central factor in the whole redemptive and restorative action of God’s grace. By His death Jesus took our deserved death in order that we might have His life.

The message of the cross is the message of salvation through Jesus Christ, that He has risen from the dead and longs to live within the heart of the Christian. The message of the cross is the message of liberating freedom to all who choose Him as their Saviour. And such a message is the “good news” of the gospel—the grace of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Paul refers to “preaching the gospel” in I Corinthians 1:17, and then in the next verse tells us the “cross” is “to us who are saved, the power of God.” (verse 18).

The proclamation of the “finished work” of God in Christ, whereby God has done, and continues to do everything necessary for man’s salvation through sanctification, will always be regarded as scandalous by the natural man. It is contrary to all the conventional wisdom of the world which believes that anything worth having should be worked for. Proclaiming the “finished work” of God in Christ deals a “death-blow” to the human pride of personal performance. That “death-blow” was dealt when Jesus died on the cross and exclaimed just prior to His imminent death, “*It is finished!*” (John 19:30).

When Jesus cried, “It is finished”, as He was dying, He knew He had set in motion the finished work of God for the restoration of mankind and creation. Redemption, whereby we are “*bought with a price*” (I Corinthians 6:20) by the death of Jesus, is the remedial aspect, whereas regeneration is the restorative factor wherein the life of God once again indwells all who are receptive through faith.

The “cross” conveys the theological significance of the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Though the material cross was the instrument of physical death, mention of the “cross” throughout

the rest of Scripture will always encompass that great cry from the cross, “It is finished,” and the consequent restoration of God’s life in His creation.

The Purpose of the Cross

The Bible tells us that there is no other way to cleanse sin, but through the sacrifice of an innocent one in place of the guilty one (Hebrews 9:22). This is seen all the way back in the beginning when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:21). And this line of thought continues all the way through the days of the Tabernacle and the Temple. There, sin was atoned for by the blood of a lamb. Then when Jesus went to the cross and died for the sins of humanity, He did so as “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*” (John 1:29).

The Power of the Cross

When John Wesley was returning home from a service one night, he was robbed. The thief, however, found Wesley to have only a little money and some Christian literature. As the bandit was leaving, Wesley called out, “Stop! I have something more to give you.” The surprised robber paused. “My friend,” said Wesley, “you may live to regret this sort of life. If you ever do, here’s something to remember: ‘The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin!’” The thief hurried away, and Wesley prayed that his words might bear fruit. Years later, Wesley was greeting people after a service when he was approached by a stranger. What a surprise to learn that this visitor, now a believer in Christ as a successful businessman, was the one who had robbed him years before! “I owe it all to you,” said the transformed man. “Oh no, my friend,” Wesley exclaimed, “not to me, but to the precious blood of Christ that cleanses us from all sin!”

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