

The Scandal of Blood Atonement: “Why All the Blood and Cross-Talk, Christian?”

The story of Jesus’ death and resurrection raises accusations that Christianity is obsessed with blood. Many believers struggle with this too. Byron Barlowe explores the biblical reasons for the focus on Christ’s blood and why its shedding was necessary.

The Bloody Cross: A Tough Thing to Handle

Easter season is all about the death and resurrection of Christ—which centers on the blood sacrifice He endured. Christianity is called a bloody religion, focusing on the execution of Jesus Christ on a cross. Why is this true and what does it mean when we say His blood atones for our sin?



Millions of Americans—and billions of Christians around the world—celebrated the death and Resurrection of Christ during Passion Week and Easter Sunday. The topic was everywhere from sermons to a CNN docudrama titled *Finding Jesus: Faith, Fact, Forgery*.

You may have questions about all the talk of “the blood of Christ” and songs saying things like “Jesus’s blood washed away my sins.” This bloody theme does raise understandable concerns that are shared by believers, seekers and skeptics alike.

In fact, more and more skeptics are posting on the Internet things like this book promotion:

“Christians are obsessed with blood! They sing about it, declare they are washed in it and even drink it! In this

book you will discover the crazy background to this Christian obsession and the truth about the bloodthirsty God they claim to know and serve.”[\[1\]](#)

In this article, we’ll discuss whether these charges are true and fair and explain the doctrine of blood atonement.

Again, even many Christians—including me—have wondered deeply about all the biblical imagery of shed blood, what some call the Crimson Thread of Scripture. I mean the grotesqueness of Old Testament animal sacrifice and the belief in Jesus’s torturous slaying as the core of salvation. Radical stuff for modern ears.

So what is blood atonement and why does it matter? In historic orthodox Christian thought, God’s Son is at the very center of history doing these things:

- reconciling man to God,
- ransoming humans from slavery to sin and well-deserved death and
- justly recompensing God for the horrific offense of rebellion and disobedience to Him.

Thankfully, the gospel (or good news) is simple. The Bible claims, “Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”[\[2\]](#)

The bottom line for all people is this: out of Christ’s death came the hope of eternal life—and His resurrection proved this. Our sin caused God’s Son to suffer and die. By grace, through faith, we can benefit. Otherwise, we suffer eternally for staying with the cosmic rebellion that started in a perfect Garden long ago.

Yet, this blood-centered good news is a scandal to both those who believe and those who deny it. In fact, the Greek root

word *skandalon* is used for Christ Himself.[\[3\]](#) You see, Jews denied Christ as the Promised One and Gentiles thought it was all nonsense. Nothing has changed for mankind: the choices are either do-it-yourself religion, being too smart for all that, or believing in this radical hope.

The Reason Someone Had to Die

Why did anybody have to die? God's justice and holiness demands a death penalty for the sinner.

We are all in a serious spiritual and moral pickle. Biblical Christianity declares that each person ever born is stuck under an irreversible “*sin*drome” for which there is no human answer. History sadly records the habitual and continual effects of sin: oppression, addictions, self-promoting power plays, deceit, war, on and on.

Now for a reality check: no moral order, either in a family, a company, military unit or society survives ambiguity or failure to enforce laws. Just ask the victims of unpunished criminals set loose to perpetrate again. If the Creator were to simply wink at sin or let people off scot-free, where would justice be? What kind of God would He be?

God is holy and He called Himself the Truth. There is no way God would be true to Himself and the moral order He created and yet fail to punish sin. Such impunity would mock justice. As one theologian puts it, “Pardon without atonement nullifies justice . . . A law without penalty is morally unserious, even dangerous.”

Ok, but penalties have levels of harshness. Why is death necessary? Scripture spells out clearly the decree that sinners must die. In God's original command He stated, “When you eat of [the tree of the knowledge of good and evil] you will surely die” (Genesis 2:17). In Ezekiel the same formula appears slightly reworded: “The soul who sins is the one who

will die” (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). Paul boiled it down this way: “For the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23).

God’s justice and holiness demand death for sin. Blood must be shed. Detractors of the cross tend to underestimate sin and know nothing of its offense to a holy God. Everyone wants justice—for others.

Ok, so what does a just and holy God do with impure, treasonous creatures He made to bear His image? God was in a quandary, if you will.

Yet, even in the Garden, He was already hinting at a plan to reconcile this dilemma. “God so loved the world” that he sent down His own Son as a man to pay the death penalty.[{4}](#)

Thomas Oden writes, “God’s holiness made a penalty for sin necessary . . . Love was the divine motive; holiness [was] the divine requirement. [Romans 5:8 reads] ‘God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us’. [And as Romans 8 teaches,] This love was so great that God ‘did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all’ (Romans 8:32).”[{5}](#)

Christ’s Death and Resurrection Was Unlike Other Religious Stories: It Was All for Love

God’s morally just demand for a death-payment is not the same as pagan gods, who maliciously demanded sacrifices. True for one big reason:

Isn’t this crucifixion thing simply about a grouchy god acting all bloodthirsty, as some atheists like popular author Richard Dawkins say? Should good people find this repugnant? One unbelieving critic wrote,

“Unfortunately, much of Christian art consists of depicting

the sufferings and agony of Jesus on the Cross. This reflects the obsession of Christianity with the Crucifixion . . . “Crosstianity” [in the contemptuous words of one skeptic]. The obsession with ‘our sins’ having been ‘washed away by the Blood of the Lamb’ would be regarded as evidence of a serious mental illness . . . but when this is an obsession of millions of people it becomes ‘religious faith’.”{6}

Wow! Did you know that you, if you are a believer, are part of an insane global crowd? This vividly illustrates the scandal of the cross: “which is to them that are perishing foolishness” as the Apostle Paul described it.{7}

No, biblical sacrifice is not a bloodfest, but the way to deal with a sad reality. Put it this way: If God said, “Nah, don’t worry about rebelling against your Creator,” would that be a just and righteous God? Would a deity who fails to punish wrongdoing be worth following? Would His laws mean anything? Yet, we are unable to keep laws, so He steps in to pay that penalty. With His lifeblood. This storyline is utterly unique in the long human history of religions. And the resurrection Christians celebrate shows its truth in actual time and on this dirty earth.

Pagan myths of savior gods who rise from the dead have only a surface resemblance to the biblical resurrection. Such deities are more like impetuous and tyrannical people than the one and only Yahweh. The biblical God’s love fostered the unthinkable: set up a sacrificial system for a one-of-a-kind people—the Israelites—that served as a foretelling of His *coup de grace*: dying in man’s place as the spotless sacrificial Lamb. What a novel religious idea that only the true God could dream up! Theologian Thomas Oden says it this way: “It was God who was both offering reconciliation and receiving the reconciled.”{8}

God’s merging of perfect holiness, just retributive punishment and allowance of His Son’s execution was actually a beautiful

thing. Francis of Assisi wrote that “love and faithfulness meet together [at the cross]; righteousness and peace kiss each other. Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.”[\[9\]](#)

But Why a Violent, Bloody Death?

I get that death was demanded of someone to pay for sin. So why a bloody suffering and execution? Why the constant shedding of blood?

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* hit movie theaters in 2004 to mixed reviews. It earned its R-rating for gory bloodshed and, ironically, became a cultural scandal itself. Seems that the bloody realism was too much for both soft-core Christians and high-minded unbelievers. But this vividly poignant portrayal of Christ's blood-stained Passion did raise a good question.

When it came to saving mankind, why the shedding of blood? Could God not have found another way? Church Father Athanasius believed that, if there were a better way to preserve human free will and still reconcile rebellious man to a holy God, He would have used it. Apparently, Christ's suffering and death was the only solution.

The Apostle Paul summarized Christ's entire earthly ministry this way: He “humbled Himself and became obedient unto death” (Philippians 2:8). At the cross, “human hate did all the damage it could do to the only Son of God.”[\[10\]](#) God used the realities available to Him, including the masterfully grim method of crucifixion, honed to a fine art by Roman pagans who viewed human life as dispensable.

Again, why is death demanded of God to atone for sin? The grounding for such a claim appears early in the Bible, after the murder of Abel by his brother Cain. In Genesis 9 Yahweh declares, “I will require a reckoning . . . for the life of

man. Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in His own image.”{11} Apparently, God has put the price of a man’s life as that of another’s life.

The highlight of Christ’s death was its substitutionary sense. The Apostle Peter wrote, “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit.”{12} Justice, fairness, reality itself demanded a bloodguilt payment for sin. Christ paid it.

Substitutionary sacrifice was nothing new for the Jews who unwittingly had the Messiah crucified. From the beginning of God’s dealings with His people, agreements were blood covenants. What else could carry the weight of such momentous things? And, as the book of Hebrews teaches, “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and **without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.**”{13}

One theologian plainly said, “Through this sacrificial system, the people of Israel were being prepared for the incomparable act of sacrifice that was to come in Jesus Christ.”{14}

His suffering, death and resurrection conquered sin and neutered the fear of death. Only blood could clean sin; only God’s Son’s blood could do it perfectly and forever.

Here’s the scandal we spoke of: only a perfect sacrifice would do for washing mankind’s sins away and reconciling us back to God.

Beautiful Obsession: God Was Glad to Allow This Brutality for Us!

God said it was His pleasure to pay the death penalty with His own self, in the Person of His son. Christianity’s so-called blood-obsession is a beautiful picture of perfect divine love.

Theologian Thomas Oden summarized well our discussion of

Christ's blood atonement. He wrote, "Love was the divine motive; holiness the divine requirement. 'God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8)."

Such claims trump the understandable disgust of doubters. But the red blood leads to clean white.

Chick-fil-A restaurant employees are trained to say, "My pleasure" when serving customers. Imagine God saying that to believers regarding the cross of Christ! Paul explains in his letter to the Colossian church that "it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness of deity to dwell in Him . . . having made peace *through the blood* of His cross . . . He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death . . ."[{15}](#)

God was glad to stand in as the essential scapegoat to restore us to right relations with Himself, to buy us back from slavery to sin, fear and death, and to abolish sin and its effects. This doesn't sound like a bloodthirsty tyrannical deity demanding a whipping boy or abusing his own child, as some acidly accuse. "My pleasure" brings in new dimensions of lovingkindness and servant-heartedness.

But wait, there's more! Scripture lists lots of wonderful effects created by the blood of Christ. These include forgiveness, propitiation or satisfaction of God's righteous wrath, justification or being made right, reconciliation with God, cleansing, sanctification, freedom from sin, and the conquest of Satan.

Yes, you could say that Christianity is blood-obsessed. As accused, even its hymns often focus on the benefits bought at the highest of prices: the life of the God-Man Himself. One famous hymn goes:

For my pardon, this I see,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;

For my cleansing this my plea,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

This beautiful blood obsession finds its highest hope in Revelation. The following is a prophecy about persecuted believers:

“These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have *washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb* . . . For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”[\[16\]](#)

Maybe the revelations here are as crazy as skeptics say. The foolishness of God. We believe they are the most glorious story ever told.

Notes

1. Promotion at Amazon.com for *Obsessed with Blood: The Crazy Things Christians Believe*, Book 1, by Ex-Preacher.
2. 1 Peter 3:18, NASB.
3. Romans 9:33, 1 Corinthians 1:23, 1 Peter 2:8.
4. John 3:16.
5. Oden, Thomas, *Classic Christianity: A Systematic Theology* (New York: Harper Collins, 1987), 405.
6. Meyer, Peter, “Why I Am Not a Christian”. Serendipity blog. Accessed 2-27-17, www.serendipity.li/eden/why_i_am_not_a_christian.htm.
7. 1 Corinthians 1:18.
8. Ibid., 414.
9. Ibid., 405.
10. Ibid., 389.
11. Genesis 9:4-6.
12. 1 Peter 3:18.
13. Hebrews 9:22-23, emphasis mine.
14. Oden, *Classic Christianity*, 413-414.

15. Colossians 1:19.

16. Revelation 7:14b-17, emphasis mine.

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If God is So Good, Why Does He Let Me Hurt?

This is probably the biggest question, and the biggest obstacle to trusting God, in Christianity. It's a legitimate question, and it deserves a thoughtful answer that honors the amount of pain attached to it. Disclosure: I am writing this while beset by the most physical pain I've experienced since post-polio syndrome started attacking my body with the "unholy trinity" of pain, weakness and fatigue. It hurts to stand, it hurts to walk. Every single step.

Why does God allow it? And my pain is *nothing* compared to the horrific suffering of millions around the world. Doesn't He care? Why doesn't He stop it—surely He can. He could stop it all with a single word. So why does He let innocent people—especially children, for heaven's sake—suffer?

We need to put evil and suffering into perspective, and that means the Really Big Picture. Starting before the beginning of time. When all there was, was God: Father, Son and Spirit, engaged in a three-Personed "holy hug" that had no beginning and has no end. A continual celebration of love, adoration, respect, and delight in each other. At some point Father God decided to create mankind and draw us into His circle of love, adopting us as sons (Eph. 1:4-5) and creating a Bride for His eternal Son (Rev. 19:7), a fit companion who would reign with the Lamb (Rev. 22:5).

But God knew that all of human history would unfold between the bookends of the creation of mankind and the Marriage Feast of the Lamb. The God of light and life, of love and truth, knew that all those things are found only in Him; He knew that to reject Him meant choosing darkness and death, isolation and deception. He knew that Adam would rebel, that His perfect creation would crash and burn in the Fall, and that everything would be infected and corrupted by sin. He knew that every human being would be born with a compulsion to reject Him, to live disconnected from Him, independent from Him—something like spiritual HIV+, insuring a death sentence. And sure enough, the mortality rate is still 100%.

God knew all this, and He created us anyway. Because He knew the end result was worth it.

Because God is love, He created people to love, and He created people to love Him back. In order for us to choose to return His love, we needed to be free to choose NOT to love Him. God made us with the very real option to say no to Him, so that our yes would mean something. The alternative would be the equivalent to making a phone say, "Good morning, I love you." The words might be there but there is no heart and no choice behind them—they are nothing more than the result of a programming code. God wanted real and actual love, and that meant that some people He made and dearly loved, could and would say no.

When people say no to God, they not only cut themselves off from relationship with Him, they open the door to all kinds of evil. Some of it comes from sinful human hearts; some of it comes from the demonic realm, angels who also said no to God and became devils. Evil was unleashed by Adam when he disobeyed God in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3) and it has been causing havoc, pain and suffering ever since. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that this world plagued by pain and disease, deliberate meanness and selfishness, is not God's original perfect creation. If it were, God would indeed be a

horrible monster. He knew Adam would open the door to all kinds of evil and suffering, and He allowed Adam to do it anyway. Because He knew the end result was worth it.

Why does God let people suffer?

God uses suffering to cleanse us, to mature us, to burn up shallowness. (Please see my article [The Value of Suffering](#).) [He uses pain](#) as His instrument to shape us into the image of His Son (Rom. 8:28-29). God has no magic wand that instantly transforms us from something broken and dirty (and we are far more broken and dirty than we have any idea) into something whole and beautiful. There is no divine “Bibbity-Bobbity-Boo.”

Instead, the Son left heaven, wrapped Himself in human flesh, and came to earth where He lived a perfect, sinless life. Every day of His earthly life, He suffered as a human, limiting Himself to a body that would get tired, hungry, thirsty and dirty. What the first Adam messed up, Jesus the Second Adam corrected. Where Adam disobeyed the Father, Jesus learned obedience through suffering (Heb. 5:8). Jesus suffered throughout His incarnation simply because of His limitations as a human, then suffered an unimaginably horrible death through crucifixion, made even worse because He absorbed all the sin of every human being who had ever lived, was living on the earth at that time, and would ever exist in the future. He took our sin into Himself, actually becoming our sin (2 Cor. 5:21), so that when He died, our sin died with Him. But the Father raised Him from the dead, and He is alive at His Father’s right hand right now in heaven.

This means that God knows what it means to suffer. There is no pain, no suffering we can endure, that God Himself did not experience even more during Jesus’ time on earth. This same suffering God promised, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5). The Father knew He would send the Son to suffer, and the Son knew that’s what He would leave heaven for.

He did it anyway. Because He knew the end result was worth it.

God allows pain and suffering and evil because He has a plan, and He's working His plan. The end result is that He is redeeming and restoring all the evil, pain and suffering of this sin-sick world. He will set all things right in the end. The last chapter of the Bible makes it clear that there is a happy ending to what is NOT a fairy tale. What started out as a Three-Personed holy hug of the Father, Son and Spirit loving each other while still remaining one God, will be a hugely enlarged circle of love that includes millions, possibly billions of people God made in His image, marked "Mine," and drew into the divine circle to love and be loved forever.

At that point I believe we will agree, as we look back on evil, pain and suffering on earth, that it was so, so worth it.

This blog post originally appeared at [If God Is So Good, Why Does He Let Me Hurt?](#) on July 15, 2014

Why Our Expectations of God Are Unrealistic

In my last blog post I talked about "[Unrealistic Expectations](#)" and promised to explore some of the reasons our expectations of God are unrealistic (and thus why we get frustrated or even furious with Him). I mentioned several ways in which we think God *should* act. Here are my responses to why those expectations are unrealistic.

- *Show the same grace to all of us by treating us all the same*

No child ever has to be taught about fairness. The heart's cry for justice is part of our design. But we are broken in our understanding of so many things, and we usually equate fairness with equality. We want God to treat everyone the same way. But God isn't doing the same thing in everyone; He is creating a masterpiece that will bring glory to Him and goodness to us for all eternity, and His means and tools will differ from person to person. Creating a masterpiece of sculpture in a piece of marble takes different tools and techniques than creating a masterpiece of an oil painting. It's a good thing that God doesn't treat us all the same.

- *Give us an easy life*

Easy, sheltered, enabled lives produce spoiled, entitled children. God's intention is that we grow up to maturity, which necessitates learning to survive the bumps in the road and the harder aspects of living in a fallen world. He is creating an adult, glorious bride for the Lamb, who is fit to reign with Him. An easy life is completely inadequate to the task of preparing us as the church to become the bride of Christ.

- *If I do all the right things to be "a good person," God should do His part to make life work the way I want it to*

That linear "A ensures B" kind of thinking makes sense to our limited, immature minds, but reality doesn't work that way. We cannot manipulate God to make life work the way we want it to. We are part of a much bigger picture that involves spiritual warfare, the battle against our own flesh, and God's purposes that can only be accomplished in ways we don't understand in the process.

One of the most important places of understanding God wants us to reach is the profound truth I saw on a t-shirt once:

2 essential truths:

1. There is a God.

2. You are not him.

God is God, and we are not. We don't get to dictate the way life works, and God will lovingly bring us to the point, as many times as necessary, where we let go of the illusion that we are in control.

He is in control. We are not. And that's a good thing.

But the granddaddy of unrealistic, albeit understandably so, expectations are these:

- *Protect the innocent from pain and suffering*
- *Protect the people who maybe-aren't-so-innocent-but-not-as-bad-as-axe-murderers from pain and suffering*

This is really the bottom line issue for most problems with our understanding of God, the age-old difficult question, "How can a good and loving God allow pain and suffering?"

The bottom line answer is that because of the sinful choices of Adam and Eve, we all live in a world where evil and suffering were unleashed. Our world is now fallen and corrupt, and bad things happen all the time. Part of the equation is that God honors our choices, which are significant and real—even the choices that bring unintended consequences of pain and suffering. Yet God is in control, and He can redeem even the most heinous choices and the most awful pain and suffering. He delights to exchange "a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair" (Isaiah 61:3).

We have a hard time imagining how God can bring good out of evil, and especially out of our pain. Sometimes it's even harder when we look outside ourselves, to the suffering of innocent children such as the growing number of children abused and murdered by their mothers' boyfriends. And I really don't have an answer for that; I just know that God is good,

and He is loving, and my inability to see how He will make it all okay in the end does not affect whether it's true or not.

One of my favorite stories comes from my dear friend whom I'll call Emily, who was not only raped repeatedly by her father from the time she was two years old, but he would take money from his friends so they could abuse her as well. Emily has a vibrant relationship with Jesus, especially because she has learned to listen to Him.

One day after the Holy Spirit gently restored a vivid memory of one of these gang-rape sessions for her to process, she said, "Jesus, I had a sense of being covered in something heavy, like a stack of blankets, while the abuse was going on. What was that about?" The Lord lovingly told her, "That was Me lying on top of you, protecting you from the full brunt of the abuse you were experiencing. The men had to come through Me to get to you, and I took a portion of their evil into Myself before it got to you." Through her tears, she asked, "But why? How could there possibly be any good to come out of that horrific sexual abuse?" Jesus said, "Beloved, you are a diamond of great value. Every incident of abuse that you sustained was a hammer and chisel in My Father's hands, creating a new facet in the diamond. When you see the finished product, you won't believe the stunning beauty of the jewel that you are. And you will say it was worth it."

(Incidentally, Emily hasn't had to wait till heaven to start seeing the value of her horrific suffering. She has been able to be "Jesus with skin on" to other wounded women and children because she understands their suffering.)

The reason our expectations of God are so often unrealistic is because He is so much bigger, so much more glorious, so much more loving, so much more in control, than we can possibly comprehend. May we grow in our understanding as He continues to prove Himself faithful and good—in everything.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/engage/sue_bohlin/why_our_expectations_of_god_are_unrealistic on Oct. 26, 2010.

Crime and Punishment – A Christian View of Dostoevsky's Classic Novel

Michael Gleghorn looks at the famous novel through a Christian worldview lens to see what truths Dostoevsky may have for us. We learn that this great novel records the fall of man into a degraded state but ends with the beginning of his restoration through the ministry of a selfless, Christian woman.

Introduction and Overview

In 1866 the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky published *Crime and Punishment*, one of his greatest novels. It's a penetrating study of the psychology of sin, guilt, and redemption, and it haunts the reader long after the final page has been read. It tells the story of an intelligent, but impoverished, young Russian intellectual named Raskolnikov. Under the unfortunate influence of a particularly pernicious theory of society and human nature, he exalts himself above the moral law, grievously transgresses it by committing two murders, "and plunges into a hell of persecution, madness and terror."[\[1\]](#)

Raskolnikov had conceived of himself as a great and extraordinary man, on the order of a Napoleon. He tried to convince himself that he wasn't bound by the same tired old

moral code that the vast mass of humanity lives in recognition of, if not obedience to—the merely *ordinary* men and women who accomplish little and amount to less. Nevertheless, after committing his horrible crime, he finds that he cannot escape his punishment: he cannot silence his sensitive and overburdened conscience. In the end, when he can stand it no longer, he decides to confess his crime and accept suffering as a means of atonement.

Joseph Frank observes that Dostoevsky, the author of this story, had “long been preoccupied with the question of crime and conscience.”^{2} In one of his letters, Dostoevsky describes his story as the “psychological report of a crime.”^{3} The crime is committed, he says, by “a young man, expelled from the university . . . and living in the midst of the direst poverty.” Coming under the influence of “the strange, ‘unfinished’ ideas that float in the atmosphere,” he decides to murder an old pawnbroker and steal her money. Dostoevsky describes the old woman as “stupid and ailing,” “greedy” and “evil.” Why, it would hardly be a crime at all to murder such a wretched person! What’s more, with the money from his crime, the young man can “finish his studies, go abroad,” and devote the rest of his life to the benefit of humanity!

Inspired by these thoughts, the young man goes through with the crime and murders the old woman. But, notes Dostoevsky, “here is where the entire psychological process of the crime is unfolded. Insoluble problems confront the murderer, unsuspected and unexpected feelings torment his heart . . . and he finishes by *being forced* to denounce himself.”

This, in brief, is the story of *Crime and Punishment*. In what follows, we’ll take a closer look at the theory which led Raskolnikov to commit his crime. Then we’ll consider why the theory proved false when Raskolnikov actually attempted to put it into practice.

The Ordinary and Extraordinary

Raskolnikov committed two murders, in part simply to see if he really has the bravado to put his theories into practice. But what are these ideas? Where do they come from? And why do they lead Raskolnikov to such heinous actions?

Essentially, Raskolnikov's theory, which was partially developed in an article on crime that he had written, holds that all men, by a kind of law of nature, are divided into two distinct classes: the *ordinary* and the *extraordinary*. This theory, which finds some of its philosophical roots in the writings of men like Hegel and Nietzsche, claims that ordinary men exist merely for the purpose of reproduction by which, at length, the occasional, extraordinary man might arise. Raskolnikov declares, "The vast mass of mankind is mere material, and only exists in order by some great effort, by some mysterious process, by means of some crossing of races and stocks, to bring into the world at last perhaps one man out of a thousand with a spark of independence." The man of genius is rarer still, "and the great geniuses, the crown of humanity, appear on earth perhaps one in many thousand millions."[\[4\]](#)

The distinctive features of the ordinary man are a conservative temperament and a law-abiding disposition. But extraordinary men "all transgress the law." Indeed, says Raskolnikov, "if such a one is forced for the sake of his idea to step over a corpse or wade through blood, he can . . . find . . . in his own conscience, a sanction for wading through blood."[\[5\]](#) So the extraordinary man has the right—indeed, depending on the value of his ideas, he may even have the duty—to destroy those who stand in his way. After all, Raskolnikov observes, such ideas may benefit "the whole of humanity."[\[6\]](#) But how can we know if we are merely ordinary men, or whether, perhaps, we are extraordinary? How can we know if we have the *right* to transgress the law to achieve our

own ends?

Raskolnikov admits that confusion regarding one's class is indeed possible. But he thinks "the mistake can only arise . . . among the ordinary people" who sometimes like to imagine themselves more advanced than they really are. And we needn't worry much about that, for such people are "very conscientious" and will impose "public acts of penitence upon themselves with a beautiful and edifying effect."[{7}](#)

But as we'll see, it's one of the ironies of this novel that Raskolnikov, who committed murder because he thought himself extraordinary, made precisely this tragic mistake.

A Walking Contradiction

James Roberts observes that Raskolnikov "is best seen as two characters. He sometimes acts in one manner and then suddenly in a manner completely contradictory."[{8}](#) Evidence for this can be seen throughout the novel. In this way, Dostoevsky makes clear, right from the beginning of his story, that Raskolnikov is *not* an extraordinary man, at least not in the sense in which Raskolnikov himself uses that term in his theory of human nature.

In the opening pages of the novel, we see Raskolnikov at war with himself as he debates his intention to murder an old pawnbroker. "I want to attempt a thing *like that*," he says to himself.[{9}](#) Then, after visiting the old woman's flat, ostensibly to pawn a watch, but in reality as a sort of "dress rehearsal" for the murder, he again questions himself: "How could such an atrocious thing come into my head? What filthy things my heart is capable of. Yes, filthy above all . . . loathsome!"[{10}](#)

This inner battle suggests that Raskolnikov has mistaken himself for an *extraordinary* man, a man bound neither by the rules of society, nor the higher moral law. But in fact, he's

actually just a conscientious *ordinary* man. The portrait Dostoevsky paints of him is really quite complex. He often appears to be a sensitive, though confused, young intellectual, who's been led to entertain his wild ideas more as a result of dire poverty and self-imposed isolation from his fellow man, rather than from sheer malice or selfish ambition.

In fear and trembling he commits two murders, partly out of a confused desire to thereby benefit the rest of humanity, and partly out of a seemingly genuine concern to really live in accordance with his theories. Ironically, while the murders are partly committed with the idea of taking the old pawnbroker's money to advance Raskolnikov's plans, he never attempts to use the money, but merely buries it under a stone. What's more, Raskolnikov is portrayed as one of the more generous characters in the novel. On more than one occasion, he literally gives away all the money he has to help meet the needs of others. Finally, while Raskolnikov is helped toward confessing his crime through the varied efforts of Porfiry Petrovich, the brilliant, yet compassionate, criminal investigator, and Sonia, the humble, selfless prostitute, nevertheless, it's primarily Raskolnikov's own tormented conscience that, at length, virtually forces him to confess to the murders.

So while Raskolnikov is guilty, he's not completely lost. He still retains a conscience, as well as some degree of genuine compassion toward others. Dostoevsky wants us to see that there's still hope for Raskolnikov!

The Hope of Restoration

After Raskolnikov commits the two murders, he finds himself confronted with the desperate need to be reconciled with God and his fellow man. From the beginning of the story, Raskolnikov is portrayed as somewhat alienated from his

fellows. But once he commits the murders, he experiences a decisive break, both spiritually and psychologically, from the rest of humanity. Indeed, when he murders the old pawnbroker and her sister, something within Raskolnikov also dies. The bond that unites him with all other men in a common humanity is destroyed—or “dies”—as a sort of poetic justice for murdering the two women.

This death, which separates Raskolnikov both from God and his fellow man, can only be reversed through a miracle of divine grace and power. In the novel, the biblical paradigm for this great miracle is the story of the raising of Lazarus. Just as Lazarus died, and was then restored to life through the miraculous power of God in Christ, so also, in Dostoevsky’s story, Raskolnikov’s “death” is neither permanent nor irreversible. He too can be “restored to life.” He too can be reconciled with God and man.

While this theme of death and restoration to life is somewhat subtle, nevertheless, Dostoevsky probably intended it as one of the primary themes of the novel. In the first place, it is emphasized by Sonia, Porfiry Petrovich, and Raskolnikov’s own sister, that only by confessing his crime and accepting his punishment can Raskolnikov again be *restored* to the rest of humanity. In this way, Dostoevsky repeatedly emphasizes the “death” of Raskolnikov.

In addition, the raising of Lazarus is mentioned at least three times in the novel. One time is when, in the midst of a heated discussion, Porfiry specifically asks Raskolnikov if he believes in the raising of Lazarus, to which Raskolnikov responds that he does.[\[11\]](#) This affirmation foreshadows some hope for Raskolnikov, for the fact that he believes in this miracle at least makes possible the belief that God can also work a miracle in his own life. Secondly, the only extended portion of Scripture cited in the novel relates the story of Lazarus. In fact, it’s Raskolnikov himself, tormented by what he’s done, who asks Sonia to read him the story.[\[12\]](#) Finally,

at the end of the novel, the raising of Lazarus is mentioned yet again, this time as Raskolnikov recollects Sonia's previous reading of the story to him.[{13}](#) Interestingly, this final reference to the raising of Lazarus occurs in the context of Raskolnikov's own "restoration to life."

Restored to Life

Near the end of the novel, Raskolnikov at last goes to the police station and confesses to the murders: *"It was I killed the old pawnbroker woman and her sister Lizaveta with an axe and robbed them."*[{14}](#) He is sentenced to eight years in a Siberian labor prison. Sonia, true to her promise, selflessly follows him there. Early one morning she comes to visit Raskolnikov. Overcome with emotion, he begins weeping and throws himself at her feet. Sonia is terrified. "But at the same moment she understood She knew . . . that he loved her . . . and that at last the moment had come."[{15}](#) God's love, mediated through Sonia, had finally broken through to Raskolnikov: "He had risen again and he . . . felt in it all his being."[{16}](#)

Although Raskolnikov had previously been something of an outcast with his fellow inmates, nevertheless, on the day of his "restoration," his relations with them begin to improve. Dostoevsky writes:

He . . . fancied that day that all the convicts who had been his enemies looked at him differently; he had even entered into talk with them and they answered him in a friendly way. He remembered that now, and thought it was bound to be so. Wasn't everything now bound to be changed?[{17}](#)

What's more, Dostoevsky also implies that Raskolnikov is being restored to relationship with God. Picking up the New Testament that Sonia had given him, "one thought passed through his mind: 'Can her convictions not be mine now? Her

feelings, her aspirations at least . . .'"[{18}](#) And Dostoevsky then concludes his great novel by stating: "But that is the beginning of a new story—the story of the gradual renewal of a man, the story of his gradual regeneration, of his passing from one world into another, of his initiation into a new unknown life."[{19}](#)

So by the end of the novel, Raskolnikov, as a type of Lazarus, has experienced his own "restoration to life." He is ready to begin "his initiation into a new unknown life." And interestingly, the grace which brings about Raskolnikov's restoration is primarily mediated to him through the quiet, humble love of Sonia, a prostitute. Just as God was not ashamed to have his own Son, humanly speaking, descended from some who were murderers and some who were prostitutes—for it was just such people He came to save—so also, in Dostoevsky's story, God is not ashamed to extend His forgiveness and grace to a prostitute, and through her to a murderer as well. *Crime and Punishment* thus ends on a note of hope, for the guilty can be forgiven and the dead restored to life!

Notes

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Constance Garnett (New York: Bantam Books, 1987). Citation from cover blurb on back of book.
2. Joseph Frank, "Introduction" to Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, ix.
3. The citations from Dostoevsky's letter come from Joseph Frank's "Introduction" to Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, viii-ix.
4. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 229.
5. Ibid., 227.
6. Ibid., 226.
7. Ibid., 228.
8. James Roberts, *Cliffs Notes on Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment*, ed. Gary Carey (Lincoln, Nebraska: Cliffs Notes, Inc.), 70.

9. Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, 2.
10. Ibid., 7.
11. Ibid., 227.
12. Ibid., 283.
13. Ibid., 472.
14. Ibid., 458.
15. Ibid., 471.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., 472.
19. Ibid.

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The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe: Reflections on Its Meaning

A Very Brief Overview

With the recent release of the movie *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the public fascination with all things “Narnian” has once again been raised. But what are we to make of this wonderful story? What deeper truths might it contain?

In order to answer these questions, we must begin with a very brief overview of the story. Four children—Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy—are evacuated from London to the house of an old professor during World War II. Once there, they soon discover a magic wardrobe that leads to another world! First Lucy, then Lucy and Edmund, and then all four of the children

find their way into the enchanted land of Narnia. The country is ruled by the White Witch, who has placed it under a spell so that it's always winter but never Christmas.

Once in Narnia the children learn of Aslan, the great lion and true king of the country. After a long absence, he's now returned. He will deal with the Witch, they're told, and put everything right again. They also learn of an ancient prophecy, that when two Sons of Adam and two Daughters of Eve sit enthroned at the castle of Cair Paravel, then the Witch's reign (as well as her life) will be over. It's believed that the time for this must be near, since Aslan and the four children are now in Narnia.

But Edmund threatens to ruin everything. Unbeknownst to the others, on a previous visit to Narnia he'd met the Witch, eaten her food, and come under her power. Although he really knows that the Witch is bad, he nonetheless betrays his siblings, hoping the Witch will one day make him king. Knowing about the prophecy, however, she eventually decides to kill Edmund. But before she can do so, he's rescued by forces loyal to Aslan!

Not to be outdone, the Witch then appears before Aslan, demanding the traitor's life. Aslan acknowledges the validity of the Witch's claim on a now repentant Edmund, but gets her to renounce it by offering to die in his place. The Witch agrees, and that night she slays Aslan on the Stone Table. She believes her rule in Narnia is now assured. But with the rising of the sun, Aslan rises from the dead! He leads his army to victory against the Witch and her forces. After personally dispatching the Witch, he installs the four children as kings and queens of Narnia, thus fulfilling the ancient prophecy.

This, in a nutshell, is the story. But did the author, C. S. Lewis, intend some deeper meaning? And if so, what is it?

The Search for a Deeper Meaning

It seems that Lewis had at least three objectives in writing his famous *Chronicles*. First, he simply wanted to tell a good story. And almost everyone who's read the *Chronicles* will agree that he succeeded admirably here, for they're among the best-loved books of all time. Second, Lewis also aimed at using his stories to communicate moral truth, both by precept and example. In this regard, Paul Ford observes that Lewis is something of a Christian Aesop. Like Aesop, he's more than *just* a storyteller; he's "also a moral educator."[\[1\]](#) As Gilbert Meilaender notes:

Lewis . . . believes that moral principles are learned indirectly from others around us, who serve as exemplars. . . . the Chronicles of Narnia . . . are not just good stories . . . they serve to enhance moral education, to build character. . . . To overlook the function of the Chronicles of Narnia in communicating images of proper emotional responses is to miss their connection to Lewis's moral thought.[\[2\]](#)

Finally, Lewis also purposed to communicate important truths of the Christian faith by translating them into the imaginary landscape of Narnia. But here we must be careful. Lewis insisted that the *Chronicles* should not be read as Christian allegories. Paul Ford observes that in an allegory there are "one-to-one correspondences between philosophical or religious concepts and the characters or events or objects in a story."[\[3\]](#) The *Chronicles*, said Lewis, are not allegories. They're rather what he called "supposals." He explained the difference in a letter, with special reference to the great lion Aslan:

[Aslan] is an invention giving an imaginary answer to the question, 'What might Christ become like, if there really were a world like Narnia and He chose to be incarnate and die

and rise again in that world as He actually has done in ours?’ This is not an allegory at all. . . . The incarnation of Christ in another world is mere supposal.[\[4\]](#)

So while the *Chronicles* should not be read as allegories, it’s still quite true that they’re informed throughout by Lewis’s Christian faith and imagination. They are Christian “supposals”—and Aslan is *supposed* to be what Christ *might* look like if He became incarnate in a land like Narnia.

Having discussed Lewis’s purposes in writing the *Chronicles*, and having seen that they do indeed contain a deeper meaning, we’re now ready to look more closely at the most famous of these: *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Temptation and Sin

Two of the major themes developed by Lewis are temptation and sin. By carefully weaving these into his story, Lewis is able to address issues of importance both for basic morality and for the Christian faith.

When Edmund first stumbles into Narnia through the wardrobe, he finds himself alone in a snow-covered wood. Cold, and not much liking the look of the place, he almost decides to go home when he hears the sound of bells in the distance. Shortly thereafter a sleigh comes into view, and in it sits the White Witch.

The Witch stops the sleigh and questions Edmund. She knows of the ancient prophecy that, when two Sons of Adam and two Daughters of Eve sit enthroned at Cair Paravel, then her reign (and life) will be over. When she learns that Edmund is human, she raises her wand as if she intends to turn him into stone. But she changes her mind and with feigned friendliness invites Edmund to sit in her sleigh. She asks if he would like something to eat and Edmund requests Turkish Delight (which

she magically produces).

As he devours the sweets, the Witch continues to question him. She learns that he has a brother and two sisters. Together, the siblings could fulfill the prophecy that would spell her doom! But the Turkish Delight is enchanted; whoever tastes it will want more and more. Knowing this, the Witch tempts Edmund. She says that if he will bring his siblings to her house, then she will give him more Turkish Delight—something Edmund desperately wants. She also says that she would like to make Edmund a prince. And later, when she's gone, he will even be king! So the Witch tempts him by appealing to his desire for power and pleasure.

And it works! Before Edmund returns home, “he [is] already more than half on the side of the Witch.”^{5} Later, when all four siblings get into Narnia together, Edmund slips away from the others and goes to betray them to the Witch. His desire for Turkish Delight and to be king leads him to yield to temptation—and sin. It reminds one of what James says in the New Testament: “But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (1:14-15).

Though we might not like to admit it, there's something of Edmund in all of us. Like Edmund, we've all sinned (Rom. 3:23). And unless Someone intervenes who can change both us and our circumstances, then like Edmund we're also doomed to die (Rom. 6:23; Rev. 20:14-15).

Sacrifice and Redemption

Lewis claimed that the idea for his story, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, “all began with a picture of a Faun carrying an umbrella and parcels in a snowy wood.” “At first,” he wrote, “I had very little idea how the story would go. But

then suddenly Aslan came bounding into it. . . . [and] He pulled the whole story together.”{6} It’s a good thing He did. For without Aslan the traitorous Edmund would have met a very different fate than that which actually befell him.

You see, Aslan’s Father, the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea, put some Deep Magic into Narnia at its beginning. The Witch, who accuses Edmund before Aslan, is quite knowledgeable about this Deep Magic. “Every traitor,” she insists, “belongs to me as my lawful prey. . . . Unless I have blood as the Law says all Narnia will . . . perish in fire and water.”{7} Aslan agrees that her claim is valid.

Although it looks like Edmund is as good as dead, Aslan, in a private conversation with the Witch, gets her to renounce her claim on Edmund’s blood. It’s only later that we learn why. The great lion made the Witch an offer she couldn’t refuse. He offered to die in Edmund’s place. True to His word, He arrives that night at the Stone Table and there He is slain by the Witch.

But that’s not the end of the story. Early the next morning, as the sun peers over the horizon, the Stone Table cracks in two and Aslan is raised from the dead. He’s conquered death through an even Deeper Magic, unknown to the Witch. As Aslan explains, “Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked . . . into . . . the darkness before Time dawned . . . She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.”{8}

It’s a beautiful picture of substitutionary atonement. Aslan willingly lays down His life for the traitorous Edmund, thereby redeeming him from the just demands of the Law. It reminds one of what Christ did for us. Paul told the Galatians, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is

everyone who is hung on a tree'" (Gal. 3:13). Just as Aslan gave up His life for Edmund, so Christ gave up His life for each of us, dying as a substitute in our place so that we might forever share in the life of God!

Reflections on the Movie

As many fans of Lewis's classic story *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* have already observed, the movie is really quite good and well worth seeing. It is a generally faithful rendition of Lewis's beautiful and imaginative original. Indeed the film is really at its best when it adheres most closely to the book. It was reported that at one time another group of filmmakers was planning to produce a very different version of the story. Supposedly their plan was to set Lewis's wonderful children's classic "in present-day Brentwood. Instead of a White Witch wooing young Edmund with Turkish Delight, a cool Californian would win him with cheeseburgers." [\[9\]](#) If this is really true, we can all rejoice that such an absurd retelling of Lewis's famous story never saw the light of day. All those involved with bringing *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to the big screen are to be commended for adhering so closely to Lewis's original vision.

But of course no movie is perfect, and *The Lion* is no exception. Possibly two of the biggest disappointments for fans of the book are the diminished role given to some of Lewis's most important dialogue and the diminished importance of the great lion himself. For example, compared to his counterpart in the book, wise old professor Kirke has precious little to say in the movie.

Even more troubling, the extended conversation which the four children have with Mr. and Mrs. Beaver about Aslan lacks many of the Beavers' most important declarations. Unlike the book, the movie never refers to Aslan as "the son of the great Emperor-Beyond-the-Sea." And Mr. Beaver is also denied his

famous response to Lucy's question about whether Aslan is actually safe. "Safe?" he asks, "Who said anything about safe? 'Course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the King, I tell you." [\[10\]](#) Not only was such important dialogue cut, but as Jeffrey Overstreet noted, Aslan's appearances are "painfully brief." He doesn't "have the time onscreen to earn our affection and awe the way we might have hoped." [\[11\]](#)

In spite of such shortcomings, however, the movie still possesses much of the book's magic. What's more, it retains the crucially important themes of temptation and sin, sacrifice and redemption. Aslan still dies as a substitute for the traitorous Edmund, thereby redeeming him from the just demands of the Law. Finally, as Overstreet observed, "Those who respond to the movie's roar by running to Lewis's book will find Deeper Magic in its pages. Meeting them there, Lewis himself will lead them 'further up, further in'." [\[12\]](#) If the movie leads a new generation of readers to tackle this classic story, then it will indeed have served as a fitting tribute to its author.

Notes

1. Paul F. Ford, "Introduction," in *Companion to Narnia* (San Francisco: Harper, 1994), xxviii.
2. [Gilbert Meilaender](#), *The Taste for the Other* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 212-13, cited in Ford, *Companion to Narnia*, xxxi.
3. Ford, *Companion to Narnia*, xxv.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Letters of C.S. Lewis*, ed. W.H. Lewis (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), 283, cited in Ford, *Companion to Narnia*, xxv-xxvi.
5. C. S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* (New York: Collier Books: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1970), 39.

6. C. S. Lewis, *Of Other Worlds*, ed. Walter Hooper (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1966), 42.
7. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 139.
8. Ibid., 159-60.
9. Andrew Coffin, "The Chronicles of Making Narnia," *World*, December 10, 2005, 21.
10. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, 75-76.
11. Jeffrey Overstreet, "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe," www.christianitytoday.com/movies/reviews/lionwitchwardrobe.html, posted December 8, 2005.
12. Ibid.