

CWR*magazine*

April 2022
Volume 13, Number 2

CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT THE RELIGION



The CROSS

God's Eternal Mercy Seat

by Brad Jersak

- The Cross: God's Eternal Mercy Seat | Brad Jersak 2**
Trimming the Roses | Laura Urista 5
The Saving Power of the Cross | Richard Rohr 6
The Meaning(s) of the Cross | Greg Albrecht 7

The CROSS

by Brad Jersak

God's Eternal Mercy Seat

The celebration of Easter this month once again places the Cross of Christ and his resurrection front and center of our faith, as they should be. These events comprise a hinge-point in the human story and what theologians have called “salvation history.” The New Testament witness not only records what occurred but also reflects upon the meaning of those occurrences as good news—our *gospel*.

Unveiling the meaning of the crucifixion is of particular importance to the apostles, because they are convinced that it spelled more than a tragic end to the life of Jesus. Somehow, the Cross is essential groundwork for the reconciliation of all people and the restoration of all things. To make their case, the first Christians developed a constellation of words, images, and analogies—leaning heavily on how their Jewish backstory anticipated a Messiah who suffers and dies before entering his glory.

Jesus is the “hilasterion” for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1 John 2:2).

One such word-picture comes from the Greek term *hilasterion*. John the beloved disciple writes that Jesus “is the *hilasterion* for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). In Romans 3:25, Paul speaks of Jesus, “whom God put forward as a *hilasterion* by his blood.” The big question is what *hilasterion* means and how best to translate it.

Some Bibles render the word *propitiation*, others *expiation*, and still others *atoning sacrifice*. Such terms tend to be obscure or worse—they seem to suggest an *appeasing* sacrifice toward a wrathful God. So our readers are right to ask, “What do you make of this in light of a *nonviolent* God?”

What an important question! Especially when readers are so often at the mercy of the theology of translators. That’s why it’s good to compare Bible translations and check in with those who have more time to dig a little deeper.

We need to carefully assess a specifically gospel approach to translating *hilasterion*. Pagan religions in Jesus’ day could use that term to describe:

a. propitiation: offering sacrifices to their gods to avert their wrath and gain their favor, in which case, the gods were reconciled to them, or...

b. expiation: their gods could remove whatever offense was alienating the people, so that the people were reconciled to the gods.

In the 20th century, Christian theologians argued these senses of *hilasterion* from either side. Most famously, C.H. Dodd argued that God *expiated* (removed, washed away) our sin (by forgiveness) to reconcile us to himself. Meanwhile, Leon Morris

argued that Jesus was the sacrifice of *propitiation* that appeased God’s wrath so God could be reconciled to us (hence the phrase “penal substitutionary atonement”).

But here’s the thing: to begin with, we’re NOT pagans. For us, the

backstory for the Christian use of *hilasterion* is NOT pagan sacrificial religion. The word was also used frequently by God’s people in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint), which was composed before the time of Christ and cited in the New Testament.

THE MERCY SEAT

In the Septuagint, *hilasterion* primarily refers to *the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant*. This is the throne where God would sit as Israel’s king ... a throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16) where God extends the mercy that endures forever.

Hilasterion can thus be defined as “the means or the place where sins are forgiven and reconciliation happens.” In the NT, where is the mercy seat where we see God seated? **The *hilasterion* is the throne of grace, the seat of mercy, which is the Cross of Christ!**

And rather than demanding a blood sacrifice to appease God’s wrath for our sins (propitiation), we see God in Christ offering himself to us as a mercy gift of reconciliation and welcoming us to receive his forgiveness, freely offered. It is by grace that we are saved, not through violent transactional religion. We believe this was the sense in which the apostles John and Paul used the term.

And it’s not just that God forgave our sins, as if sin were merely ‘wrongdoing.’ The sin problem runs far deeper than that. In an *Ancient Faith* blogpost titled “The Seat of Mercy and the End of the Legal View’ (Aug. 11,

2016), Stephen Freeman writes,

[Sin is] a violation of the very constitution of our being and of the world around us. . . . it is “disintegration.” St. Athanasius and a number of other fathers described it as a movement towards non-being. Sin is substantial. It can be healed and washed, excised and destroyed.

This brings us back to the Mercy Seat. Christ is indeed the “Mercy Seat” for our sins. As our Mercy Seat, he destroys them, cleanses

“Hilasterion” refers back to the mercy seat of Israel’s ark of the covenant, the throne where God sits as king. The CROSS is that throne of eternal grace and infinite mercy!

them, remits them, carries them away, etc. Christ’s bearing of our sin is the bearing of our disintegration, our drive towards non-being. It is the recreation of his creation.

Now, the NIV translation tried to play it neutral between

propitiation and expiation, by translating *hilasterion* as the “*atonement sacrifice*,” but again, what do we mean by *atonement*?

The English term was originally coined from *at-one-ment*, which simply means union or reunion, a reconciliation, as with the father and son in the parable of the prodigal sons(s). Yet the English language morphed the word *atonement* through the centuries into almost its opposite: *appeasement*. Then we’ve reverted

to transactional pagan religion!

Instead, we should think of *atonement* as the *reconciliation* we experience through Christ when he forgave humanity from his Mercy Seat—from the Cross.



RECONCILIATION TOTEM

There is, however, another point of view: a friend alerted me to current research by a scholar at Kings College in Canada (Dr. Andrew Rillera). His PhD research (at Duke University) offers a compelling rationale to argue that *hilasterion* in Romans 3 may *not* be referring to the Mercy Seat. Rather, he argues, Paul may have been referring to *hilasterion* in its common hellenistic (i.e., Greek culture) usage as an *imperial peace totem*. Rillera's claim leans on the archeological discovery of several Roman *hilasterions*.

Hellenistic language for this kind of *hilasterion*, rather than the Jewish Mercy Seat.

It is striking that once again, even the imperial totem represents an act of forgiveness that reconciles without any reference to appeasing the wrath of an angry emperor. It's a sign of forgiveness offered by the king as a visible reminder of grace—no punishment required!

While I am not entirely convinced, it occurs to me that Paul and John may be drawing from *both* Jewish religion and Roman culture to make the same point for both audiences. Could it

sacrifice? Do we imagine sacrifices as offerings of appeasement like that of the pagan religions?

No, for Christians, we think of sacrifice as a facet of *self-giving love*. It is more like the sacrificial love of a mother when giving birth to a child, or the self-sacrifice of a first responder rushing into a burning building to save someone trapped in the flames. Surely these latter illustrations are descriptive of God's sacrifice for us.

P.S. Though I still prefer to use the LXX "mercy seat" and link it to the Cross, I also found the translation "*reconciliation gift*"

helpful in conveying the meaning of *hilasterion's* mercy seat metaphor.

Unfortunately, a lot of the online information is still loaded with the penal substitution propaganda (and promoted as the gospel itself). This really imposes its transactional system onto the word, which becomes self-fulfilling of the theology. In other

RECONCILIATION TOTEM

The Haida indigenous people erected a reconciliation totem in Vancouver to pay tribute to child survivors of Canada's religion-based residential schools and to remember the thousands of children who died there. The totem features children of diverse tribes standing atop a model of a school. Families of lost children pounded hundreds of copper nails into the image of the school. This cross-shaped totem represents their first steps on the path of truth and reconciliation.

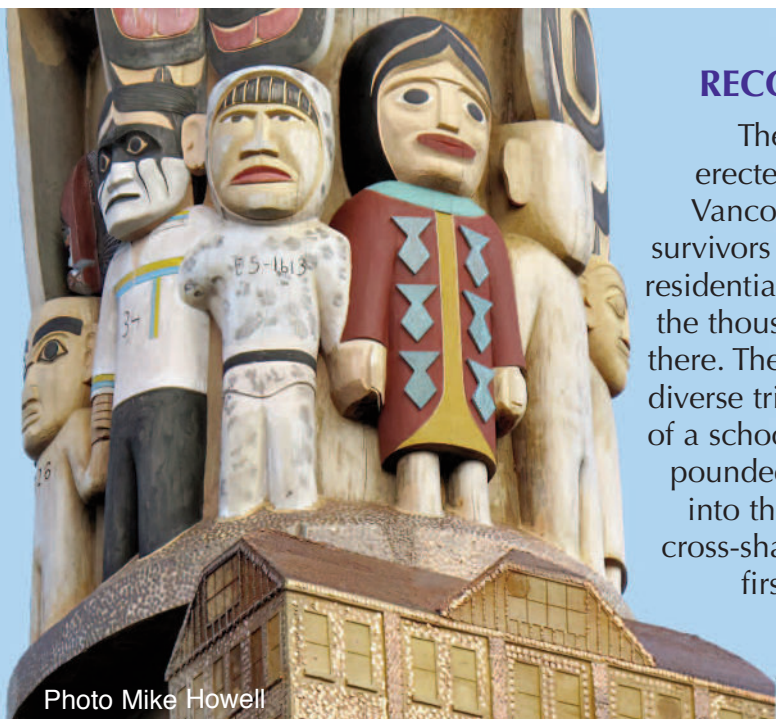


Photo Mike Howell

One example comes from Miletus (in Turkey, just south of Ephesus), where Caesar Augustus forgave the followers of Antony for their rebellion, and erected a stone pillar (*hilasterion*) as a sign of his peace with them. Dr. Rillera makes the case that Jesus is this kind of *hilasterion* in Romans 3. He feels that all the surrounding verses in the text align with

be that the Cross of Christ is the eternal *hilasterion*, forever reminding us of God's mercy, love and peace?

AT-ONE-ING SACRIFICE

And finally, if we're to make use of the NIV sense of *hilasterion* as *atonement sacrifice*, since the blood of the lamb is sprinkled on the Mercy Seat, what do we mean by

words, they think the *hilasterion* means wrath-appeasement because they *need* it to mean this. Happily, we're now seeing a better and much more beautiful way forward as we explore the glory of the Cross of Christ. □

Brad Jersak further develops this theology of the Cross in his book, A More Christlike God, available at www.ptm.org/books.

Trimming the Roses —Laura Urista

A person who is good at reviving dead plants (or keeping plants healthy and vibrant) is often known as a “green thumb.” If there is such a nickname for someone who’s not very good at taking care of plants, I suppose it might be a “brown thumb.” That would come closer to describing my ability (or rather, inability) to take care of plants, bushes and flowers. My husband teases me that I have trouble just keeping silk plants alive!

But here in Southern California even a “brown thumb” like me can somehow manage to keep rose bushes alive, so that each spring we enjoy beautiful, vibrant rose blooms in front of our home.

We first moved into our house in the winter. The rose bushes in front of our house were spindly and withered. I accidentally trimmed them back too far—so I thought. I trimmed until it looked like there wasn’t much left but a stump, and I thought they wouldn’t survive. But I fed and watered them, and along with a little rain and a lot of sunshine they survived. Not only did they survive, to my surprise and delight, that spring our rose bushes blossomed with the largest, most vibrant and fragrant roses I had ever seen.

TRIALS, SETBACKS & STRESS

When we go through trials, setbacks and stressful times—health issues, a job loss, a divorce or broken relationship, perhaps even the death of a loved one—it can often seem like we won’t survive. We can feel like we’ve been trimmed back too far to ever return to normal. But we can take a lesson from the rose bushes.

Feeling like we’ve been trimmed back too far can actually help us grow! Trials, setbacks and stressful times can help us be more aware of God’s presence and receptive to promptings of the Holy Spirit in our lives. That is, if we recognize and choose to listen to that “still, small voice” within.

As we become more receptive to God’s presence, we can allow Christ to live in us and water us like a fresh spring rain. Trials, setbacks and stressful times can make us more aware of our true

dependence on God—so that our parched souls truly thirst for the living water that Jesus described to the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4:10-14:

“If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”

“Sir,” the woman said, “you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water?”

Jesus answered, “Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”

IN THE GARDEN

Just like roses need sunshine to grow, we also need the “Sunshine” of a vibrant relationship with Jesus. Spending time walking and talking with our best friend and Savior can help keep that relationship alive and healthy. Which reminds me of these lyrics from the old familiar hymn, “In the Garden.”

TRIMMING THE ROSES (cont’d on p. 6)



The Saving Power of the Cross

Richard Rohr

Today the primary human problem is both revealed and resolved. It is indeed a “good” Friday. What is revealed is our human inclination to kill others, in any multitude of ways, instead of dying to ourselves—to our own illusions, pretenses, narcissism, and self-defeating behaviors. Jesus dies “for” us not in the sense of “a substitute for us” but “in solidarity with” the suffering of all humanity since the beginning of time!

Jesus dies “for” us not in the sense of “a substitute for us” but “in solidarity with” the suffering of all humanity since the beginning of time!

The first is merely a heavenly transaction of sorts; the second is a transformation of our very soul and the trajectory of history.

In “Jesus the Forgiving Victim: Listening for the Unheard Voice” (DOERS Publishing: 2013), my dear friend James Alison writes about the true power of the Cross:

[Jesus] went to death as a victim. ... And the reason that this is important is that it catches us at our worst, as it were. The space of

the victim is the kind of place none of us at all ever wants to occupy, and if we find ourselves occupying it, it is kicking and screaming. More to the point, we spend a great deal of time pointing fingers and making sure that other people get to occupy that space, not us.

Now by Jesus going into, and occupying that space of the victim, deliberately, without any attraction to it, he is not only proving that we needn't be afraid of death, but also we needn't be afraid

of shame, disgrace, or of the fact that we have treated others to shame and disgrace.

It is as if he were saying “Yes, you did this to me, as you do it to each other, and here I am undergoing this, occupying the space of it happening, but I'm doing so without being embittered or resentful. In fact, I was keen to occupy this space so as to try to get across to you that I am not only utterly alive, but that I am utterly loving.

“There is nothing you can do, no amount of evil that you can do to each other, that will be able to stop my loving you, nothing you can do to separate yourselves from me. The moment you perceive me, just here, on the cross, occupying this space for you and detoxifying it, the moment you perceive that, then you know that I am determined to show you that I love you, and am in your midst as your forgiving victim. This is how I prove my love to you: by taking you at your very lowest and worst point and saying, Yes, you do this to me, but I'm not concerned about that, let's see whether we can't learn a new way of being together.”

On the Cross, the veil between the Holy and the unholy is torn and the “curtain of his body” becomes a “living opening” (Hebrews 10:20). We all can enter the Holy of Holies, which is the very heart of God. Nothing changed in heaven on Good Friday, but everything potentially changed on earth! □

Adapted from Richard Rohr's Daily Meditation. UBP.

TRIMMING THE ROSES (cont'd from p. 5)

“I come to the garden alone, while the dew is still on the roses... And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own. And the love we share as we tarry there, no other has ever known.”

I've often heard we should stop and smell the roses in life—meaning, take time to notice the blessings all around us. That's good advice and well worth the extra time and effort. But next time you happen to see some roses blooming in the sunshine, I suggest you don't just stop and smell them. Take a moment to also ask God to show you where you might experience new growth. Thank him for the *Son-shine* that nourishes and helps us enjoy closer relationships with Him and with others. Praise him for providing the living water of Christ that he promises will become *“a spring of water welling up to eternal life.”* □

Laura Urista is vice-president of Plain Truth Ministries and managing editor of CWRm.



GREG ALBRECHT

PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

The Meaning(s) of the Cross

What does the Cross of Christ mean and why was it necessary? Many thoughts and theories have been offered over the past two thousand years. We'll explore some here:

The earliest Christian theologians, including the Gospel writers, rooted their understanding of the Cross in the Exodus story of the Passover Lamb. As the Israelites were freed out of Egypt by the blood of a Passover lamb, Christ-followers are redeemed by the blood of the Lamb of God.

Over time, some equated this ransom with a payment. But to whom? To God? To Satan? Or to death itself? But in light of the Exodus story, the redemption metaphor need only apply to the liberation of those in bondage, without reference to any payment to anyone. The Cross is a work of grace.

At the end of the 11th century, Anselm of Canterbury attempted to explain the Cross (using feudal law) as the way God's "honor," offended by our sin, could be satisfied. Since humans could not repay God for their own sins, much less anyone else's, Anselm wrote that God the Father sent his

The Cross of Christ is the single most profound demonstration of God's love, ever! It reveals there the incredible lengths to which God in Christ went in order to love us and embrace us.

divine Son to restore God's honor through his perfect obedience, including his death on the Cross.

Building off Anselm, John Calvin (early 1500s) emphasized God's need for satisfaction, but now it was his *wrath* that needed to be satisfied. And not merely by obedience, but by *violent punishment*, not unlike "honor killings" in cultures where a son or daughter might be killed for shaming their family. God's righteous indignation in the face of human sin demanded his death. This angry God must be appeased, so Jesus placates the Father by taking our place to get us off the hook.

This theory takes occasional biblical imagery of God's courtroom and ends up making our salvation transactional. Consider, then, the fact that trials and penalties and suffering and imprisonment are so in vogue within religious legalism—something the gospel of Jesus Christ absolutely rejects.

One HUGE error with "penal substitution" concerns the Trinity—a central teaching of our faith. We believe in One co-eternal and indivisible God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—forever in perfect harmony and purpose. The three Persons of the undivided God share one, united divine identity.

One error of penal substitution is in how it presents Father and Son at the Cross. It divides the Trinity, pitting the Father (as infinite justice) against the Son (the sin-bearing victim), from whom God must turn away, severing the One inseparable God.

Penal substitution is a legal term, a forensic model of our relationship to and with God. But the gospel is not about forensic punishment, evening the score or paying our debt. The gospel is about forgiveness, grace, mercy and love, so that God seeks our love, not his satisfaction. God in Christ is not worried

about the holiness of his name or reputation—these are set aside on the Cross, when Jesus endured and consumed all hatred, evil, and sin forever.

How? Not by a legal mechanism but through the overflowing love of the Father, whom Jesus came to reveal.

So, the Cross of Christ is not a legal event, but a declaration and covenant of love, by God, who out of his grace, offers us what we can never deserve or earn, rather than demanding a payment.

The Cross of Christ is the single most profound demonstration of God's love, ever! It reveals there the incredible lengths to which God in Christ went in order to love us and embrace us. □

Greg Albrecht is the president of Plain Truth Ministries and editor-in-chief of CWRm.

Now, you can listen to podcasts by Greg Albrecht seven days a week!

Plain Truth Radio – Monday through Friday. Programs produced to play on radio stations available every day of the working week.

CWR Unplugged – Saturday. An impromptu, off-the-cuff discussion of a relevant and timely topic.

Christianity Without the Religion Audio – Sunday. Once-a-week sermons, complete with music, prayers and communion.

CWR audio



Podcast

Join us daily and listen to audio teaching from Greg Albrecht from a grace-based, Christ-centered perspective on your phone, tablet or iPad.

For an easy-to-follow listening guide, visit ptm.org/audioinstructions

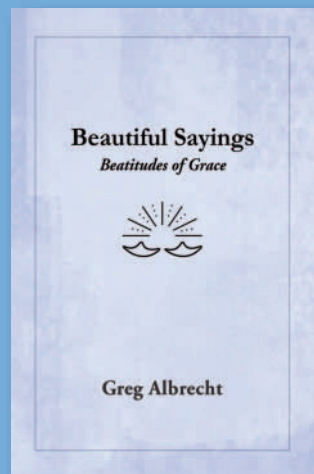
or search CWR/PTM on any of these podcast formats:

- * Apple/iTunes
- * Amazon/TuneIn
- * Google Podcasts
- * Spotify Podcasts
- * Sticher Podcasts

Now Available! Beautiful Sayings: Beatitudes of Grace by Greg Albrecht

The Beatitudes of Jesus Christ shine as a light in the midst of the darkness of our world. Here is the Jesus Way that can transform our lives, our culture and our world at large.

Join Greg Albrecht exploring the amazing grace of God, freely offered and described in these beautiful sayings.



Order your copy at www.ptm.org/books or by calling **1-800-309-4466**

MISSION STATEMENT

Plain Truth Ministries proclaims Christianity without the religion. Our Christ-centered ministry is based on faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone.

TO SUBSCRIBE OR UPDATE YOUR ADDRESS

Electronic subscription: www.ptm.org/sub. We serve readers around the world digitally.

Print subscriptions to *CWRm* are a benefit for those in North America who generously support *CWR/PTM*. To contribute, visit www.ptm.org/give.

Please notify us immediately of any change in your address by phone at 1-800-309-4466, online at www.ptm.org/contact or by mail at *Christianity Without the Religion*, Pasadena, CA 91129.

TO MAKE A DONATION

Plain Truth Ministries gratefully accepts donations (tax deductible in the U.S.) to further the ongoing work of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We accept donations in U.S. funds by check, money order or credit card. Please visit our secure website www.ptm.org/give, call us at 1-800-309-4466, or write us at *Plain Truth Ministries*, Pasadena, CA.

TO SEND A LETTER OR E-MAIL

Write to *CWR magazine* at Pasadena, CA 91129, email us at managing.editor@ptm.org. The editors reserve the right whether or not to publish comments, in whole or in part, to print your name and edit for clarity and space.

We protect the confidentiality of correspondence we deem to be of a personal nature.

COPYRIGHT

CWRm (Christianity Without the Religion magazine) is published six times a year by Plain Truth Ministries, Pasadena, CA 91129. Copyright © 2022 Plain Truth Ministries. Printed in U.S.A. All rights reserved. Vol. 13, No. 2: April 2022.

Unless noted otherwise, scriptures are quoted from the Holy Bible, NIV. © International Bible Society. UBP of Zondervan. *Christianity Without the Religion* is a U.S. trademark.

SUBMISSIONS

CWRm does not publish unsolicited manuscripts. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited artwork, photographs or manuscripts.

PLAIN TRUTH MINISTRIES

CWRm is published by *Plain Truth Ministries (PTM)*. To learn more about *PTM*, visit our website at www.ptm.org (and email us) or write us at *Plain Truth Ministries*, Pasadena, CA 91129.

EDITORIAL STAFF

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF: Greg Albrecht

EDITOR / ART DIRECTOR: Brad Jersak

MANAGING EDITOR: Laura Urista

PUBLISHING / CIRCULATION: Dennis Warkentin

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Ed Dunn

ASSOCIATE EDITOR: Monte Wolverton

