

The Crisis of the Cross: God as Scandalous

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Two Philosophical Questions

The Passion of the Christ suggests that the God and Father of Jesus Christ is scandalous. How could an all-loving God allow His innocent Son and Prophet to undergo barbaric torture and death by Roman crucifixion? Surely, accordingly to many philosophers and other people, this could not be part of an all-loving God's plan. The torture and the death of Jesus by Roman soldiers are, we hear, incompatible with God's loving intentions. Likewise, according to many people, The Passion portrays "needless violence" and "misrepresents" the person and mission of Jesus—recall the seemingly endless scourging of Jesus and its bloody aftermath. These objections come from philosophers and others of widely divergent perspectives, including many Christians, Jews, Muslims, agnostics, and atheists. Are such objections answerable? If so, how?

This chapter uses the movie to address two philosophical questions. First, could an all-loving God have purposes served by the scandalous death of Jesus? Second, how could one come to know the reality of such a God? These questions require that we begin with two other questions: Who is this "Jesus Christ," and what is his avowed purpose in undergoing crucifixion? We will understand the crucifixion of Jesus only if we understand the one who was crucified. Perhaps we will understand ourselves only if we understand Jesus and our role in his crucifixion.

"Who Do You Say I Am?"

Jesus asked his disciples: "Who do you say I am?" (Mark 8:29). The disciples were puzzled by this question, as are many people today, even Christians. Jesus responds by talking about his impending death and subsequent resurrection, thus suggesting that we must understand him in terms of his death and resurrection. He could have pointed to his teachings, his healings, or his influence on his followers, but he did not. Why not? We need some background. It is fitting, we shall see, that The Passion begins with the prophecy from Isaiah 53 that God's servant would be "crushed because of our iniquities."

Jesus claims that he is the unique Son and sole revealer of God as Father (Matthew 11:25-26; Luke 10:21-22). Such a claim would seem delusional on the lips of any other human. In making this claim, Jesus portrays his Father as hiding His plans from "the wise and the intelligent." This fits with the biblical idea that God is elusive, and it should caution us against easily presuming that we adequately understand God's purposes. A recurring biblical theme is that God's ways are not our ways and God destroys the wisdom of the wise (Isaiah 29:14, 55:8-9; 1 Corinthians 1:19; Hebrews 3:10). The Passion vividly portrays God's Son as being mocked, beaten up, clad in rags, and even tortured and murdered. How could this be? How could it be part of God's loving purposes? Is God's love hidden somehow in the cross of Jesus?

The earthly life of Jesus exhibited authority and power unique among humans. According to the New Testament, Jesus has unsurpassed authority and power in human history. The movie portrays his disarming authority in a flashback where Jesus rescues the woman caught in adultery. Jesus remarks that acceptance (or rejection) of him amounts to acceptance (or rejection) of God (Matthew 10:40; cf. 1 John 2:23). In addition, Jesus claims authority to forgive sins apart from God's Temple (Mark 2:1-12) and to oversee the final judgment as God's king (Luke 22:29-30). Likewise, Jesus symbolically presents himself as the everlasting king of Israel, after Zechariah 9:9, in his humble entry into Jerusalem on a colt (Mark 11:1-10). The Passion captures this with the scene of a crowd celebrating Jesus's entry into Jerusalem. The celebration is actually ironic, since Jesus was going not to a throne but to his scandalous death.

Jesus suggests that he is King David's Lord (Mark 12:35-37), and that he is greater than even King Solomon (Luke 11:31). Indeed, in reply to a question from John the Baptist (Luke 7:18-23), he alludes to Isaiah 61:1-2 and 35:5-6 to suggest that he is God's Messiah. Similarly, as the movie dramatically portrays, Jesus claims to be the messianic Son of God in response to the chief priests (Mark 14:61-64). This claim elicits the charge that Jesus is guilty of blasphemy, of exalting himself in a way that demotes God. Even if Jesus is King David's Lord, he does not promote worldly power as the way to triumph. The movie thus begins with Jesus's healing of an enemy injured by Peter's use of a sword to "protect" Jesus (cf. Mark 14:47; John 18:10). In the movie this person appears to be puzzled and deeply moved by the mercy of Jesus. Should we be similarly moved?

In his own earthly life and ministry, according to Jesus, the kingdom of God had arrived: "if it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you" (Luke 11:20, NRSV). This is a central theme of the Good News he preached and exemplified. In the parable of the vineyard (Mark 12:1-12), Jesus suggests that he is God's beloved Son who is heir to the things of God but who will be rejected by humans. Jesus predicted on at least three occasions that he would be put to death by humans but then resurrected (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:33-34).

Despite his predicted death, Jesus saw himself as the one sent by God to fulfill the hopes of Israel for an everlasting kingdom under God. No other human could make such an authoritative claim with any real plausibility. Jesus thus transcends the limits of human authority in a way that merits our attention. In the movie, Jesus leaves Pilate shaken by his remark that his kingdom "is not of this world" (John 18:36). Jesus is no mere moral reformer, spiritual guru, or philosophical sage. He leaves us with three options. He is either (i) patently insane (Mark 3:21), (ii) Satanic (Mark 3:22), or (iii) God's unique Son (Mark 15:39). Clearly, he was not insane. If he was, we should all become similarly insane and thereby improve the world. His not being Satanic should go without saying, after one attends to his compassionate life and teaching. The movie rightly portrays Satan and Jesus as in ongoing conflict with each other. We see this conflict in Gethsemane, at the scourging of Jesus, and while Jesus carries his cross. The third of our three options thus recommends itself. We are thus back to our opening question: How could God allow His innocent Son to be brutalized in the way portrayed by the movie?

The Scandal of the Cross

What exactly is "the scandal of the cross" (Galatians 5:11)? It stems from the One who was crucified. Jesus himself is the scandal, the scandal of his Father's reconciling love for His enemies, including us. Jesus stands absolutely alone, among leaders of the world's religions, as the self-proclaimed atoning sacrifice from God for human sin. As The Passion shows in a flashback, Jesus announces this unique role at the Last Supper. The rest of the New Testament consistently echoes this Good News: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:22-25; cf. Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:15-20). Jesus claims that his death will inaugurate the (new) covenant of God for people. He thus suggests that his death on the cross has saving (or, redemptive) significance for others. Some ancient Jewish literature acknowledges that human suffering can atone for sin (4 Maccabees 6:27-30, 9:23-25). The novelty is that Jesus, the Galilean outcast, regards his death as the means of God's new covenant of redemption. The

covenant is God's loving promise and plan to save humans from their destructive ways via reconciliation with God as a gift unearned by humans. Could the cross of Jesus be the anchor of such a covenant?

Matthew's Gospel represents Jesus as saying that he will die "for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28). The atoning (= reconciling) sacrifice of Jesus as God's covenant offering for humans sets Jesus apart, decisively, from Abraham, Moses, Elijah, Confucius, Krishna (counted by some as a god), Gautama the Buddha, Muhammad, the Dalai Lama, and every other religious leader. None of the latter religious leaders offered himself as God's atoning sacrifice for humans.

People outside the Jesus movement have typically shared the apostle Peter's doubt that the gruesome death of Jesus is integral to God's plan of reconciliation for humans (Mark 8:31-32). Many have doubted that the crucifixion of the Son of God would be compatible with God's character of merciful love. Given that The Passion focuses unabashedly on the passion and the crucifixion of Jesus, many Christians object to it on the ground that the resurrection of Jesus should be given more attention than the cross of Jesus. The apostle Paul faced similar uneasiness about the cross of Jesus among Christians in Corinth. His response was forthright: "... I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2). Why? The obedient death of Jesus is no less important than his resurrection. We shall see why.

The crucifixion of Jesus seems to brand him as a dismal failure. The Passion shows Jesus being held at the mercy of his enemies, offering no resistance, and suffering excruciating abuse. Even so, the cross of Jesus is the place of God's turnaround victory. Out of the crushing defeat of Jesus, God brings proof of His love and forgiveness toward us, His enemies. The cross of Jesus is God's grand reversal of the darkest human tragedy. As Paul says: "... the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength" (1 Corinthians 1:18,22-25, NIV). The power of God's self-giving love is demonstrated in the crucified Jesus, the One whom God approvingly raised from his death on the cross. This invincible power of divine merciful love overcomes even death, thereby surpassing any human power. The resurrection of Jesus is God's indelible signature of approval on His crucified, obedient Son. His resurrection gets significance from the cross, where Jesus gave full obedience to his Father to redeem us.

God sent His Son, Jesus, for a definite purpose: to prove God's merciful love for all people, even His enemies (Romans 5:6-8). The Passion, accordingly, portrays the crucified Jesus as asking for forgiveness for those who have crucified him (cf. Luke 23:34). Jesus came to identify with us in our troubles, while he represented his Father in faithful, self-giving love. He thus represents both God and humans, seeking to reconcile humans to his Father via his gift of merciful love. His obedient death on the cross shows how far he and his Father will go — even to gruesome death — to bring us to God. Jesus gives us all he has in love to demonstrate that God loves us without limit and offers us the gift of unearned friendship with Himself (cf. John 3:16-17, 15:13-14).

God uses the cross of Jesus as the place where our selfish rebellion against God is mercifully judged and forgiven. This does not mean that God punished Jesus. The New Testament does not teach this, contrary to some theologians. God sent Jesus into our nexus of rebellion to undergo suffering and death that God would deem adequate for dealing justly, under divine grace, with our rebellion against God. Jesus thus pays the price on our behalf, and removes the need for fear, condemnation, shame, guilt, and punishment among us (Romans 8:1). Jesus thereby reconciles us to his Father, as he becomes our Lord and Redeemer.

The cross of Jesus is the focal point of divine-human reconciliation. It is thus the very heart of the Jesus movement and its Good News of God's amazing gift of gracious love (see 1 Corinthians 2:2). The self-giving, crucified Jesus is the power and the mirror-image of the all-loving God. Jesus himself, as the human image of God, serves as distinctive evidence of God's reality. He is living proof of God's reality and unsurpassable love. He fulfills his Father's loving plan to reconcile us to Himself. We need to look for the

right kind of evidence of God, while we set aside our misleading preconceptions of such evidence. The movie's shocking portrayal of torture should not obscure God's seeking to use the torture for good, even our good. The Passion is right in putting the cross first and dwelling on its inhumanity and humiliation. The sacrifice of the cross, in all its gruesome horror, is essential to a correct understanding of the significance of Jesus. The scourging that precedes it, to which the movie gives abundant attention, prepares the way for the defining moment and sacrifice of Jesus.

The ultimate motive for the cross of Jesus is his Father's holy, righteous love for us humans (see Romans 3:21-26). Paul remarks: "God proves His own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.... Since we have now been **justified by his blood**, how much more shall we be saved by him from **the wrath** [of God]! [W]hen we were enemies [of God], we were **reconciled** to Him through **the death** of his Son...." (Romans 5:8-10). The living God of love is also a God of **righteous** wrath (Romans 1:18), and because He loves us and all other sinners, He has wrath toward sin. He seeks to reconcile us to (relationship with) Himself in a way that exceeds mere forgiveness and satisfies His holy standard of genuine, righteous love. Through the loving self-sacrifice of Jesus, God meets this standard for us, when we could not and would not. He thereby welcomes us to Himself as our righteous loving Father. As Paul says, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself," not counting our sins against us (2 Corinthians 5:19). This is the heart of the Good News of Jesus Christ. This is God's scandalous holy love. It should shock us and shake us to our core. We typically hold a different, less demanding standard of love, and we thereby domesticate God. We thus pretend to be God. God meets our selfish pretension with scandalous love that is righteous and merciful. In emphasizing this, the movie shocks us. The image of a suffering self-giving God is nothing but scandalous. Coercive power giving way to self-giving love makes no sense to us in the ordinary terms we use to deal with the world.

The heart of the cross for Jesus is his perfectly loving obedience to his Father on our behalf, and not just his physical suffering. We see this exemplified by Jesus in Gethsemane. The movie rightly begins the passion in Gethsemane, where Jesus resolves to obey his Father, and then crushes the snake's (=Satan's) head (cf. Genesis 3:15). Later, it shows Jesus resolutely, even eagerly, embracing his cross. Paul vividly identifies the crucial role of Jesus's obedience. He refers to: "Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness. Being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became **obedient to death**, even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8; cf. Romans 5:19). Jesus can be and is our "Passover lamb" (1 Corinthians. 5:7), our "sacrifice of atonement" (Romans 3:25), because he is perfectly obedient, fully righteous, in the eyes of his holy Father. He became "a curse for us" to save us from the law's curse (Galatians 3:13). His perfectly obedient life toward God is an acceptable sacrifice to God for us. Gethsemane and the Last Supper, as depicted by the movie, manifest these lessons. Gethsemane shows Jesus passionately resolving to put his Father's will first, and the Last Supper shows Jesus portraying, with the bread and the wine as his body and his blood, the ultimate self-sacrifice pleasing to his Father.

Given God's righteousness and our sin, we desperately need a perfect atoning sacrifice, and only the perfectly obedient Jesus can and does provide it in his sacrificial love for us, at the command of his Father. God's power of sacrificial love is made perfect in Jesus's weakness on the cross (cf. 2 Corinthians 12:9). Without Jesus, we have no reconciler to bring us to the holy living God. Jesus alone voluntarily pays the price of our selfish rebellion against God by obediently meeting God's standard of righteous, sacrificial love. For this reason, Jesus alone is Lord and Savior who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29; cf. 1 John 2:2).

The Myth of a Nice God

God is not "nice," contrary to popular expectations. Nor is God out to win a popularity contest. God's purposes are much more profound than popularity contests, and they are not constrained by human purposes, expectations, or standards. God's own character is the ultimate constraint for God's purposes and plans.

Any being worthy of the preeminent title “God” must be worthy of worship. This means that God must be morally perfect. A being merits the full commitment of worship only if that being is morally perfect. It follows further that God must be all-loving, even perfectly loving. A being is morally perfect only if that being is perfectly loving. God, then, must care about us perfectly, in a way that seeks to bring about whatever is truly good for us. What is truly good for us, however, is not always the same as what we want. Hence, God is not required to be “nice” by ordinary standards. God is not a “people-pleaser” in the way that many humans seek to be. The all-loving God is too loving to be a people-pleaser. God cares too much about us to settle for satisfying our wants, and for this we should be grateful.

The myth of the “nice” God looms large in ordinary and philosophical thinking. It leads to misguided conceptions of God and misleading standards for evidence of God’s reality. As a result, the God of scandalous love is domesticated, trivialized, and even rejected. We domesticate God when we approach or even portray God on our terms, by our standards, without “the scandal of the cross” of Jesus. Natural theology, advanced by philosophers with various “arguments for God’s existence,” typically domesticates God in this way. It leaves us at most with the abstract and innocuous “god of the philosophers,” and not the living and suffering God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. The “nice” god of the philosophers does not need the cross of Jesus, for this god is not set on redeeming humans from their rebellious ways. The nice god would say “I’m OK, you’re OK, and we have no need for the cross of Jesus.” This, of course, is not the self-giving suffering God who sends Jesus to a scandalous death on the cross for human sinners. The movie does not promote the nice god of the philosophers. Its God, in keeping with Jesus, goes against our “nice,” shallow, and selfish approaches to love. The Passion captures God’s character of self-giving love by showing Jesus as the obedient Son who gives all he has for the sake of his Father’s plan to restore us to Himself. Jesus, in agreement with his Father, provides us with what we truly need, not just what we may want.

Gethsemane and Forgiveness

Humans must receive the undeserved gift of (a) God’s sacrifice for us in Jesus and thereby (b) God’s Holy Spirit sent by Jesus (Galatians 3:1-2). We receive this gift by faith, or trust, in God, which includes obedience to the Good News of Jesus (see Romans 10:16-17; 2 Thessalonians 1:8; Hebrews 5:9; Matthew 7:21). In saving faith, we are “crucified with Jesus” in our obedient love toward His Father. The theme of our cross-bearing with Jesus pervades the New Testament (see Mark 8:34-35; cf. Matthew 10:37-39; Luke 14:25-27; Galatians 2:20-21, 5:24-25; cf. Romans 6:5-11). The Passion shows the cross-bearing of Jesus to be deliberate and slow, and thus suggests that our own cross-bearing will not be coincidental or rushed.

We receive the gift of life in the saving cross of Jesus only as we live out the cross of self-sacrificial love toward God on behalf of others. Faith in God includes dying with Jesus as we respond to his Father’s love with obedient love as exemplified by Jesus in Gethsemane: Not what I will, Father, but what You will! (Mark 14:36; cf. Matthew 26:39; Luke 22:42). This attitude is the heart of obeying God. The shocking love of his cross is exactly what we need, as an atoning gift and as a way of life. The Passion suggests this lesson in its opening scene, where Jesus in Gethsemane resolutely sets his life on a path that will prove God’s self-giving love for us.

A dominant biblical theme is that people are alienated from God owing to their rebellion against God. The Last Supper message in the movie assumes this. The rebellion stems from our selfish disobedience to God’s love commands: the commands that we love God with all we are and have and that we love others as we love ourselves (Mark 12:28-31). We habitually live our lives as if we have no need of either these commands or the all-loving God who issued them for our own good. Hence, we all share to some degree in the rebellious attitude that led to the scandalous crucifixion of Jesus. Mel Gibson thus fittingly gave himself a role of holding one of the nails in the movie’s crucifixion scene. We reject our God-given status as creatures, and we presume to know better than God regarding what is good for us. In willfully exalting ourselves, we demote God from His status as Lord of our lives. We pretend to be God. Like the Roman soldiers, we seek to be the true God’s executioner. The crucifixion of Jesus shows this.

In opposing God, we undermine our own lives. We choose to cling to sources of supposed security that hinder our loving and trusting God. These include wealth, health, education, and fame. We lapse into

idolatry. We move toward bondage and death, and away from freedom and life. When faced with God's standard of unselfish love in the crucified Jesus, we experience fear, guilt, shame, and hiding. Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus, represents this vividly in the movie. He finally senses his alienation from the merciful Jesus, and becomes overwhelmed with guilt and shame, even to the point of suicide. Our own alienation from God deepens and widens. We become weary and devoid of joy and peace. Death looms large. We have no escape. We are lost indeed, despite the diversions and distractions we use to avoid the God who calls us from death into His life. Will we follow Judas Iscariot into suicide?

In the midst of our self-made mess, the living God of Jesus comes to us. Amazingly, God comes not with condemnation but rather with forgiveness, with merciful love. He comes not to meet our twisted expectations but instead to give us what we truly need. He meets with resistance and rejection from us, but He does not give up. Instead, He goes for broke: He sends His beloved Son, Jesus. He stoops low, humbly, to meet us in self-giving compassionate love, in Jesus. God is, in Jesus, proclaiming forgiveness to His enemies (including us), and extending an offer of reconciliation, of friendship on God's life-giving terms of unselfish love. The movie ascribes to Jesus, on his way to be crucified, a line from the book of Revelation spoken to his mother: "Behold I make all things new!" (Revelation 21:5). In particular, Jesus renews relationships with his Father.

God's call to us is a Good News call of compassionate forgiveness. When God pronounces forgiveness upon us, we are being judged by God's love as having fallen short of His love commands. We are judged as needing forgiveness and as being worthy of judgment, owing to our rebellion against God's love commands. We expect judgment as condemnation, but instead we receive judgment as merciful forgiveness in Jesus. This is the core of the Good News, the Gospel, of Jesus Christ. Part of this core is that we receive, as a free gift, the very Spirit of Jesus and of His Father. The Passion vividly illustrates God's forgiveness in a flashback to Jesus who frees a woman caught in adultery from punishment by stoning.

In Jesus, God has taken care of any supposed or self-imposed ground for human alienation or hiding owing to human rebellion. In Jesus, God offers compassionate forgiveness to all people, however alienated and rebellious they are. God counts the death of Jesus as any needed payment for justly forgiving our rebellion. God's offered reconciliation of us to Himself is a free, unearned gift in Jesus. It undermines any of our distorted conceptions of a "just" reconciliation. God's gracious gift of Jesus sets the standard for justice in reconciliation. This is a central theme of Paul's letter to the Romans (see Romans 3:21-26), and it is foreshadowed in Jesus's parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1-16). Divine reconciliation comes in a kind of unselfish, suffering love foreign to us and our inferior, "nice" and selfish ways. It shatters our distorted ideas, including our philosophical preconceptions, about God and about our value before God.

In receiving Jesus as our Lord, we receive God's gracious offer of forgiveness and reconciliation. We thereby receive the gift we need to live in unselfish freedom and love. Receiving Jesus as Lord consists in loving, trusting, and obeying him in the spirit of Gethsemane: His will must be authoritative over our wills, just as in the Garden Jesus gave his Father's will priority over his own. We must forgive others as God has forgiven us (see Matthew 6:15); otherwise, we are not truly receiving God's universal offer of forgiveness. This is a tall order, because our forgiving others, including our enemies, requires that we love them (cf. Matthew 5:43-45), but we lack the power to love our enemies on our own. Such rare forgiveness and love must be empowered by our trusting God to be faithful to us. Otherwise, our selfish fears will hinder us. The Passion powerfully represents Jesus as resisting the temptation to be selfish in Gethsemane, where he obeys his Father's call to offer his life on our behalf.

The proper reception of God's forgiving love requires that I subject my faulty, selfish will to God's perfect, loving will. This is an ongoing struggle, and not just an intellectual commitment. It requires that I seek help from God, and it cuts to the core of my intentions and desires, the attitudes that motivate me. It is thus a power struggle between God and me, and in the end I will not defeat God. I am thus well advised to fold now, without delay.

Our second opening question concerned how we can know the God of self-giving love. We can now appreciate the answer. The extent to which we know God as our loving Father depends on the extent to

which we are gratefully willing to acknowledge God's non-coercive authority for us and, as a result, to participate in God's life of redemptive love (1 John 2:3-6). It thus becomes obvious why we humans (not just atheists and agnostics) have difficulty in knowing God as our loving Father. The difficulty comes from our resisting God's authority for us, just as Satan does in the movie when he tries to dissuade Jesus from his atoning purpose. The heart of this resistance is our resisting God's desired agape transformation of us: that is, our change in the direction of God's morally perfect all-loving character. We contradict Gethsemane in saying or in acting as if we are saying: "Not what You will, God, but what I will." We thus supplant God's will, and thereby steal the place of God. We do this whenever we yield to selfishness. We are then at odds with the only One who can give us lasting joy and peace. "The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love" (1 John 4:8).

Our knowing God as loving Father, requires our welcoming and embracing a child-parent, or filial, relationship to God. It includes filial trust in God as one's rescuer from all that is bad, including moral failure and death. Its heart of obedience emerges in Gethsemane, in Jesus's obedient prayer to his Father: "Not what I will, but what You will." Such filial knowledge rarely, if ever, emerges in philosophy of religion or even in Christian approaches to knowledge of God. The result is widespread misunderstanding of suitable knowledge of the living God. We need to understand knowledge of God in terms of the Gethsemane of Jesus rather than the Athens of philosophers.

The Real Jesus as Scandalous

The scandal is that despite God's self-giving love for us, we rebel in ways that call for the suffering of God's innocent Son. This is the crisis of the cross. The crucified Jesus is a scandal to us and to religion as we know it, but the crucified Jesus is the only real Jesus. So, the real Jesus is, as always, the odd man out. He stands outside and knocks, with his cross and wounds of love, awaiting a receptive entry. The Passion conveys this Good News message clearly. It vividly portrays God and His Son, Jesus, as taking the merciful initiative in coming to us with self-giving, suffering love on our behalf. Jesus suffers long and lays down his life for us, and his Father raises him up again, with love's approval.

Will we welcome the real, scandalous Jesus? We move now from a movie to reality. As we stop pretending to be God, the true God will emerge as real in our lives. Will we let God be God? Will we let Jesus be Jesus? Will we come to see who we really are, through the eyes of the crucified Jesus, the savior of the world?

(Many thanks to Jorge Gracia and Linda Mainey for very helpful comments.)

Relevant Questions

1. Would an all-loving God allow God's innocent Son to suffer and to die by crucifixion? If so, why?
2. If God is perfectly loving, could God be a "people-pleaser" who aims mainly to satisfy our wants? Would an all-loving God seek to satisfy our true needs rather than our wants?
3. If God wants humans to be transformed into God's all-loving character, what place would obedience have in our coming to know God? Would God seek to change our wills (and our desires and intentions) and not just our beliefs?
4. Who is in a position to say how God must relate to us, in giving us evidence and knowledge of God? God or humans? Do we naively presume to be able to say how God must reveal Himself to us?

5. What is idolatry? Do we commit a kind of idolatry when we demand that God meet our standards for how God should be revealed to us?

Recommended Reading

1. Wesley Carr. *Tested by the Cross*. London: Harper, 1992.
2. Michael J. Gorman. *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality of the Cross*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.
3. Luke T. Johnson. *Living Jesus: Learning the Heart of the Gospel*. San Francisco: Harper, 1999.
4. Leon Morris. *Testaments of Love: A Study of Love in the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981.
5. Helmut Thielicke. *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*. New York: Harper, 1959.