

This is a thought-provoking and well-worth reading book by a brilliant evangelical thinker on the perennial and puzzling problem of how to explain physical evil in the world before the fall. I could not put it down. It has so much intellectually stimulating material in it.

—*Norman Geisler*

The most telling argument presented by non-Christians against the existence of the God of the Bible is the claim that the evils in our world are incompatible with the existence of a good, all-powerful, and loving God. This “argument from evil” turns up again and again, for example, in the writings of English atheist John Mortimer, author of the *Rumpole* stories. Believers have badly needed the kind of compelling case for biblical theodicy provided in Dr Dembski’s new book—grounded, as it is, not in traditional philosophical arguments (often not merely obtuse but irrelevant in today’s scientific climate), but in intelligent design, of which Dr Dembski is the world’s foremost academic proponent.

—*John Warwick Montgomery*

By brilliantly wrestling with a range of scientific, theological, and philosophical challenges to the conservative Christian worldview, William Dembski is establishing himself as the C. S. Lewis of this generation. Dembski blazes a new trail of thought through the morass of the problem of evil and leads us to a powerful and inspiring view of God, His Creation, and of our purpose in God’s kingdom. This is a must-read book for everyone who has wondered how a good God fits with an evil world, be they conservative, liberal, or atheist.

—*John A. Bloom, Ph.D., Ph.D., M.Div.,*
Professor of Physics, Academic Director of the Science
and Religion Program, Biola University

It is striking how frequently “scientific” arguments about the origin of life are motivated by moral issues. Bill Dembski masterfully dissects the convoluted logic surrounding modern thought about the problem of evil and crafts a compelling resolution which honors the historic Christian faith and scientific reasoning. This book will infuse purpose into our understanding of the world.

—*Paul Ashby,*
Scientist, Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory

Once again, Bill Dembski has broken new ground. *The End of Christianity* is a novel, fascinating, and profound reflection on the problem of evil in a world created by a beneficent God. Dembski has an uncanny ability to combine deep reflections with clear and persuasive prose. We have come to expect deeply thoughtful and path-breaking work by him. In *The End of Christianity* he does not disappoint. This tour de force weaves together science, philosophy, and theology to generate profound insights on an old problem. No one thinks more deeply about the implications of

science for philosophy and theology than Dembski. In *The End of Christianity* he makes yet another profound contribution to the reconciliation of modern science and the deepest truths of Christianity. In *The End of Christianity*, Dembski again displays the fiercely independent spirit of inquiry that made his earlier works so important and influential.

—**Joseph M. Bessette**,
the Alice Tweed Tuohy Professor of Government and
Ethics at Claremont-McKenna College

For much too long, theodicy has been little more than a boutique topic in theology, a justification for the world's misery that lets God off the hook. William Dembski's new book goes a long way toward restoring theodicy's original claim to be a master science of intelligent design. It is arguably the most worthy successor to Leibniz's own *Theodicy*, which artfully showed how a rational theology, properly understood, could retain its role of queen of the sciences in the modern world. No doubt the book will stir controversy among both the religious and the secular, as Dembski intertwines quite specific interpretations of Scriptures with equally specific interpretations of an array of physical and biological sciences, all in clear prose and with a deft philosophical touch. However, Dembski is no dogmatist, and all along he suggests alternative lines of thought that readers might pursue. Here we finally see in open view the full potential of intelligent design theory to put an end to the intellectual segregationism that has limited science-religion relations for much too long.

—**Steve Fuller**,
Professor of Sociology, University of Warwick, UK.
Author of *Dissent over Descent: Intelligent Design's Challenge to Darwinism*.

As his books prove with monotonous regularity, Bill Dembski's brain runs circles around my own (and just about everyone's, I naturally like to believe), but like all the others, *The End of Christianity* is also intellectually honest, generous, and respectful—and not, I'm convinced, as merely a gambit. Christian readers will find Dembski's theodicy devotionally worthwhile, all of us intellectually so. Nice combination, not easily achieved.

—**Mike Bryan**,
author of, among other books, *Chapter & Verse: A Skeptic Revisits
Christianity and The Afterword*, a novel about a new deity

The End of Christianity is very different from William Dembski's previous books, most notable of which were the academic classic *The Design Inference* and the popular best-seller *Intelligent Design*. The present book deals with perhaps the most profound question to challenge humankind, the problem of evil. Like everything else Dr. Dembski has written, this book will be controversial. However, the readers of

The End of Christianity will be greatly rewarded with a rich intellectual/philosophical/theological feast.

—**Henry F. Schaefer III**,
Graham Perdue Professor of Chemistry, University of Georgia

I am deeply grateful for Dr. Dembski and his work. Theologians have long known that the problem of evil is one of the biggest threats to traditional Christianity. Here Dembski boldly tackles the problem and offers a thoughtful and clearly written approach to it. His overall argument, that all evil can be traced to the fall of man (even in a transtemporal way), deserves serious consideration. Even if you might find particular points on which to differ with his judgments, you will do well to incorporate his insights into your own thinking. And the final two chapters, on thankfulness and purpose, show that this book supports a vigorous love for God in daily life. Thank you, Dr. Dembski, for using your talents so well!

—**C. John (“Jack”) Collins**,
Professor of Old Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

William Dembski is a first-rate scholar who has focused his attention on the perennial challenge to Christianity: Why does God allow such evil and cruelty in the world? While staying well within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy, Dembski offers fresh insights that can truly be described as ground breaking. Whether you end up embracing his solution or not, *The End of Christianity* is a book all Christians—and even non-Christians—need to wrestle with. We enthusiastically recommend it.

—**Josh and Sean McDowell**,
co-authors of Evidence for the Resurrection and More Than a Carpenter

William Dembski’s profound interdisciplinary expertise in writing about the most contested terrain at the intersection of science, philosophy, and religion is enormously impressive and valuable and puts him in the exalted company of contemporary authorities such as Stanley L. Jaki and Alister McGrath. He knows, and shows, that “the only way to avoid metaphysics is to say nothing,” and his work is a noble, tightly argued protest against both reductive scientism and premature fideism in the interest of reason, truth, and ethics.

—**M. D. Aeschliman**, Ph.D. (Columbia),
author of *The Restitution of Man: C. S. Lewis and the Case Against Scientism*,
Professor of Education at Boston University, Professor
of English at University of Italian Switzerland

This book is an example of philosophical theology at its best. It contains fascinating and even exciting new perspectives on the problem of evil. While I am not convinced

of every point that the author makes, *The End of Christianity* should be read by anyone who is interested in a Christian approach to natural and moral evil.

—**Stephen T. Davis,**

Russell K. Pitzer Professor of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College

William Dembski's latest book, *The End of Christianity: Finding a Good God in an Evil World*, shows how the traditional Christian doctrine that sin entered the world through humans is not refuted by the evidence that natural evils (earthquakes, storms, disease, death, etc.) are chronologically much older than humans within the universe. Because time within the created universe need not follow the same order as the logical process of God's creation of the universe, human sin could have caused earlier evil. There are many aspects of the problem of evil left mysterious by this book (and indeed by all other attempts to solve the problem), but I strongly recommend *The End of Christianity* as a refreshing approach that maintains the traditional theistic doctrines of God's omniscience and omnipotence.

—**Don Page,**

Professor of Physics, University of Alberta, Canada

Addressing the problem of a perfect God in an imperfect world, this book offers the most coherent answer to this question I've ever read. William A. Dembski has given us a bold and uncompromising theodicy that both confirms Christian orthodoxy and makes peace among our family of believers. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "We will not build a peaceful world by following a negative path." This book eschews the "negative path" by launching a peace offensive offering a positive solution that meets the demands of natural and revealed theology. Reconciling the many points of an issue that has confounded generations, this is the most important contribution to the question of God and evil since Leibniz defined it nearly 300 years ago.

—**Michael A. Flannery,**

Professor and Associate Director for Historical Collections,
University of Alabama, Birmingham

Happily, there are many good books being written today. But it is rare, indeed, to find a book that towers over the others in profundity and quality. William Dembski's *The End of Christianity* is such a book. It is so interesting and well-written that I could not put it down. But more importantly, I have read very few books with its depth of insight, breadth of scholarly interaction, and significance. From now on, no one who is working on a Christian treatment of the problem of evil can afford to neglect this book. It is vintage Dembski, and I highly recommend it.

—**J. P. Moreland,**

Distinguished Professor of Philosophy, Biola University
and author of *The God Question*

UNEDITED TEXT MATERIAL/NOT FOR RESALE

WILLIAM A. DEMBSKI



THE **END OF**
CHRISTIANITY

FINDING A GOOD GOD IN AN EVIL WORLD



NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

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by William Dembski

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PART 1



DEALING WITH EVIL

ONE

THE REACH OF THE CROSS

GOD'S goodness in creation begins and ends with the Cross of Christ. So Christians have always believed. In 1 Corinthians, Paul underscores the centrality of the Cross:

I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. (1 Cor 2:1–2)

Why did Paul, in his ministry to the Corinthians, focus so exclusively on the Cross? Why has the Cross played such a preeminent role in Christian theology? Why, in the iconography of the Church, is the Cross absolutely central? Why did George Bernard Shaw, himself a religious skeptic, think that Christians ought to rename themselves “Crosstians”?¹

In the Cross, the eternal Son of God enters fully into the human condition, takes on himself the totality of human sin and pain, and once and for all extinguishes the power of evil over our lives. To accomplish so great a salvation, Christ paid the ultimate cost, undergoing rejection, humiliation, physical torture, psychic torment, and death. Out of love for humanity, he laid down his life for ours, thereby securing our redemption. And then, through his Resurrection, he defeated death and gave us eternal life. As the ancient Easter hymn exults,

Christ is risen from the dead,
trampling down death by death,
and upon those in the tombs
bestowing life!²

Truly, there is no greater suffering or triumph of love than Christ's sacrifice for us on the Cross.

The last paragraph is traditional orthodoxy. We've heard it before. Sermons repeat it endlessly. But do we really believe it? And if we do believe it, should we? Consider James Carroll, a former Catholic priest, who sees the Cross not as God's means of redemption but as an excuse for Christians to persecute Jews (for their complicity in Christ's crucifixion).³ Granted, the history of anti-Semitism includes the persecution of Jews by persons claiming to represent Christianity. But persons claiming to represent Christianity have committed all manner of heinous crimes. The question, therefore, is not what people do in the name of Christianity, but what Christianity is essentially. Jesus himself was a Jew, as were the first Christians who spread the good news of God's redemptive work at the Cross. To fault the Cross because it has been misrepresented is therefore itself to misrepresent the Cross.

A more troubling worry about the Cross comes from a diary entry by Anna Williams, a medical researcher active in the early part of the twentieth century. The Cross gave her no comfort. As she saw it, Jesus knew that his anguish would be momentary and that in exchange he would save the world. As she wrote in her diary, "This knowledge . . . if we were sure, oh! what would we not be willing to undergo."⁴ Williams implies that anybody would willingly endure the Cross once the costs and benefits are properly weighed—the costs being minimal compared to the huge benefits.

How should we respond to Williams? Is it relevant that Christ was sinless and thus, unlike all other persons in history, utterly undeserving of any punishment he received (see Heb 4:15)? Does it help to note that crucifixion was the ultimate form of torture in the ancient world? Was Anna Williams therefore taking the sufferings of our Lord too lightly? As a cosseted ivory-tower intellectual, what did she know about suffering anyway? Didn't Christ on the Cross suffer more than she ever did in her little bourgeois world? Instead of complaining about the Cross not being

enough, shouldn't she have gratefully accepted the redemption that could be hers only through the Cross?

Such questions miss the point. Williams wasn't comparing her personal sufferings to those of Christ. Rather, she was asking about the *reach* of the Cross. Specifically, she was asking whether Christ's suffering on the Cross could adequately encompass the full extent of human suffering. Williams suggests that Christ got off cheap. Christ's passion, after all, lasted only a matter of hours. By the standards of the day, his time on the Cross was short, beginning in the morning and ending in the afternoon. Yes, his scourging must be factored in as well. But crucifixion was common in the Roman empire, and most crucifixions lasted days rather than hours before the victim expired. The physical suffering of our Lord was no more than that of many others brutalized by Rome. Thus, for Williams, Christ's Cross seemed like a small price to pay in exchange for the redemption of the whole world.

I don't mean to make light of our Lord's physical suffering, but it seems that Williams has a point. She underscores why a movie like Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* does not convey the full measure of what Christ, in securing our redemption, endured on the Cross. Mel Gibson, a master of movie violence (going back to his early *Mad Max* days), was clearly in his element in portraying the cruelty that Jesus experienced at the hands of the Romans. But by focusing so one-sidedly on the physical violence surrounding Jesus' crucifixion, Gibson missed the far deeper suffering of our Lord, for which the Cross was but an outward expression.

Let's be frank. If the entirety of Christ's suffering was the physical pain he endured on the Cross, then Anna Williams is right: Christ's suffering on behalf of humanity has limited reach. Perhaps it can reach well-fed, heavily sedated, incessantly entertained Westerners whose main afflictions are stress and disillusionment. But can it reach the whole of humanity and the worst of its afflictions? Many forms of death, degradation, and torment seem far worse than the few hours that Christ suffered at the hands of the Romans. Off the top of my head, here are three:

- Locked-in syndrome, in which the body is completely without ability to move or respond but the mind remains fully conscious. Imagine your body being in this state, a living coffin, for decades.

- Being a long-term subject of Josef Mengele's medical experiments at the Nazi extermination camp of Auschwitz.
- Being raped and tortured over a period of months by one of Saddam Hussein's sons for refusing his advances, and then finally being torn apart by his Doberman Pinschers.

Ask yourself, if faced with such horrors, what comfort you would find in the Cross if it meant only that Jesus suffered a few hours of scourging and crucifixion. What comfort would you find in his words "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world" (Matt 28:20) if, for all you could tell, his suffering was markedly less than yours? The Church father Gregory of Nazianzus stressed that Christ cannot redeem what he has not taken on himself. The usual theological formula for stating this is "That which is not assumed is not redeemed."⁵ How can Christ overcome the sin of the world if his experience of the consequences of that sin are at best partial—if he has not fully drunk the cup of God's wrath against sin?

The brief time into which Christ's Passion was compressed is not the only problem we must consider. In anticipating the Passion, Jesus gives every impression of knowing exactly what is to happen and when it is to happen. Everything seems scripted. Everything seems to happen on cue. In John's Gospel we are told that Jesus knew that Judas would betray him from the start (John 6:64). On the Cross, Jesus exclaims that God has abandoned him (Matt 27:46). The terror of that abandonment, however, ends no more than six hours later when Jesus utters "It is finished" and gives up the ghost (John 19:30). Moreover, leading up to the Cross, Jesus has been continually assuring his disciples that he would rise again from the dead on the third day (Mark 9:31)—a prophecy he fulfills, once again, right on cue (Mark 16:2–6).

Most of us, when in the throes of suffering, however, don't have the luxury of having our tribulation so neatly choreographed. We don't know exactly what to expect when, and when the suffering will be over, if at all. Often, we see no end to the suffering, and we don't know how things will turn out. Uncertainty about the course of suffering makes suffering doubly hard. And yet, by his knowledge of the future, our Lord seems to have avoided this aspect of suffering. Statistician David Bartholomew even goes so far as to ask whether "Jesus was truly human" since he seems

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to have escaped the experience of uncertainty and risk that “is part of what it means to be human.”⁶

What, then, is the reach of the Cross? Is it enough to embrace the totality of the human condition? I submit that it is. But to see this, we need to look beyond the physical agony of the Cross. The Cross points to a deeper reality of divine suffering that gets largely lost in films like *The Passion of the Christ*. How can we see that the reach of the Cross encompasses the full consequences of the Fall, including the full extent of human suffering? I’m not sure that our finite minds can fully comprehend the reach of the Cross. Nonetheless, we can catch glimpses of it.

Certain biblical images indicate that the suffering of the Cross cannot be confined merely to the few hours of Christ’s earthly passion. After Jesus is resurrected, he appears to his doubting disciple Thomas and has him place his fingers in the wounds that were inflicted on the Cross. Ask yourself, Why would a resurrection body show marks of crucifixion? And why, in the book of Revelation, is Christ portrayed as a lamb that was slain? There’s no indication in Scripture that in eternity the redeemed of Christ will exhibit any marks of suffering from their life on earth. And yet our Lord bears these marks in eternity, and is referred to, in Rev 13:8, as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”⁷ Clearly, then, the sufferings of Christ transcend his torture by the Romans.

Another factor to consider in probing the reach of the Cross is Christ’s complete willingness to embrace it. Most of us, when in pain and sorrow, look for a way of escape. Indeed, if there were a button we could press to make our troubles disappear, most of us would press it. But seldom is such a button available. Yet, when Jesus gave himself up to be crucified, he could at any time have halted the proceedings. He makes that clear in the Scriptures. Thus, he informs the disciples that no one takes his life from him but that he lays it down freely (John 10:17–18). He adds that at any time he could call on more than twelve legions of angels to rescue him (Matt 26:53). According to a hymn sung on Good Friday, “He who hung the earth upon the waters is hung upon the Cross.”⁸ Instead of the Cross holding Jesus, in reality Jesus upheld the Cross. What does it say about our Lord that he chose, on our behalf, to experience the utmost agony even though at any time he could have called it off?

Still another way to see how the reach of the Cross exceeds our first impressions comes, perhaps surprisingly, from the doctrine of divine omniscience. God knows all things. But if God knows all things, does God know—really know from the inside out—the full conscious experience of human suffering? In particular, does he know what it feels like to experience the uncertainty of not knowing the outcome of suffering?

The philosopher Bertrand Russell, atheist though he was, offered a useful distinction when he differentiated two forms of knowledge: *knowledge by description* versus *knowledge by acquaintance*.⁹ I have knowledge by description of what it is like to climb Mount Everest. I have that knowledge because the climb up Mount Everest has been described to me. But I have no knowledge by acquaintance of climbing Mount Everest. I've never actually climbed a mountain and have no plans to do so.

Now consider God and his knowledge of human experience. Does he know human experience simply by description? Or does he also know it by acquaintance? And if by acquaintance, how deep is his acquaintance? If God only knew human experience by description, he would be like a fabulously wealthy king gazing serenely on emaciated subjects who are dying of starvation. Even if this king eased the plight of his subjects and even if he assured them of how bad he felt on account of their pain, his role as comforter would be hopelessly compromised because he himself had never felt hunger.

That's why missionaries who live in mansions when the bulk of the local population lives in hovels are never very impressive. As human beings, we have a fundamental need to be known, and being known means being known by acquaintance and not merely by description. Knowledge by description is available from books. But knowledge by acquaintance means getting your hands dirty in the nitty-gritty of human experience. On the Cross, Christ has done exactly that. He has fully embraced the human condition. He knows it by acquaintance.

As a consequence, the doctrine of divine omniscience entails a paradox: to know everything, God must know by acquaintance the full measure of human experience and thus must know what it is not to know since not knowing (what we call "ignorance") is a basic feature of human finiteness. We know that Jesus himself experienced this limitation since the Scriptures teach that the boy Jesus grew not only physically but also mentally

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(Luke 2:52). Moreover, we find the mature Jesus telling his disciples that there are things the Father knows that he doesn't (Matt 13:32).

Note that I am not here advocating openness theology, or open theism. On that view, the future is taken to be indefinite and therefore not knowable even by God. Openness theology flies in the face of Christian orthodoxy. Christianity's clear teaching throughout the ages has been that God fully knows the future.¹⁰ Yes, this teaching is under dispute, and a growing literature disputes it. But the incompatibility of openness theology with Christian orthodoxy becomes evident on reflection. In particular, strict uncertainty about the future means that God cannot guarantee his promises because the autonomy of the world can always overrule God. Of course, we could try to get around this by saying that God can step in when things get out of hand, but that defeats the point of openness theology, which is to limit God and thereby absolve him of evil.

God's knowledge includes knowledge of the future. When God becomes man in Jesus Christ, however, he sets aside divine omniscience. The point of God becoming man is for God to identify with the whole of human experience, and this is not possible if Christ retains all his divine privileges. Christ does not set aside every divine privilege. Quite the contrary, he retains the ability to heal people at command, raise the dead, expel demons, and calm storms. He refuses only those privileges that would prevent his subjection to our misfortunes. In particular, Christ on the Cross identifies with the whole of human suffering, and this includes the ignorance and uncertainty that intensify human suffering.

But how can this be? How can God in Christ so fully identify with humanity that he fully knows the full extent of human suffering (albeit without himself sinning)? Can Christ look each of us in the eye and honestly tell us that because of what he endured on the Cross, he knows what each of us is going through *even better than we do ourselves*? As Christians we want this to be true and, in our heart of hearts, we know it to be true. But how can it be true? A mystery exists here that our finite minds will never fully comprehend. Nonetheless, let me offer two considerations that may help.

First, we need to see the Cross as a window into a much deeper reality of divine suffering. For instance, the Scriptures teach that with God a day is as a thousand years. But if a day is as a thousand years, then each day in

a thousand years is itself a thousand years. Thus, if you run the numbers, a day with God is also as 365 million years. Follow the math to its logical conclusion, and with God an instant is an eternity. For this reason, the mere six hours that Jesus hung on the Cross is no obstacle for God taking upon himself the full sufferings of humanity.

Second, in the Incarnation, and especially on the Cross, Jesus identifies with humanity at the deepest level. In Col 3:4, Paul teaches that Christ is our life. In Gal 2:20, Paul describes the believer as being crucified with Christ. In Philippians 3, Paul rejoices to share in the sufferings of Christ, so much so that our suffering becomes an expression of Christ's suffering. It's not that Christ vainly tries to imagine what we are suffering; when we suffer, it *is* Christ suffering.

We see this in Matthew 25, where Jesus describes the final judgment as a separation of goats and sheep. The goats' crime is that they did not show mercy to Christ as he suffered hunger, sickness, and imprisonment. But when the goats ask how they could have missed ministering to his needs, Jesus replies that what they failed to do for others, they failed to do for him (Matt 25:45). Their failure is a failure to follow Jesus' command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matt 22:39). This commandment does not mean that as one looks in the mirror, one should think about all the warm feelings one feels toward oneself and then consciously determine to project those warm feelings onto others (small comfort since warm feelings do not come easily to many of us). Rather, Jesus is talking about the bond that, as descendants of Adam and now of the second Adam, ought to hold humanity together.

We need to love our neighbor as our self because our neighbor *is* our self. In saying this, I'm not advocating an all-is-one pantheism of the sort popularized by the Beatles in their song "I Am the Walrus." There's a simple reason why our self and the self of others constitute a unity: our life and their life are Christ's life (Col 3:4). Christ on the Cross sacrificed himself for the life of the world and thereby became the life of the world (John 6:51). In loving one another, we love Christ. In refusing to love one another, we refuse to love Christ.

Christ's identification with us in our limitation and weakness makes it possible for God to love us and to call us friends (John 15:13-15). In fact, it's not clear that any other religion or system of thought can account for

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God's love for humanity. Aristotle, for instance, saw friendship as something possible only among equals. Consequently, his God, an "unmoved mover," was so far above and distant from humanity that he could never be our friend: "If the interval is great, as between a man and God, there can be no friendship at all."¹¹ Indeed, Aristotle's God thought only about himself since thinking about anything else would be degrading and therefore unworthy of God.¹²

But in the Incarnation and then upon the Cross, God in Christ did degrade himself. The word "degrade" comes from the Latin and means to "step down." God stepped down to save us. God's ultimate act of love is therefore the ultimate act of humility. Not only did the exalted God who fills the heavens and whom the heavens cannot contain step down to our level, but he went as low as it is possible to go. As Paul teaches in 2 Cor 5:21, God made Christ "to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." The suffering servant passage in Isaiah 53 makes the same point.

Aristotle's ethics is therefore radically incomplete. Among the vast catalogue of virtues that adorn Aristotle's ethics, humility is nowhere to be found. Yet humility is the only virtue that captures the love of God for humanity, a love fully expressed in the Cross. Only by humility does Christ—and those who share his life—defeat the sin of pride that led to the Fall. Without humility, as Martin Luther noted, all the other virtues become merely occasions for pride (as in, "See how well I'm doing").¹³

By the Cross, an infinite God forms a relationship of love and friendship with finite creatures. In mathematics there are two ways to go to infinity. One is to grow large without measure. The other is to form a fraction in which the denominator goes to zero. The Cross is a path of humility in which the infinite God becomes finite and then contracts to zero, only to resurrect and thereby unite a finite humanity within a newfound infinity.

This is why the Scriptures teach that God's strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor 12:9). In contrast to Aristotle's God, the Christian God does not meditate exclusively on himself. Rather, "the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth to show himself strong in the behalf of those whose hearts are perfect toward him" (2 Chr 16:9). Far from finding human finiteness boring, God delights in it, finding creative possibilities that an unchangeable infinity cannot match.

At the Cross, divine infinity and human finiteness intersect. Hence “the death of Jesus,” writes Timothy Keller, “was qualitatively different from any other death.”¹⁴ We see this difference underscored in the gospel narratives, which “all show that Jesus did not face his approaching death with anything like the aplomb and fearlessness that was widely expected in a spiritual hero. The well-known Maccabean martyrs, who suffered under the Syrian rule of Antiochus Epiphanes, were the paradigms for spiritual courage in the face of persecution. They were famous for speaking defiantly and confidently of God even as they were having limbs cut off.”¹⁵

By contrast, Jesus, when confronted with his impending death in the Garden of Gethsemane, was deeply troubled (Mark 14:33–36 and Luke 22:42–44). Why? Not because of the physical pain. Keller explains:

The physical pain was nothing compared to the spiritual experience of cosmic abandonment. Christianity alone among the world religions claims that God became uniquely and fully human in Jesus Christ and therefore knows firsthand despair, rejection, loneliness, poverty, bereavement, torture, and imprisonment. On the Cross he went beyond even the worst human suffering and experienced cosmic rejection and pain that exceeds ours as infinitely as his knowledge and power exceeds ours.¹⁶

But why was the Cross necessary at all? If there was a rift between God and humanity, why was suffering—Christ’s suffering on the Cross—the key to healing it? *In a fallen world, the only currency of love is suffering.* Indeed, the only way to tell how much one person loves another is by what that person is willing to endure for the other. Without the cost incurred by suffering, love among fallen creatures becomes cheap and self-indulgent. Suffering removes the suspicion that the good we do for one another is for ulterior motives, with strings attached, a quid pro quo. Christ, by going to the Cross and there taking on himself the sin of the whole world, fully demonstrates the love of God. Moreover, only such a full demonstration of God’s love enables us to love God with all our heart. The extent to which we can love God depends on the extent to which God has demonstrated his love for us, and that depends on the extent of evil that God has had to absorb, suffer, and overcome on our behalf.

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But note, for us to love God also depends on us seeing the magnitude of our offense against God and gratefully receiving the forgiveness that God's suffering, in Christ on the Cross, has made possible. The principle at issue here is stated in Luke 7:47: those who realize that they have been forgiven much love much; those who think that they have only been forgiven little love little. It would seem that God has demonstrated a lot of love for celebrity atheists such as Oliver Sacks, Ted Turner, and Richard Dawkins.¹⁷ In an interview with Dawkins for the movie *Expelled*, Ben Stein even noted that if God exists, he's been awfully good to Dawkins, giving him lucrative book contracts, a cush professorship, etc. Because Stein's criteria for what constitutes a divine blessing may be a bit off (lucrative book contracts are fine and well, but no biblical prophet would have regarded such monetary rewards as a sure sign of divine favor), let me restate his point as follows: God, in Christ, has given us ample reason to love him, so our failure to respond to God in love is just that—our failure.

To say that love in a fallen world is demonstrated through suffering raises the question of what love would look like in a nonfallen world. In a world untouched by sin, love is expressed through the gift of sacrifice. To see this, consider that the very existence of the world depends on such a gift. A common challenge to the Christian doctrine of creation is to ask whether, in creating the world, God augmented himself since it would appear that God plus the world is greater than God alone. This is supposed to raise an insuperable difficulty for Christian orthodoxy, which regards God as perfect and thus as not improvable through the addition of anything external to God, such as the world.

But, in fact, God plus the world is less than God alone. To see this, consider that God could have created any world whatsoever. All were possibilities before him. Yet, in the very act of creating this world, he gave up creating others. Creation gives existence to one possibility by withholding existence from the other possibilities that exclude it. In creating the world, God jealously gives himself to it and expects the same loyalty from it, a fact to which all the covenants in the Old and New Testaments testify. Creation is inherently covenantal. Thus, in creating this world, God, far from expanding himself, contracted himself by limiting his possibilities. G. K. Chesterton put it this way:

Every act of will [and that includes divine creation] is an act of self-limitation. To desire action is to desire limitation. In that sense every act is an act of self-sacrifice. When you choose anything, you reject everything else. . . . Every act is an irrevocable selection and exclusion. Just as when you marry one woman you give up all the others, so when you take one course of action you give up all the other courses.¹⁸

The lesson here is that even apart from evil and sin, it is possible for intelligences (whether created or uncreated) to give irrevocably so that they deny and thereby sacrifice other options. Christian theology has always regarded God's creation of the world as an act of love. In the act of creation, God gives himself irrevocably to this world to the exclusion of all others.¹⁹ Creation is a gift of sacrifice—the giving of what holds ultimate value by giving up everything of lesser value. As beings created in God's image, we are likewise able, and indeed called, to offer such gifts of sacrifice. Moreover, such acts of love would be ours to perform even if we had never sinned.

In a fallen world, however, sacrifice by itself is not enough to assure love. The problem is that fallen creatures like us know very well about delayed gratification of rewards, that is, we sacrifice an immediate good for a foreseeable greater benefit down the road. There is nothing wrong, in principle, with delayed gratification or sacrifice in this sense. But sacrifice ceases to be a gauge for love when it becomes an instrument of exchange, part of a system of reciprocity in which persons are duly compensated for costs incurred. This is why Jesus states, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). In laying down his life at the Cross, Jesus offered himself in a sacrifice of suffering that cannot be compensated (certainly not by us). Only the sacrifice of a suffering that cannot be compensated and does not ask to be compensated is a true gauge of love in a fallen world.

It is vital here to form a correct picture of Christ's redemption and our role in it. In allowing evil and then redeeming us from it, God is not an arsonist who starts a fire, lets things heat up for us, and then, at the last moment, steps in so that he can be the big hero. Nor is God a casual bystander, who sees a fire start spontaneously and then lets it get out of control so that he can be the big hero to rescue us.

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We are the arsonists. We started the fire. God wants to rescue us not only from the fire we started but also, and more importantly, from our disposition to start fires, that is, from our life of arson. But to be rescued from a life of arson requires that we know how destructive arson is.²⁰ Fires always start out small. If God always instantly put out the fires we start, we would never appreciate the damage fires can do.

We started a fire in consenting to evil. God permits this fire to rage. He grants this permission not so that he can be a big hero when he rescues us but so that we can rightly understand the human condition and thus come to our senses. In rescuing us by suffering on the Cross, God does end up being a hero. But that is not the point of his suffering. The point is to fix a broken relationship between God and humanity.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus beseeched the Father to let this cup pass from him if it were possible. But there was no other way. Our sin demanded the ultimate cost. It is a cost our Lord willingly paid. He paid it at the Cross. He bears the marks of the Cross to this day.