### 2 Why Was Jesus Killed?

Well then, one might ask: why *was* Jesus killed? I believe it was human politics, pride, and love of power that conspired to kill him. Some religious politicians felt their power was threatened by his independent teaching, and they persuaded the Roman Procurator to execute him. The religious politicians happened to be Jewish, but such behavior is not a *Jewish* feature but a *human* one. Down through time, it has been common for religious leaders to take offense at independent teachers. In this case, the Sadducees, along with *most* of the Pharisees, forgot their moral principles, plotted to frame him on false charges, and handed him over to the Romans to be killed. The Sadducees were the wealthy and conservative Jerusalem priests. The Pharisees were a lay religious party; they were more open-minded religiously.

Let us spell this out a little. The Sadducees did not accept anything outside the Torah (the first five books of the Bible). The Pharisees were, relatively speaking, the liberals within Judaism. They were serious laymen who followed the purity laws that applied to priests, even though they were not priests. They were more open to religious discussion and accepted the idea of an afterlife. Yet most (not all) of the Pharisees felt threatened by the influence of this independent teacher and prophet whom they had not trained. They tried to trip him up with debates, trying to get him to say something they could use against him. To be fair, some of the Pharisees rejected this plot, and a few even became disciples (Joseph of Arimathea [Luke 23:50–53]; Nicodemus [John 3:1; 7:50]). But most of the Pharisees (judging from the gospel record) felt their prestige was at stake, and joined the conspiracy against Jesus.

Jesus dared to bypass the priestly cult system[[1]](#footnote-1) (controlled by the Sadducees) when he said forgiveness of sins was freely available to all. The supposedly powerful priests were truly afraid of the power of this single man, and they stooped to the shameful act of framing him, which revealed their desperation and impotence. And by his response, that man of God revealed his spiritual power and courage.

What got Jesus killed was a cynical conspiracy between zealous conservatives and pretend liberals, along with the moral cowardice of a creepy politician (Pilate). Grimsrud says it a little differently: “Jesus died due to the combined violence of cultural exclusivism (seen in the Pharisees and focused on the issue of the law), religious institutionalism (seen in the leaders linked with the temple), and political authoritarianism (seen in the occupying Roman colonial hierarchy).”[[2]](#footnote-2)

#### The Conspiracy and the Response

It has to be said that the railroading and condemning of Jesus was an evil plot by people who were prisoners of their own pride and position. The irony is that Jesus came to free just such people. Jesus announced his mission as being “to proclaim freedom for the prisoners . . . to set the oppressed free” (Luke 4:18 NIV). He came *especially* to free those held captive by pride and power, and those oppressed by spiritual blindness. The *spiritual* captivity that we create for ourselves is the worst confinement. The most heartbreaking of all oppression is our own narrow-mindedness and judgmentalism. The hardest prison to escape is our own mental subjugation to dogmas that we think cannot be questioned. But Jesus is the greatest jailbreaker of all time. If only the Sadducees and Pharisees had *wanted* that freedom! If only they could have seen how *bound* they were by their love of power, their pride of position, their judgmental thinking!

Jesus truly suffered. He endured the heartbreak of seeing these people harden their hearts, and he knew they were going to kill him. But he did not *have* to be murdered! That is, *God* did not intend it, and several of Jesus’ parables show that. In the parable of the tenant farmers, we always seem to miss one key line near the beginning. The vineyard owner sends his servants to the tenants farmers, and then sends his Son in order “to collect from them his share of the produce of the vineyard” (Mark 12:2). In the NIV, this is “to collect from them some of the fruit.” The vineyard owner just wants some “fruit.” He is not sending his son to be killed—which would be a strange thing for a father to do! Rather, he expected the son to be respected (12:6). The owner is horrified when his Son is killed. He wants only *growth* in his vineyard, not violence, and certainly not a sacrificial murder.

“Fruit” is Jesus’ favorite metaphor for spiritual progress. Numerous times he uses the image of plants growing to signify spiritual growth (Matt 7:16–20; 21:43; Mark 4:20, 28; Luke 6:44). “A mustard seed. . . when it is sown it grows up” (Mark 4:31–32); “the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine” (John 15:4); “every good tree bears good fruit” (Matt 7:17). I must say it again: In the vineyard parable, Jesus says that God’s Son is sent to collect some fruit, that is, to observe and encourage spiritual *growth*. Jesus did not come to earth in order to be murdered or to pay some horrible price. This parable is totally inconsistent with the idea that the Son was sent in order to be offered up as a sacrifice or a payment for human sin.

Jesus came to foster and support spiritual growth. He is all about living and bearing fruit. That is what *God* is all about, too!—*growth*, not punishment. Growth is a fundamental point throughout Jesus’ teaching. It is treated as something natural and desirable: “The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head” (Mark 4:28). We provide the conditions for spiritual growth, but God fertilizes the seed and causes the growth: “the seed would sprout and grow, [the farmer] does not know how” (Mark 4:27). This parable in Mark perfectly pictures the wonderful paradox of growth: we are like farmers who need to prepare the soil, yet the actual growth is God’s doing, not our own. Spiritual growth is completely unconscious, and follows certain stages of progress that are not determined by us.

Jesus’ life mission was to embody and to teach the love, goodness, and beauty of God. His purpose was not to bargain with or to persuade God in any way, but to lead us closer to a loving God. The Father already wants to give what is best for all the children. As the Epistle of James confirms: “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights” (James 1:17 NIV).

It is not God but sinful human beings who killed the Son of Man. The priests (Sadducees) desired the death of the one by whom they felt threatened, and they persuaded a cowardly Roman official to carry it out. It was not God’s desire that this happen. Jesus mourns for Jerusalem, “you who kill the prophets . . . how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing” (Luke 13:34 NIV). This shows that the killing was not God’s will. Jesus *would* have gathered the whole Jewish people with him in a spiritual mission, but the jealous leaders would not allow it. Instead, they killed another prophet.

Many Christians have thought of the killing of Jesus as inevitable, necessary, and even desirable (thus, “Good” Friday), but Jesus’ own attitude is more sensible; he does not blame the Father for this act of violence. If Jesus thought his killing was planned by God, it would make no sense for him to *weep* over Jerusalem’s unwillingness to comprehend or to recognize the time of God’s visitation (Luke 19:41–44). He expresses real sorrow over the spiritual failure of Jerusalem’s leaders. He feels sorrow for the people who are going to get him killed. They could have chosen to respond differently.

Once the Sadducees had put their plan into motion, Jesus recognizes that his killing is inevitable, and he warns the apostles of his coming death (Matt 16:21–26; 17:22; 20:17–19), but he says nothing about it being sacrificial or substitutionary in any way. There are nine of these passages, three in each of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and all of them are matter-of-fact warnings to his apostles about the coming tragedy. Jesus is trying to prepare the apostles for the tests they will face. He wants to forestall the grief and fear that might overwhelm them. He is *always* thinking aboutothers, and here he is concerned aboutthese men. In none of the nine passages does Jesus say anything about his coming death as a sacrifice. “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes . . . The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him” (Mark 8:31; 9:31). These are statements about human violence, not about God’s will. He anticipates his coming death, but does not speak of it as a sacrifice.

Luke the evangelist believes that the Messiah had to be put to death to fulfill what was written (Luke 22:22; 24:26–27), but the emphasis is on the predictive role of Scripture and on God’s foresight, rather than on any *interpretation* of the death (as a sacrifice, a payment, etc.).

The death became *humanly* unavoidable once some powerful people conspire to kill him. One theologian asks what would happen if someone who lived wholly by love “entered hostile territory ruled by violence and domination? . . . If he kept on living by self-giving, non-violent love, death’s antithesis, that person would finally be killed.”[[3]](#footnote-3) So the fault is clearly that of the evildoers. Unfortunately, many people misplace the blame for the crucifixion, and then theologize upon the basis of human evildoing. Whenever people make salvation dependent on the cross, they have (probably unconsciously) made *God to blame* for the crucifixion. Let us not blame God for what *people* have done. Let us not be misled by a dreary sacrificial logic into thinking that God required sacrifice before Godwould forgive!

Rather, we need to recognize that good people are *often* made the target of violence, and what happened to Jesus is what has happened to many reformers, non-conformists, and prophets. “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s home town” (Luke 4:24). “Prophets are not without honor except in their own country and in their own house” (Matt 13:57). All whistleblowers are resisted by the authorities. Every courageous thinker is resented by his or her family. The creative artist is sneered at, at home. In *our* lives, this is what is meant by a prophet not being honored in the prophet’s own country. It is a tragic phenomenon in human society, caused by people’s hostility to reform, fear of change, and resistance to truth.

#### Jesus’ Mission

We must remember that Jesus came here to live a *whole* human life all the way through to its ending, *whatever* that ending might be. It turned out that his enemies decided to frame him and get him killed. A necessary part of the Incarnation experience was that he *not* use miracles to escape that end, because an ordinary person could not pull off a miraculous escape. He had to experience what people experience in this often unjust and dangerous world. He drank the cup of authentic human living. As the Epistle to the Hebrews says, “Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things. . . He had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect” (Heb 2:14, 17).

Jesus did not escape sorrow, misunderstanding (even by his family), or severe injustice. He knows what we go through when we are despised for doing good. He knows the heartbreak of having his love rejected and his teachings misrepresented. The Incarnation was indeed the divine plan, even though it meant that the Son would come like a “light shin[ing] in the darkness,” a darkness that would try to overcome it (John 1:5). But it was wholly appropriate that the Creator should incarnate as a human being. “The Creator of souls came in fashion as a soul he made. . . Could the agent of creation in Godhead not appear among the persons he created?”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Jesus lived a genuine human life with all the joy and sorrow it could contain, so he knows *by experience* what human life is like. He can “sympathize with our weaknesses,” for he “has been tested as we are” (Heb 4:15)—actually tested much more severely than most of us will ever be. The quiet courage and determination with which he lived out his last days and accepted the fate that people had planned for him, the mercy that he showed while on the cross (Luke 23:34, 43), these are the *same* courage and mercy that he demonstrated throughout his life. His whole life, *including* the way he behaved as he was railroaded even unto death, was a revelation of God’s nature.

Jesus tried to win his people, the Jewish people, over to his spiritual vision of God’s will. He *would* have gathered them under his wing and have led them into a new age of spiritual truth and religious living, if they had accepted his revelation, but their leaders rejected the offer. And most people follow leaders. That is the “sheep”-like quality of people that Jesus noticed (Matt 18:12; Mark 6:34; 14:27; John 10:2). He tried to get through to these religious leaders, but, tragically, they turned against him. This was heart-breaking for him, for he knew there would eventually be dire consequences. He grieved for Jerusalem, because “you did not recognize the time of your visitation from God” (Luke 19:44). A generation after this spiritual failure, the impulses of the Jewish people led them into a nationalist rebellion, which was crushed by Rome in 70 ad.

It was sinful human action that conspired against Jesus and got him killed. Human history has been cursed with violence, scapegoating, and lust for power, even in religious institutions. This needs to be recognized and repudiated as *human* sin and not as God’s fault, if we are ever to move into a time of peace, where we may be ruled by the Prince of Peace.

These facts should never be used to slander the Jewish people. When it comes to hypocrisy, murder, and treachery, so-called Christians have been second to none. The betrayal and killing of reformers like Jan Hus, the cruelty of both Catholics and Protestants during the Reformation, and the monstrosity of sexual molestation by clergy in our day—these show that Christians have no justification for looking down their noses at Jews. The Jewish leaders *did* let their people down by failing to recognize the time of their visitation from God. It was a failure of insight and of common decency, like many that happened before, and like many that have happened since.

The blood-atonement obsession of so many Christians is also a failure of insight. How did we have arrive at this place where so many Christians believe that God sent Jesus to be killed as a sacrifice, that his death should serve as a ransom payment to buy salvation? How did sacrificial ideas become so dominant, in the religion that grew up around the one who said “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice’” (Matt 9:13)? Parallel to this is the ethical question: How have we arrived at a place where Christians sometimes embody bullying and self-righteousness, in direct contradiction to everything Jesus embodied? Both of these questions involve accounting for how Christians strayed from the teaching of Jesus.

To start with the question about sacrifice, we must observe how deeply ingrained were the practice and the *concept* of sacrifice during the time when Christianity originated. And so we must examine sacrificial texts in the Old Testament. In chapters 3 and 4, I will look at the practice of sacrifice, the debate about it, and the *interpretation* of sacrifice that underlies Christian sacrificial metaphors.

1. “Cult” refers to a repeated ritual, or a ritual system. This is the academic definition of “cult.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Grimsrud, *Instead of Atonement*, 21–22. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Finger, “*Christus Victor* as Nonviolent Atonement,” 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 348. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)