

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

Did God Kill Jesus?

by
Tony Jones

PART ONE: THE PROBLEM WITH THE CROSS

CHAPTER 1: “WHEN HE DIED, HE SAW YOUR FACE!”

1. Tony Jones begins the book with the poignant story of a youth ministry speaker. Have you ever heard a talk like that about Jesus’ death? If so, what did you think of it? How did it make you feel?
2. In the story about the Lutheran confirmation class, it seems that the parents didn’t really know how to explain the phrase “Jesus died for your sins” to their kids. If someone asked you to explain that phrase right now, what would you say?

3. Many people find it disconcerting to think that God hates them because of their sin, but maybe this wasn't always the case. Maybe people in the Middle Ages, for example, did fear God and God's wrath. Do you think that we are more sensitive than earlier generations of Christians to thoughts like this?
4. Tony suggests that the dominant view of the crucifixion—that a wrathful God punished an innocent Jesus—may be responsible for much of the violence in our world and for the fact that Christians are often known not for love but for fear. What do you think of this suggestion?
5. Tony makes it clear that we'll be judging all of our thoughts about Jesus' death according to a "rule of love" (p. 70). What do you think about that as the primary criterion for explaining the crucifixion?
6. Tony writes that, in the end, we simply cannot pit an angry God against a loving Jesus, that we can't think of the cross as an instrument by which God punishes his own son. What do you think of the premise that the crucifixion *must* be good news?

CHAPTER 2: WHY GOD MATTERS

1. Think about the church that you grew up in. Did you hear more sermons about God's love, about God's wrath, or about God's disappointment?

2. Tony writes about how he's experienced God in prayer. Talk about your experiences of God in response to your prayers.
3. This chapter asks if God is wrath or love, "violence or peace" (p. 15). Do you think these dichotomies are too clean? Is it possible for God to be both?
4. The crucifixion tells us something important about who God is. What do you think that is?
5. Does it surprise you that the way most people understand the crucifixion today is just one of many interpretations in the history of the church? How does that fact change what you think of the crucifixion?
6. Tony asserts, "Throughout Christian history, the death of Jesus has been the answer—it's the question that has changed" (p. 22). If that's true, what's the most pressing question in today's world that the cross answers?

CHAPTER 3: THE BIBLE AND THE SMELL TEST

1. What do you think of the "smell test" as a way to judge a theological doctrine?
2. What is your experience with churches that have "beautiful" doctrine and those that have "ugly" doctrine (p. 24)?
3. Do you find Tony's statement that the Bible is "scary" (p. 30) offensive or difficult to swallow? How would you characterize your relationship with the Bible?

4. What do you think of the suggestion that the Bible is God's *second* most important revelation of God to humanity?
5. This chapter is concerned with the working assumptions or premises in our quest for the truth about the crucifixion. Are there any you would add to Tony's list?

PART TWO: SACRIFICE AS PRELUDE

CHAPTER 4: THE MYSTERY OF SACRIFICE

1. Why do you think human sacrifice is such a common meme in pop culture?
2. Tony tells a story about watching a Hindu ceremony that was sacrificial in nature. What experiences have you had of sacrifice?
3. René Girard offers an explanation of why ancient people found sacrifice so compelling. What do you make of his explanation?
4. How do you experience sacrifice in your everyday life?

CHAPTER 5: AN ACCEPTABLE SACRIFICE

1. Have you ever wondered why God accepted Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's? Has that troubled you? If you've ever heard it explained, what was the explanation?
2. Genesis tells a story in which God accepts a blood sacrifice and rejects a grain sacrifice. Why do you think that is?
3. Along those same lines, have you ever wondered what God intended to when he told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac? How have you made peace with that text in the past?
4. If you've ever been to a Seder dinner, what was it like?
5. What are your thoughts on the origins of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, on Abel, Noah, Abraham, and Moses?

CHAPTER 6: SACRED BLOOD

1. Why do you think blood was so sacred in ancient cultures? Do we have the same reverence for it today?
2. Having read about it, can you explain the difference between "guilt offering" and "sin offering" in ancient Israel (p. 55)?

3. What do you think of the difference between Jewish and Christian understandings of sin? Does one make more sense to you? Does one seem more biblical?
4. Does the blood sacrifice of the Hebrews make you like the Old Testament less?
5. At the end of the chapter, Tony says that Christians tend to take one of three stances toward the blood, violence, and sacrifice of the Old Testament. Which of these positions do you take, and why?
6. Do you find the fourth possible explanation interesting—or heretical?

PART THREE: THE VIOLENCE ON THE CROSS

CHAPTER 7: HISTORY'S MOST FAMOUS EXECUTION

1. How have you been tempted to make Jesus into your own image? Why do you suppose this impulse is so common?
2. Was anything in the summation of Jesus' life a surprise to you?
3. What do you think of Tony's interpretations of Jesus' teachings and miracles?
4. What's the most surprising aspect of Jesus' passion?

5. Do you have any experience with people blaming Jews as a whole for Jesus' death?
6. Why do you think that connecting the crucifixion to Passover was so important to the Gospel writers?

CHAPTER 8: PAUL'S CROSS-CENTERED LIFE

1. Have you ever read a book backward or watched a movie that tells the story in reverse?
2. How do you think Paul's entry into the Christian faith gave him a different perspective than that of the disciples?
3. Why do you suppose Paul didn't reject Judaism when he converted to Christianity but instead tried to find a way for the two to fit together?
4. Tony says that Paul sees everything in the world, history, and life through the lens of the cross. How does this change your perspective on Paul?
5. Tony suggests that we should read Romans 3:21–22 as “the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe” (p. 90). How does this change your understanding of the passage?
6. How would you summarize Paul's view of the cross? How is Paul's view primarily about the love of God?

CHAPTER 9: REUNITED WITH GOD

1. The book of Hebrews explicitly states that the blood of Jesus was required to pay God for sins. How does this show God's love?
2. What do you think of Peter's take on suffering? Do you think Jesus' death on a cross might be seen as encouraging victimhood?
3. Regarding 1 John, do you favor "propitiation" or "expiation" (p. 100)?
4. The book of Revelation has been one of the most intimidating and misunderstood books in the Bible. After reading this chapter, how do you make sense of it?
5. Do you find the various views of the crucifixion in these New Testament books contradictory or complementary? Why?

PART FOUR: THE MAJORITY OPINION: THE PAYMENT MODEL

CHAPTER 10: THE PAYMENT MODEL: GOD IS VERY ANGRY WITH YOU

1. If the crucifixion is the solution and each era has a different problem, how does that make it difficult to determine what the cross really *means*?
2. What do you think of the six questions that Tony introduces? Are there questions you would add to, or subtract from the list?
3. How have you experienced the gap between the ideal of justice and the reality of the legal system?
4. What are your memories of having the Payment/Penalty/Punishment model of the atonement explained to you?
5. How does the Payment model strike you? Does it make sense? Does it seem fair?

CHAPTER 11: THE INVENTION OF ORIGINAL SIN

1. Did you grow up in a church that taught original sin? If so, how was it explained to you?

2. Tony argues that the notion of original sin is simply not found in the Genesis account of creation. Do you agree with him?
3. Does it surprise you to learn that Jesus never taught anything that supports original sin?
4. The idea that sin is passed biologically from parent to child strikes us as anachronistic today. How does that change your perspective on the doctrine of original sin?
5. Do you believe that God would punish you for the sin of another person (namely Adam)?

CHAPTER 12: DOES GOD DEMAND A PAYMENT WE CAN'T AFFORD?

1. Have you ever heard the story of the dad, the son, and the railroad tracks, or one like it? How do you feel about it as an explanation of the crucifixion?
2. Tony argues that God cannot be forced into a position, since God can do anything God wants. Where do you stand on that argument?
3. Have you ever had a preacher tell you that God hates you? What was your response to that?
4. How do you think the Payment model stacks up to the six questions?
5. All things considered, how do you feel about the Payment model?

6. Tony concludes this chapter, “That’s the God of Payment/Penalty/Punishment. He may be a God to be feared, but he’s not a God to be loved” (p. 138). Do you agree?

PART FIVE: MINORITY OPINIONS

CHAPTER 13: THE VICTORY MODEL: GOD IS YOUR SPIRITUAL WARRIOR

1. If you’ve read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, did you realize that it was about Jesus? And what do you think of its take on atonement?
2. Do you believe in Satan? If so, how much of a role do you think Satan has in the world today?
3. How does the image of a “warrior God” strike you?
4. Some Christians believe that angels and demons are active today, and others don’t. What do you believe and why?
5. How do you think the Victory model stacks up to the six questions?
6. All things considered, how do you feel about the Victory model?

CHAPTER 14:
THE MAGNET MODEL: GOD DRAWS YOU IN

1. How do you suppose Peter Abelard's personal experiences changed his view of Jesus' death?
2. What do you think of Abelard's interpretation that everything else the Bible says about God should really be seen as God's love?
3. Abelard argues that the crucifixion of Jesus is a more terrible crime than Eve and Adam eating the forbidden fruit. Do you think he makes a good point?
4. In the Magnet model, Jesus' death activates a supernatural love. Have you ever experienced anything like that when contemplating the cross?
5. How do you think the Magnet model stacks up to the six questions?
6. All things considered, how do you feel about the Magnet model?

CHAPTER 15:
THE DIVINITY MODEL: GOD WANTS YOU TO BE A GOD

1. You probably remember learning about the Great Schism of 1054 in history class. What do you think of the reasons for the split between East and West?

2. Tony introduces the Orthodox idea of *theosis*—that God dwells within us, that we are actually meant to be gods. How does that idea sit with you?
3. Tony proposes that the incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection are three phases of God’s bridge construction. How does this help you make sense of those three aspects of Jesus’ life?
4. How do you think the Divinity model stacks up to the six questions?
5. All things considered, how do you feel about the Divinity model?

CHAPTER 16:
THE MIRROR MODEL: GOD IS SHOWING US
WHAT WE’VE DONE

1. René Girard says that all great myths reveal mimetic rivalries. Can you think of some examples of this?
2. Why do you think people tend to believe that a sacrifice will appease God (or the gods)?
3. Girard says that Jesus’ death is unlike all other sacrifices because it tears the veil off the entire system. Do you find this explanation helpful?
4. How does it change your view of a crucifix to think of it as a mirror reflecting your own culpability in systems of violence?

5. How do you think the Mirror model stacks up to the six questions?
6. All things considered, how do you feel about the Mirror model?

CHAPTER 17: OTHER MODELS OF WHAT GOD DID ON THE CROSS

1. How does the analogy of the trillion-dollar coin affect your view of the crucifixion?
2. When you read James Cone's words in this chapter, what kind of reaction do they provoke in you?
3. Does Richard Beck's vision of sociomoral disgust being overthrown on the cross resonate with you?
4. How have you seen Jesus' death used to silence victims?
5. What do you think of the Korean idea of *han* and God's overcoming of that on the cross?
6. How do you respond to the idea that Jesus killed God (or the idea of God)? Discuss.

PART SIX: WHAT GOD EXPERIENCED ON THE CROSS

CHAPTER 18: WHAT JESUS TELLS US ABOUT GOD

1. Tony says that we should use the operative phrase *God is love* to perform the “smell test” on interpretations of the crucifixion. What do you think of that criterion?
2. What experiences do you have of self-limitation in a love relationship? Does it seem right to you that God would act the same way?
3. How much freedom do you think God has given you?
4. In the past, how have you understood the relationship between Jesus and God, especially at the moment of Jesus’ death?
5. Tony argues that God (the Father) allowed Jesus (the Son) enough freedom to follow his own fate. Does this seem to accord with the Bible?

CHAPTER 19: THE CRY THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

1. In the early church, the question of how Jesus Christ was both divine and human stirred much debate. Has that question ever troubled you?

2. Tony says that both Jews and Gentiles struggled with the Christian idea that God was in a human being, Jesus of Nazareth. Is that a problem that still troubles people today?
3. Some early Christians didn't like the idea that God died on the cross in Jesus. How does that idea sit with you?
4. When have you experienced the "feeling of utter dependence"? How about a feeling of despair that we might be alone in the universe?
5. Tony makes the controversial claim that when Jesus experienced human life, God *learned* something. How do you feel about that claim?
6. Do you think God could experience atheism?

CHAPTER 20:
HOW THE CRUCIFIXION CHANGED GOD'S
RELATIONSHIP WITH US

1. Had you ever heard the story of Jephthah and his daughter before? What do you make of it?
2. Tony suggests that the crucifixion is decide, the death of God. Do you think that's an appropriate term for it?
3. Do you think Tony's right when he says that Jesus' faith in God's power of resurrection flagged during Holy Week?
4. Jesus asked for God's intervention in the garden and cried out to God in anguish from the cross. God's

response was simply quiet presence. When have you had similar experiences with God?

5. What do you think Dietrich Bonhoeffer meant when he wrote, “Only the suffering God can help” (p. 238)?
6. How do you distinguish between an act of sacrifice and someone becoming a victim?
7. How did your concept of sin change when you read this chapter?

PART SEVEN: THE WAY OF THE CROSS

CHAPTER 21: THE WAY OF PEACE

1. How do you deal with your own violent tendencies, whatever they may be?
2. Do you find that meditating on the cross helps you experience more peace?
3. When have you found yourself on the margins? Was the church there for you? How did others come to your aid?
4. In what place in your life could you show solidarity with the marginalized?
5. How have you experienced God’s presence lately?

CHAPTER 22: THE WAY OF SOLIDARITY

1. If Jesus were executed today, what do you imagine the circumstances would be?
2. Who are the people at the margins today, the people with whom Jesus would likely be found?
3. As a Christian, do you think it's better to use cultural power to advance God's kingdom or to forsake power and dwell with those on the margins?
4. How might you reflect God's self-limitation by living a spirituality of humility?
5. Tony writes, "The crucifixion is a bridge between our loneliness and God's reality" (p. 265). Has that been your experience? If so, how?
6. Who in your life seems lonely or abandoned? How can you help that person?

CHAPTER 23: THE WAY OF LOVE AND THE POWER OF PRESENCE

1. Does it surprise you to discover that "Lord" and "God Almighty" aren't necessarily the best translations of the names for God in the Bible?
2. How would it change your understanding if you thought of God primarily with feminine metaphors rather than masculine?

3. If Jesus left his miraculous Holy Spirit power to his followers, why do you suppose we struggle to see that power today?
4. What do you think the resurrection means for the crucifixion? What is their relationship?
5. As we end this book, do you feel a sense of hope, as Tony suggests? What aspect of Jesus' death gives you hope?