

FINDING MEANING IN THE CROSS

Last year a few weeks before Easter I told a story I called “Why Did Jesus Die”. That story was about why the religious leaders and Roman authorities wanted to kill Jesus. They had their reasons! But as I thought about the Easter story over the past few weeks another angle on the question occurred to me. That is, since Jesus is in God and God is in Jesus, why did Jesus have to let himself be killed? Couldn’t he have used God’s power to save himself?! Certainly, that’s what the people making fun of him as he died were getting at when they mocked him by saying, “you’re God’s son? Then come down off that cross!”

For Jesus’s friends in the weeks and months after he rose from the dead, just having him back was enough. Jesus’s rising had shown that nothing was stronger than his message or than God’s love shown through him: not the religious leaders, not the Roman Empire, not even death! But as the years passed and people who had never met Jesus or heard him speak started to be interested in his teachings, they began to wonder about the bigger picture of what his death and resurrection meant. Was it all part of God’s plan? And if so, why?

The first person we know about who really engaged with the meaning of Jesus’s death was a man named Paul. Paul never met Jesus in person, but he had an amazing experience where Jesus appeared to him a vision and spoke to him. After that he felt that he knew Jesus really well! To Paul, Jesus’s death and resurrection were maybe the most important part of his story. “Because Jesus died for all of us,” Paul wrote, “all of us are raised with him to new life.” In another letter Paul explained, “I’m not proud of anything, except the cross. In Jesus’s death and resurrection I’ve been transformed into a new person.”

But Paul’s writing didn’t settle the matter. In fact, he just added to the arguments, since people who read his words don’t all agree on just what he meant! Some people think the most important part is that Jesus was a sacrifice so that God could forgive all the bad things that people did. Others say that his death paid a ransom to Satan so that humans could belong to God again. Some warlike people had the idea that Jesus went down into hell to beat up the devil and free the souls trapped there.

All of those ideas are based on the notion that Jesus saved people from their bad actions or bad thoughts—their sins—by taking the badness on himself and then turning it around. That’s a powerful notion for people who are worried about how they can live up to God’s perfection. But other people aren’t so concerned about sin in that way. To them, the important thing was what Jesus, in dying, showed us something new about God and about following God. He was willing to give everything to bring God’s love to people—even willing to give up his life. Now, they feel, we can follow that example, and find ourselves changed by it, so that we aren’t even afraid of dying because we’re so embraced by God’s love.

Which one of those ideas is right? Who knows?! Wise, thoughtful people have been wondering—and sometimes fighting!—about the meaning of the Cross and the Empty Tomb for 2,000 years. And there’s lots to learn about all the ideas they came up with. But maybe, just like God is bigger than we can imagine, Jesus’s story is bigger too: big enough to hold all the meanings that people need it to!

Wondering Questions

I wonder how following Jesus would be different if he had used his power to keep the Romans from killing him?

I wonder why people have fought over their different ideas about Jesus’s death and resurrection?

I wonder what ideas *you* can add to our understanding of why Jesus died?