

## CHAPTER 1

# A Man Hanging on a Tree

### **I have a question.**

I'm happy to listen.

### **It might seem like a dumb one.**

I honestly don't think there are dumb questions.



### **You might after I ask this one.**

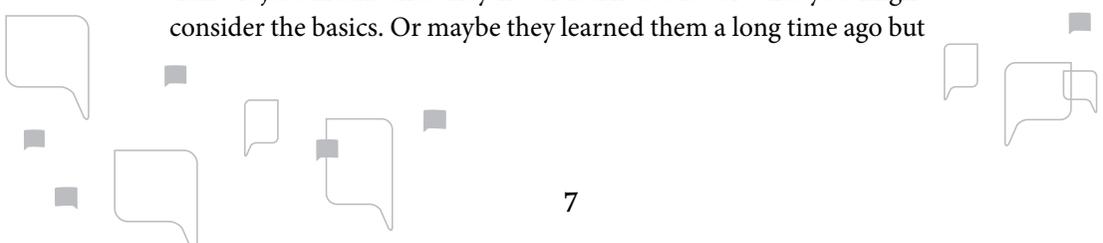
Honestly, I doubt it. Questions are the best way to explore something we want to know more about.

### **Well, this one is pretty basic, something I'm pretty sure most Christians already know.**

You might be surprised.

### **What do you mean?**

Only that a whole lot of people going to church don't know all that much about their faith. That doesn't mean they're not good Christians. It just means that they never learned a lot of what you might consider the basics. Or maybe they learned them a long time ago but



what they learned when they were kids doesn't seem as helpful now that they're adults. Either way, a lot of Christians feel like you do. They have questions but don't want to ask for fear they might look dumb.

**Which means that churches might be filled with people who have all kinds of questions but don't ask and, because they don't ask, don't learn more about their faith.**

Not a pretty picture.

**Yeah.**

Which brings us back to your question.

**All right, all right, you've convinced me—I'll risk it. So . . . what's with the cross? What's the big deal with that?**

That's not a dumb question at all. The cross is at the center of the Christian faith. Can you say a little more about why you are asking?

**Sure. It's, like, everywhere I look there are crosses—in the front of the church, on the top of the building, on the church newsletter and stationary, all over the Web page.**

It's definitely a powerful church symbol.

**And it's not only churches. A lot of people have crosses hanging on their walls at home; my parents did. And then there's the cross as jewelry. Lots of Christians wear crosses, but so do a lot of folks that I'm pretty sure haven't darkened the door of a church in quite a while. And it shows up in all kinds of movies and advertising, and not always in the most "Christian" of ways. So I guess I'm wondering how it became such a huge symbol.**

Good observations, and good question.

**And there's more. I mean, it seems like we talk about the cross a whole lot, too. The minister certainly does, especially near Easter. That makes sense. Jesus dies and is raised again and all that at Easter. But it's like we *never* stop talking about the cross.**

And you're not sure you understand it?

**No, I'm definitely sure I *don't* understand it. I mean, I've heard people talk about Jesus dying for our sins. About him being a sacrifice. And at communion, we sometimes sing a song about the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. But to be honest, I'm not sure I understand what that means. How does Jesus' dying take away my sin?**

That's another really good question.

**And, while we're at it, I've got a few more. If that's okay?**

Absolutely. Fire away. We'll sort them out later.

**Okay, great.**

**So, we've got all this talk about Jesus' death taking away our sins. I've also heard the minister say that the cross shows us God's love. Again, I'm not sure what that really means. In fact, that one kind of troubles me. If God is all about love, why did someone have to die, especially in such an awful way? I saw Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, and to be honest, the sheer violence of the crucifixion was pretty hard to take.**

So you're trying to understand how a loving God squares with the violence of the cross?

**Right. It seems like there are a lot of different messages about the cross. It's about sin. It's about love. I also remember Jesus saying somewhere something about "taking up your cross." With that one, I always figured it meant doing something hard, or bearing some kind of burden without complaining. At least that's the way my dad always used it, especially when my grandmother—his mother-in-law—would come for a long visit. Though I'm not sure that's what Jesus meant.**

Those *are* a lot of questions!

**Too many?**

Definitely not. In fact, I'd say there are even *more* questions to ask and things to talk about.

**Really? I kind of thought I was already going a bit overboard.**

No, there's lots more we could talk about. Because Christians have claimed that the cross isn't only about sin and love, but also about

forgiveness, and passion, and sacrifice, and trying to create an open future when it seems like no future is possible, and whether there's life beyond the life we know here and now.

The cross deals with all these things and more. Which might be why it's such a popular image in our culture—not only as jewelry, but also, as you said, in films, television, and literature.

**That's what I've noticed, too. It just seems like the cross is everywhere.**

So you definitely shouldn't think these are dumb questions. After all, it seems that lots of people are asking them.

**I guess so.**

And, I think you might be surprised that, in some ways, they're all linked together.

**How so?**

All of these different questions get at a central question: who is God?

**Wait. I think you lost me. I thought we were talking about the cross.**

We are.

**So how did we suddenly switch to God?**

Because ultimately the cross is all about God.

**I still don't think I'm following you.**

The cross raises all kinds of questions—just like you've been asking—but sooner or later those questions lead back to God. What was God up to in the cross? Why does God send Jesus to die on the cross? *Does* God send Jesus to the cross? What does the cross say about God, about what kind of God the Christian God is? Is God angry, loving, both, or neither? And that's really just the beginning.

**What do you mean?**

Well, the other way to approach the question is to focus on Jesus. Did Jesus have to die? Did he choose to? If Jesus is God—which is what Christians confess—then what does this say about God?

And so all of this leads us back to God. Even the questions we asked earlier—about forgiveness, the future, life beyond the one we know—all of these, I think, end up being “God questions” in one way or another.

Does that make sense?

**Sort of. I guess I’d wondered about where God was in the mix of all of this, too. I know I’ve wondered why God would have Jesus die, or if Jesus had to die, but to be honest it didn’t seem like the kind of question you should ask. I mean, it seems a little disrespectful.**

Remember, there are no dumb questions. And there’s nothing you can’t ask, either. Besides, this is exactly the question that the authors of the New Testament were trying to answer.

**Really?**

Really. In some ways, the whole New Testament is a response to the cross. It’s just not what anyone was looking for from God.

**What do you mean?**

When the Old Testament prophets talked about a future Messiah, most people assumed that this meant that God would send a mighty warrior, like King David, to rescue and restore Israel. And so when Jesus showed up, that’s what a lot of people thought was happening. But then he went and got himself killed, and killed by crucifixion, which, as you mentioned, is a pretty nasty way to die. No one knew what to do with that.

**So what did they do?**

They went back to the Bible.

**Wait, I thought you said the Bible was written to answer questions about the cross. So how could they go “back to the Bible”?**

It’s the New Testament authors I’m talking about in particular. Keep in mind that when they were writing, these early followers of Jesus already had a Bible, what we call the Old Testament.

**Ah, okay. I think I get that.**

Further, when they were writing, they didn't think they were writing the second half of the Bible. They were just trying to make sense of their scriptures in light of what had happened to Jesus. And, at the same time, they were trying to make sense of their memories and experiences of Jesus in light of their scriptures.

**The New Testament authors didn't know they were writing the New Testament?**

Nope. By the time they were writing, there were lots of stories about Jesus floating around. Some were written, but many more were only being told. So they sorted through these stories in light of studying their Bible, the Old Testament, in order to address some of the questions and problems their communities were having. Over time, other Christians found those reflections—we call them *Gospels*, which means “good news”—really helpful, and eventually they were gathered into the New Testament along with other writings that also tried to make sense of life in light of Jesus' cross and resurrection.

**Interesting; and they did all this because they still believed Jesus was the Messiah, even though he died on the cross?**

Right.

**Why?**

There are a number of reasons, but the primary one is the resurrection.

**Can you say a little more about that?**

Sure. When Jesus died, all the hopes his early followers had about him and for him died, too. The one they thought would redeem them, the one they'd called “Messiah” and “Son of God,” was now dead. So when they experienced the resurrected Jesus—or, in the case of the Gospel writers, heard about the resurrected Jesus—they realized God was up to something they had never, ever expected. It took them a while—and I mean a long while—to figure it out, but ultimately they were convinced that Jesus' death and resurrection changed everything.

**Okay. I think I'm following you. But I want to ask another question. This one might definitely be considered disrespectful, maybe even a little heretical.**

Honestly, don't sweat it. You can't figure things out in the faith without risking a little heresy.

**That's good to know!**

**All right. Well, here's the thing: You said it's not just the cross that changes everything, but also the resurrection. And even though I don't pretend to understand everything about the cross, I guess I at least find it a little easier to believe than the resurrection. I mean, people die all the time. But nobody comes back; at least nobody I've met.**

I understand what you're driving at. Especially today, there are a lot of Christians who wonder what to make of the resurrection. It's not something we've experienced, and it doesn't seem to square with everything science tells us about our lives and the world.

**Exactly!**

There are a lot of people writing some pretty interesting opinions about it. I can direct you to some of those sources if you want. But for now I mostly want to say that you shouldn't feel bad about wondering. Lots of people wonder the same thing today and, frankly, Jesus' own disciples had a hard time believing the resurrection as well.

**Really? His own disciples?!**

Definitely. In fact, not one of Jesus' disciples, when he or she first heard about Jesus being raised from the dead, believed it. In one story the women who come to take care of Jesus' body flee the tomb in terror and silence after they discover his body's not there and hear the news of the resurrection. In another Gospel, when the women do muster the courage to tell what they've seen, the men dismiss their testimony as "a crazy story." In all four Gospel accounts, it appears that the natural response to word of the resurrection is doubt, fear, and general confusion.

**I didn't know that.**

So maybe we shouldn't be surprised that Christians today struggle to make sense of it all, too.

So don't feel guilty about asking the question. That's the first thing.

**And the second?**

The second is that the resurrection is, in one sense, *the* crucial part of the story.

**What do you mean?**

Just that according to pretty much everything in the New Testament, the resurrection—no matter how you understand it—is the primary validation that Jesus is, in fact, the Messiah.

**Can you say a little more?**

Absolutely. Just like you said, we don't experience people coming back from the dead. And so when Jesus returns, everyone—or at least everyone who believes—sees Jesus' resurrection as the sign of God's triumph over sin, death, and all the things that oppose the kingdom of God. More than that, they view the resurrection as God's seal of approval, of God's sign that the life Jesus lived, the kingdom he preached, and the death he died are all important clues to understanding who and what God is for them and, really, for all the world. So in every possible way, the resurrection is a huge event that causes them to rethink, well, just about everything.

**So that's why they go back to the Bible and reinterpret it.**

And not only that, but they also reinterpret their own experiences of Jesus and their own lives. Resurrection—raising someone to new life—calls into question almost everything they thought they knew. Which is, of course, why it's so hard to believe. But if you believe it, you have to look at everything differently. And so if Jesus is raised from the dead, then that's where they have to start—not with what they *thought* God was going to do, but with what God actually *did*.

**And what did they come up with?**

Well, searching through all the passages about the Messiah, especially some passages from Isaiah and the Psalms, they came to the conclusion that they'd actually misunderstood God's intentions.

**You mean in terms of God sending another king like David.**

Yes. They expected the Messiah to come and throw out the Romans, who were the foreign army that was occupying Israel at the time of Jesus. But what they got instead was a guy who talked about the kingdom of God, was said to be a descendant of David, was reportedly performing all kinds of miracles, and was challenging the authorities left and right . . .

**And so must've seemed like a pretty good candidate to be the Messiah.**

Exactly, except that he ultimately didn't throw anyone out but instead got himself killed by the very authorities he was challenging.

**Which pretty much meant they'd backed the wrong horse. Except for the resurrection, that is.**

Right. So now they realize that they not only have to reread the Bible in general, but also to reinterpret it in light of what happened to Jesus.

**Because that's what *actually happened*—God raised Jesus from the dead.**

Right again.

**That must have been a little challenging.**

What do you mean?

**I mean, giving up your ideas about God, especially when what God actually did was so different than what you'd been expecting.**

I think you're exactly right. In fact, I sort of think we all carry around inside of us a little picture of what we think God is like.

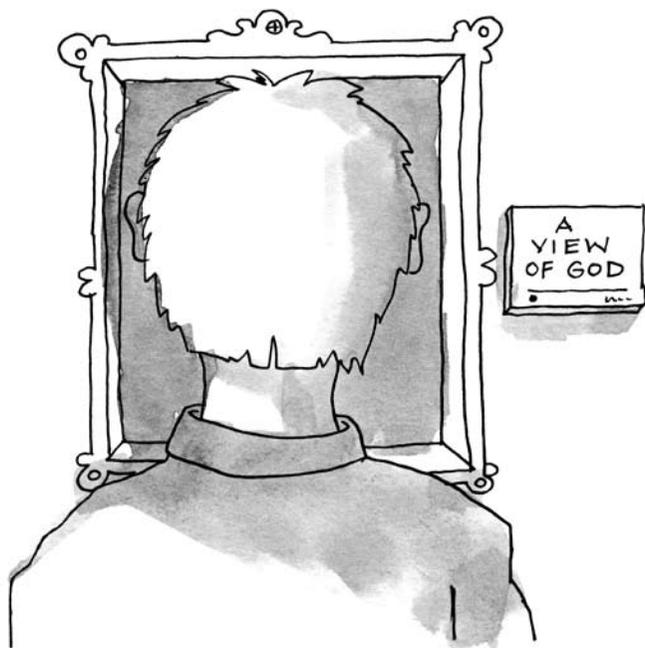
**Mine probably looks like a combination of my favorite grandfather and Santa Claus.**

I don't think you're alone in that. We all carry these pictures around. And they're usually not pictures of a guy hanging on the cross.

**Wait. What do you mean?**

Well, most of us tend to think about God in terms of what we think God ought to be able to do. You know, God knows everything, so

we say God is omniscient; that's Latin for "knows all things." Or we figure God is all-powerful, so we call God omnipotent.



**Let me guess, Latin for “all-powerful”?**

Right—we define God in terms of God’s *attributes*—ideas or theories about what any self-respecting God should be able to do. And when God comes and does something so different than what we’d expected, like die on the cross and then rise again . . .

**That messes with our pictures of God. I think I see what you mean.**

Yeah, it totally messes with our pictures of what God should be. And although that’s hard to get over—I mean, who wants to trade in a powerful, warrior God for some schlep who gets the death penalty?—it ultimately ends up being incredibly helpful.

**How so?**

Because the God who is omniscient, omnipotent, all holy—we shouldn't forget that one—is incredibly hard to approach. Nearly impossible, actually.

**What do you mean?**

Well, the great thing about an all-holy, all-powerful God is that it feels like you can count on this God. Right? I mean, this is what you expect from God.

**Right.**

The difficulty is that we can never measure up to this kind of God. I mean, how can we expect to understand this kind of God, or be understood in return? Further, how can we imagine even standing in the presence of this kind of all-holy, all-just God when we're so definitely not all holy or all just?

**I think I'm following, but could you say a little more?**

Let me try to explain by telling a story from history, the Christian church's history in particular.

**Fire away.**

Okay, so there's this guy—a monk actually—named Martin Luther.

**The guy so many churches are named after.**

He's the one. He lived in the sixteenth century and took everything people said about God very seriously, and mainly what they were saying about God in the Middle Ages was just what we've been talking about. They said that if you want to know God, you focus on God's attributes. God is all holy, all powerful, all knowing, all just, and so on. And the more Luther thought about that, the more worried he got.

**Worried? Why? I thought you said he was a monk.**

He was.

**So what's he got to worry about? He's given his whole life over to serving God.**

Yeah, but that means he's got a whole lot of time to think about God, and mostly he ends up thinking that if God is all holy and all just—and knows everything to boot—then God knows that he, Martin Luther, totally doesn't measure up. Because no matter how much Luther may try—and believe me, he tried really, really hard—he still ends up making mistakes—what the church calls “sinning”—and he figures this can't go down well with an all-holy, all-just . . .

**All-powerful, all-knowing God.**

**Got it. If God is all everything, then we don't look so hot. In fact, we're downright rotten in comparison and don't have a chance with this God.**

Exactly. Luther ends up feeling that there's this huge chasm between where he is and where this God-of-attributes is, and it scares him. He just doesn't know how to approach this kind of God, let alone be acceptable.

**I get that. It's like a kid trying to live up to this overbearing, overachieving parent. Or working for this incredibly demanding, perfectionist boss, except multiplied a thousand times. I mean, where do you even begin? How do you even talk to a God like that?**

That's Luther's dilemma in a nutshell. This God-of-attributes—all knowing, all powerful, all holy, and all the rest!—ends up being downright terrifying, because we can never be sure this God will even want to have anything to do with us, let alone help us in our time of need.

**And Luther's solution?**

That's where the cross comes in. Luther ends up seeing in Jesus another side of God. Or, maybe better, Luther wonders if he'd ever really seen God clearly before at all.

**Hmmm. You might want to slow down a little.**

No problem. From early on, Christians have confessed that Jesus isn't simply another prophet or messenger, but actually is the Son of God and, because of this, represents God fully. In fact, Christians believe Jesus actually is God in the flesh.

**Sounds a little complicated.**



Believe me, on one level it is. Formally, it's called the doctrine of the incarnation—which means, literally, “in the flesh”—and it took the early Christians a couple of centuries to think it all through.

At another level, though, it doesn't have to be quite so complicated, as the incarnation is at heart a promise that everything you see in Jesus really is true of God.

**Kind of like the WYSIWYG on my PC.**

Now *I'm* not following, but maybe that's because I use a Mac.

**We'll save the Mac-PC debate for later. But, for now, what you said about what we see in Jesus being true of God reminds me of when I got my first PC, right after Microsoft came out with Windows.**

Which was, as I'm sure you'll recall, Microsoft's attempt to be more like Apple.

**Whatever. The point is, when Microsoft first developed Windows, they created this little device driver—a program—that made it so that what you saw on the screen was what you got on the page. Before that, when you were**

**writing, italicized words would be one color, boldfaced words another, etc., but nothing looked quite like it was going to look when you printed it out.**

How do you know all this?

**Like I said, this was my first computer, and I tried to learn everything I could about it. Anyway, they named this program WYSIWYG for “What you see is what you get.” And it sounded like that’s what the early Christians wanted to say about Jesus through their doctrine of the Incarnation: what you see in Jesus is what you get in God. So, in a sense, Jesus is God’s WYSIWYG.**

Brilliant. Really, I’ll have to remember that one.

**I’m glad I can help.**

**So you were saying that Luther came to believe that Jesus shows another side of God, or maybe even that Jesus shows Luther he had been wrong about God all along.**

Right. Because what you see in Jesus is what you get in God—I like that!—you need to rethink all the talk about God’s attributes in light of what actually happens to Jesus. And once Luther did that he realized that the God we see in Jesus is quite different from the God-of-attributes he’d imagined. Luther says that this God—the one revealed in Jesus on the cross—is vulnerable rather than powerful, approachable rather than distant, and is someone you can count on receiving mercy and grace from rather than judgment. Ultimately, Luther observes, this God is the one who understands everything we go through because, in Jesus, God went through it all too, even death.

**Which made it easier for Luther to imagine that this God maybe could accept him, maybe actually love him.**

Exactly.

**But are you saying—or is Luther saying—that God *isn’t* all holy or all just or all powerful and the rest?**

What do you think?

**Well, I can see how focusing on all the attributes gets overwhelming. But, still, isn’t God *supposed* to be all those things? Isn’t that what makes God . . . God?**

That's where Luther gets stuck, too.

**Glad I'm in good company!**

Definitely.

**So what does he do?**

He ends up saying that God is *both* all powerful and all the rest *and* that God is approachable and understanding.

**How convenient!**

Yeah, I know what you mean; it sounds like a contradiction. But when you think about it, it actually makes some sense.

**If you say so. Though to be honest, I'm not there yet.**

Try this, then: think about the president of the United States.

**Okay . . .**

He's regularly called the most powerful man on earth, and I'm guessing that most people are kind of in awe when they meet him, maybe even intimidated.

**I think that's how I'd probably feel.**

But now think about his kids. To his kids, the president isn't the president; he's just "dad." Whatever they think of him, I doubt they're intimidated.

**And they're probably not exactly in awe of him, either.**

Right. And that's kind of what Luther is saying about God. In one sense, God *is* all powerful, all holy, and all the rest. You said it well—that's what makes God *God*. But that's not the whole story. That's not even the main story. In Jesus, we also see that God is a God of love, a God who wants to relate to us as a parent instead of as a cosmic president. Luther came to believe that in Jesus we discover a God willing to suffer for our sake, a God who loves us enough to become one of us, to live our life and to die our death. So whatever God may be *in general*—all powerful and the rest—in the cross we see God

setting all that aside in order to be *for us*: living for us, caring for us, and eventually dying for us.

**Interesting.**

It gets even more so, as Luther eventually begins to wonder whether all of our ideas about God are kind of mixed up apart from the cross.

**What do you mean?**

Well, think about what we've said about God's attributes—all holy, all just and the rest. They make sense because that's what we *assume* God is like, what God ought to be like. And, on one level, it makes sense to talk about God this way, because God is the creator and sustainer of the universe. But on another level, the cross reveals that it doesn't make any sense to talk about God this way and that maybe we were wrong to assume these things. That is, the cross suggests that maybe we assume divinity is about power, but we discover that it's not. That God is most *truly* God when God is being caring, vulnerable, and forgiving.

**And Luther got all this from looking at the cross?**

Right. Like we said, no one expected the cross. Not when it happened, and not ever since. So the cross reveals a *different kind* of God than anyone expected. Which is good news, because as Luther points out, when you look to the God-of-attributes, all you see is God's righteousness and justice, and you end up being terrified. You can't find any mercy, grace, or goodness there. It might be there, and you hope to high heaven it's there, but you can't count on it because all you see is God's attributes.

But when you look at the cross, you see God revealed as vulnerable, loving, gracious, like a parent willing to do anything to save his or her children. This God, Luther realized, is unrelentingly *for us*, on our side, always eager to draw near to us in love.

**Which is why the cross becomes so important—because it reveals to us this other side of God. Or, actually, a whole other God than we'd expected.**

That's it. Luther calls this way of talking and thinking about God the "theology of the cross" because it measures everything we *assume* about God against *what we actually see revealed* in the cross. In fact, he was once asked what he thought about when he thought about God—you know, what attribute of God is most important.

**And what did he answer?**

He skipped the attributes altogether and instead said, "When I think of God, I think of a man hanging on a tree."

**What did he mean by that?**

That he thought that whenever we say something about God, we should start not with how we think God *should be* but instead with what God *actually did*. That, in turn, means all our talk about God's attributes have to be filtered through a cross-shaped lens. For instance, what do you mean by "all powerful" when you see Jesus suffer on the cross? What do you mean by "all just" when Jesus forgives sinners and dies an innocent man? What do you mean by "all knowing" when Jesus cries out in despair on the cross?

**That's beginning to make more and more sense. But I have to say that it also paints a very different picture of God than I'd imagined.**

Say a little more?

**Well, when I think of God, I don't think first of a guy hanging on a cross. In fact, that's almost the opposite of what I—and I suspect most people—think about. Instead, I think of God's power—you know, the one who created the whole world and all that. But this God seems pretty powerless. Is that what Luther meant by saying we have to filter talk about God's attributes through the cross?**

That's exactly what he meant. His "theology of the cross" means calling into question our assumptions about God, including how God is powerful.

**How God is powerful? What do you mean?**

The cross invites—maybe actually demands—that we reconsider what we assumed about God and God's power in light of what God

actually did in Jesus. So the question becomes, what does God's power look like when it doesn't come packaged as a mighty king or warrior but instead is revealed in a guy who gets executed?

**So Luther—and lots of other Christians, too, I'm assuming—focused on the cross because it told him things he might have missed otherwise?**

Right. In fact, one of my favorite movies with lots of cross imagery sums it up pretty well.

**What's the movie?**

*Cool Hand Luke.*

**I've heard of it—the one with Paul Newman, right?—but haven't seen it.**

It's about this guy named Luke, obviously, who doesn't understand life. He's come back from a war and nothing makes sense, so he starts doing stupid things, like cutting the heads off of parking meters.

**Why does he do that?**

You don't really know, except that, in general, the rules of society don't make sense to him—whether they're big rules like why you have to go to jail for committing a crime, or little ones like why you have to pay to park your car. In any event, because of the stuff he's doing, he ends up in jail.

And there are lots of rules in jail, too, but they don't make sense to him, either. So he breaks them, and he gets punished. And he breaks more and is punished more, until he finally tries to escape prison. When he's brought back, the prison warden says, "What we've got here is a failure to communicate." And that pretty much sums things up—it's like someone forgot to communicate to Luke something important about life, and so none of it makes sense.

**And this connects to the cross . . . how?**

I think that's what Luther is trying to say about our life of faith, too. Apart from the cross, all we can imagine is the God-of-attributes, and so God ends up being kind of terrifying and much of life doesn't make sense.

There's this great scene in the movie when a thunderstorm comes up. The other prisoners run to take shelter, but Luke just stays out there and starts yelling up at the thunder and lightning, eventually shouting at the all-powerful God one of the other prisoners is afraid of. Except Luke's not sure this God even exists, so he shouts, "Let me know you're up there. Come on. Love me, hate me, kill me, anything. Just let me know it." Finally, he gives up. The God-of-attributes either doesn't exist or is just not approachable.

**I think I see what you mean. So Luther is saying that we're like Luke: most of life, and definitely God, doesn't make a whole lot of sense unless you have a clearer sense of not just *what* God is, but *who* God is.**

Right! And according to Luther, if much of life feels like a failure to communicate, then the cross is God's way of establishing communication, of telling us more directly what God is up to and just who God really is for us.

**Okay, I think I'm with you, more or less, with an emphasis on *think*.**

I know what you mean; it takes a little time for it to sink in. But this is exactly why your questions are such good ones and why the cross is worth talking about. Because it's right at the center of the Christian faith and, as we've already seen, not the simplest thing to explain or understand.

**You're telling me.**

Like I said, it took the earliest Christians, the ones who wrote what we call the New Testament, a long time to think all this through.

**How long, exactly?**

A couple of generations, at least. Maybe it will help if I give you a general timeline.

**I'll take it.**

Okay, so the earliest writings we have in the New Testament come from the apostle Paul, an early convert to Christianity who spread the message of Jesus throughout the ancient world.

### **Paul—he’s the one who wrote all the letters?**

That’s right.

### **And what’s an “apostle”?**

It comes from a Greek word. It means “one who is sent with a message.” And that’s Paul in a nutshell. He was a missionary pastor, called and commissioned to share the message of Jesus with as many people as possible. So after getting a new Christian community started, he would usually move on to a new territory where people hadn’t heard the gospel yet. Often, though, the communities he had founded would write him for advice, and many of the letters we have in the New Testament are his responses to some of these questions.

**Got it.**

**But I have to say this surprises me a bit. I mean, I’m sure Paul’s letters are important, but I really would have guessed that the four Gospels came first. After all, they’re the stories about Jesus.**

That’s completely understandable. I think most of us grew up assuming the Gospels were written first. But they actually come much later, about forty to fifty years after Jesus taught his disciples. On the other hand, Paul was writing only about twenty years later.

### **Why do the Gospels come so much later?**

Lots of reasons: the early Christians were busy spreading the news. They thought Jesus might return soon so there didn’t seem to be any need to write things down, there were plenty of eye-witnesses around to tell the stories, and so on. But after a while, when they realized Jesus wasn’t coming right back, and because some of the eye-witnesses were dying, it suddenly seemed like a good idea to collect the stories, sort through them, and tell them in a way that could help new Christians understand the ministry and mission of Jesus.

**Interesting.**

Further, they probably weren’t written by eye-witnesses. Luke, one of the people who wrote a Gospel, says as much at the very beginning of his book; he says that there are a lot of stories about Jesus floating

around that have been passed down by actual eye-witnesses, and he's now trying to sort through them and put together an ordered account for his community.

**I never knew that, either.**

Again, you're not alone. But, to put it simply, the apostle Paul comes first, as he's writing in the early fifties of the first century, or about twenty years after Jesus died. Then come the four Gospels—probably Mark first, around 70, near when the Romans destroyed the temple of Jerusalem. Then Luke and Matthew followed ten or so years after that, and finally the Gospel of John was written, maybe another decade or so later, around 90 or so, or nearly sixty years after Jesus' actual ministry.

**And all this time they're trying to figure out the cross?**

Right, and what's interesting is that as you go from Paul to John you can actually see the early Christians' understanding of the cross develop.

**What do you mean?**

Nearly all of what Paul says about Jesus centers on Jesus' cross and resurrection, how that changes everything.

**Like we do in church.**

Sort of, but it's more than that. I mean, Paul talks about all kinds of things—ethics, church divisions, local customs. But everything he takes up he discusses in light of the cross. Interestingly, he says next to nothing about Jesus' actual life. In fact, it's hard to know if he even knows anything about Jesus' life and ministry.

**What do you mean?**

Well, Paul doesn't tell any stories about Jesus—no miracles, no parables, no sermons, nothing. So if he knows them, he obviously doesn't think they're important, because all he does is talk about the difference the cross and resurrection make.

**So where do all the stories come from then?**

They come from the eyewitnesses and traditions about Jesus Luke mentions, and they end up getting written down in the Gospels, connected to the story of the cross.

**So they've realized, like you said earlier, that the cross helps them understand all the stories they have about Jesus' life.**

Right, but here's where it gets even more interesting. Mark, who writes first, begins his story with Jesus' baptism. Matthew and Luke, writing ten years or so later, begin their stories with Jesus' birth. Then John, writing still another decade later, begins his story of Jesus at the very beginning of time, starting his Gospel with a line that echoes the beginning of Genesis: "In the beginning was the Word."

**So if Paul is writing in the 50s and only talks about the cross, and John is writing, what, about forty years later, and has taken that story all the way back to the beginning of time, it's like the longer they have to think about Jesus' cross the more it explains for them.**

Exactly—first it's just the cross and resurrection. Then Mark uses the cross and resurrection to make sense of Jesus' ministry and all the stories about him. Then Matthew and Luke realize . . . no, wait, this helps us understand his birth, too. And then John comes along and says, sorry, but we're not done yet—the cross has implications for all of human history.

**That's pretty cool. I can see why they'd take a long time to think all this through. And, clearly, it doesn't stop there. Like you said, Luther is still thinking about all this fifteen hundred years later, and we're still thinking it through today.**

Absolutely. And what all of these conversations have in common is that they all center on figuring out what God is up to in the cross, about what the cross tells us about God. Not about *what* God is—all powerful and the rest—but instead, about *who* God is for us.

**Interesting.**

I think so, too.

**Okay, that helps me understand why the cross becomes so important to the early Christians and, for that matter, to Christians ever since. It tells us**

**something about God, something we didn't expect, something that changes the way we think about God and, I suppose, everything else, too. That makes sense.**

**But we're still a long way from answering all the other questions I mentioned, about what the cross means and how it relates to sin and forgiveness and all the rest.**

You're absolutely right. We've just scratched the surface. Where do you want to begin?

**To be honest, my head is spinning a bit with all the questions I have. But I think at this point I am most curious about what you said about the whole New Testament being a response to the cross, and I find it really interesting how much the thought of the authors of the New Testament developed while it was being written.**

Yeah, it is interesting, and it's also part of what makes the cross so challenging for us to understand today.

**What do you mean?**

Well, like I said, it takes a while, and just as Paul and the four Gospel writers start at different places in terms of how far back they go with Jesus' story in light of the cross, they don't all end up at the same place, either.

**I'm not sure I'm following.**

Well, we'd like to think there's one and only one way to interpret the cross, but in the New Testament there are actually several different interpretations. What Paul thinks isn't exactly the same as Mark, and that's not the same as John, and we haven't even talked about some of the other letters and documents in the New Testament. As it turns out, there are several different ways to answer the question: what is God up to in the cross?

**That sounds like it could get confusing, especially if the Gospels are saying totally different things about the cross.**

I don't think I'd go so far as to say they're saying *totally* different things. They definitely tell a similar story and overlap in lots of places, but no question about it, they also have different emphases.

### **Can you say a little more?**

Each Gospel has a particular point of view it's trying to get across, a distinct confession of faith about Jesus that is addressed to different Christian communities that were facing different challenges and asking different questions. As you said, this can get complicated, even problematic. So much so that one early Christian leader blended the four together into one seamless story.

### **Sounds like a reasonable solution.**

Maybe. I mean, it was definitely popular for some time in some parts of the early Christian world, but after a while most Christians actually appreciated having four distinct stories about Jesus.

### **Why? Wouldn't they rather have one clear story instead of four different ones?**

I think they ended up feeling like you lose too much when you splice them all together. Maybe having four stories, each with a distinct perspective, gets a little complicated at times, but in the end, the early Christians figured that what God was doing in Jesus to save us and all the world was, well, complex. And they believed that somehow you get a richer, truer picture of Jesus through the four different perspectives than you do by slapping them all together into one.

**Kind of like when I was at an art museum once and was looking at this statue on the museum lawn. Each time I moved, it looked a little different. I saw different angles and contours; the lighting was a little different, and so forth. I ended up seeing all kinds of details that I would have missed if I'd seen it from just one angle, like in a picture.**

That's a great illustration—the four Gospels give us a more three-dimensional view of what God is doing in Jesus. That makes things a little more complicated at times, but it also makes it much more interesting.

**By the time I was done walking around the statue, I felt like I'd really seen it.**

And that's what the early Christians felt like, too. The distinct but complimentary perspectives on Jesus give us a more complete and



true picture of what God is doing in Jesus, especially through his cross and resurrection. Each Gospel, that is, tries to show us something about God that maybe we hadn't noticed before, something about how God is *for us* that the cross makes clear.

**It sounds like each Gospel presents its own theology of the cross. So maybe that's where we should go now, to look at the way each of the Gospels describes what's going on in the cross.**

Sounds like a plan. Let's go there next.

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## Insights and Questions