

Good Friday and the Passion in John's Gospel
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by
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Author and pastor Tony Campolo tells how he was asked years ago to be a counselor at a junior high summer Bible camp. He observed that a junior high kid's concept of a good time is **picking on** other kids. And at this particular camp, there was a little boy named Billy who was suffering from cerebral palsy. As Billy walked across the camp with his uncoordinated body, the other kids would line up and imitate his strange movements, teasing him mercilessly. One day, Billy was asking for directions, "Which way is the craft shop?" he stammered, his mouth contorting. And the boys mimicked him in that same mocking stuttering, "It's over...there...Billy." And then they laughed at him. Two days later, it was Billy's cabin's turn to give morning devotions and prayers. Tony wondered what would happen because his fellow cabin mates had appointed Billy to be the speaker. Tony knew that they just wanted to get Billy up there to make fun of him. As Billy dragged his way to the front, you could hear the giggles rolling over the crowd. It took him almost five minutes to say 7 words. **These** were the words: "Jesus... loves..me..and..I ..love..Jesus!" When Billy finished, there was **dead** silence. Tony looked over his shoulders and saw junior high boys **crying** all over the place. A revival broke out in that camp after Billy's short testimony. Tony says that as he travels all over the world, he finds missionaries and pastors who say, "Remember me? I was converted at that junior high summer Bible camp. " The counselor had tried **everything** to get those kids interested in Jesus, even bringing in well known baseball players whose batting averages had gone up since they had started praying. But God didn't use the superstars. God chose to use a kid with cerebral palsy.

And here we are on Good Friday, with Jesus dying on the Cross, facing what to almost everyone appeared to be an ignominious shameful defeat: the crowds, the religious authorities, Caiaphas, Pilate, even the disciples, saw Jesus's death as an out-and-out dismal failure. **Everyone**, that is, except Jesus. Yet what God accomplished through Billy at that junior high summer Bible camp is exactly what God did for the world through the Cross. God took the most **unlikely** scenario possible and what everyone saw as a shocking tragedy, turned it upside down and made it a glorious triumph over sin and death. Our God is a God of reversal who likes to take our beliefs and **stand** them on their head.

It must be remembered that the cross was somewhat of an **embarrassment** to the early Christians. The popular view of the Messiah was that he was a **political** savior who would lead an army to rescue the Jews from their oppressors and give them back control over their country. So, they had to understand why it **was** that the promised Messiah suffered the humiliation of a common criminal at the hands of their enemy, the Romans. To make sense of this reversal, John uses the phrase "**lifted up**" as a way of referring to raising Jesus onto the cross for execution, but these **same** Greek words can **also** be used

to describe the process of lifting a king onto his throne. John is suggesting that the **same** act, which **is** a horrible means of death, is also, in the case of Jesus, an exaltation of a king in **all** his royal power. Paradoxically, his death, which evil **inflicts** on Jesus in its effort to **destroy** his mission, becomes the **very** means by which his mission is **achieved**. Rather than disgracing Jesus, the crucifixion was his **coronation**. Throughout the passion, John emphasizes Jesus's control over his destiny. Even the soldiers and guards fall to the ground in worship when they come to arrest him. We see Jesus standing firm against the questioning of the religious authorities, while at the same time, outside, Peter is caving in out of cowardice. The gospel makes clear that Pilate finds Jesus **innocent** of the charges against him, but senses trouble from the crowd and possibly down the line, **Rome**, if he does not do what the religious authorities are **demanding**. Pilate lacks the courage of his convictions and allows the situation to produce the **opposite** of his judgment. Ultimately, **Pilate** is the one being convicted and Jesus is the **true** Judge. There is **no** agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus carries his own cross to Calvary... there's no Simon of Cyrene here to help him. He endures whatever people do to him, without losing his royal dignity or composure. He does not "die," so much as freely hand over his spirit. Jesus remains in control throughout the **entire** Passion, knowing what is going to happen to him. Jesus takes command of his death and **willingly** lays down his life. When Jesus says, "It **is** finished," he means not **only** his own mortal life, but that God's mission to make pardon and redemption a reality in this world, **has** been completed. Through the cross, human beings are reconnected with God and are given an entirely new way of living, which was what God had always intended.

The meaning of the Passion in John is, above all, God's love. Unlike the other Gospels, Jesus' death is not so much a **sacrifice**, as it is an act of love done by the king willing to lay down his life for his friends. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus says his followers are no longer servants but friends, because Jesus has shared with them, everything that he received from God. Since the world was in the grip of evil and alienated from God, on the cross, Jesus throws his body between the forces of evil and us, securing our freedom. The Passion of Jesus has become **compassion** for us, knowing that love is the power that breaks the bonds of sin and alienation, so no longer separated, we can now relate to God as friend, for we are reborn as children of God.

Elie Wiesel, survivor of the Holocaust and a Nobel Peace prize winner, tells while imprisoned at Auschwitz, he was forced to watch the hanging of two Jewish men and a young Jewish boy. The two men died almost instantly, but for some reason the boy struggled on the gallows for almost half an hour. As Wiesel and others stood watching this boy die an agonizing death, some people behind him muttered, "**Where** is God?" Wiesel was struggling with the **same** question. Then he heard a voice within him saying, "God is hanging **there** on the gallows." This is the **same** message John is trying to convey in his gospel. No matter what the circumstances of our lives might be, love is **always** present, creating something new, even amidst the most adverse and hateful of conditions. Love rescues life from death and is stronger than anything we might face. Good Friday will never answer the **why** of suffering. But it does tell us that God is not **removed** from our suffering. God does not watch as an **impartial** bystander in our lives. Having become one of us and endured the full range of human experience and emotions, God feels our pain because God suffered also. On the cross, Jesus took upon himself, every tragedy injustice, hideous crime, abuse, and torture the world has ever seen or

done or **will** see or do. By witnessing nothing but peace and forgiveness throughout his life and by taking into his heart all the sin, pain, shame, and guilt of the world with him as part of his death, Jesus became a **peace** offering, which created the supreme act of reconciliation, that restored our friendship with God. What was broken by sin, has now been repaired by love.

About 12 years ago, schoolgirls from the Israeli village of Beit Shemesh, were enjoying a springtime field trip to the Island of Peace on the Jordan River border between Israel and Jordan. Suddenly without warning, a Jordanian soldier went **berserk** and started spraying the young girls with automatic machine gun fire. He chased them down a hill, killing 7 young girls and wounding as many others at point blank range. CNN transmitted pictures of the mourning happening in that village around the world, but amid all this anguish, anger, and alienation, King Hussein of Jordan, left his palace and his country and entered each of the modest homes of these grieving families and he fell on his knees. King Hussein bowed down before them. In each home, he looked up into the eyes of the mother, father, sisters, and brothers and said, "I beg you, **forgive** me, forgive **me**. Your daughter is like my **daughter**; your loss is my **loss**. May God help you to bear your pain." And then this Muslim king, humbled before them, bowed again and walked out. Yes, we live in a world that continues to believe that violence can bring peace, a world that worships power, privilege, and possessions, rather than sacrificial love and service. It is a world where kids can ridicule a child suffering from cerebral palsy and where a young boy is hung to death simply because of his religion. We don't have to look **too** far to find Christ crucified, whether it be the pain of loved ones, the silent misery of neighbors, or the remnants of lives torn asunder by crisis, natural disasters, violence, or war. From the view of the Cross, we understand that God's power is the power to love and to forgive, even when that seems almost impossible, because such power is **not** of **this** world. Jesus reigns **whenever** love overcomes hatred and mercy conquers revenge. Jesus's death is not a shameful grisly end, but a **glorious** self-sacrifice and a **victorious** sign of God's overwhelming and unfathomable love for us. On Good Friday, our God works **in** and **through** our weakness and vulnerability opening the door to new life. We want to know on **Friday** that the last word has not been spoken and that **Sunday** will eventually come. The pain of Jesus's death is not a **terminal** pain but a **birth pang** moment of incredible transformation. Everything we **are** and believe, the world and its values are turned upside down and miraculously, all the hurt and wounds we have suffered, become the source of forgiveness and reconciliation, as we and the world are reborn into new hope and possibilities. The cross becomes that place where we gaze with **shock** and **awe** at the dead body of Jesus and our hearts are broken open, such that the healing power of God can flow into **us** and through **us** into our sick and broken world. Yes, for these and many other reasons, of all the possible words that **could** have been used to describe this Friday of Jesus's death, the word settled on was "good!"