

In 2017, a California man named Mike Hughes planned to launch himself 1,800 ft into the air in a rocket he made himself. The rocket was steam-powered.

Why would Hughes do this? Well, it turns out he was convinced the earth is flat, and he was willing to risk his life to prove that was the case.

His plan was thwarted by the Federal Bureau of Land Management, which denied him permission because he did not obtain the proper permits. Also because it was a terrible, terrible idea.

There's some debate, of course, about whether the government should be allowed to make such a ruling. If someone wants to risk their own life, should the government have a say in whether they're allowed to do so? Should we be legally obligated to wear seatbelts, or have our cars inspected? If someone wants to build a rocket and shoot themselves into the air, shouldn't they be allowed to?

It's a fascinating question, made all the more poignant by the fact that Mike Hughes *did* launch his homemade rocket three years later. And he died when the rocket crashed mere seconds after it was launched.

Whose fault is Mike's death? Clearly not the government, who tried to restrain his choices. Of course we can blame Hughes himself. And maybe there's some fault to be laid at the feet of the flat earth community, a group so hell-bent on denying reality that they'll literally risk their own lives to prove what Aristotle proved 300 years before Jesus was born.

Who can save us from ourselves? What happens when we're so committed to a bad idea that we won't turn away?

Flat earth isn't the only deadly ideology. From white supremacy to patriarchy, to the human impulse to conquer and colonize, these are what Christian theologians label as sin.

So how does God save us from ourselves? Today, we're going to celebrate God's great love for us, a love great enough to save us even from ourselves!

Message

This summer, we're putting *your* questions front and center. All spring, we collected your questions and we got dozens. We've grouped them all together and are working through them together this summer.

A couple of principles are guiding our series:

Here at Catalyst, doubts and questions aren't enemies of faith; quite the opposite. We think it matters that Jesus asked way more questions than he gave answers.

Secondly, we're not trying to settle questions here. The goal of this series is to create conversation, not consensus. These messages are the beginning of conversations. Not the end. Our goal is to ask better questions together.

We began last week by looking at how we know God. Today, we've got a question that hits at our experience of God's goodness. Let's look at the questions guiding us today:

"Why did God have to kill his son?"

Talk about a question that doesn't pull any punches. This is one of those questions that's so real it feels scary.

I saw a debate once between a Christian theologian and a Muslim Imam. The Imam brought up Jesus' crucifixion as a reason he *doesn't* follow Christianity. He said, "In Islam, Allah just forgives us. If I loan you \$20 and you come to me and say, 'I'm sorry, I can't pay you back,' I can simply forgive you. I don't have to punch my son first."

There are all sorts of weird justifications theologians offer to square this circle. We'll say things like, "God is perfectly holy, so perfect offenses require just punishments."

Except... they don't. That's literally the opposite of forgiveness. To forgive means 'to cancel'.

And again, if God is really God, the all-powerful creator of everything, then surely God *can* actually just forgive. Certainly there would be a way other than the lavish violence of the cross, meted out against God's only son?

So, why did God have to kill God's son?

I want to offer the beginnings of an answer, one that's consistent with our insistence that God is most fundamentally self-giving love.

How can a God who is essentially self-giving love kill their only son?

Let's talk about God's wrath.

Fair warning: today, we're going to be moving through a bunch of different Scriptures. They'll all be on the screens, but they're all in the virtual beaker too.

When you hear the phrase "Wrath of God," what comes to mind?

I'm guessing it's everything from the cross to lightning raining from the sky to the end of the world. So hear me:

In Scripture, the 'Wrath of God' isn't what you think. God's wrath looks like giving us what we want.

Paul says this explicitly in his letter to the Roman Church:

But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness... So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. -- [Romans 1:18, 24a \(NLT\)](#)

This idea of God abandoning us to our desires is the image I want you to hold on to today. When Paul thinks of God's wrath, Paul pictures God as one who is restraining us, holding us back from rushing headlong off a cliff. But eventually, God reaches a point where God says, "Okay, have it your way." And God lets go, lets us receive the natural consequences of our actions.

I know there's a long distance between God letting us have the consequences of our own actions and God killing God's son on the cross. But we're beginning here, with Paul's definition of God's wrath.

Paul is actually drawing on an idea that's widespread among the Hebrew prophets. When they talk about God's wrath or God's anger, they use the picture of a winecup full of wine.

The prophet Jeremiah warned again and again that if God's people chose not to follow God's way in the world, the other nations in the world would destroy them. Listen to the language he used to describe how those nations would behave:

This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, said to me: "Take from my hand this cup filled to the brim with my anger, and make all the nations to whom I send you drink from it. When they drink from it, they will stagger, crazed by the warfare I will send against them." --[Jeremiah 25:15-16](#)

Jeremiah imagined the violence of these other nations as them being drunk on violence. Essentially, God's message is: Oh, so you want to trust their ways instead of mine? Okay... drink up.

Of course, God's people were devastated in the Exile, when those other nations destroyed the nation, the capitol, God's temple and their whole civilization. So listen to how this later prophet talks to those who have survived the Exile:

But now listen to this, you afflicted ones who sit in a drunken stupor, though not from drinking wine. This is what the Sovereign LORD, your God and Defender, says: "See, I have taken the terrible cup from your hands. You will drink no more of my fury. Instead, I will hand that cup to your tormentors, those who said, 'We will trample you into the dust and walk on your backs.' — [Isaiah 51:21-23](#)

God promises to take the cup from them and give it back to the Babylonians (which happened - they were conquered by the Persians, who gave people permission to return to the holy land and rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple.)

By Jesus' day, the Babylonians and the Persians are long gone. The new Empire on the block is Rome. And Rome's favorite propaganda tool was crucifixion. Of all the ways they had to execute someone (and Rome *loved* killing people), crucifixion was reserved for those who tried to challenge Rome's right to rule.

The Cross was Rome's ultimate way of denying the humanity of the executed. It was the ultimate sign of Empire, of the rejection of God's will for the world in favor of Rome's.

So listen to Jesus, the night before he is going to be crucified. Listen to the language he uses to describe what he knows is about to happen to him:

He went on a little farther and fell to the ground. He prayed that, if it were possible, the awful hour awaiting him might pass him by. "Abba, Father," he cried out, "everything is possible for you. Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine." — [Mark 14:35-36](#)

Jesus understands that he's about to put himself in the way of Empire. He's about to take our place, to stand where everyone who's ever said to God, "Not your way but my way," ends up.

We imagine that religion is about God saying, "Obey me or else," and then getting mad when we don't play by his rules.

But the Scriptures show us a God who created a world where every person has value because every person bears God's image. And God invites us to live in this world in a way that honors that.

Instead, again and again, we build systems that privilege some at the expense of others. We deny God's image in those who should be our neighbors over and over. That's a pattern that leads to death and destruction every time.

But rather than leave us to our own devices, God sent Jesus to take our place, to drink from that cup for us.

Now, I know we haven't gotten all the way to the answer to our question yet. But I hope this shift we've made is already helping you see a more loving picture of God than you had. Can we pause and worship in song?

Song

So back to our question: Why did God have to kill his son?

The way we ask this question reveals a way we talk about God that actually gets in the way of the vast picture of God's love for us the Bible offers.

Why did GOD have to kill his son? It makes it sound like God the Father made a unilateral decision to send poor baby Jesus down to be killed.

But probably the most important doctrine in the Church is that of the Trinity. We insist that God is not three separate deities. Rather God is one. So when we say the Father sent the Son to die, we are also saying the Son sent himself to die and the Father died with the Son.

If your head is starting to hurt, you're in good company. What matters here is that the Cross is not something God is doing to someone else.

God is taking the consequences of our sin on Godself. God put Godself in our place.

And here's the truly amazing part: God committed to do this before God even began to create. Revelation uses the image of a slaughtered lamb to represent Jesus - he's the Passover Lamb, killed to save us from the evil Empire, be it Egypt or Babylon or Persia or Rome. And look how it describes Jesus here:

And all the people who belong to this world worshiped the beast. They are the ones whose names were not written in the Book of Life that belongs to the Lamb who was slaughtered before the world was made. — [Revelation 13:8](#)

Before God created a world with us in it, God knew we would want to go our own way. God knew that way would lead to injustice, oppression and empire-building. And so, before God said, "Let there be..." that first time, God committed Godself to die for us.

Friends, when we look at the Cross, it's easy to see a God we should be afraid of. A God we're told loves us, but who is so angry he takes it out on his son rather than us.

Let's be clear: that's abuse. That's not love.

Fortunately, that's *not* how the Bible talks about the Cross. What we see is not an angry God venting his anger at an innocent target.

What we see is the one who created us and loves us and would rather die than live without us. A God who refuses to let evil and injustice have the last word and so instead becomes one of us and takes our place as the recipient of all the consequences of our own sin.

In doing so, Jesus broke the power of sin and death and opened up a new way for us to live - as God's own beloved children!

That's why the writer of Colossians says:

You have died with Christ, and he has set you free from the spiritual powers of this world. — [Colossians 2:20](#)

The Cross is freedom from death. Freedom from wrath. Freedom from Sin. The Cross is why we can hope that our struggles are not in vain. Because we struggle alongside the very God who created us!

Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us to share his cup that we might know his life!

When in the last week have I rested in God's love?

When in the last week have I avoided God because of fear or shame?

When might fear or shame keep me from God this week?

How can I rest in God's love this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Pray with Jesus in Gethsemane