

AT HOME WITH GOD



HOW THE CROSS
TRANSFORMS US

JASON G. EDWARDS



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THE FRONT DOOR: SUBSTITUTION

Love That Took Our Place



EVERY HOUSE HAS A FRONT DOOR. It's the first thing you see when you walk up. It's where the world is invited in. Where the light first spills out in the evening, and where the dust of the road gathers at the threshold. It's not the whole house . . . no one lives in the door. It's where welcome begins.

For many people, **substitution** is the Front Door of the gospel. They were handed this story in Sunday school. They heard it at youth camp alter calls. They whispered it in late-night testimonies. Jesus took your place. Jesus paid your debt. Jesus died so you don't have to. At its best, it's breathtaking. Simple, yes, but so are bread and water. So is the sound of someone saying your name when you thought you'd been forgotten.

Beneath these images lies a deeper ache: alienation. So many of us quietly fear we're not enough, that we've been left outside love's threshold. At the cross, Christ steps into our alienation so that we may step into God's embrace. As poet George Herbert confesses, "Love bade me welcome; yet my soul drew back."¹ That is the shape of substitution here: Love steps over our shame, takes our place at the door, and ushers us in. Welcome isn't a theory. It tastes like bread on a plate and feels like your name remembered. The porch light is

on . . . someone's been watching for you. The door opens, and we enter as beloved children, lovingly beckoned home. Brush the dust from your shoes and come on in. You don't owe a thing.

It's worth pausing here. Because this story, this glimpse into the wide Great House of Atonement, tells a truth we know in our bones: You were stuck, and Jesus made a way. And we shouldn't confuse the simplicity of the image with shallowness. The power of substitution lies in realizing what it cost someone to step in. Substitution means love took our place.

Think of the stories that shape us most, the ones where a friend holds a secret, a parent bears the shame, a stranger absorbs the blow meant for another—the kind of love we usually only recognize in hindsight, when we realize how much we didn't deserve it. These aren't just stories of rescue. They're stories of a love willing to lose something. You could not save yourself. And someone, unexpected, undeserved, stepped forward and said, "I'll take this one."

It's primal, this kind of love. You feel it somewhere older than words. It sings in stories we tell again and again: the ram caught in the thicket just before the knife falls (Genesis 22:13); the lamb whose blood marks the door so that death passes over (Exodus 12:7-13); the suffering servant in Isaiah, "wounded for our transgressions, / crushed for our iniquities / . . . and by his bruises we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). Even Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games* stepping forward with the shout, "I volunteer as tribute!"²

Substitution touches something deep and old and trembling.

Scripture's little preposition *for* opens one portal into this mystery. It means more than *instead of*. It can mean *on behalf of*, even *for the sake of*. Listen: Jesus gives his life as "a ransom *for* many" (Mark 10:45, italics mine). And then comes a larger vision: "In Christ God was reconciling the world" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Father and Son on the



same side of the door. (Which, it turns out, matters more than we were sometimes led to believe.)

We've glimpsed this mystery in our lives too: A nurse at 3 a.m. bears fear you can't carry; a teacher stands with a failing child so the child can try again. Israel knew this pattern well. A lamb was offered so a people could walk free; a servant was wounded so a nation could be healed (Exodus 12; Isaiah 53). None of that was a machine to turn cruelty into salvation. It was a sign that God was making a way where we had none.

In the Christian imagination, substitution isn't a heavenly transaction that leaves us unchanged; it's the triune God giving God's own self to draw us back into communion—love acting for us so it can act in us. So when we say, "Jesus took my place," we don't mean God needed a victim; we mean love went where we were stuck—sin's cul-de-sacs, shame's locked rooms, death's holding cells—and opened them from the inside.

There's a boy I'll call Sam who once shattered a storefront window with a rushed, foolish throw. He stood there trembling, glass like ice at his feet, already preparing for the reputation that would follow him: careless, destructive, trouble. The owner came out fast, then stopped. He saw a kid, not a case. Sam didn't have the money, but a neighbor stepped in and said, "Put it on my account, and give me a broom." He paid the bill, then handed Sam the dustpan, and the two of them cleaned the mess together. The store was made whole; the boy was not humiliated; the neighbor both lost something and gained someone.

That's good substitution: it pays, then it stays. It draws the one who failed into the right-making, so repair becomes formation. Jesus shoulders what we cannot and then places tools in our hands: truth to tell, amends to make, a table to set.

Somewhere, though, the story shifted. God started to sound less like a lovesick Father waiting on the porch and more like a Judge



tallying debts. If that's the only front door you were given, then this quiet question makes sense: Is God really like that?

Before we answer, listen to how Paul says it: "While we were still weak. . . . While we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8). Love moved before we deserved it. That is the pulse of substitution in Scripture—not a deity finally satisfied but a God who refuses to give us up.

The first biblical doorframe is painted in mercy (Exodus 12:13). Jesus carries that sign into himself: "This is my body. . . . This cup is the new covenant" (1 Corinthians 11:24-25). The door that wouldn't yield to us yields to him.

Anne Lamott admits she doesn't quite understand grace, "only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us."³ That's this Front Door: it's less about a transaction than loved-shaped transformation. If Christ has stood with us at our worst, the worst is no longer the end of the story.

What does this look like on a typical Monday? It might be sending the apology text message you've put off. Or knocking on your neighbor's door to return the tool you borrowed weeks ago. Or choosing to simply listen without defending yourself in a hard conversation. These are small, ordinary moments, but they carry the weight of grace, each one a step deeper into the forgiveness already given.

Substitution, told this way, produces both deep gratitude and practiced mercy. You step through this opening into a House where you'll spend the rest of your life learning the rooms: how to feast without fear, how to see **justice** as repair, how to pray in a language larger than apology. You begin to notice that the One who stood in for you is also standing with you, coaching courage, guiding you to forgive without erasing truth, teaching you to carry wounds without letting them harden your heart. The cross doesn't graduate us from



discipleship; it sends us to school for it . . . and the syllabus may be longer than we hoped.

The cross doesn't shift God's heart for us; it shatters the powers that convinced us otherwise, breaking shame's grip so we can trust love again. The Judge steps off the bench to lift us up, yes, but not to keep us small. To restore us to our place at the table. To give us back to God and to one another.

Some have traced this idea of substitution back to Anselm, the eleventh-century theologian who described the cross as a way of restoring divine honor (**satisfaction theory**). In his feudal world, honor was everything. If you broke trust with a lord, you didn't just owe an apology; you owed satisfaction. That was the currency of the age: dignity traded like coin and easily lost. And so, Anselm imagined the cross not as God demanding blood, but as God's own act of making things right.⁴

It's important to remember, though, that Anselm wasn't painting a picture of a wrathful God. He was trying to express that only God could restore what humanity had broken. His intent was devotional, not punitive. But over time, especially during the Reformation, his ideas were reframed in legal terms. The focus shifted from God's self-giving love to God's demand for justice. And in that shift, something vital (and holy) was lost.

The problem, of course, is what happened next. Over time, Anselm's vision bent in two directions. First came punishment. Satisfaction was reframed as penalty, reverence turned to fear, and the God of mercy began to sound like a God who could not forgive without pain. That was never Anselm's intent, but it is part of the story we inherited. And it's worth saying aloud: there are ways to speak of Christ's self-giving that restore honor without demanding violence. Love does not send us spiraling into shame; it draws us further into itself, where mercy waits.



In that light, we can hear the echoes of Hosea's God, the one who says, "How can I give you up, Ephraim?" (Hosea 11:8). Or the father in Jesus' parable who jumps from his porch and runs down the driveway toward his wayward son only to offer embrace (Luke 15). These aren't sentimental distractions from justice; they are its true fulfillment. This is the pattern of **incarnation** itself: God moving toward us, entering our suffering, and redeeming the world from within it. Because real justice restores. Real justice moves toward, not away.

Another turn bent the story in a different direction. What began as the language of gift was reduced to the language of transaction. Love became a ledger, and the God who comes near in grace began to sound like a divine accountant, balancing sin with suffering until salvation collapsed into a calculation and lost the shape of embrace. But that's not the God I know in Christ. Because the deeper truth is this: Jesus didn't die to change God's mind about us. Jesus died to show us what God's mind has always been.

As John writes, "God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:9-10).

There is no split in the Trinity. The cross is not the Son pleading with an unwilling Father. It is the triune God moving together toward our **redemption**. It's the long, long echo of love: one voice, one heart, one movement of mercy. Substitution is the incarnation going all the way down: God comes, shoulders what we cannot carry, and walks the road we could not survive alone.

Jesus said it himself: "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). That's what substitution means here. Divine communion, not cold math. And maybe that's what makes it so hard to explain, because what we're talking about isn't a theory at all. This is love in the shape of a body, with arms



outstretched, ready to receive. It's the kind of love that chooses to stay, even when it costs everything. The kind that doesn't just forgive, but moves into the neighborhood, sits at the table, and says, "You're worth this."

So if this is the door where your faith began, where the tears and the relief came with the strange sense that maybe, just maybe, you weren't beyond redemption, then you already know: that's the power of this story when told well.

In the church of my childhood, and in the pages of Scripture itself, one word often gathered this hope: *saved*. It's a biblical word, shaped by stories of rescue, healing, and return, spoken to name the God who acts on behalf of those who cannot save themselves.

Like all words, it has traveled through time and communities, gathering tone and memory along the way. For many, its sound has shifted. Sometimes it has grown thinner than the stories that first gave it life. Sometimes it has carried an emotional weight Scripture never meant it to bear.

Recently, a family member reached out with honest questions about that word, shaped by love for the faith and weariness with how the language had been carried. I recognized the struggle immediately. Words form us before we know how to question them, and later faith often begins by listening again, asking whether a true word might recover its depth and be heard once more as good news.

And still, over time, some of us discover that the way we first learned to enter the House no longer feels as spacious as it once did. What once offered relief can begin to feel small, heavy, even bruising. When that happens, it may be time to let the door open wider, to remember that this is only the threshold, not the whole House.

The cross is not where the wrath of God was poured out on Jesus. It is where the love of God was poured out on us all: God's self-giving.



So if you still carry guilt like a name tag or shame like a second skin: Come. Lay it down. Step through the Door. You are a beloved child God wants to restore.

There is a temptation, especially in a house as layered as this one, to wonder whether we have to understand every beam and doorway before we're allowed to belong. We start to ask whether our faith is sturdy enough, informed enough, articulate enough. We forget how often belonging begins with something much simpler.

One evening, when my daughter Norah was very young, she came to me with questions about how to give her life to Jesus. I answered her the way pastors sometimes do. I talked about grace and commitment and what it means to follow Christ. I could hear myself gathering careful words, trying to be faithful to a mystery that mattered.

She listened for a moment, then stopped me.

"Daddy," she said, "can I just say yes to Jesus in my own way?"

I smiled and told her yes. That was exactly the right way to do it.

She ran to her room, closed the door, and prayed. When she came back, her face carried a quiet joy that needed no explanation.

"Daddy," she said, "I said yes to Jesus in my own way!"

That is how people enter this House. We come with the words we have, at the age we are, carrying whatever questions and hopes we bring. Long before we ever speak our yes, Christ has already spoken one over us. The Front Door stands open for that kind of coming.

THE ONE WHO STEPPED FORWARD

It happened quietly,
as love often does.

Just the hush
before a name was spoken,



and a figure stepping forward—
the kind of step
that says,
I know what this will cost.

I was there,
though I didn't know it.
I was carrying
my own small bag of failures,
holding them like souvenirs.

He didn't wave a flag
or write a treatise.
He didn't point at the ledger
or read me my wrongs.

He only looked at me—
with knowing.
Like he had read my whole story
and still thought it beautiful.

And then,
he walked ahead.

Into the dark,
through the door
that should have been mine.

And when I followed—
empty-handed,
half-believing—
I found it open.

And the light was on.

A PRAYER AT THE FRONT DOOR

Jesus, you stood where I should have stood, out of love alone. No one forced your hand. You did it because mercy runs deep in your blood. You stepped into the fire to bring me through it. You carried the weight so I could breathe again. And now I find myself here, at the threshold of grace, still holding the bags I promised I'd lay down.

Help me lay them down . . . the guilt that clings too tightly, the shame I've mistaken for humility, the belief that I still have something to prove, when you have already called me beloved. Let me walk through this door as one you've already welcomed: someone wanted, someone you came to find. You took my place to set me free. Thank you for the Door, and for the love that opened it. Amen.

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