

God in the grave

by [David Heim](#) in the [March 13, 2002](#) issue

Did God die on a hill outside Jerusalem? Was it not only Jesus of Nazareth but somehow God himself who was hung on the cross and laid in the tomb? Christian theology has answered yes to these questions, and then struggled to articulate what this strange claim means.

Alan E. Lewis takes up the task by meditating on a day of the church year that often goes unmarked--Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter. On the boundary between cross and resurrection, Lewis contends, Christians can best contemplate the decisive events of the Christian story. On Holy Saturday, Christians look forward to celebrating the ultimate victory of God over sin and death, but remain vividly aware of the penultimate horrors of the cross. On Holy Saturday, Christians prepare to sing of Jesus' triumph over the grave, but cannot deny that the stench of death is emanating from the tomb of an innocent man, tortured and executed by an imperial power.

Lewis's theology of Holy Saturday is a theology of the cross, a challenge to any version of Easter faith that would ignore the awful silence of God as encountered in the cancer ward, or at the bedside of a dying child, or in the killing fields and extermination camps. Though the Easter gospel affirms that the forces of evil and death will be finally defeated, it does not deny that in the meantime those forces win an awful lot of battles.

Lewis had his own intimate Easter Saturday experience while working on this project. He was stricken with cancer, and died in 1994 at age 50. In this masterful book, assembled by his colleagues at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, he speaks with elegance, honesty and passion about the heart of the faith.

As Lewis sees it, the silence and impotence of God is part of the biblical story. God's beloved son dies an excruciating and shameful death, "unprotected from the self-serving powers." And as Jesus expires, he complains of his own abandonment by God. If such is the case with Jesus' life, Lewis observes, then we have no reason to be optimistic about the course of our lives or about the future of the planet.

The shocking enigma of Holy Saturday is not only that humans have rejected God, but that God, who has tied himself to the humanity of Jesus, has been defeated by sin and inhumanity. God has not only suffered and died, but been laid in the grave. Lewis repeatedly presses this brutal point: Jesus is God "incarnate and interred"; in Christ, God has "united himself with a corpse."

Lewis thinks through the death of God in a trinitarian framework. Indeed, the entombment of God points to the necessity of thinking of the Son as both distinct from yet fully identified with the Father. It is God the Son, not God the Father, who dies and is buried. Yet the church confesses that the Son is "one in being with the Father," to cite the Nicene Creed. Therefore Christ's self-giving life and humiliating death, as well as his resurrection, do more than illustrate God's life: they constitute that life.

Lewis's work is part of a renewal of trinitarian theology in recent decades that can be traced largely to Karl Barth. This renewal began with the rejection of philosophical speculation about God (which applied to God traits such as omnipotence, invulnerability and timelessness) in favor of the biblical story in all its strangeness. God is to be known through God's acts in time and history--his engagement with humanity in the life of Israel and the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

Following the lead of Barth and especially two of Barth's students, Jürgen Moltmann and Eberhard Jüngel, Lewis argues that the triune God includes the Father who gives up the beloved Son and the beloved Son himself. Jesus' death must therefore be conceived as a rupture in the life of God--but a rupture that God overcomes for the sake of the world. "God is the one who knows how to die and knows that in accepting death there is life, and life only through accepting death."

Is a God who "knows how to die" much help to us? We would often prefer a God who uses his power directly on our behalf, rather than one who participates in our suffering. Lewis's answer is that the surrender of power on the cross and in the tomb, in self-abandoned love, is the form that God's power takes. "That God remains God in self-emptying and self-negation is the core of the trinitarian mystery of Easter Saturday."