

THE  
**Execution**  
of **GOD**

ENCOUNTERING THE

**DEATH PENALTY**

**JEFF HOOD**



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*For the Executed*



# PREFACE

**IS GOD A KILLER?** I don't think so. Well, then again, I don't know. I guess I should stick to talking about things that I know. What is there to actually know? When you get right down to it, I guess we all only know a little. If we just stuck with what we know, we wouldn't be able to produce much. This wild collection of words flows out of unknowing. Revelation isn't about spaces of knowing. Revelation is about spaces of unknowing. In the chaos, we find God or God finds us. This is a book about God... The *dead* God... The *executed* God.

## **THEOLOGY IS A LOST ART.**

Experimentation is about recovery.

*The Execution of God* is an experiment concerned with the recovery of art.

**THEOLOGY CALLS OUT TO US.** Listen wider. Can't you feel the beauty of it all? Look over there. Can these words live? They



don't seem to fit. There must be something wrong. Prophecy to the words! Tell the words to be filled with life. The majesty of art began to revive the words. The ground was shaking. The earth was quaking. Dead words of theology began to rise and bring forth new life. In the midst of it all, the voice of God and the voice of abolition became one. Theology ushered in a creation free from the horrors of the death penalty.

**BALLADS TELL STORIES.** Listen. God is in the melodies. There is a song in this text. Every so often, a short grouping of verses arises out of the text to collectively bring forth something magical. The embedded ballad pulls at the eyes, to get to the ears, to pierce the heart. Literally and figuratively, there is a new song in this text. *Sing out! Do you feel it? Sing out! Do you know it? Sing out! Are you ready? God's abolition is at hand. No more ex-e-cu-tions in our land.*

**THE END IS NEAR!** What does the end look like? In our minds, we must make a way out of no way. We must find the end and go there. The end is about giving everything we've got. The apocalyptic amalgamations in this text are abolition amalgamations. Grab the revelations of abolition and hold on tight. God uses these types of stories to make sure that we don't get left behind.

**THIS IS NOT A NORMAL BOOK.** I ain't gonna study killing no more. Normal is always about killing. From our economic systems, to crime, to war, to a wild assortment of other manifestations, I can think of nothing more normal in our world than killing. I'm trying to get away from killing. I'm interested in getting back to life. Now, real life is always something other than normal. With the knowledge that normal always leads to more dead bodies, I set out to write something queer. I have no doubt that I did.

*Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood  
October 2016*





# DEATH NOTES

*Behold, the heavens opened up and I saw the chamber of death. I could hardly believe my eyes. In the center of the room, I saw a gurney.*

## ***Death Is the Beginning***

*“In the beginning...” -Genesis 1:1*

“There will be silence!” “Sit down! Sit down!” “The charge is murder!” Death is natural. Murder is not. Do you recall the execution of God? You were there. So was I. We witnessed it all. We watched God being led into court. We heard the incriminating testimony. We listened to the damning details about God’s past. We cringed at the description of the crime. We wanted the demise quicker than the law would allow. The guilty verdict moved us. The sentence sent us into a pandemonium of elation. “Death!” In time, we forgot about it. Later, we rediscovered the joy of murder in the days leading up to the execution. We told everyone that death was too lenient. We watched as God was led into the chamber and strapped down. We saw the needle draw blood. We were thirsty for more. We listened to God’s surprising words of forgiveness. We watched the poison flow. We waited to feel better. We didn’t. We felt empty. The execution of God only made us worse. God was dead. Who would save us now?



*God died  
It wasn't no suicide  
Look, isn't it plain to see  
It could've been you or me*

**Move**

*"...move..." -Acts 17:28*

God has countless names. Not long after “the shirt” arrived, I dropped by my grandparents’ house. Emblazoned in white letters across the front of the blue fabric was the cry, “I am Troy Davis.” Many decades prior, in a racially charged trial with a whole host of problematic evidence, Davis was convicted of killing Officer Mark Allen MacPhail in Savannah, Georgia. As the time of Davis’ execution drew closer, I felt more and more drawn to the case. On that day, I walked in the front door. Even though my grandparents were prejudiced against a whole host of people in a variety of ways, I didn’t think anything of wearing the shirt in their presence. Not long after I entered, my grandmother screamed out, “Oh, my God!” Feeling like a fit of rage was next, I froze. Though I felt like I already knew the answer, I asked, “What is it?” With tears in her eyes, my grandmother said, “Troy Davis is the name of my brother who was paralyzed in the war.” Even though she knew my shirt had nothing to do with her brother, the slogan “I am Troy Davis” touched her core. When I told her what the shirt was really about, she instructed me not to tell my grandfather. I didn’t. When I was about to leave, my grandmother looked me in the eyes and said, “We all have a little God in us... Perhaps we all have a little Troy Davis in us too.” Could the God in a white Troy Davis and the God in a black Troy Davis be the same God who is the God in us all?

In the midst of the juxtaposition between black and white in my community, everyone I knew supported executions. In fact, I think most of the people wanted them to happen more often. This is also an accurate description of my family. We loved Jesus and, therefore, we thought we needed blood. I guess the death penalty turns us all into vampires or maybe it’s Christianity that actually



does that with its sermons and songs about the blood of Jesus. The execution was close. Christians were the biggest proponents for killing Troy Davis. I couldn't figure out why. Regardless, I placed a tremendous amount of trust in one Christian in particular. An attorney from our community sat on the Board of Pardons and Paroles. While all the other folks on the Board very well *could've* been the Christians they *claimed* to be, I knew for a fact that at least one member was. For many years, I'd seen his fruit with my own eyes. Through it all, I kept telling myself that I didn't have anything to worry about. I didn't trust all those other cats. I trusted this attorney. In the midst of crisis, we should expect God to show up in Christians. Our expectations are often executed. I'll never forget that night. Darkness closed in. Death was the only God.

Georgia is a mysterious place. Evil rises and falls like the morning dew. You can't really catch it. Before you know it, it's gone. If you can't catch it, it's not real to the average viewer. Public officials in Georgia have a way of calling themselves Christians and avoiding the dawn. For, if they rise too early, evil might be seen for what it is. No one woke up early that day. Public officials talked about God and rushed toward killing. Evil was all around. I'd never been to an execution before. The drive was dark and ominous. Desperate for updates, I left the radio on. Over and over, I prayed for God to move. I couldn't figure out what was happening. Fear was closer than God ever was. Somewhere in there, I heard that the Board of Pardons and Paroles denied clemency for Troy Davis. The attorney, I knew, wouldn't stop there. Christians don't stop. I pulled the car up as the sun was setting. I parked across from a gas station with a burger joint in it. Looking out the windows, the people stuffing their faces with meat didn't seem to notice the crowd gathering. I kept pushing toward the prison.

Light remained longer than I thought it would. It was as if the sun refused to move. Looking up, I felt like the very cosmos was trying to expose what was going on. I didn't get any further than Highway 36. Hundreds of law enforcement officers met me there. I'd never seen so many batons and shields. Slap after slap to their shin guards warned the gathered demonstrators that violence was there for whoever wanted it. Multiple people took them up on the offer. I just prayed. More law enforcement in riot gear showed up. I thought they were coming across the street. No one did. I



figured the attorney I knew was doing all that he could. Holding a sign that read “The World is Watching,” I stepped out into the street as far as I could. In the midst of the chaos, an old man driving a tan van purposefully turned into the crowd. After he struck me with his side mirror, he had the nerve to get out and say that I was trying to destroy his car. The wild scene morphed into pandemonium when word reached us that Troy Davis had been granted a brief stay from the United States Supreme Court. It felt like a resurrection. Maybe God wasn’t so absent after all. Between the attorney I knew and the Supreme Court, I knew we had this. I knew God was working. I was wrong.

Joy quickly turned into mourning. We knew a murder was about to take place. Darkness descended on my heart. My psyche grew foggy. The United States Supreme Court dropped the stay and allowed the execution to proceed. We’d all failed. While murders happen all the time, tremendous numbers of people were watching this time. The various lights of the protests filled the night. I tried to convince my brain that these lights represented a divine light. My heart knew better. Divinity was gone. I put down my “The World is Watching” sign. I couldn’t lie anymore. The world didn’t care about the killing of Troy Davis. If the world cared at all, they would’ve stopped it. A woman shrieked at the top of her lungs, “They killed an innocent man!” Feeling like I’d lost control of my body, I crumpled over. I had to get back to the car. Struggling to be the pastor I was trained to be, I stopped beside a crying young woman and reminded her that God was with her. Looking up at me with tears flowing, she managed, “God was just executed... Move.”

*It was the night that murder won  
We killed a native son  
We’re the ones who’ve killed so long  
Georgia what’s gone wrong*

### **Moving**

*God created us in God’s image... -Genesis 1:27*

Theology is always the weapon of the executioner. In order to kill, one has to find a way to believe that killing is a necessity.



Christians are experts at such problematic believing. We manage to turn killers into monsters while turning ourselves into killers. We forget that they, like us, were made in the image of God. However, monsters are easier to kill than God. The problem is, *God* is always in the monsters. God don't make no monsters. God makes children created in the divine image. Every time we carry out one of these executions, we are executing God. We are executing the image of God in that person. The only way that you can execute God is if you have a theology that is contrary to what God teaches. We do. We desperately need something else. Theology is the only way back.

God created us. God created us in God's very image. Theology begins and ends with God's image. Persons are created for relationship with the entity that they reflect. Theology must uplift the divine or it is not theology. You cannot uplift the divine without uplifting the divine within. Theology is about the striving to know God through deeper knowledge of our creation in God's image. How can one human reflection of God be better or worse than another? The only way that we can carry out these executions is to believe that the image of God in a person has been so totally destroyed that the person is no longer deserving of life. Who gets to make such a decision? The answer *should be*: God and God alone. When God had the chance to kill the first persons who unleashed evil in our cosmos, God showed grace. In the fullest revelations of the divine, God heals. Why do we kill when God consistently chooses to heal? We are killing in the name of a God who daily shows restraint. We're killing God's image all around us. We're killing our ability to see God's grace through the restoration of God's image. The death penalty is about God's image. We don't believe that the image of God is present in all people. If we did, we wouldn't be killing God.

People walk around insecure and angry. People seem determined to destroy anything that they determine to be evil. Unfortunately, no one ever takes the time to realize that the evil without is actually evil within. The death penalty is a reflection of our desire to kill. We are ravenous for blood. We just don't know where to direct our energies. Will we destroy ourselves or someone else first? The sprint to kill the image of God is about our desire to be free. We want to do what we want to do. The image

of God is too heavy a burden to carry. We go crazy looking for something else to fill the void. We want something to take the place of God. We never find it. When we realize that our search is fruitless, we kill in order to keep from dealing with the evil impulses that made us stray in the first place. The death penalty gives us an outlet. Killing the image of God in the other keeps us from killing the image of God in ourselves.

So in whose image is the death penalty created? If you listen to many Christians, you would think God created the death penalty in the divine image. Followers of Jesus kill all the time. How can this be? Christians are taught that Jesus is the complete embodiment of God's image. Did Jesus execute or was Jesus executed? In the Incarnation, God was executed. The life of Jesus is the antidote to our disgusting murderous theology. The life of Jesus is the antidote to the death penalty.

"...God is love" (1 John 4:8). In God is love, and in love is God. God is always going to be the love beyond love. God is always going to be the love so loving that we can barely comprehend it. God loves the world so much that God came and died. The problem is that we have twisted the love of God to fit our theologies. We have somehow reached a space where we can believe that God can love and kill at the same time. I can't think of anything more blasphemous. Loving and killing can't go together. Killing is evil. The death penalty is evil. It is always going to be evil to destroy the image of God. It is always going to be evil to destroy love. How can a God be love and promote killing? To believe in such a God is to divide the mind and sacrifice the mind for the blood we want. To believe in such a God is to divide the soul and sacrifice the soul for the blood we want. When so much dividing and sacrificing is going on, God is lost and so are we. The death penalty succeeds in killing not just the offender *without*, but the offender *within*. We must find a way back to love.

We've always been desperate for easy answers. Over and over, people asked Jesus for simplicity. Occasionally, Jesus gave it to them. In Matthew 22, Jesus told the people that the greatest commandment is to love God with all that you got and to love your neighbor as your self. If love is at the center of the message of Jesus, anything other than love is not Jesus. How could love not be the center of any religious message? Killing



and love simply can't exist together. You can't love God and kill God. You can't love your neighbor and kill your neighbor. The greatest commandment is the great commandment against the death penalty. Executions are a failure to love. How could killing someone be anything other than a failure? To purposefully take a life is never a success. Love is the only construction that can save us. Love is the antidote to the death penalty.

We don't know people. We think we do. We even *know* we do. We're prepared to act. Our minds produce decisive judgments after brief encounters. Why do we function like this? Think about all the times we turn on the television and see someone who has committed a heinous crime. We assume that the person deserves everything he or she gets and more. Before long we are prepared to act as judge, jury, and executioner. The problem is that we really don't know the person. Most of us will never take the time to get to know anyone that we've suspected of committing a heinous crime. *We* are the dehumanizers. We feel that the more dehumanizing we *do* the less we will *be* dehumanized. We are dedicated dehumanizers. The problem with our functioning is that it is based on our lack of trust in our *own* persons. We dehumanize others because we have been dehumanized. We dehumanize others because we are afraid of what the unknown in them might reveal in us. Dehumanization is the antithesis of love. Dehumanization is the weapon of hate. Dehumanization is the primary tool of the executioner. The only way that people can execute someone is if they see something less than human in front of them. We've become expert dehumanizers. We've created processes and systems to unload and direct our fear and hate at the dehumanized. Of course, we're not the first.

The Pharisees couldn't dehumanize enough. They seemed to believe that destruction was the sole purpose of religion. Love was a false concept. Those who spent too much time on compassion were the enemies of God. Love was a waste of time. Mercy was unheard of. The Pharisees did whatever it took to dehumanize.

Rejecting the repeated advances of the Pharisees, a woman raced home. When she arrived, a Pharisee came through the front door and attacked her. When the other Pharisees saw all of her clothes ripped off, they declared her actions adultery and deemed them punishable by death. Dragging her through the streets,

the Pharisees told everyone they caught her in the very act of adultery. What they didn't tell everyone is that they set her up. Regardless of how anyone arrived in their custody, the Pharisees had only one objective in mind...the death penalty. With all the energy they could muster, the Pharisees made sure the entire community knew the woman deserved execution. Sensing an opportunity to trip up Jesus, the Pharisees slung the woman at his feet. "This woman has violated the law and should be executed," the Pharisees screamed. The death penalty always begins with the battle in the court of public opinion.

Regularly, we discover the egregious sins of law enforcement. What makes us so sure that such evils have not led to the execution of innocent people? We assume that courts minimize such accidents. The problem is that the minimization of such accidents still means that innocent people are executed. I've heard that the execution of the innocent is the price we pay to live in a just and orderly society. Make no mistake, the Pharisees made similar remarks. When justice is balanced by death, we don't have any clue who the next victim will be. We only know that the death penalty will be what leads us forward, not love. Salvation comes from deconstructing the structures of execution and realizing that we are the executioners.

Our legal system sanitizes the actions of the Pharisees. How many times have we seen suspects or their pictures paraded in front of cameras? Heinous cases are always tried first in the media. We have to convince people that there's a monster in our midst. The Pharisees were able to drag the woman toward an execution because no one stopped to question the executioners. No one questions *us*, either. Like the Pharisees, we just keep on executing in God's name. We don't stop to consider the cost. We just want more blood. Where does that thirst come from?

Dirt rose. Heat lingered. Silence reigned. What was Jesus going to do? The world is wondering about our next move. We stand between the executioner and the condemned. We are in the same spot that Jesus was. The safe choice is to stand still. If we let someone else take the blows, we won't have to. Jesus was never safe. In the midst of certain death, Jesus moved toward the woman. There will always be the temptation to stay clean. We think that cleanliness is next to godliness. We think that cleanliness will



keep us from death. We are wrong. You can't engage the world and not get dirty. God is always dirty. If the source of life is dirty, why do we spend so much time trying to stay clean? The death penalty is about cleansing. We think we can get rid of the dirt and make ourselves cleaner. We are wrong. The only way we can make ourselves whole is to restore the afflicted. We have to get dirty. Jesus knew life couldn't come from cleanliness and safety. Without hesitation, Jesus got down in the dirt.

People ran to the piles of stones. Carnage was on the menu and nobody wanted to miss the show. The Pharisees stood ready to fire. No one averted their eyes. Everyone wanted blood. Why have we always had such a desire for blood? We want carnage. One does not have to search far for proof of this fact. Those who encircled the woman wanted to kill someone, or at least be close to her death. The same is true of us. Those who want to kill someone or at least see a little blood always surround modern executions. There is a tremendous blood lust in the human race that seems to be timeless. Nothing about this makes us *human*. Killing always takes away *humanity*. We don't care. We want to kill.

Those who gather for executions are not the only problematic people amongst us. Think about all the people that the Pharisees dragged the woman past. Think about all the people that we drag the condemned past. Door after door shut. Window after window closed. We go deeper into the house. We go further into the business. We make noise so that we don't have to hear it. We do whatever we can to resist any temptation we might have of ever considering whether what is happening is right or not. We turn our eyes. We shift our heads. We move our bodies. We just don't want to have to believe that we are part of killing someone. We would never go to an execution and probably don't even think about them. Those who ignore the cries of the condemned are just as guilty as the executioners. Jesus couldn't ignore her. Jesus got down in the dirt. Jesus stared down their stones.

We can't stop the machinery of death without being prepared to die. Jesus was. With the death penalty about to be carried out, Jesus put his body between the condemned and the executioners. If the stones had ripped, Jesus would've died with the woman. The call to life is a call to give our lives so that others might live. In refusing to move, Jesus challenged the carnage and the Pharisees

dropped their stones. While death was possible, life became probable. We cannot bring about life without the possibility of death. The call of Jesus is always to go and do likewise. We are called to place our bodies between the condemned and executioners. Where do we stand? Do we participate? Do we watch? Do we ignore? Do we work? Do we get down in the dirt? Do we give our lives? Where do we stand? These questions speak beyond a political reality to our very souls. Our engagement with the death penalty speaks to our engagement with God. Do we love God enough to stop the execution? Do we want to follow Jesus? In the face of the death penalty, Jesus shows us who God is. God is always going to be down in the dirt. God is always going to be ready to die. God is for the deconstruction of anything that promotes the destruction of humanity. How can we execute people without promoting the murder of God's image? We can't. God is an abolitionist.

People dropped their stones and walked away. What did it feel like to save a life? Obviously, there's a difference between walking away disappointed that you didn't get to kill someone and walking away feeling like you've been enlightened to do the right thing. While walking away saves the life of the condemned, it doesn't save the life of the walker. While I certainly wish more people would walk away from killing, the only walking that can save the life of the walker is when the walker turns toward the condemned. The walk toward the condemned is the walk of restoration and reconciliation. We need to be restored. God restores. Love restores. God is in those we condemn. We can't be restored until we are reconciled to the ones who we have condemned. We have to choose to walk in the loving path of life, not death. The abolition of the death penalty frees us to the task. When we put down our stones and walk toward the condemned, we are finally ready to meet God.

*That woman was dehumanized  
Knocked down by all of their lies*

*Movements*

*"...the powers of movement were established..." -2 Esdras 6:3*

