

# 120 Volunteer to Serve 10-Year Sentence for Nigerian Teen

## In the News

On September 25, Piotr Cywinski, the director of the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial in Poland, wrote an open letter asking Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari to pardon 13-year-old Omar Farouq for the crime of blasphemy (or "publicly insulting" Allah) he purportedly committed during a dispute with a friend.

"However, if it turns out that the words of this child absolutely require 120 months of imprisonment, and even you are not able to change that," the director wrote, "I suggest that in place of the child, 120 adult volunteers from all over the world, gathered by us -- myself personally among them -- should each serve a month in a Nigerian prison."

"In total, the price for the child's transgression will be the same, and we will avoid the worst," Cywinski continued.

In August, a sharia court in Kano, Nigeria's second-largest city, located in the predominantly Muslim northern region of the country, sentenced to the boy to 10 years forced hard labor in prison. In one-third of Nigeria's 36 states, Islamic sharia law, which allows capital punishment for the crime of blasphemy, is in effect.

Cywinski said he hoped that an appeal to show Farouq mercy might resonate with the Nigerian leader, who visited the Auschwitz-Birkenau Memorial in 2018 to pay his respects to victims of the Holocaust.

"As the director of the Auschwitz Memorial, that commemorates the victims and preserves the remains of the German Nazi concentration and extermination camp, where children were imprisoned and murdered, I cannot remain indifferent to this disgraceful sentence for humanity," Cywinski wrote in his letter.

"[The boy] should not be subjected to the loss of the entirety of his youth, be deprived of opportunities and stigmatized physically, emotionally and educationally for the rest of his life," Cywinski added, arguing that "whatever the boy said, just because of his age he cannot be held fully responsible."

Salihu Tanko Yakasia, a special adviser to Kano's governor, said that the position of the state government aligned with the decision of the Sharia court. But on the federal level, the president has the power to pardon the boy, remarked Baba Jibo Ibrahim, a spokesman for the Kano State Judiciary.

Farouq's lawyer, Kola Alapinni, appealed the sentence, which he claims violates the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child as well as Nigeria's own constitution that guarantees citizens rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and expression.

Human rights advocates around the world have also condemned the sharia court decision. UNICEF's representative in Nigeria, Peter Hawkins, filed an official protest with Buhari, reminding him that Nigeria has signed child rights treaties that the Kano State court judgment abrogated.

Reflecting on the willingness of more than 120 people to go to prison in place of Farouq so he might be forgiven and freed, Cywinski said: "We are really impressed by the humanity around us. Now we have to see if it will be enough to get freedom to this very, very young kid."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Head of Auschwitz Memorial Seeks Easing of Nigerian Boy's Prison Sentence. \*The New York Times\*](#)  
[Auschwitz Memorial Director Offers to Share Nigerian Boy's Blasphemy Jail Term. \*Reuters\*](#)  
[Auschwitz Museum Head Asks to Swap Spots with Nigerian Boy Jailed for Blasphemy. \*The Times of Israel\*](#)  
[Auschwitz Director Offers to Serve Nigerian Teen's Sharia Sentence. \*The First News\*](#)

## Applying the News Story

The news story introduces the idea of an innocent person volunteering to take the place of someone convicted of a crime so that the convict can go free. One way to understand the death of Christ is as a substitutionary sacrifice of a blameless person to obtain forgiveness for sinners.

"Although not a Bible word, *substitution* is certainly a Bible idea," wrote J. Oswald Sanders, international Bible teacher and former consulting director for Overseas Missionary Fellowship, in his book, *The Incomparable Christ: The Person and Work of Jesus Christ*. "By substitution we do not mean the saving of a life by *mere assistance*, as in the throwing of a rope to a drowning man; or by the *mere risking* of one life to save another; it is the saving of one life by the *loss* of another. As substitute, Christ took on himself the sinner's guilt and bore its penalty in the sinner's place."

J.S. Stewart, who was a minister in the Church of Scotland, explained it this way: "Not only had Christ by dying disclosed the sinner's guilt, not only had he revealed the Father's love: He had actually taken the sinner's place. And this meant, since 'God was in Christ,' that God had taken that place. When death and destruction were rushing up to claim the sinner as their prey, Christ had stepped in and accepted the full weight of their inevitable doom in his body and soul."

In theological circles, this interpretation of Christ's death is called "substitutionary atonement." Not all Christians accept that interpretation, and there are several other theories. And none of them, including substitutionary atonement, exhaustively explains what happened on the cross. Each theory may shed some light, but, in the end, we still must wrestle with mystery. Nonetheless, for this lesson, we will focus on the theological concept of substitutionary atonement.

## The Big Questions

1. What do you think motivated so many people to volunteer to share Farouq's sentence? What do you think they might learn, if the Nigerian government were to accept their offer? Could similar efforts potentially transform the criminal justice system in our country? Explain.
2. What do you think might be the impact of the offer to serve Farouq's sentence on Farouq himself? On members of the court who rendered the original 10-year judgment? On the Nigerian criminal justice system? On the Nigerian president? On observers around the world?
3. Has anyone ever voluntarily accepted punishment for a wrong you did, to prevent you from being punished? If so, how did you feel about that person, and how did you react?
4. Have you ever volunteered to take someone else's punishment, so that person would be spared? If so, what motivated you to do so? If not, what might move you to do so? Would the person's guilt or innocence factor into whether you would be willing to take the blame and the punishment awaiting the individual? Why or why not?
5. Given that human criminal justice systems can not and do not replicate God's perfect justice here "on earth, as it is in heaven," what caveats or limits would you put on the metaphor of substitutionary atonement (as it might apply to Christ's death) suggested by the "In the News" article?

## **Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope**

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

### **Genesis 44:33-34**

*[Judah said to Joseph,] "Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father."* (For context, read 44:18-34, 45:1-3.)

This chapter records Joseph's encounter with his 11 brothers many years after they sold him into slavery. Since then, God had raised him to a position of great power, as the coordinator of famine relief, so that he was second only to Pharaoh in authority in Egypt. But so much time had passed, and Joseph appeared so different, that his brothers didn't recognize him.

Joseph didn't immediately reveal his identity, but instead launched a plan that would show whether his brothers had any remorse over the way they had abused him. He had his steward put his silver cup in his brother Benjamin's sack of grain, so that it would appear that Benjamin had stolen it (vv. 1-5).

After the brothers had left Egypt with grain for their families, Joseph sent his servant after them, to apprehend and accuse them of theft. They denied it, of course, but after conducting a search, the servant found the silver cup in Benjamin's sack. Immediately, the brothers returned to answer the charges (vv. 6-14).

Judah spoke for the brothers, knowing they could not clear their name. He offered that they all become Joseph's slaves. But Joseph declined the offer, as it would be unfair to punish those who had not been caught with so-called stolen goods (vv. 15-17).

Judah then told Joseph that they had had another brother, but he was dead (which must have amused Joseph, considering he was that same brother, still very much alive!). Judah had only persuaded their father to allow Benjamin to accompany them to Egypt by promising that if he did not bring Benjamin back, his father could blame him for the rest of his life (vv. 18-32).

While neither Judah nor Benjamin was guilty of theft, Judah presumably did not know for sure that Benjamin was innocent. Still, out of love for his father, and desiring not to bring down more grief upon his head, Judah offered to take his brother's place as a slave in Egypt.

**Questions:** What do you think happened to Judah to make him willing to offer himself as a substitute slave in his brother's place, when years earlier, he had been more than willing to sell out another brother? What does it take for that kind of miracle to happen?

### **Isaiah 53:4-6**

*Surely he has borne our infirmities  
and carried our diseases;  
yet we accounted him stricken,  
struck down by God, and afflicted.  
But he was wounded for our transgressions,  
crushed for our iniquities;  
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,  
and by his bruises we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have all turned to our own way,  
and the LORD has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.* (For context, read 53:3-6.)

The early church understood this prophecy as referring to Jesus (Acts 8:32-35). Notice whose are the infirmities, diseases, transgressions and iniquities that require healing and forgiveness. Notice also who bears those infirmities, carries those diseases, is wounded for those transgressions and crushed for those iniquities.

Sometimes called "The Great Exchange," Martin Luther wrote: "That is the mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners: wherein by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ's and the righteousness of Christ not Christ's but ours. He has emptied himself of his righteousness that he might clothe us with it, and fill us with it. And he has taken our evils upon himself that he might deliver us from them ... as he grieved and suffered in our sins, and was confounded, in the same manner we rejoice and glory in his righteousness."

**Question:** Compare and contrast the sacrifice Cywinski and his cohorts offered to make for the Nigerian boy with the sacrifice of Christ.

### **John 10:14-15, 17-18**

*[Jesus said,] "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. ... For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father." (For context, read 10:11-18.)*

Some object to the idea that Christ would be punished for the sin of others. They wonder if that doesn't make God seem unjust, since it would be an injustice to punish an innocent person.

J. Oswald Sanders wrote that "since Christ did this voluntarily, no injustice is done to anyone."

In this chapter, Jesus depicts himself as the good shepherd who willingly gives his life to save the lives of his sheep from the wolf who is bent on destroying the flock to satisfy its own hunger and bloodlust. Jesus in effect puts himself in the place of the sheep, taking the brunt of the wolf's attacks on the flock, to keep his people safe. This is a form of substituting the stronger for the weaker.

**Questions:** When and how has Jesus protected you personally from "wolves" that threatened you? When have you seen Jesus protect the church from "wolves" seeking to decimate the community of faith?

When did Jesus lay down his life and when did he take it up again? What hope can we take from Jesus' statement that he has the power to lay down his life, and he also has the power to take it up again?

### **1 John 3:16-18, 23**

*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us -- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action. ... And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. (For context, read 3:16-24.)*

Here we see similar language as that used in the John 10 passage above: that he laid down his life for us -- and we ought to lay down our lives for one another.

First Corinthians 13:3 indicates that it might even be possible to lay one's life down for less than altruistic motives, but without love, Paul writes that even self-sacrifice profits us nothing. Yet when self-sacrifice is driven by love for the other, we fulfill God's greatest desire for us.

**Questions:** What might it mean for you to "lay down your life" for those in your community who are in need and unable to protect themselves from spiritual predators and oppressors?

How might helping a brother or sister in need involve laying down our lives for them?

### **For Further Discussion**

1. Discuss this, from *Crucified and Crowned*, by theologian and author William Barclay: "The basic New Testament statement about the death of Jesus and its significance is the saying of Paul: 'Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures' (1 Corinthians 15:3).

"It is important to remember what the word *for* means in this statement. The word is *huper*, and it does not mean *because of* or *in place of*. It means *on behalf of, for the sake of, ...* Jesus Christ died in order to do something on behalf of our sins. ... and the effect of his death is to remove the estrangement between man and God and to make man and God *at one*."

2. Consider this: In his book, *And the Angels Were Silent: The Final Week of Jesus*, Max Lucado wrote: "As a young boy, I read a Russian fable about a master and a servant who went on a journey to a city. ... Before the two men could reach the destination, they were caught in a blinding blizzard. They lost their direction and were unable to reach the city before nightfall.

"The next morning, concerned friends went searching for the two men. They finally found the master, frozen to death, face down in the snow. When they lifted him they found the servant -- cold but alive. He survived and told how the master had voluntarily placed himself on top of the servant so the servant could live.

"I hadn't thought of that story in years," Lucado continued. "But when I read what Christ said he would do for us, the story surfaced -- for Jesus is the Master who died for the servants.

"He is the general who made provision for his soldiers' mistakes.

"He is the Son of Man who came to serve and to give his life as a ransom ... for you."

3. Reflect on this: Every week, an old man walked a Florida beach, carrying a bucket of shrimp to the end of an isolated pier. For about a half hour, he offered the tidbits to fluttering seagulls who gathered around him, some perching on his hat. The ritual had the feeling of a sacrament, a kind of eucharist as the old man said "thank you" for a time a bird saved his life and that of his B-17 crew during World War II.

The man was pilot Eddie Rickenbacker, whose plane went down in the South Pacific in October 1942, while on a mission for Gen. Douglas MacArthur. The eight crew members all managed to make it to life rafts.

For eight days, they fought weather, waves, sharks, cold at night and hot sun in the daytime. Then, when their rations were depleted, hunger hit. What hope would they have to survive now? They needed a miracle.

One afternoon, as the pilot napped with his hat over his eyes, a miracle arrived in the form of a seagull that landed on his head. Rickenbacker was able to catch the bird and shared its flesh with the crew, who used its intestines as fish bait. Thanks to a bird that lost its life, the entire crew survived the ordeal. Rickenbacker never forgot its sacrifice, and never stopped saying thank you.

Where have you seen elements of sacrifice in your own life experience? Has awareness of such sacrifices increased your feeling of gratitude, and if so, how have you expressed that gratitude?

4. Discuss this, from Philip Yancey's book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*: "If Jesus of Nazareth had been one more innocent victim, like King, Mandela, Havel, and Solzhenitsyn, he would have made his mark in history and faded from the scene. No religion would have sprung up around him.

"What changed history was the disciples' dawning awareness ... that God himself had chosen the way of weakness. The cross redefines God as One who was willing to relinquish power for the sake of love. Jesus became, in Dorothy Solle's phrase, 'God's unilateral disarmament.'

"Power, no matter how well-intentioned, tends to cause suffering. Love, being vulnerable, absorbs it. In a point of convergence on a hill called Calvary, God renounced the one for the sake of the other."

Based on your own observation of churches in America, would you say that those who identify

themselves as Christian tend to lean more in the direction of power, or love, or something else? What happens when one or the other becomes more prominent as a defining principle and motivation?

5. "Not everyone is a fan of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, which largely has its theological roots in Anselm of Bec (1033-1109)," commented TWW team member Bill Tammeus. "One reason is that as it stands, in some ways it says that God loves us because Christ died for us, whereas the biblical message is the opposite, Christ died for us because God loves us.

"But here is what scholar Karen Armstrong says in her 2019 book *The Lost Art of Scripture: 'In Why Did God Become Man?*, Anselm used biblical texts to support a wholly logical rationale for the incarnation and crucifixion: Adam's sin required atonement; because God was just, a human being must atone; but because the original sin was so grave, only God could make reparation. If he wanted to save the world, therefore, God had to become man. The logic was impeccable but it was bad theology, because Anselm was making 'God' think and reason like a human being."

What do you make of Armstrong's analysis?

## **Responding to the News**

1. You may wish to play one of these songs as you reflect on what it means that Jesus took our place:

["He Took My Place" by Olaf Lundgren & Salvation Army Staff Band \(3:18\)](#)

["He Took My Place" by Oakwood University Dynamic Praise \(4:56 / Begins at 1:35\)](#)

["He Took My Place" by Charley Pride \(3:04\)](#)

["Took My Place" by Vashawn Mitchell \(5:07\)](#)

["He Took My Place" by Keturah Sandoval \(4:12\)](#)

2. You may wish to meditate on one or more of the following verses in the coming days, as you ponder how Jesus was willing to take our suffering upon himself, though he had committed no sin, to bring us to God.

- Genesis 22:1-14 (especially vv. 13-14)
- Exodus 12:1-13
- Leviticus 16:21-22
- Mark 10:45
- 1 Timothy 2:5-6
- 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, 21
- Galatians 2:19-20
- Hebrews 9:23-28
- 1 Peter 2:21, 24-25
- 1 Peter 3:18

## **Prayer** Suggested by Romans 5:1-11

We thank you, O God, that we are made right with you through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, who brings us peace with you. We thank you that through him we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand. We thank you that while we were still weak, ungodly sinners, and your enemies, O God, you were in Christ, proving your love for us as he died for us. Empower us by your Spirit to lay down our lives for others, especially for the weak and needy, just as you laid down your life for us. Amen.