

The Story of God and Us: Atonement

Westheimer Sermon: <https://vimeo.com/435490804>

Gethsemane Sermon: <https://vimeo.com/435480880>

Pastors' Discussion: <https://vimeo.com/435151558>

Sermon Workbook: <https://www.stlukesmethodist.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GodandUs-workbook-web.pdf>

The earliest known summary of Christian faith, written within a generation of the death of Jesus, was written by Paul to the Corinthians: "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died **for our sins** in accordance with the scriptures." (1 Corinthians 15:3-5)

What does it mean that Jesus died for our sins? How did Jesus' death (and possibly life) bring us into right relationship with God? Was his sacrifice on the cross absolutely necessary for our forgiveness?

All of these questions have been considered and debated for 2,000 years both by the New Testament authors and Christian theologians. Because all of the theories of atonement place some level of importance on the cross, we'll begin by looking at the history of sacrifice in Judaism and how that would have been a framework through which Christ followers saw Jesus' death.

One of the most important feasts in Judaism is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. The instructions for it are given by God to Moses (for him to pass on to his brother Aaron) in Leviticus 16:

This will be a permanent rule for you, in order to make reconciliation for the Israelites from all their sins once a year. - Leviticus 16:34 CEB

On that day, all of the Israelites were to fast and refrain from doing any work, and the priest atones for the sins of the Israelites with two goats:

1. The priest puts both of his hands on the head of one of the goats and confesses all the Israelites' offenses and all their rebellious sins, as well as all their other sins;
2. The other goat is sacrificed for the purification offering inside the holy area of the tabernacle (blood sacrifices were important: "The life of an animal is in the blood. I have provided the blood for you to make atonement for your lives on the Altar; **it is the blood, the life, that makes atonement.**" Leviticus 17:11 MSG)

Everyone agrees that through Jesus, we are made at one with God... but how does that happen? Though individual Christian traditions have done so, the ecumenical church has not canonized a single doctrine of atonement.

Christus Victor – The earliest model was promulgated by Irenaeus in the 2nd century. It understands Jesus' life as a victorious struggle against evil. Jesus died in order to defeat the powers of evil (sin and death) and to free us from bondage. God defeats Satan and liberates us.

- Hebrews 2:14-15, 1 John 3:8

Ransom – A century after Irenaeus, Origen of Alexandria modified the theory so that instead of Jesus just defeating evil on the cross, Jesus is buying us back from the devil through his death on the cross. Origen posited that Adam and Eve, by their sin, sold humanity over to the devil at the time of the fall and God had to pay the devil a ransom for our freedom.

- Mark 10:45

Recapitulation – This theory of atonement originates with Athanasius in the 4th century. He affirms that it is the whole Christ event – incarnation, life, death on the cross, and resurrection – that effects atonement for humans. In order to put an end to our corruption and death God took on a human body and fulfilled in the flesh the death sentence that had come to us because of our sin. By doing this, God has made all humanity safe from death. Athanasius wrote, "For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all." He compares it to a powerful King coming to a city endangered by attackers. The King stays in only one house, not all houses, but his presence in the city in that one house makes the city safe for everyone.

- Romans 5:18-19, 2 Cor 3:18, 1 Peter 5:10

Satisfaction – Anselm, who lived in the 11th century, wrote that Jesus was understood as necessary to justify the vengeance of God. In this model, God demands more than just repentance – God demands that we pay back the debt that we owe (we have to *satisfy* the debt).

- Romans 3:25, Hebrews 9:22, Hebrews 10:10

Moral Influence – This theory was developed by Abelard as an alternative to the Satisfaction theory. It doesn't involve sacrifice; in this view, Jesus' life – from incarnation to resurrection – was an example for us. The teachings of Jesus are considered as important as the sacrifice on the cross, which showed us what love is.

- Hebrews 12:1-2, John 13:15, 1 Peter 2:21

Penal Substitution – Developed during the Reformation partly to combat the Satisfaction model's idea that we must pay back debts to God (as those debts were often satisfied with the church through the abuse of the indulgence system). In this model, Jesus's death was substituted for what should have been our death due to our sin. God is able to extend forgiveness to humans because Jesus was substituted for us.

- Isaiah 53:3-13, 2 Peter 2:24, Romans 4:25

The satisfaction model, which has retained popularity in the Western Church, was promulgated by Anselm late in the 11th century, forty years after the schism between

Eastern and Western churches and thus the Eastern Church never adopted a penal model of atonement. The Western church has clung more tightly to atonement theories that are understood through the judicial lens of guilt and punishment, while the Eastern church has used the therapeutic framework of healing and restoration. For that reason, the Satisfaction and Penal Substitution theories are widely viewed as the primary models of atonement in the Catholic, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Baptist and Presbyterian churches, whereas the Recapitulation theory is the primary model of the Orthodox churches.

John Wesley never assented to a single theory of atonement, but his writings and sermons indicate that his view is more in line with the Eastern church than the Western church. Unlike the Reformers (Luther, Calvin) who focused on justification at the exclusion of sanctification, Wesley stresses our restoration of what God originally intended us to be through sanctification – the continued process of becoming holy. As we are made perfect (to use Wesley's language), God is transforming our hearts to what God always wanted us to be.

“By salvation I mean not barely according to the vulgar notion deliverance from hell or going to heaven but a present deliverance from sin a restoration of the soul to its primitive health its original purity a recovery of the divine nature the renewal of our souls after the image of God in righteousness and true holiness in justice mercy and truth.” (*Farther Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, Pt. I, §3)

The United Methodist “Service of Word and Table” reminds us that it is the incarnation, life of Christ, crucifixion and resurrection that comprise the saving act that delivers “us from slavery to sin and death.” This overcoming of death is God’s radical gift of grace to humanity, for it is the only way in which humans could become at-one with God again. This grace restores the relationship between humans and God.

In the way that the four gospels tell the same truth about Jesus’ life but emphasize different components, the various models of atonement each offer different ways of understanding how we are at-one with God through Jesus.

This discussion would not be complete without addressing both the purpose of salvation and to whom salvation is offered.

As Dr. Pace mentioned in his sermon, when Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, they know not what they are doing,” nobody there is asking forgiveness. Nobody is jumping through religious hoops to gain it. Jesus is just doing it – and he is doing it for *everyone*.

Athanasius wrote, “For by the sacrifice of His own body [Jesus] did two things: He put an end to the law of death which barred our way; and He made a new beginning of life for us.”¹ This new life compels us to work so that others may experience the salvation of God as well. Revelation 5:9-10 underscores this point: that humanity is to be “a kingdom and priests serving our God, and they will reign on earth.”

¹ St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*,
<<https://www.ccel.org/ccel/athanasius/incarnation.iii.html>>.

We are atoned not just, as Wesley said, to be delivered from hell. Instead, God wants to be at-one with us so that we can fully experience the life that God intended for us and so that we can help others experience life that way as well.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

1. Can you remember the first time that you heard that Jesus died for you? What feelings or images does it evoke in you? Now that you have learned about the various models of atonement, can you identify which framework was used when you first hear about Jesus dying for you?
2. Based on your experience and faith journey, which model of atonement most resonates with you? Are there components of each that help you understand the atonement more fully? Do you disagree with any of the models?
3. How does our culture try to downplay the need to atone for sins?
4. Many of the atonement theories are based on the idea that God has to punish sin. Why can't there just be a "get out of jail free" card? Or why can't God overlook sin?
5. Dr. Pace ended his sermon by reminding us that we don't do anything to deserve the atonement, but that we do have a role in it – we need to accept the grace God offers through Jesus. Do you ever struggle to accept that grace?
6. What difference does knowing that you are at-one with God make in your life? How has God's forgiveness changed you?