

## **This I Believe – Something Has Changed**

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Romans 5:6-10

*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely, therefore, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. Romans 5:6-10 (NRSV)*

Let's pray together. *O God, open us up today, open our eyes that we might see, our ears your word in these words, open our hearts that your word might fall in and then, O God, open our hands that in response we might give and serve and love others. Amen.*

My brilliant wife the other day informed us that we needed to rotate our mattress. Do you do that? You're supposed to do it twice a year it says on the internet, but we don't rotate our mattress quite that often. But she informed me that it makes the mattress last longer, so I'm game for it. It's hard to do, by the way, to hold a mattress. Why do they no longer put handles on mattresses? In the old days, there were two handles on the mattress; you'd pick it up, you'd turn it around, and now there are no handles on my mattress. I was really frustrated. So, you have to figure out how to hold it and climb over the bed and not mess up the bed skirt- no, you can't do that. Get it on there just right. It would be so much easier if you had handles.

I want to talk about handles today. Those things that help us take hold of something that's hard to take hold of. Something that's hard for us to understand in our minds that may be even beyond our capability to understand in its fullest to give us something we can begin to grasp it. Just a little bit.

Our Scripture today is one of many that focuses on the atonement. Now, we're coming up on the most powerful weekend of the Christian year. Certainly, in the secular world, Christmas is more of a big deal, but for the church, what's called the *triduum* in Latin is the three days of Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter. And those three days together are the most powerful in history. Certainly, in the life of the church. And do we understand what really happens?

Today's Scripture says, "God proves his love for us that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." Like how? How does Christ dying for us, why is that for us? How does that make a difference in our lives?

I don't know how many times in my ministry someone has said to me. You know, sort of summons all of their courage in a Bible study and says, "Pastor, I don't really get it. I don't get how Jesus' dying on the cross forgives my sins. I mean, I did it. How does Jesus' death on it ....? I mean, if you punish my brother and I'm the one who did the crime, I don't feel forgiven. Like, how does it work?"

What I want us to talk about today are handles on the atonement. The word atonement is the translation of the Greek word *hilasterion*, which is sometimes translated as *expiation* or *propitiation*. We don't really know what those words mean. *Sacrifice of atonement* is often the translation. And it simply means when you are separated from God by sin the cross and resurrection restores that relationship. Like, what happens? Before Good Friday and after Easter, something has changed. Something has changed in our relationship with Christ, with God, and something has changed in the world. What happened?

We're going to look at a number of what are called *theories of the atonement*. Now let me just say, and this is kind of important, that there is no atonement *dogma*. That's a fancy word. A dogma is something that everyone in the Christian - every denomination in the Christian faith agrees on. So, it's a dogma. This is a claimed truth. For example, there is Christian dogma that says Jesus is fully human and fully divine. All the denominations claim that understand that and believe that. If you choose to vary from that, you are sort of outside of orthodoxy. But in the atonement, there is no dogma. Christians have understood what happened in those three days in different ways throughout history. And the Bible points to all sorts of different images that God is using to help us try and get it.

So, as we look at that, we have to sort of say, which of those makes sense for me? How does this work?

I'm going to take us through some of these and just see if any of them click with you. I'm going to move quickly because we don't have a lot of time – that's why!

Here's the first, and sometimes it's called the modern theory. This says that Jesus is our example of forgiveness, and he told us we were forgiven; we're to receive that forgiveness and choose to live as he's called us to live. That the problem is ignorance, that we really don't know how to live, and that he has given us his forgiveness and taught us to live that way. Listen, this is John 13:13-16, and it says, "Listen, you call me teacher and Lord, and you are right, for that is what I am. So, if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Very truly, I tell you, slaves are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them." (John 13:13-16)

In this understanding of the atonement the problem is that we just didn't understand how to live. And that Jesus comes and actually says "Let me show you. And you can live like this."

The problem with this understanding of the atonement is it doesn't really take seriously sin in our lives. This sense of brokenness in the world around us and in our own lives enables us to live as Jesus has taught us to live.

Now, the next sort of grouping I'm going to call a group of models for the atonement. These are called substitutionary atonement, and what that means is that Jesus took our place. That something that was intended for us Jesus did on our behalf. And it's the most common now certainly since the Reformation. The earliest form of it was the sacrificial atonement, saying that Jesus satisfies God's need for sacrifice. Remember that the people of ancient Israel lived by sacrifice. You made all sorts of sacrifices. You made thank offerings and various kinds of sacrifices. But there was on the Day of Atonement one would go to the temple. The High Priest would go into the Holy of Holies and would sprinkle the blood of a bull on the gold cover of the Ark of the Covenant. And in fact, that gold cover is called the Mercy Seat. So that's where they were to receive God's

mercy. And then, all of the families would bring their own lamb as a sacrifice for their sins to participate in this ritual of forgiveness of atonement.

So that's why in the Gospel of John, we hear, "The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him and declared, 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29). You'll often hear the term "you are washed in the blood." When we hear that, it's an image of sacrifice. Now, for you and I, we don't experience ...that's not a part of our culture. That's probably not a good handle for us to grab onto, is it?

Probably the most common one is called the Legal or Penal Theory. That is, the cross satisfies God's justice. So, the idea is that God is both fully just and righteous and, at the same time, loving. When we sin and because of justice, there should be a penalty for that sin. God is loving and doesn't want us to pay the penalty: "The wages of sin is death." And how can God remain fully just, fully righteous, and at the same time fully loving? Well, Christ pays that penalty. Christ is the one who receives the penalty for us. He says, "He did this to demonstrate his righteousness... " Remember that it's the same word as justice; it can be translated either way "... because in his divine forbearance, he passed over the sins previously committed, it was to demonstrate at the present time his own righteousness so that he is righteous and he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus" (Romans 3:25b-26).

In fact, there is a penalty, and it has been paid, so we are made right with God.

Now there's another variation of that I learned from Dr. Tim Keller. I've heard him preach about it. He's passed away now. It's called an Economic Theory. And boy, this resonated with me more, I'll have to say. I would just say to myself, "I just don't get it. Why doesn't God just go, 'You're forgiven.' God's God, can't God just make the calls." And he explains in this that when there's a debt and that debt is forgiven what that means is the person who held the debt has paid it. Like if you have a debt, if you owe me money and I forgive that debt to you, you have to count that on your taxes as income and pay taxes on it. Because the truth is that I paid you, I paid your debt.

Listen to Colossians 2: "He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross." (Colossians 2:13-14). Throughout Scripture, you'll see the term, "He purchased us with his blood." That's an economic term. Or even this one, "We've

been redeemed.” God has brought redemption. To redeem something means to buy it back. He paid for it with the life of his son.

So that’s the economic one, and there’s one other one that is really the most ancient of the theories of the atonement. And it’s called the Ransom Theory or the Ransom Model. In which we are held hostage to... we are in bondage to Satan and evil, and Satan demands a ransom. So, God sends his Son as the ransom. Listen, this is from Mark 10:45 and Matthew 28 –the same words. “For even the son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45; Matthew 20:28). You see it again in 1 Timothy 2, where it speaks of a ransom. If you grew up in a Roman Catholic or a Lutheran or a Reformed – many Presbyterian churches, certainly any Orthodox churches, you would say, as you said in the Apostles Creed, “He descended into hell.” Where does that come from? Well, it’s a later addition to the Apostles Creed, but it comes from the idea that between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, Jesus was taken to hell as a ransom. God then... we were set free... we were set free on Good Friday as the ransom was paid. And by the way, while Jesus was down in hell, he preached to all the souls that were there. That’s called the Harrowing of Hell. Then, on Easter Sunday, God rescues Jesus from death and hell. And he comes out of the tomb. That’s probably the most image we have.

Now, there’s one more I want to give you before we quit. And that’s what is called the *Christus Victor*. This is not a substitutionary atonement. Christ, as Victor says, there is an ongoing battle in the world, and this was probably from about 400 or 500 through the Middle Ages. This was the most commonly used image. Still many today...Gustaf Aulén was a theologian who wrote most about this. That there’s this cosmic battle between good and evil in the world around us. And that this battle is raging. And that on Good Friday, it looked like the leader of the armies of the good – Jesus – lost. Was crucified. And it seemed that evil had triumphed. And that death had triumphed. And that Satan had triumphed. But that on Easter Sunday, no, that was proven wrong. And that, in fact, life triumphed, and good triumphed. And so, we have this picture of a victorious Jesus, so when you hear the imagery around victory, we have victory in Jesus, right? When we sing the song “Lift High the Cross,” we use imagery about victory.

This was... if you can imagine it... during the Middle Ages when the Crusades were marching across Israel to take the Holy Land back from the Muslims. That image of we are part of the victory that's been assured, and we need to help bring it back into reality again. Certainly, the book of Revelation uses imagery about this battle between good and evil, that evil is finally defeated. And the kingdom of God is now in its full fruition.

All of these, friends, are just handles, and we try and understand them in our minds. But they are just ways that God is trying to give us...that's why I feel there are so many images that are there. Ways in which we can take hold of something is so essential that is really beyond our limited picture. And that, in fact, we have to receive it in our hearts.

There's a wonderful movie called "To End All Wars." It came out in 2001 and stars Keifer Sutherland. It's really a remake of the movie "Bridge over the River Kwai," which was based on a true story in a book by Ernest Gordon. Ernest Gordon was a prisoner of war in the Japanese labor camps in Burma and was made to work and help build a road and the bridge over the River Kwai. In the story, in the movie, there's a man named Major Ian Campbell, and he is an officer, a Scottish officer who's very prideful and arrogant. He goes to the Japanese captor and says, "I am an officer; I'm not supposed to work. The enlisted men are supposed to work. But the convention says that officers that are prisoners of war should never be forced to work." And all the other prisoners he just annoys them with his pride. Well, he seeks to escape, and he's caught, and he's condemned to death. And in the climactic final scene, the Japanese captor has him kneeling down with his sword lifted to behead him. A person steps from the crowd. The man is named Dusty Miller, and he's a gardener from England, from a suburb of England. He was a red hat meaning he was sort of brought into the war. He's a Methodist – which I love. He's a very kind and gentle person. And he comes up and whispers to the executioner, "Take me instead." And there's a moment in which he finally does. He takes him instead. And they actually have Dusty Miller crucified on a cross in the movie. And you can see the face of the major as he is so full of anguish at realizing that he led to the death of this one who freely chose that on his behalf.

I don't know how we understand it exactly, but there's power in this realization that God's love for us is so great that while we were sinners, prideful, and full of ourselves, God's love for us was so great. That he died for us. And everything has changed because of that.

*Gracious God, help us experience this in our hearts. Help us to take hold of some of those handles, some way of understanding this powerful message that you love us so incredibly much that you can demonstrate that love for us as you hang on a cross. May we receive it not just in our minds but especially in our hearts. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*