

What was Jesus doing on that cross?

March 31, 2024 (Easter)

Four main theories (in roughly chronological order of popularity)

“In the early centuries there were great controversies about the person of Christ and about the nature of the Trinity. Heresies appeared, were thoroughly discussed, and were disowned. In the end the church accepted the formula of Chalcedon as the standard expression of the orthodox faith. But there was no equivalent with the atonement. People simply held to the satisfying truth that Christ saved them by way of the cross and did not argue about how this salvation was effected.” – Leon Morris, “Theories of the Atonement,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter Elwell (2001).

1. Ransom Theory

Matthew 20:28: “...even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

1 Timothy 2:5-6: “... the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all...”

Adam and Eve, when they sinned, sold all of humanity to Satan. Then, through the person and work of Jesus, God tricked Satan to accept Christ’s death as ransom. When the ransom was paid and accepted, Satan realized he couldn’t hold Jesus in hell. After three days, Jesus rose from the dead and proved Satan a fool.

A fishhook: Jesus’ humanity was the bait. His deity was the hook.

C.S. Lewis, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*: Edmund is bought back from the White Witch by the death of Aslan

Irenaeus (c. 130 – c. 202)

Origen (c. 185 – c. 253)

Christus Victor

2. Satisfaction Theory

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), *Cur Deus homo?*

1. Man owed a debt to God but could not pay it.
2. God could pay the debt but did not owe it.
3. Only the God-man could both owe the debt and pay it

3. Moral Influence Theory

Jesus' death offers us a perfect example of self-sacrificial dedication to God.

Peter Abelard (1079-1142) vehemently disagreed with Anselm. He argued that to say that God required payment for a debt would be to undermine the very love of God. To Abelard, Jesus' death was an example, a demonstration, of God's love for humanity.

Faustus Socinus (1539–1604) *De Jesu Christo Servatore* (1578) – Jesus' death offers us a perfect example of self-sacrificial dedication to God.

“When I Survey the Wondrous Cross”

Unitarians, and the more theologically liberal church

4. Penal Substitutionary Atonement

Isaiah 53, Romans 3:23-26, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 3:10-13, Colossians 2:13-15, 1 Peter 2:24, 3:18

Propitiation: To propitiate means to appease or placate wrath.

“Propitiation presupposes the wrath and displeasure of God, and the purpose of propitiation is the removal of this displeasure” – John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (1955), 30.

Heidelberg Catechism 40: Q. Why did Christ have to suffer death?

A. Because God's justice and truth require it (Gen. 2:17), nothing else could pay for our sins except the death of the Son of God (Rom. 8:3-4; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 2:9).

“They (the Protestant Reformers) took seriously the scriptural teachings about the wrath of God and those that referred to the curse under which sinners lay. It seemed clear to them that the essence of Christ's saving work consisted in his taking the sinner's place. In our stead Christ endured the death that is the wages of sin. He bore the curse that we sinners should have borne (Gal. 3:13). The Reformers did not hesitate to speak of Christ as having borne our punishment or as having appeased the wrath of God in our place” (Leon Morris, “Theories of the Atonement”).

“In Christ” (at-one-ment)

The more theologically conservative church

Images: a better way

“Each (theory) draws attention to an important aspect of our salvation and we dare not surrender any. But we are small minded sinners and the atonement is great and vast. We should not expect that our theories will ever explain it fully. Even when we put them all together, we will no more than begin to comprehend a little of the vastness of God’s saving deed.” (Leon Morris, “Theories of the Atonement”).

“This may come as a surprise, but the Church never sensed a need to articulate a single explanatory theory for the Atonement. Some ask why the Church never ‘solved’ the Atonement question. I believe it was because they knew it took more than one story to tell that story, and I believe also they knew it as a reality so rich in diversity that attempts to narrow it down to manageable size were unwise.” (Scot McKnight, *Embracing Grace* (2012), 94).

- Alister E. McGrath, *What Was God doing on the Cross?* (1999), 45-96.
- John Piper, *Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die* (2006).

1. A battlefield

“Victory!”

1 Corinthians 15:57: “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Easter morning proves that God is alive, well, and active.

In what area(s) of your life you live as someone still under fire in a battle? Because Jesus is alive and victorious, how can you share in that victory today?

2. A relationship

“You are reconciled”

2 Corinthians 5:19: “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.”

Forgiveness, healing, resolution, love, transformation.

Who in your life do you live unreconciled? You see their sin as greater than your own, and count it against them. You refuse to forgive them. Because of Jesus’ reconciling work on the cross, how can you entrust yourself to the ministry of reconciliation?

3. A hospital

“You are healed”

Isaiah 53:5: “with his wounds we are healed.”

He took on our sorrows, fears, punishment.

Mark 2:1-12: paralytic through the roof: “Son, your sins are forgiven.”

Who has bandaged your soul wounds? The resurrected Lord... or your own lame attempts at triage? How can you allow our Risen Lord to apply the balm of the Gospel to your sorrows and fears?

4. A courtroom

“You are justified”

Romans 6:23: “The wages of sin is death”

“Sin is an offense against the moral fabric of the creation, not just some personal insult to God” (McGrath, *What Was God doing on the Cross?*, 55).

Representation (covenant), participation (sharing), substitution

Romans 4:25: “who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

“The atonement is that which meets the exigencies of holiness and justice. The wrath of God is the inevitable reaction of the divine holiness against sin. Sin is the contradiction of the perfection of God and he cannot but recoil against that which is the contradiction of himself. Such recoil is holy indignation” (John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*, 32).

By whose merit do you stand before your Creator? Your own good deeds? Or by the full righteousness of Christ offered on your behalf?

5. A prison

“You are free!”

Passover – free from captivity

John 8:34, Romans 6:6

Galatians 5:1: “For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”

Ransom, redemption, liberation, payment

Are you allowing the “old man” (sin) to rule in your life? Or are you standing firm in the freedom the crucified Christ has provided for you?