

Christ as Victor, Victim and Vision

Loving Our Magnificent, Invincible Savior

So much of what the Lord does is holographic. Turn the image just a little and it will appear entirely different. Few things demonstrate this principle better than His death on the cross. What was He doing? Great truths infuse our hearts through these three historically favored perspectives on what happened at the cross. Take care that you don't only hold to one. We need them all!

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18 ESV

What Happened at the Cross?

It must come as a surprise to everyone who studies the cross of Christ that, historically speaking, there is no one clear idea of what took place there. Surely, this crucial act of God on our behalf is universally understood and agreed upon? Evidently not! No one questions that the cross is central to our salvation or that our sins were forgiven there. However, what actually happened and how it works to save us has been the subject of lively debate and shifting opinions for two thousand years.

It seems that every age focuses upon some aspect of the cross which either meets their deepest need or reflects their cultural setting or both. Of the three dominant theories, the second one (with considerable modifications) leads the field in our day.



Should we continue searching for the one and only “correct” theory? My own belief is that the Lord can accomplish many things at once, a trait He amply displayed when He said “Let there be light!” The cross is to redemption what those first words were to creation: the fountainhead of all that would follow. We *should* expect that no one theory would suffice to encapsulate this immense “making new” of the former creation, just as no one science can describe the wide range of the natural order. It may be “messy” to have such a proliferation of theories, but if you want quick closure to all your pressing questions, the Lord probably isn’t the One to ask!

Three Theories of the Atonement

We may not have one definitive, final answer but we do have a wide array of fascinating insights and foundational truths. I think that it is just like the Lord to have worked patiently through the centuries and through differing cultural context to bring forth a fuller understanding of what He was doing at the cross. I firmly believe that they all fit together. To explore the question in a



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more organized way, I have grouped these ideas under three general headings: Christ as Victor, Victim and Vision.

All three interpretations focus on aspects of the cross that are vital to our salvation. Moreover, because our battle is ongoing, it strengthens us to understand and embrace the full array of what has been won for us. One key to understanding these three theories is seeing that there are three “interested” parties which God worked through the cross to address: God Himself, Satan and humanity. It will help to think of these theories as complementary, not competing.

Christ as Victor

As Victor the atonement consists of Christ’s triumph over His enemies and ours. This was the view of the Early Church fathers, beginning with Irenaeus of Lyon, and it held sway for the first thousand years of Christianity. As Victor Christ triumphed in two ways: by ransoming us with His life and by defeating Satan who held us captive. Unquestionably, these two explanations are marked down in scripture, but they fell out of favor as other theories emerged and as belief in the devil declined in scholarly circles.

The idea of [Ransom](#) has a long history in scripture, going all the way back to Job, often considered one of the oldest books in the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures there is a clear and consistent foreshadowing of the need for God’s people to be ransomed, though how this would happen or by whom is left in the shadows. That mystery is resolved when Jesus appears, but unfortunately for our curiosity, He doesn’t tell us how or why. He simply states that by being willing to “give His life” Jesus would ransom us. In this view the “purchase price” of our redemption is in some way a payment made to the enemy: Jesus’ life in exchange for ours.

“But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” Matthew 20:26-28 ESV

You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. 1 Corinthians 7:23
ESV

Related to this idea of ransom is the view of Christ as the Victor in a spiritual battle waged for our freedom. Here, it seems to me that in terms of details we have even less to go on. As with the image of ransom, there is plenty of Old Testament foreshadowing, showing us that battles do indeed have to be fought for the sake of redeeming God’s captive people. Think of the Exodus from Egypt and the constant battles over the Promised Land as exemplars of the spiritual warfare between the [Two Invisible Kingdoms](#) which continue to our own day. In what way, however, was Jesus battling Satan at the cross? St. John emphatically stated that He was, but the Early Church fathers only outlined the theory; they didn’t fill it in. Nevertheless, scripture clearly credits Jesus with “triumphing” over the dark powers that had us enslaved.

He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. Colossians 2:15 ESV

The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. 1 John 3:8 ESV

Let's consider for a moment the broad cultural context behind this accurate (if incomplete) view of Christ as Victor. The Roman Empire set the tone for the age. The power of its sword subdued kingdoms all around the Mediterranean and beyond, uniting them in a universal peace, the Pax Romana under the rule of a supreme monarch. It would be only natural to see Jesus similarly, as a conquering King, though one whose kingdom was not of this world. Not only that, but it was an age which readily believed in the activity of those dark powers which the New Testament describes Jesus as fighting. To understand how Jesus gained that victory, however, we will have to turn to the second great view of the atonement, that of Christ as Victim.

Christ as Victim

As Victim the atonement consists of what Jesus had to suffer on our behalf. Like Christ the Victor, this theory also has two variations. The first to appear was the "satisfaction" theory developed by St. Anselm of Canterbury during the 11th century. In this view it is the sovereign God, not Satan, whose claim is addressed by the atonement. Humanity's sins bring insult and injury to the honor of God. Just as with medieval codes of honor (note the cultural context), satisfaction must be made. However, because God's glory is so great, only a perfect sacrifice could possibly atone for the affront to His honor. Since the "merits of Christ" far outweigh the debt owed to God by humanity, the sacrifice of Christ fully "satisfies" the requirements of honor. In this view the ransom, or purchase price of redemption, is in some way paid to God. This theory replaced Christ as Victor as the leading view of the atonement for the next five hundred years.

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Romans 5:10 ESV

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Ephesians 5:2 ESV

Through the Reformers, especially John Calvin, the idea of satisfaction was again taken up, but turned away from God's honor towards His justice. Humanity was indeed in debt to God as Anselm would have it, but it was a debt to the moral Law which we have all transgressed. This view, termed "penal substitution," takes seriously the statement by Paul in Romans that the "wages of sin is death." Because of our sins we are legally subject to God's wrath and deserve eternal punishment in hell. God loved us too much to let that happen!

At the Father's request Jesus went to the cross, was punished in our place and died the death our sins required. In this view it is humanity's sin which is the "enemy" to be overcome for sin places us at enmity with God, as well as enslaves us to the evil one. Here, then is the inside story on how Christ the Victor "destroyed the works" of the devil who tempted us into sinning against God in the first place. Jesus "triumphed" by becoming the Victim, an innocent victim, thereby creating the condition for God to overturn His Son's death and strip the enemy of his legal claims. As our representative (or substitute) Jesus' death fully atones for our sins, releasing us from the curse of the law and the punishment we deserved.

But God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were



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reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Romans 5:8-11 ESV

And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. Colossians 2:13-14 ESV

These views of the atonement are called “objective” because they focus upon what Christ was doing for us at the cross, apart from any involvement by us or with us. They neglect what the sight of the cross, received by faith, does for us on the inside where the saving transformation needs to take place. To understand that work of the atonement we will have to look through the lens of the third view, Christ as Vision.

Christ as Vision

As Vision the atonement consists of what God accomplishes in us. This internal or “subjective” view of the atonement was first advanced by a contemporary of Anselm, Peter Abelard. Called the “moral influence” theory, it draws our attention to what God uses to get our attention: the death of His Son at the cross. Nothing convinces us of the terrible reality of our sinfulness or of God’s merciful love like seeing Jesus dying there. Looking to the cross we see a Savior who lays down His life for His friends and a loving Father who was willing to sacrifice even His only begotten Son to rescue us.

This vision of “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” changes us, because it enables us to trust to God’s love. By [Beholding Him](#), especially in the way divine love is revealed at the cross, we are transformed into His likeness. Not only that, but the example of Jesus in loving us to the point of selfless sacrifice, shows us the true path of life for us to follow. By His example we are inspired to love like He does; by faith in the love He has shown us, we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to become like Him.

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. Galatians 2:20 ESV

But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed... And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. 2 Corinthians 3:16, 18 ESV

I can’t help thinking that this view of the atonement will gain ground in the future. The role of vision in the spiritual life can hardly be overlooked in an age as attuned to the visual arts as our own. The connection between sight, inward focus and interior state is being more fully experienced and widely understood by everyone from advertisers to designers to media producers. This will surely awaken in the church the as yet untapped potential of growing “[eyes to see](#)” the pathway to transformation that comes to those who learn the secret of [Beholding Jesus](#) with ever renewed eyes of faith.



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Explore More about Jesus

[Songs about the Cross](#) Who in their right mind would sing about an instrument of execution? We do! Because it was there that Jesus won the victory for us over sin and death. It was there that both God the Father and Jesus displayed and proved their unending love for us! Enjoy these songs both old and new: "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross", "At the Cross (Hillsong)", "The Old Rugged Cross", "Were You There", "Lift High the Cross" and "At Calvary."

[Scriptures on the Cross](#) Just as you would expect, there are tons of scriptures which speak about the salvation won for us at the cross. This selection is organized under the three main headings: 1) as Victor are listed those scriptures that carry the idea of ransoming the captives, of purchasing our redemption, or of defeating the enemy; 2) as Victim, those that point to Jesus as sacrificial offering, as propitiating the wrath of God, as justifying believers; and as Vision, those where the emphasis is on the inward effect upon believers through what they see that Jesus has accomplished for them or modeled for them.

[His Triumphant Resurrection](#) Without the resurrection we have no religion worth shouting about, no hope of heaven, no escape from our sins or our sin nature. Without the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead we wouldn't have a living and Risen Lord to know and to follow. Without His resurrection we wouldn't even know how powerful a victory was won by Him at the cross. Where would our faith be then? Funny thing is, it was the one thing He didn't do...

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For over a decade Steve Evans and [Healing Streams](#) have been helping people recover inner peace and freedom through the free eCourse for healing, [Matters of the Heart](#). Through Forerunners4Him he has been showing how we can be saved for heaven and teaching the way to live a Spirit-filled life on earth. Go now to receive a completely free primer, [Getting to Heaven](#) and/or an introduction to [Living in the Spirit](#) at our website.



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