

Assumptions about God

In upcoming chapters, I will address the genesis of the images of sacrificial atonement and ransom. For now, I can mention that our earliest source for the sacrificial and purchase metaphors for the death of Jesus is the Apostle Paul, who was writing in the 50s AD. Paul is also the source of that extremely unfortunate slogan: “you were bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). Paul’s successors took his metaphors quite literally, blending the notion of sacrifice with the image of ransom and coming up with the idea of the death of Jesus as a ransom payment for the sins of humanity, the idea called “atonement” in theological circles.

In this chapter, I want to respond to the idea of atonement that is popular *today*, by contrasting it with the teachings of Jesus. My argument is less with Paul than with his more literal-minded successors, and with the crude atonement ideas that developed over time. It is the *purchase* concept that is most problematic.

The main problem with teaching that Jesus’ death paid for human sin is that it slanders the character of God the Father! If God was either *unable* or *unwilling* to forgive without a payment in blood, then God was either weak or cruel. Both are false. God was not compelled to demand that a payment for sin be made, nor was God defending God’s honor. Such ideas emerge when people apply *human* laws and attitudes to God.

“Somebody had to pay” is based on a series of mistaken assumptions. One is that God is stern and demanding, while Jesus is merciful and kind. This goes against Jesus’ own teachings about his *similarity* to the Father: “Just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life . . . Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 5:21; 14:9). There is no spiritual contrast between the Father and the Son; they have the *same love*. This is the good news: there is a circuit of love that flows from the Father, through the Son, to the Spirit, into us, and then among us.

Of course, no Christian wants to say that God is either cruel or weak. Yet Christians commonly fall into that trap unawares, accepting formulas that Christian authorities have told them they *must* believe, usually accompanied with a fierce and angry energy. Most believers follow their leaders. Instead, we should reflect upon what we have been taught, and see if it needs to be questioned, in the light of Jesus' *own* focus on love and forgiveness. What did Jesus himself teach about salvation?

Salvation Now

Jesus made it clear, in his preaching and his ministry to people, that the kingdom of God has come; it is *here*. Jesus built people up spiritually and told them they were *already* saved by their exercise of faith. There are *seven times* in the gospels where he tells people “your faith has saved you,” even when he has performed a miraculous healing for them. I am counting the times the NRSV renders it “faith has made you well,” as well as the times they translate the *same verb* as “has saved” (Matt 9:22; Mark 5:34; 10:52; Luke 7:50; 8:48; 17:19; 18:42). The verb is σωζω (*sōzō*), which has the *primary* meaning of “saved.” In all seven passages, the verb occurs in the perfect tense (*sesōken*), so it actually means “has saved.” The choices “made well” or “made whole” make sense in their context, but so does “saved,” and I prefer to stay closer to the verb's primary meaning.

By no means am I arguing that people are self-saving. That would be too rigid a reading of “your faith has saved you.” Rather, Jesus is generously giving them credit for their faith, and their role in *receiving* salvation. Actually, salvation results from both the divine *downreach* and the human *upreach*: the coming together of God's love (embodied by Jesus) and a person's sincere and faithful plea. Jesus does do miracles of healing, but he likes to lift people up and include them. He acknowledges their *receptivity* to the act when he says “your faith has saved

you.” Jesus certainly is the Savior and the Healer, but he likes to emphasize the human end of the divine-human connection.

Throughout the gospels, Jesus saves people, and *tells* them they are saved. Without any reference to his coming death, without any substitutionary (taking the place of others) doctrine, he makes it clear that people’s faith has *already* saved them. Again, the way to salvation and eternal life is *wide open*. Salvation is made available here and now, whenever people “hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance” (Luke 8:15; see also 8:21; 11:28). Notice how crucial is the “honest and good heart”—the *sincerity* of the person. Anyone who honestly recognizes the *need* for salvation can receive it.

Jesus is the Savior, not because of his death, but because of his divine identity, his power as Creator. He is the one who gave us life in the first place: “Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind” (John 1:3–4 NIV); “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created” (Col 1:16 NRSV). Jesus is the Savior in *exactly the same way* that he is the Creator (“he also created the worlds,” Heb 1:2). He was the life-giver in the beginning, and he is the *eternal* life-giver now.

Jesus extends salvation just as he extended healing. In fact, the main images for salvation in the gospels are healing and restoration. His healings were a gift of life, or a restoration of healthy life, and salvation is the gift of *eternal* life. Jesus was the life giver before he ever came to earth in human form. There is no magic in the crucifixion; he did not become the Savior only after he was murdered. He was the Savior from the start. In fact: “In a sense, we were saved by Christ before he was born.”¹

¹ Forsyth, *The Person and Place of Jesus Christ*, 348.

Salvation and forgiveness truly are the free gifts of God, not something purchased with blood. The problem with the blood-purchase concept is not what it says about Jesus, but what it says about God. It pictures God as harshly judgmental, and also corrupt: needing a victim, but willing to be satisfied with an *innocent* victim. What good is it to see Jesus as kind and good, if we see God as sadistic, corrupt, or weak?

There is something not quite healthy in the obsession with blood, as seen in Billy Graham, for instance: “Blood redeems. . . Blood cleanses. . . His blood pumps through your spiritual veins with eternal life. . . Blood justifies. . . Jesus paid for our sins with His blood.”² Placher wrote “Christ is our sacrifice. His blood transforms us into people who can once again come into the presence of the holy God.”³ This seems like blood-magic. Further, isn’t it an over-emphasis on Jesus’ death? Shouldn’t we be focusing upon his *whole* life, his experience of God, and what he actually taught?

The teachings of Jesus go right against the notion that there would be no salvation until he had spilled his blood. God does not need to be paid or *persuaded*. Rather, God *already* loves us: “The Father himself loves you” (John 16:27). God’s loving attitude is no different from Jesus’ loving attitude. “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). If we recognize the character and the love of Jesus, we should recognize that these are also the character and love of God. No Christian who understands that will ever again think that the Father required the crucifixion of Jesus—or of anyone.

We should stop assuming that God needs *any* transaction, *any* payment. God’s arms are wide open to receive. God is loving, like *any* good father: “Is there anyone among you who, if

² Graham, *Where I Am*, 18, 22.

³ Placher, *Jesus the Savior*, 137.

your child asks for bread, will give a stone? . . . How much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Matt 7:9, 11).

Not only does this affirm a positive and loving God, it strongly asserts the basic goodness of human fathers! Jesus appeals to fathers: don’t *you* love your children? You wouldn’t play a cruel trick on your child, would you? And your children trust you, don’t they? In these remarks Jesus backs up the basic goodness of fathers. Elsewhere he admires mothers, children, and even Gentiles. He is affirming *people*, and also *family*, using family imagery for both God and the community of believers. Jesus tells us the truth about God, and he offers the appealing prospect of cooperating with God.

He says very positive things about people. When a scribe agrees with Jesus’ articulation of the command to love God and others and then adds “this is much more important than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices,” Jesus tells the fellow “you are not far from the kingdom of God” (Mark 12:33–34).

Some Christians are profoundly pessimistic about the human heart, but Jesus says anyone with an honest heart can receive the kingdom of God. Those who “receive the kingdom of God as a little child” will enter it (Luke 18:17). He taught that sincere faith really is possible, and is *effective*. Further, he says that people can actually *do the will* of God: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35). This would make no sense if he thought that doing the will of God were impossible. He believes in the goodness of anyone who wants to do right: “the good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good” (Luke 6:45). He tells his disciples to love, “so that you may be children of your Father in heaven . . . Be perfect . . . as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:45, 48). By practicing love and mercy people are actually imitating God!

Of course, this goes against the old notion that people are evil and that God is burning with wrath against them. The gospel is meant to dispel such fearful and pessimistic views of God. “Fear not” (Luke 8:50; 12:7, 32 KJV [King James Version]).

If we follow Jesus, our entire life, our minds, and our ethics, will be forever changed.