



# Atonement

*Understanding why and how Jesus' death brings hope*



'Jesus saves'. 'Jesus died for you'. These are simple statements that have changed billions of lives throughout history. But how does Christ's death on a cross 2000 years ago bring about spiritual salvation today? Just how does it work?

## **Misconceptions**

Some preachers graphically describe the barbaric punishment that Jesus received at the hands of the Roman soldiers. They talk about the sharpness of the crown of thorns that was thrust onto His scalp, the size of the nails that were driven into His wrists and feet, the effect on his bones and ligaments of being suspended from a cross without support, the length of time that it would have taken to die such a painful and drawn-out capital punishment. They conclude by saying that Jesus endured all this for you and me. He paid the ultimate price for all our sin, taking the punishment that you and I deserved. All this raises a number of questions.

First, as humiliating and barbaric as crucifixion was, in the history of human wickedness, others will have suffered even greater physical torture at the hands of their oppressors than Jesus did. So, the amount of pain He suffered was not the issue.

Furthermore, crucifixion was not unique to Jesus. The Romans crucified all those they considered a threat to their rule. It was a very dramatic and public way of dissuading others to follow their example. Even on the day of Jesus' crucifixion at least two others were also crucified [Lk 23:32]. So, death through crucifixion was also not the issue.

If the *form* of death is not unique, then it must be something to do with Jesus, His identity and understanding of what was happening.

Second, who says that a price must be paid? How much? And what for?

Third, what's all this about 'sin'?

**Atonement** is the theological term that describes what God did to mend the broken relationship between God and humanity/ creation through the life and death of Jesus Christ, God the Son. The English word 'at-one-ment' spells out this 'making at once'. We will look at three different models of the atonement. These are not the only ones available and therefore this is the start of an investigation, not the final word. Each model contains strengths and weaknesses. Furthermore, all three derive support from the Bible. Consequently, we approach them with humility, openness, and questions.

## A. Atonement as Penal Substitution



### Summary

- Though originally made perfect (without sin), all humanity is now born into sin because the first humans (Adam and Eve) rebelled (sinned) against holy God. It's as if Adam and Eve passed on the sin gene to every human born thereafter. Consequently, all humans are born already as 'sinners' because of the sin DNA genetically inherited from our sinful ancestors, Adam and Eve. This is called '**original sin**'. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Rom.3:23).
- Sin matters because it distorts what God originally made good. All those contaminated with sin experience varying degrees of struggle, suffering, and disease. 100% ultimately die. "The wages of sin are *death*" (Rom.6:23).
- Sin is primarily an offence against holy God. It is a crime against the divine order. "The sinful mind is *hostile* to God. It does not submit to God's *law*, nor can it do so" (Rom.8:7). Therefore, to remain holy, God reacts with **wrath** to judge the crime of sin and condemn sinners. God would cease to be just if, despite their guilt, He simply let sinners off. God's holiness exposes sin; His wrath opposes it.
- Having found all humanity guilty of the crime of sin, God as Judge must pass a sentence proportionate to the seriousness of the offence. The just penalty is death and eternal separation from God for all humans, with the condemned being tormented physically, emotionally and spiritually for eternity in hell. Having been committed by humans, only humans could **satisfy** the punishment for sin. Anything less would undermine God's holiness and justice.
- And yet, God is also Love. God has compassion for His creation, He does not want anyone to perish or be separated from Him. Despite our sin, God has not stopped loving each one of us.
- Being merciful, God wants to forgive sinners. But to simply overlook the offence of sin would be to undermine His justice. God's justice demands that sin is condemned and yet God's love desires that sinners are forgiven.
- God's solution was to send God the Son to become fully human in the person of Jesus whilst continuing simultaneously to be fully God. This is called the **incarnation**. As the God-man, Jesus was uniquely able to **reconcile** God and humanity, restoring their relationship.
- Being fully *God* Jesus was completely without sin (sinless) [Lk 23:40]. Unlike all other humans, Jesus was not guilty of sin and was not therefore subject to the penalty of death. Being God the Son, His life had infinite worth (priceless). His life could pay the price for all sinful humans.
- Being fully *human*, Jesus was also able to stand as a **substitution** in the place of His fellow humans to endure the punishment they deserved.
- *Jesus' death on the Cross satisfied both God's justice and love*. By dying the death penalty that sinful humans deserved God's justice was satisfied (the price had been paid) and God's love was satisfied (God could forgive guilty sinners without undermining the offence of sin).
- It is **penal substitution** because on the Cross God the Son took the place of guilty sinners (substitution), enduring their capital punishment (penal) so that God's justice could be satisfied by a suitable punishment, whilst still allowing God's love to forgive guilty sinners.

### Origins

- Penal substitution is a relatively new model. It was first described by **Anselm of Canterbury** (1033-1109 AD) and later developed systematically by **Martin Luther** (1483-1546 AD) and **John Calvin** (1509-1564 AD) during the Reformation.

- It was not an approach used by the Early Church Fathers or generally for the first 1500 years of church history. Despite this, many Nineteenth Century hymns and contemporary charismatic worship song lyrics rely on penal substitution.

### Strengths

- Takes seriously the problem of sin (humans as *guilty* of sin).
- Emphasises the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross.
- Demonstrates God's willingness to sacrifice what is most precious to Him in order to save humanity.
- Explains the significance of Good Friday in the Christian calendar.
- Attempts to deal honestly with the Biblical text.

### Challenges

Despite its many strengths and familiarity, there are some challenges to this approach.

#### 1. **What about the sovereignty of God?**

- "In the beginning, God..." (Gen.1:1). God is before, above and beyond anything. He is omnipotent (all-powerful), as well as omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (all-places) and omnibenevolent (all-loving). Yes or No?
- Because God is sovereign, He does not have to satisfy any external power or authority. He answers to no-one. He need only satisfy Himself.
- God can therefore choose who to forgive, when and why. He does not need to adopt a complex 'internal market' in which sins are priced, a ransom is demanded, and a price paid. Why would God initiate such a system?

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

#### 2. **What about justice?**

- Justice requires that the guilty are appropriately punished. Yes or No?
- If an innocent person is convicted and punished for crimes they did not commit, we say there has been a miscarriage of justice.
- If an individual who did not commit the offence tries to cover for someone else's guilt, even to the point of taking their punishment, we say they have perverted the course of justice. They would no longer be innocent.
- Victims need to know that justice has been done. Victims aren't satisfied if the wrong person is convicted of the offence. To be satisfied by the punishment of an innocent person would turn a victim into a wrong-doer.
- The consequence of a miscarriage of justice is that the person responsible for the offence remains unchallenged and unpunished. Justice has yet to be served.

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

#### 3. **What about God's holiness?**

- A doctor might hate disease as God hates sin, but the first aim of medicine is to remove the disease and heal the patient, not to placate the anger of the doctor!
- Jesus demonstrated that holiness is to do with who you are and what you do, simply associating with 'sinners' does not undermine holiness.

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

#### 4. **What about sacrifice?**

- It is a misunderstanding to think in the Old Testament God's forgiveness was secured by sacrificing animals. At times, God even said how much He loathed such sacrifices [Isa.1:11-17; Jer.7:22-23; Hos.6:6; Amo.5:21-24]. The issue was not, were enough animals sacrificed

to pay the price but, was the heart right? Abraham was saved by faith [Heb.11] as much as Paul was.

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

### 5. **What about the resurrection?**

- If Christ's atoning death on the Cross was sufficient once and for all for God to forgive us of our sin, what was the point of the resurrection? Was it simply a dramatic exit strategy to get Jesus back to heaven? There has to be more to the resurrection than this.

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

### 6. **What about the rest of Jesus' ministry?**

- As with the resurrection, if it's all about the Cross, what was the point of Jesus' ministry – His teaching, miracles and personal example? Was it simply a 'time filler' whilst Jesus was waiting for His appointed time?

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

### 7. **What about the love of God?**

- God is love [1Jn.4:7]. It is not just that He is loving. God is the *source* of love. He is love. Everything He does is consistent with love. Yes or No?
- If God is presented with a stark choice, sacrifice His son to save all humanity or save His son and sacrifice all humanity, then it would be more loving to sacrifice His one son for the sake of billions of people.
- But God is sovereign. He answers to no-one. The only system is the one He designed. Why design a system that requires such unjust sacrifice?
- Jesus taught, "Turn the other cheek", "Love your enemies", "Forgive those who sin against you". Why would God not follow His own teaching?
- Provocatively, just imagine... If someone offends me I don't think I can only forgive them if I first hit my innocent child. Surely the right way is simply to forgive the person that offended me. To hit my child would simply make me an abusive father. To stand back and allow (even encourage) someone else to hit my child and do nothing to stop it would make me cowardly and co-accused.
- Yet, Paul says "*in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself*" [2 Cor. 5:19].

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

## B. Atonement as **Christus Victor**

### Summary

- Though originally made perfect (without sin), all humanity is now trapped in sin because the first humans (Adam and Eve) rebelled (sinned) against holy God. In rejecting God, they *submitted to the powers of evil, sin and death*. Consequently, all humans are born as 'sinners' *under the dominion of evil, sin and death*. This is called 'original sin'. "*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*" [Rom.3:23].
- Sin matters because it distorts what God originally made good *and made humanity subject to the powers of evil, sin and death*. Consequently, all those contaminated with sin experience varying degrees of struggle, suffering, and disease and 100% ultimately die as a result. "*The wages of sin are death*" [Rom.6:23].
- Sin is primarily bondage to the powers of evil, sin and death. All humanity needs liberation from such powers that hold us hostage, and yet we are powerless to free ourselves.



- Because God is Love, God sought to rescue humanity from the powers of evil, sin and death by sending God the Son to be a **ransom**, to rescue or liberate humanity from slavery to sin.
- Some say the Devil demanded a ransom price from God to release humanity from his control; the agreed price was the death of God the Son. The devil thought this would result in the death of God. Foolishly, the devil did not realise that God would resurrect Jesus from the dead.
- Indeed, Jesus' death on the Cross at first appeared to be a defeat. The powers of sin, death and evil had won. God the Son had been killed, proving that even God was now subject to, and inferior to, the powers of evil. No hope for humanity's liberation then.
- At least the death of Jesus on the Cross exposed the cruelty and evil that was present in the worldly powers that rejected and killed Him. Evil was seen for what it is – evil.
- But more than that, three days later Jesus emerged from the tomb resurrected – victorious. By coming back to life again, God had defeated the powers of evil, sin and death. He had broken the chains that had held us hostage.
- "Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" [Heb.2:14-15].
- Christ's victory brought about not only individuals' salvation, but also wider cosmic salvation. It liberates economic, social and political systems, the environment... "And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" [Col.2:15].
- It is *Christus Victor* because Christ was victorious when He was resurrected from the dead. In doing so, He defeated the powers of evil, sin and death. Those who are 'in Christ' can also know Christ's victory over evil, sin and death in their lives.

### Strengths

- Takes seriously the problem of sin (humans as *victims* of sin).
- Takes seriously the spiritual battle between good and evil.
- Emphasises the victory of Jesus over the power of sin and death.
- Portrays God the Father and God the Son working together to achieve the victory (the Father is not having to sacrifice the Son to satisfy His own law).
- Recognises it's not just about personal (my) salvation, it's also about the wider cosmic salvation (economics, politics, ecology...)
- Explains the significance of Easter Sunday in the Christian calendar.
- Attempts to deal honestly with the Biblical text.

### Origins

- Dominant atonement model at least for the first 1000 years of Church history, supported by virtually all of the Early Church Fathers, including Irenaeus, Origen of Alexandria and Augustine of Hippo. Hence why it is often called the 'classic theory'.
- It is still the dominant model in the Orthodox Church (based on Irenaeus' recapitulation - Jesus became what we are so that we could become what he is).
- The term 'Christus Victor' was the title of a book written by Gustav Aulen in 1931.

## Challenges

Despite its many strengths, and resonance with 'spiritual warfare', there are some challenges to this approach.

### 1. What about the sovereignty of God?

- "In the beginning, God..." [Gen.1:1]. God is before, above and beyond anything. He is omnipotent (all-powerful), as well as omniscient (all-knowing), omnipresent (all-places) and omnibenevolent (all-loving). Yes or No?
- Because God is sovereign, He does not have to satisfy any power or authority. God is not dictated to by evil.
- God is no more locked into a battle with the forces of evil (personified as Satan) than we are with our teddy bears or toy soldiers. Some caricature a spiritual boxing match between Rocky God in the red corner and evil Satan in the blue corner, in which both contenders struggle until battered Rocky God eventually delivers the knock-out punch. This gives too much value (worship) to the power of evil.

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

### 2. What about the rest of Jesus' ministry?

- As with the resurrection, if it's all about the Cross, what was the point of Jesus' ministry – His teaching, miracles and personal example? Was it simply a 'time filler' whilst Jesus was waiting for His appointed time?

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

## C. Atonement as Moral Influence

### Summary

- Humanity was originally made perfect and therefore without sin (**original goodness**). Human beings don't need to be taught how to sin: we instinctively seem to know. We are sinners not so much because our distant ancestors, Adam and Eve, sinned but because we sin. We abuse others, damage God's creation, create financial systems that exploit the poor, and so forth. Indeed "*all* have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" [Rom.3:23].
- Humanity had become so disconnected from God through sin we had forgotten what He is like. We had lost sight of His love, mercy, justice, and so forth. God the Son came to show us what God is like. Looking at, and listening to, Jesus helps us understand what God is like. He is pure love, forgiveness, courage, bias to the poor...
- Being so disconnected from God and His creation, we had also forgotten how to live properly. We no longer knew right from wrong. God the Son came to show us the right way to live. Unlike other religious leaders of the day, Jesus taught as one who had true authority because He practiced what He preached [Mk.1:21-22; Lk.4:31-33]. He perfectly demonstrated God's agenda of love, mercy and non-violence – even refusing to recant when faced with death. By living a perfect, sinless life, God the Son demonstrated how we should live.
- By observing the purity of Christ's life and actions, we see the contrast with our own impure values, beliefs and actions. We recognise and become ashamed by our own failings and wrong doing (sin). We recognise the need to change and seek God's forgiveness. By identifying with our brokenness, He wins us to repentance. God forgives us because He wants to, not because He now can.



- We are also inspired by the positive example given by Christ. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we to seek to live according to God's agenda of love, mercy and non-violence.
- Jesus' death is understood as a consequence of His activity, and it gains its significance as part of the larger story of his life, death, and resurrection.
- The It is *Moral Influence* because the purpose and work of Jesus Christ was to bring positive *moral change* to humanity. This moral change comes through the response of observers to His teachings, miracles and example, the Christian movement founded in His name, and the challenging effect of His death and resurrection.

### Origins

- It is one of the oldest views of the atonement in Christian theology and a prevalent view for much of Church history.
- During the Medieval period it was taught by **Peter Abelard** (1079-1142).
- The **Mennonites** based their commitment to radical non-violent resistance on the moral influence theory.

### Strengths

- Provides a more holistic view of Christ's saving work. Everything He did and said contributes towards humanity's salvation.
- Takes seriously the responsibility of humans to respond to God, seeking His forgiveness.
- Affirms the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering people to live 'Christianly'.
- Emphasizes the love of God and His willingness to forgive 'sinners'.
- Provides a strong moral imperative for humans to live responsibly according to God's agenda.
- Explains the significance of Christmas, as well as Good Friday and Easter Sunday, in the Christian calendar.
- Attempts to deal honestly with the Biblical text.

### Challenges

Because no model of the atonement is perfect, there are challenges to this approach too.

#### 1. **What about the seriousness of sin?**

- It can be interpreted as teaching that humans save themselves. It's less about what God does for us, more about what we do for God.
- It can be interpreted as teaching salvation by works.

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

#### 2. **What about the centrality of the Jesus' death?**

- It risks portraying Jesus as seeking out martyrdom, rather than as the 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (Saviour).

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

#### 3. **What about the wrath of God against sin?**

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

#### 4. **What about the resurrection?**

- If Christ's atoning death on the Cross was sufficient once and for all for God to forgive us of our sin, what was the point of the resurrection? Was it simply a dramatic exit strategy to get Jesus back to heaven? There has to be more to the resurrection than this.

Yes, but \_\_\_\_\_

## Conclusion

Three models of the atonement: all with strengths and weaknesses; all seeking to be true to the Biblical text. And yet none of them able to provide the definitive answer. Maybe that's as God intended. It causes us to seek, question and, in the process, find more of God. As Jesus asked the expert in the law, how do *you* read it?

## Further reading

- Past Event and Present Salvation: the Christian idea of atonement* by Paul S. Fiddes (D.L.T., 1989).
- The Cross of Christ* by John Stott (IVP, 1986).
- Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* by Joel Green & Mark Baker (IVP, 2000).
- The Lost Message of Jesus* by Steve Chalke & Alan Mann (Zondervan, 2003).
- The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*. Edited by David Hilborn, Justin Thacker and Derek Tidball (Zondervan, 2007).

## My questions are:

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## My response to God is:

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