



Are You Saved?

SESSION 2

What do we mean when we say “Jesus is Savior of the World” or “I take Jesus Christ as my personal Lord and Savior”? Everyone agrees that Jesus has saved us, but the Bible suggests various models for just how Jesus saved us. Just what kind of work did Jesus Christ perform to accomplish salvation?

Introduction

Christians frequently say that Jesus died for our sins. Does this mean Jesus died because we human beings are sinful and our sin killed him? Or, does it mean that somehow his death leads to the forgiveness of our sins? If the New Testament connects Jesus’ death and resurrection with our forgiveness and our becoming just in God’s sight, how should we think about the way this works?

Jesus as Our Satisfaction

When the word *atonement* comes up, we most frequently rely on our fourth model: Jesus as our Satisfaction. Christ atones for our sins and renders us forgiven. The blood of Christ renders us clean, righteous, and ready to stand in God’s presence. Why does Jesus’ death accomplish this? Satisfaction of the need for cosmic justice is one theological answer. The idea of satisfaction is a narrow theological concept that is used to interpret a large collection of verbal symbols in the Bible: blood, lamb, sheep, the Good Shepherd, scapegoat, the “lamb upon the throne,” high priest, and such.



The symbol of the Good Shepherd tells us that God cares for us like a shepherd who so loves his sheep that

he would lay down his life for the sheep (John 10:11). The New Testament mixes together the Good Shepherd with the sacrificial lamb and the scapegoat. Just how should we think about this? One way is to employ the model of Satisfaction.

Our word *satisfaction* comes from Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), who wrote the book *Cur Deus Homo?* asking: Why did God become human in Jesus Christ? Anselm began by describing the world as God originally created it. It was a world of order, a world of justice. All things were ordered in harmony for the benefit of God’s creatures. It is God’s will that we creatures enjoy lives of fulfillment, felicity, and blessedness. Human disobedience in the form of sin, however, has disrupted the world order. Like defaulting on a mortgage, humanity cannot pay what it owes to make amends. As a result, justice requires that humans be disqualified from enjoying the blessedness God had originally planned.

God, however, wants to press on. God wants to deliver blessedness despite human sin and still in harmony with the order of justice. God confronts a dilemma. Neither God alone nor humanity alone can pay the debt to satisfy what is required by the order of justice. On the one hand, if God simply forgives humanity for its sinful disobedience, then this would throw the order of justice out of sync. It would introduce disorder into the creation. So, God can’t just write it off and forget the loss. On the other hand, the human race cannot fix what is broken either. The damage is too severe. No human being has the moral capital to repay the debt. Only justice in the form of retribution can repair the broken

creation. But this means humanity will get punishment rather than blessedness. What's a loving God to do?

An offering to satisfy justice must be made from the human side, but only God has the capacity for making such satisfaction. Because only God is able to make the offering that we ought to make, it must be made by a combination of the divine and the human. Therefore, concludes Anselm, the incarnation is necessary to accomplish salvation. Now we know why God became human.

Whew! That's quite an argument! What Anselm is trying to do is provide a coherent concept of atonement that explains why Jesus' death results in our salvation. We need to think about passages such as this: It is Jesus Christ "whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed" (Rom. 3:25).

Jesus' voluntary death is what triggers atonement. This leads Christian poets and artists and hymn writers to lift up biblical images of Jesus dying on the cross. The favorite version of the cross is the crucifix, where the suffering and dying Jesus is depicted hanging from the tree of condemnation.



In some iconography, the chest of the dying Jesus is open with blood spilling from his body into the communion chalice. Alternatively, the prancing lamb sheds its blood into the eucharistic cup.



Note that here it is the prancing lamb of the victorious champion and not the sacrificial lamb that is depicted.

Martin Luther combines *Christus Victor* and Satisfaction in his Large Catechism: Jesus Christ "has snatched us, poor lost creatures, from the jaws of hell, won us, made us free, and restored us to the Father's favor and grace. . . . He suffered, died, and was buried that he might make *satisfaction* for me and pay what I owed, not with silver and gold, but with his own precious blood."¹ Liturgical Christians sing during worship the *Agnus Dei*, "O Christ, thou lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world." Lamb symbolism, blood symbolism, and satisfaction theology imbue the church life of North American evangelicals, including fundamentalists, Roman Catholics, and mainline Protestants.

Two theological problems attend this model. The first is whether or not God needs to be appeased by sacrifice. Is it God who needs the sacrifice of Jesus, or is it the justice of the world order? Anselm assumed it was the latter. John Calvin (1509–64) seemed to think we human beings need "to appease God." However, this does not mean that appeasing God elicits a love from God that had not existed before. Rather, satisfaction "derives from God's love, therefore it has not established the latter."² Appeasing an otherwise wrathful God simply does not belong in Christian conceptuality because, even when sacrificial symbolism is used, the entire work of atonement is initiated by God out of God's love for us creatures. No sacrifice and no satisfaction are necessary to change God's mind on this count.

A second problem has been raised recently by feminist theologians. The concept of atonement, especially the Satisfaction model, connotes that God the Father is a child abuser. If the notion of divine appeasement holds, then our heavenly father needs appeasing just as an earthly alcoholic father needs appeasing. The suffering of Jesus becomes a vindictive act on the part of God. Feminists denounce child abuse and wife abuse on the part of earthly fathers, and they fear that this atonement model sends a destructive message to faithful Christian families.

Despite the imagery of blood sacrifice in the Bible, Christian theologians do not completely agree that such a thing as a mechanism of sacrifice exists, nor do they think God's love toward us is dependent on a sacrifice either by Jesus Christ or by us. The language of sacrifice in the New Testament is symbolical, not literal. Jesus may have literally been a teacher, but he is symbolically

a sacrificial lamb or a Good Shepherd just as he is symbolically a victorious warrior.

Jesus as the Happy Exchange

The Satisfaction model shows that through his work on the cross, Jesus Christ restores the just order of the universe. Yet, we may ask, how does this objective atonement become real to persons of faith? At this point we introduce a new model, Jesus as the Happy Exchange. Like the Satisfaction model, the Happy Exchange involves the two natures of Christ, the human and the divine. Yet, satisfying divine justice is not its aim. What happens here instead is an exchange, an exchange between the human and the divine natures. This very exchange constitutes the work of salvation.

Here is what happens. First, God becomes present in the person of Jesus. The incarnate Son of God is both human and divine. An exchange of attributes occurs, so that God experiences what it means to be human, and the human Jesus expresses the eternal life of God. Second, the risen Jesus Christ is placed into the heart of the person of faith by the Holy Spirit. Christ now takes unto himself the negativities of our lives: our sins, our guilt, our subjection to suffering and death. In exchange, Christ shares with us the forgiveness of sins and the power of resurrection unto eternal life. All these divine attributes are present in, with, and under our daily mundane existence. If we are unjust, Christ bestows on us his justice. We are justified by our faith, because in faith Christ has communicated to us his divine being. This is the way we receive salvation.

Where will we find the Happy Exchange model? The idea of the communication of attributes goes back to the Council of Chalcedon and earlier. We will find it buried under the piles of ignored theological concepts on the dusty shelves of Roman Catholic and Protestant theologians. When Protestants dig this one up, they discover that the Lutheran and Reformed traditions disagree. The Lutherans believe that the finite can contain the infinite, whereas Reformed theologians deny that the finite can contain the infinite. This means divine attributes cannot be received by our human nature. So, the Happy Exchange model of atonement is much more at home among Lutherans than among Presbyterians or members of the United Church of Christ.

No existing cross symbol actually conveys completely the exchange. Perhaps the Latin cross would fit best, because it conveys what Christ's atonement accomplishes for us.

Jesus as the Final Scapegoat

The book of Hebrews describes Jesus as a priest, the final priest. "Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17). Jesus was never literally a priest, to be sure. Yet, like a priest performing a sacrifice, Jesus renders the final sacrifice—the sacrifice after which no future sacrifice will ever be needed—to atone for human sin and render complete the work of salvation.

Should we think of Jesus' atoning work literally as a sacrifice? No. It may look like a sacrifice, to be sure. Roman Catholic priests pray during the eucharistic liturgy that God find their sacrifice acceptable and grant us forgiveness. Theologically, Catholic priests do not intend to add a second sacrifice to that of Jesus; rather, their recitation of the mass participates in Jesus' inclusive sacrifice.

Hidden within the practice of sacrifice is human belief in the scapegoat mechanism. When it comes to visible ritual sacrifice and scapegoating, we turn to the Old Testament for precedent. On the Day of Atonement, says the book of Leviticus, two goats will be selected. One will be slaughtered and its blood sprinkled. The second is the scapegoat. The sins of the people will be ritually heaped upon its head. Then it will be driven out into the wilderness, bearing the sins away. "The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a barren region" (Lev. 16:22). This ritual of blood, goats, sacrifice, and bearing away sins provides symbolic background for framing the atoning work of Jesus in the New Testament. These symbols convey the meaning of the work of Christ, but just how we should interpret the meaning has become a theological puzzle.

To scapegoat is to sacrifice someone else for our own self-preservation and self-justification. In another Thoughtful Christian study called "What Happens When We Sin?" we explain how we fallen human beings have a propensity to justify ourselves, to lie to ourselves

so that we imagine ourselves to be right and good and virtuous and deserving. While telling ourselves this lie, we heap our sins onto the head of someone else. In gossip, to ruin a person's reputation, or in political rhetoric, to rally a nation for war, we project evil onto someone else so that we can feel good about ourselves in contrast. This is the practice of scapegoating. No such mechanism exists in reality whereby we can actually sacrifice an animal or an enemy who will bear our iniquities away, yet we fool ourselves into believing this in order to whitewash our own darkness. Jesus denounced us for self-justifying in this manner, using the word *hypocrite* with frequency. "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth" (Matt. 23:27). Scapegoating and hypocrisy are like salt and pepper; we always find them together.

Jesus is the scapegoat that reveals the lie we tell ourselves, and it renders the scapegoat mechanism lame and unusable. In principle, Jesus is the final scapegoat, because the lie no longer can fool us into believing we can justify ourselves by sacrificing others.

According to the Final Scapegoat model, God accepts no sacrifice from human beings, either visible ritual sacrifice or invisible scapegoating of enemies. Perhaps we can interpret the book of Hebrews to be saying that as high priest Jesus Christ has performed the final sacrifice, after which no future sacrifices will be accepted. We might also ask: has God rejected sacrifice all along? "I will not accept a bull from your house, or goats from your folds" (Ps. 50:9). In either case, Christians today need to eschew sacrifice at every level. Our task is to study the cross of Jesus and ask ourselves: what does this reveal to us about covering up our scapegoating with hypocritical lies? In this regard, the Final Scapegoat model could be considered a much more intense version of the Moral Example model.

The construction of the Final Scapegoat model is new. Theologians are now considering this in light of the theory of scapegoating put forth by French literary critic René Girard. Perhaps the most appropriate cross might be either the crucifix or the Armenian cross, which places the lamb in the center of a fleury version of the Jerusalem cross. This lamb is offered to us by God, not the other way around.



God does not need to be appeased. Nor does God feel compelled to respond to any of our human sacrificial offerings. Salvation is not the result of the sacrifices we offer. This is because God in Christ has performed the work of salvation. It's done. It's been accomplished. Salvation is already ours as a free gift. All we need to do is appropriate it in faith.

What about self-sacrificial love? Such love colors the daily life of the faithful Christian as paint colors a wall. Such love is not a sacrifice we offer to God in expectation of some sort of salvific return, however. Rather, this kind of love is the very love of God breathing within our individual soul.

How Does Jesus Save Us?

Our Bible overflows with metaphors, images, and symbols that depict the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Over the centuries theologians have tried on different conceptual models to see which ones fit. We have sized up six such models here. Each one is internally coherent. Each one is biblical. None can claim a copyright for exclusive rights on what the Bible says. What do you think?

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Martin Luther, Large Catechism, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 414.
2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.9.14.