

## Why did Jesus die? What happened as a result of his death?

The church, over the centuries has explored a number of theories of atonement answering 'why did Jesus have to die?'. In many cases these theories have been set against each other as alternatives, but perhaps it is wiser to see them all as true, simply different perspectives on the same event. The death of Jesus had massive consequences and no one simple theory can contain it all. There may well be some overlap between a few of these, but see them as complementary and another angle of vision as if looking at a multi-sided cut diamond.

In Riverside Vineyard Bible School we summarised the Gospel as:

1. God made everything and it was very good.
2. It went wrong – and that was our fault.
3. Jesus came to correct what was wrong and did so in his life, death and resurrection.
4. There is more – there is always more – God is the God of the 'omnis' and just when we think we have everything 'sorted' he does more. The same with atonement and the death of Jesus on the cross ... just when we think we have a few ideas of what happened and why, God expands it a bit more .... And then a bit more .... And then a bit more ....

## So .... What happened when Jesus died on the cross? A few complimentary views:

### 1. Satisfaction (esp Anselm)

Sin is an offence of disobedience against God and the offence needs balancing out, or cancelling out with Jesus' act of obedience.

Anselm speaks of human sin as defrauding God of the honour he is due. Christ's death, the ultimate act of obedience, brings God honour. Christ's death is *substitutionary*; he pays the honour to the Father *instead* of us paying.

Anselm sought to argue through reason and a wide panoply of scriptures not relying on 'proof texts' – so he sites the usual references (**Isaiah 53, John 8 & 10, Romans 3 & 8, 2 Corinthians 5, Ephesians 1 & 2, Colossians 2, 1 Peter 2 & 3** etc) but seeks to keep a wide view. **All of these passages are well worth reading for considering all aspects of the work of atonement on the cross** – don't rely on single verse 'proof-texts', plus think 'and' not 'or' when considering multiple views of atonement – they all have an element of biblical truth in them - there is always more!).

### 2. Penal substitution (esp Calvin and Reformers)

Sin is an offence, or crime against God and the offence needs judgement.

Penal substitution sees Christ's death not as repaying God for lost *honour*, as in the Substitution perspective, but rather paying the *penalty* of death that had always been the moral consequence for sin (e.g., Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23).

Jesus takes the punishment which is duly ours. A legal approach – crime (sin) and punishment (death)

God is just, demands justice and provides that justice in the form of Jesus death.

Look at: Isaiah 53.4-6, 2 Corinthians 5.17-21, Hebrews 9.26, 1 Peter 2.24,

A distinction should be made between penal substitution (Christ *punished* instead of us) and substitutionary atonement (Christ suffers *for* us), also known as 'vicarious atonement'. Both affirm the substitutionary and vicarious nature of the atonement, but penal substitution offers a specific explanation as to what the suffering is for: *punishment*.

### 3. **Ransom and repayment** (esp Origen)

We were purchased by Jesus blood – think of the slave market analogy.

The death of Jesus was a ransom sacrifice to satisfy the debt of inherited sin in addition to our own sins of omission and commission – in essence a debt to the devil or the powers of evil who hold humankind under their legal power due to sin.

This is the emphasis of atonement brilliantly illustrated by C.S.Lewis with Aslan in 'The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe' where Aslan and the white witch agree the 'price' of Edmund's release.

It is like a business transaction – a trade of Jesus life for our lives.

Exodus 12.13, Matthew 6.12 (debts/sins), Acts 13.38, Ephesians 1.7, Colossians 2.14, Rev 5.9

### 4. **Christus Victor** (esp Aulen)

Jesus rescues humankind from the power of evil and the devil. He liberates us from slavery to sin and from death and triumphs over the powers of evil. The resurrection is the vindication and ultimate proof of victory.

The cross was the decisive victorious moment in the cosmic war – the enemy is defeated, the war is won. In the words of Gustav Aulen: "*The work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil*"

The cross is the pivotal point in the theme of spiritual warfare which runs throughout the bible and ultimately finishes in the book of Revelation. As the crucifixion has happened, the ultimate obliteration of evil and the devil is a certainty, it's just a matter of time. The cross is the ultimate victory in this multi-millennial cosmic warfare.

John 12.31 & 16.11, Romans 8.6-11, 1 Corinthians 15.24-26, 2 Corinthians 4.4, Galatians 1.4, Ephesians 6.12, Colossians 2.15, Hebrews 2.14-15, 1 John 3.8 & 5.19, Revelation 11.15

## 5. **Recapitulation** (esp Irenaeus)

Jesus succeeded where Adam failed and in doing so, undid the wrong which Adam did including the staining of humanity with sin and its consequent separation from God. Jesus reversed the direction from disobedience and us being an offence to God to that of obedience and us being the delight of God.

Jesus, as wholly human in addition to being wholly divine, can then lead humanity on to heaven and eternal life. Some progress a step further to 'divinisation' or 'theosis' where, as part of the body of Christ, as people within whom the Holy Spirit lives, we are NOT God, but we are more than merely his representatives – we 'become like God', the 'dwelling place of God' (Tozer) – God is still incarnate – in his people.

Theosis is brilliantly explained by Maximus the Confessor (580-662): *"man (the image of God) becomes likened to God, he rejoices in all the plenitude that does not belong to him by nature, because the grace of the Spirit triumphs within him, and because God acts in him."*

John 1.12, John 10.34 (quoting Psalm 82.6), Romans 8:17 (heirs and joint heirs), Ephesians 2.6 & 22

## 6. **Moral example of love and self sacrifice** (esp Socinus)

Jesus takes the role of the sacrificial lamb voluntarily laying down his life for mankind. As Christ laid down his life for us, so we should do the same for each other.

This Divine voluntary self-giving has God embracing the fallen and broken mankind, healing and cancelling sin by Jesus death on the cross.

Isaiah 53.7, John 10.15-18, Romans 5.8, 2 Corinthians 5.15, Ephesians 5.1-2, 1 Peter 2.21

## 7. **Reconciliation** (esp Calvin & Ryken)

Jesus tore down 'the dividing wall of hostility' between mankind and God, reconciling mankind and God from being former enemies to being friends and family. Jesus repaired the relational split which happened with Adam's disobedience.

The repair was not just of the relationship between God and mankind, but of the whole of the cosmic creation.

As Jesus was God in human form, when he died, we all died with him, and when he rose from the dead, we all rose with him.

Romans 8.14-16 & 37-39, 2 Corinthians 5.18-19, Ephesians 2.13-14, Colossians 1.20-22, 1 Peter 3.18,

## 8. Eschatological gateway

This is a consequence of many of the above, but I add it as a separate element as some presentations emphasise it.

The death of Jesus paved the way for us to go to heaven – it's our unique stairway to heaven as there is no other route (John 14.6). Jesus died so that he can take us to heaven – Rev 4.1, 'a door standing open in heaven' – deliberately open and made possible by Jesus death for many of the above reasons.

The resurrection is both a proof that what Jesus has said about his death is true (John 11.25) and also a demonstration of a 'prototype' new eternal body. The book of Revelation shows many times a huge crowd in the presence of God in heaven (e.g. Rev 7.9-17), presumably, all with their versions of this eternal body.

When considering the work of Jesus on the cross, I often look to one of my many heroes in life, in this case a French nun, St Therese of Lisieux who died aged 24 in 1897.



She was very physically poorly and each night other nuns had to carry her up the stairs to her room as she didn't have the strength to ascend the stairs herself. One of her fabulous insights was that this was a picture of heaven – she could not ascend the staircase to heaven, no matter what she did and how hard she tried – she could only get up that staircase by allowing Jesus to carry her up it. As St. Therese said (translated from French) “ *like a child, into God's arms .... I rejoice to be little because only children, and those who are like them, will be admitted to the heavenly banquet*”.

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