

30 August 2020

Fleshing Out Atonement

Hebrew 5:1-10

Last week, we talked about the doctrine of the incarnation, that God became a flesh-and-blood human being, and I told you at the end of the service that this week I would begin talking about the implications of this doctrine on the rest of our lives as Christians. Today I want to apply the Incarnation to one particularly knotty problem in Christian theology: atonement. Here's the problem. From the beginning of our faith, followers of Christ have declared that in his life, death, and resurrection, Christ fundamentally changed something. We who were once separated from God have now been atoned, restored to relationship with God. Hebrews tells us that now we have a New Covenant with God, based on grace, that supersedes the Old Covenant. Paul tells us that now we are new creatures, that old things are passed away and all things have become new. We have been buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life. We are now more than conquerors and nothing can separate us from the love of God. But how did this dramatic change happen? How do the events that took place in one life – even a unique life – alter reality for every other life forever? What is the mechanism by which what happened to Jesus changed everything? How do we even picture such a thing?

So the New Testament and subsequent theologians began offering a wide variety of different stories to illustrate this. And I use the word “stories” intentionally. The different passages that deal with this question in the New Testament are not *explanations*, exactly. They are more like different pictures thrown up on a wall, or parables, and they often give very different perspectives. We don't have a single correct explanation of the Atonement; we have an anthology of different illustrations. And, as is usually the case with illustrations, they work up to a point, but if you press them they unravel a bit.

Let me give you an example, the “sacrificial” model. First century Jews sought reconciliation with God through animal sacrifice in the temple, especially on Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Blood in the Hebrew Bible represents life, and the shedding of the sacrifice's blood cleansed the individual and the land itself from uncleanness, restoring life. So this was an easy and obvious story to pick up. Jesus' death was like the death of a temple sacrifice, except that Jesus' sacrifice is once-for-all and doesn't have to be repeated the next year. Jesus' blood, like the animal's blood, restores life, except that Jesus' blood brings *eternal* life. It would have made perfect sense to the early Jewish Christians. But don't push too hard on the analogy. The temple sacrifices were offered to God; when God himself is the sacrifice, who is he offered to? That gets a bit muddled. Worse, when Christianity spread to the Gentile world, the analogy took on a different meaning. Where the Jews saw sacrifices as a way of cleansing themselves before God, Greeks and Romans, who also practiced temple sacrifice, saw them as ways to appease the wrath of their gods or buy favor from their gods. That doesn't work as well applied to our God, who cannot be bought.

Fortunately, there are other atonement stories to look at. Most of the early Christians, influenced by Persian and Greek thought, saw the world as a battleground between supernatural

powers. We see that in the demon stories of the gospels as well as in Paul's reminder that our battle is not with flesh and blood but with principalities and powers in the heavens. In that context, many Christians saw Christ's work as a victory over the forces of evil, the defeat of Satan. It's an unusual "victory" of course, given that Jesus was crucified. So how does that work? Well, some saw Jesus death as a ransom, a sort of prisoner exchange. Jesus gave himself, to set free those imprisoned by evil. Another variation that was also familiar to the ancient world was that Jesus gave himself to redeem people who had been sold into slavery. And you can see the appeal of the image, but again don't push too hard. If Jesus is a ransom, who is the ransom paid *to*? Satan? Does that mean that Satan had God over a barrel, and the only option was to negotiate with the terrorist?

But the only other option was that the ransom was paid to God by God? That feels muddled again, but move ahead a thousand years into the Middle Ages, and that interpretation made sense. You see, the medieval feudal society was based on a rigid class system in which maintaining order and the proper respect to the liege lord was crucial. In that world a new atonement story developed, in which the problem of sin was that the honor of God had been offended and restitution had to be paid. Jesus, the Son, voluntarily gave himself as that restitution so as to save the lives of the lower orders. It worked for the medieval mind, apparently, but not so much for us. The good news of Jesus Christ is *not* that he managed to protect us from God.

One more story, and then I'll give it a rest. When the medieval world gave way to the Enlightenment and the notion of universal laws, the medieval "substitution" idea got updated. Reformation theologians often set Jesus' atoning work in a courtroom setting. Humans had been found guilty of breaking God's eternal law and divine justice demanded that *somebody* should be punished for it. So Jesus volunteered, and God punished his Son instead of us. That should teach us a lesson. This story must have some appeal, because it's still very much around, but I don't see it. What we have here is a picture of God as a soulless bureaucrat, tasked with keeping the moral accounts, who doesn't care who covers the deficit, so long as everything's balanced.

These are some – by no means all – of the atonement stories that we find in our faith, and they all worked at some point for some people in particular contexts. But even in their own time, they all had their own problems, and today – in a world without animal sacrifice or slave markets or feudal lords – even the parts that used to work don't. In fact, some of them – like the Penal Substitution story – might even do more harm than good. You know what we need? We need some different stories.

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We read from the letter to the Hebrews, chapter 5, verses 1-10:

***5** Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. ²He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness; ³and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. ⁴And one does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.*

⁵So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him,

*‘You are my Son,
today I have begotten you’;
⁶as he says also in another place,
‘You are a priest forever,
according to the order of Melchizedek.’*

⁷In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. ⁸Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; ⁹and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him, ¹⁰having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

No New Testament book takes on the atonement question more directly than the Book of Hebrews, which offers several different ways to look at the problem. This passage, as you noticed, is clearly set in the context of the temple sacrifice system, but there’s something else here, too. Why does it say the high priest is able to offer sacrifices on behalf of others? *He is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness.* It is because he’s no different, at heart, from anyone else. Now, why is Jesus able to atone for everyone’s sins? Because *in the days of his flesh* he suffered and *learned obedience through what he suffered*. Notice something very different here. In all the other atonement stories, the crucial event for the atonement was Jesus’ death: he *died* for our sins. This story focuses on his life. He was able to reconcile us to God because he was one of us, *in the flesh*. This is atonement by incarnation, not crucifixion. We are reconciled to God because Jesus *lived* for our sins.

Let’s imagine a horrible scenario. You are a parent, and your child has died of Covid-19. You are utterly broken, crushed. Life is empty. You are wracked with pain, struggle with guilt (could I have done more to protect her) and anger. You are in a dark place. So let’s fix that. Some of you are already spluttering and shouting at your screen, “You can’t *fix* that!” And you’re right. You don’t fix grief; you weather it and come out the other side. What if our sinful condition is like *that*? All the earlier Atonement stories seem to describe the ways that Christ *fixed* sin. He was the ultimate once-and-for-all sacrifice, and we never have to do it again. He paid a ransom, and we’re home. We’ve been pardoned of our crimes. These all imply that by Christ’s sacrifice, sin has been “washed away” forever. Maybe it’s just me . . . but that hasn’t been my experience. So maybe we need a story that isn’t about fixing sin but about getting us through it. In that dark place of grief and guilt, what helps you to get through it? Well, it’s not the person who offers explanations – God wanted another angel, she was too good for this world, whatever. Nor is it the person who suggests restitution: “You should sue the hospital! Or the school!” No, who is it? It’s the friend who comes and sits with you, listens to you, talks when you want to talk and is quiet when you don’t. And here’s something important, that friend who is with you through your grief needs to be someone who has also known grief, has wept the same tears you are weeping,

has lain awake at night as you do. If she hasn't, her sympathy is worthless. Only the person who has been there can bear your burden with you.

That's the atonement story of Hebrews 5: that God restored us to relationship by coming to earth and becoming one of us, learning what we know, feeling as we feel, suffering as we suffer. It wasn't just Christ's death that offered atonement, it was his entire life in the flesh. In a sense, the salvation event didn't change *our* relationship to God; it changed *God's* relationship to us. God didn't draw us closer; instead, God drew closer to us. That's how one event in the first century could change everything forever, because the change involved the One who is everything forever. That's atonement. That's redemption. Thanks be to God.

Final word: As I've said all through these thoughts, none of our stories are perfect. But the incarnation atonement story works for me as no other does. We were restored to God by Christ's life, not just his death. Atonement began at Bethlehem. The incarnation means more than we have usually thought. And it means still more than just this. But that's for next week.