

22 January 2023

Stumbling Blocks: Atonement
“Nothing But the Blood”
Romans 3:21-26

We read today from Paul’s letter to the Romans, chapter 3, verses 21-26:

²¹But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²²the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵whom 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; ²⁶it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Last week we talked about the Christian doctrine of Original Sin, the recognition that all humanity seems strangely trapped by the compulsion to do all the things that are least likely to lead fulfillment or peace. We also talked about some further details that had been added to that idea after the Bible was written, many of which I expressed some skepticism about, but the basic teaching that we are sinful is definitely part of our faith. But only one part. The heart of the Christian faith is what comes next: that God emptied himself and took on flesh, becoming one of us in the form of a Jewish laborer named Jesus, lived among humanity teaching and demonstrating the life we were created to live, was killed by people in power, but rose from the dead and *in so doing, restored the possibility of relationship with God*. This is what Paul and the Apostles taught. This is the heart of our creeds and our liturgies. This is the good news.

So how’d that work? I mean, you can’t help but wonder, right? Our sin had separated us from God, but somehow the Jesus event reconciled us, restored us, brought us back to God, redeemed us, brought about atonement. But how? How did what Jesus did – and what others did to him – alter our relationship to God? And the Bible isn’t that clear. Paul often says “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3; Rom. 5:8), but that’s about as detailed as Paul ever gets. He was kind of a big picture guy, maybe. The details would have to wait for others to suggest.

And here’s the problem I want to deal with today in this sermon series on “stumbling blocks.” You see, a lot of people have set out to explain Christ’s “atonement,” but every explanation is different. And while they all have something significant to say, they also all have their weaknesses. And the atonement explanation that you’re most likely to have heard has, I would say, *primarily* weaknesses, to the point that it’s a huge stumbling block to many who hear it. So what I’m going to do is a whirlwind survey of several different atonement stories, their strengths and weaknesses. There will not be a quiz. This is not so that you can remember every detail but so that you can see the broad range of options when thinking about atonement.

The first one is an excellent example: Christ’s death was an atoning sacrifice. Insofar as Paul had an atonement theory at all, this was it. In the passage we just read he says Christ is a “sacrifice of atonement by his blood,” but it really took the author of the book of Hebrews to put it all together. Briefly, this one compares Jesus to the sacrifice made in the temple on the Jewish Day of Atonement. In the Jewish faith, sacrifice was done as a cleansing, not just for an individual but for the nation and the land. You see, sin was not understood as an individual thing:

my sin polluted others and the land itself, defiling all life. And so blood, which was understood to be the essence of the life that we all participate in, was poured out. The blood of the animals sacrificed on the day of atonement purified all the nation and cleansed the land of the past year's sins; Christ's perfect sacrifice, as Hebrews tells us, did the same thing but did it for all time. See what I mean? Understood in that way, this model kind of worked.

But it only worked for about thirty years. By that time, Christianity had become primarily a Gentile faith, and the Greeks and Romans had grown up with a different understanding of animal sacrifice. In their culture, sacrifices were bribes given to the gods to get them to do what you want. That's not the same, and it doesn't work so well with the God that Jesus taught. Jesus taught a God of love, not one whose favor could be purchased. So the first atonement metaphor became effectively obsolete within a generation. To make things worse, eventually people stopped doing animal sacrifice entirely, which means that to a modern audience all this talk about being cleansed by blood has not only lost its original meaning: it's gross. "There is a fountain filled with blood?" Ew.

Fortunately there are other atonement stories. Some Roman Christians used the metaphor of ransom. In this story, Christ's death and resurrection overcame the prince of this world – Satan – who had captured and enslaved us in sin. Christ's death was a ransom paid to redeem us from captivity. This resonated in the Roman Empire, where war was a fact of life and most of the population were slaves. It's not perfect, though. Does God negotiate with terrorists? Did Almighty God have no other way to free us than to pay up? Sounds like Satan had him by the short hairs, doesn't it? Not sure I'm comfortable with that one.

Augustine of Hippo – yes, Augie again – took a different approach. One thing Romans were good at was law, which Augustine had studied. He argued that God was pure justice, and that justice by its very nature demanded some recompense for wrongdoing. Wrongs must be righted. But remember, to Augustine, humans were entirely corrupt, incapable of righting the wrongs that they had committed, so the only way for justice to be satisfied was punishment. Only one who was free from original sin – that is, Jesus – could right this wrong. This explanation took hold for several centuries, so it must have worked for some, but it also had its critics from the start. The British monk Pelagius, for instance, said, "Wait a minute. So you're saying that we're incapable doing right and God knows that, but God expects it of us anyway, and will send us to hell if we fail to do what he already knows we can't do? Your God's kind of a jerk."

Augustine's emphasis on justice got an upvote a thousand years later from the early Protestants, Luther and Calvin. They lived in a time of political and social upheaval that makes today's social unrest look tame. True, Luther and Calvin had been a part of that upheaval, by breaking away from the Roman Church, but they hadn't meant to cause chaos in society, only in the Roman church. They needed order, and the rule of law, to establish their own churches. So, from this mindset came the atonement story you're probably most familiar with, called the Penal Substitution Theory. Like Augustine, they stressed God's justice. God is too pure to look on or to endure sin. There could be no reconciliation between God and humanity until sin was paid for, because holy God's wrath is great. But Jesus stepped between God's wrath and humanity, taking all of humanity's sin upon his own sinless self and bearing our punishment. After which God apparently said, "Oh, well, that's all right, then. So long as *someone* is punished." In this way, Jesus saved all humanity . . . from God.

I don't have time to go into all the ways this story makes my skin crawl, so let me just ask one question: In what universe is this good news? Is this who God is supposed to be? A tally-sheet-keeping vindictive, bureaucratic stickler whose primary concern is that all the columns balance? A small-minded pedant whose understanding of "forgiveness" is "letting people go after everything's been paid up"? A theological model that explains a mystery at the expense of distorting God needs to sort out its priorities. Every theological construct should be assessed on at least two criteria. First, does it present the same God that Jesus did? And second, is this good news or bad news? Too much of the Church's theologizing about atonement presents a weak, irritable, vengeful, or mercenary deity that Jesus wouldn't recognize, and that by itself is bad news.

Fortunately there are other options. Let me offer one more story, older than Luther and Calvin, even older than Augustine, but nearly unknown to us today. Most of our atonement stories come filtered through Western Christianity, but Eastern Orthodox Christians have walked a different path for two thousand years. Among other things, the Eastern Church has never understood our Western focus on Jesus' death as the sole source of atonement. For Western Christians it seems to be all about the crucifixion, but in the east the whole Christ story is about atonement. Christ bridged the gap between God and humanity from the moment of his incarnation. His life and ministry was not just a prologue to his death but was a redeeming of life. Christ retraced the story of humanity, but this time did it right. Yes, it matters that he died – that's part of human life, too – but even more important is the new ending to death that Jesus inaugurated: resurrection, when death itself was brought to heel and a qualitatively different life came into being. Atonement wasn't a thing that Jesus did; it was everything that he did.

Perhaps the most important effect of this story is how it changes the purpose of atonement. The Eastern theologians taught that the purpose of the Christ event was not to "save" people in the modern sense of "get them to join the right group, believing the right things, so that they can go to heaven" – that's not being made one with God. That's not atonement. The purpose of the Christ event was rather to shape people again into the image of God in this life so that they can step into the next life ready for their full transformation. Atonement was about Christ's entire life, because the goal is to transform our entire lives. Atonement is not an end, but a beginning. The result for us is that the road is before us, our guide is beside us, and our future transformation has begun. That's an atonement story I can get behind.