

# The Atonement: Finding Meaning in the Death of Jesus

John 12:20-33  
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman  
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There was a boy who went to a religious revival meeting with a friend who had invited him to attend. He had grown up in a Christian home and in the church, but he heard something that night he had never heard before.

The preacher held up a dirty glass. "See this glass? That's you. Filthy, stained with sin, inside and outside." He picked up a hammer. "This hammer is the righteousness of God. It is the instrument of God's wrath against sinners. God's justice can be satisfied only by punishing and destroying people whose lives are filled with vileness and corruption."

The preacher put the glass on the pulpit and slowly, deliberately drew back the hammer, took deadly aim, and with all his might let the blow fall. But a miracle happened! At the last moment he covered the glass with a pan. The hammer struck with a crash that echoed through the hushed church.

He held up the untouched glass with one hand and the mangled pan with the other. "Jesus Christ died for your sins. He took the punishment that ought to have fallen on you. He satisfied the righteousness of God so that you might go free if you believe in him."

When the boy went to bed that night, he could not sleep. Meditating on what he had seen and heard, he decided that he was terribly *afraid* of God. But could he *love* such a God? He could love Jesus, who had sacrificed himself for him. But how could he love a God who wanted to "get" everyone and was only kept from doing it because Jesus got in the way?

The thought crossed the boy's mind that he could only hate such a hammer-swinging God who had to be bought off at such a terrible price. But he quickly dismissed the thought. That very God might read his mind and punish him.

Some other thoughts also troubled the boy. Despite what the preacher said about the righteousness of God, is it really right to punish one person (Jesus) for what other people do? And granted that he was a pretty bad boy sometimes, was he really all that bad? Did he really deserve to *die*? Was he really so sinful that God had to *kill* Jesus to make up for what he had done?

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I would suspect that there are many of us here this morning who aren't particularly comfortable with the theology behind the story I just told. Yet it is a very common representation of what is known as 'atonement theology.'

**The doctrine of Atonement basically combines two important questions: What is the meaning behind Jesus' death?; and, How is humanity restored to a right relationship with God? Another way to put this is: What is the significance of the cross?**

The most familiar answer to these questions is, "Jesus died for our sins." Interestingly, however, this is not the only interpretation of Jesus' death in the New Testament.

In order to get into this fairly complex, and certainly controversial discussion I will be making reference to the work in a book published in 2003 entitled ***The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith***, by one of my favorite authors, **Marcus Borg**, a professor of Religion and Culture at Oregon State University, a bestselling author, and formerly an active member of the group known as the Jesus Seminar, who studied the historical Jesus. By the way, I would love to do a small group book study on this book sometime.

In discussing atonement theology, Borg begins with a statement that will shock (and perturb) traditionalists, "**In the judgment of the majority of mainline scholars, atonement theology does not go back to Jesus himself. We do not think that Jesus thought that the purpose of his life, his vocation, was his death.**"

Let me stop right there to mention that in contrast to this the basic premise behind Mel Gibson's movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, is indeed that the primary purpose of Jesus' life was so that he could die. Borg continues:

Jesus' purpose was what he was doing as a healer, wisdom teacher, social prophet, and movement initiator. **His death was the consequence of what he was doing, but not his purpose.**

To use recent analogies, the deaths of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. were the consequences of what they were doing, but not their purpose.

And like them, Jesus courageously kept doing what he was doing even though he knew it could have fatal consequences.

Borg boldly proclaims, therefore, "**So we do not think Jesus saw his purpose as dying for the sins of the world. Rather, this interpretation, like the others in the New Testament, is post-Easter and thus retrospective. Looking back on the execution of Jesus, the early movement sought to see a providential purpose in this horrendous event.**"

As it turns out, there are at least five interpretations of the cross that are found in the New Testament itself. And the most popular, and influential, is the familiar sacrificial understanding of Jesus' death: "Jesus died for our sins." Though its ingredients are in the New Testament, its full theological development did not occur until about 900 years ago, formulated by a man named **Anselm** around the year 1100 AD.

Anselm reasoned that our sin has offended God's honor and righteousness. God cannot be reconciled to us until something is done to make reparation for our insulting the divine dignity and to pay for the sins we have committed. By his perfect obedience (his sinlessness) and his sacrifice, Jesus fulfilled this requirement and made it possible for God to accept us. Jesus thus changed God's mind toward us and, in effect, purchased God' love for us. That is why this is called **the "satisfaction" theory of the atonement, or "substitutionary atonement."**

The revival preacher's object lesson using the dirty glass, hammer and pan reflect this theory. And to this day it's the one you'll hear most by TV evangelists, including at least one locally broadcast mainline church service that I have tuned into on occasion.

Borg comments on all this in the following way:

If taken literally, all of this is very strange. It implies a limitation on God's power to forgive; namely, God can forgive only if adequate sacrifice is made. It implies that Jesus' death on the cross was necessary – not just the consequences of what he was doing, but that it had to happen, that it was part of God's plan of salvation.

It also introduces a requirement into the very center of our life with God: knowing about and believing in Jesus and his sacrificial death.

So here's the real shocker, despite the great influence and popularity of Anselm's view, it is ultimately **unbiblical**. You don't have to take my word for that, by the way. I got that statement directly out of the book ***Christian Doctrine, by Shirley Guthrie***, the recently-deceased Professor of Systematic Theology at Columbia Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. As Guthrie notes, **nowhere does scripture use the word *satisfaction* or say that God's wrath has to be satisfied. Rather, it tells us that Jesus came to express, not to change, God's mind.**

The Bible does not teach that *if* certain conditions are fulfilled by or for us, only *then* God will redeem us. Nor does it say that *if* our sins are atoned for in one way or another, only *then* God will forgive and save us. Think about it. What kind of love or forgiveness or redemption is it that has to be bought or wrung out of another?

What the Bible does teach is that “**God is love**, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them” (1 John 4, 16). And, “We love because God first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

So, in contrast to Anselm’s legalistic view, what many progressives would consider to be a more accurate doctrine of the atonement teaches, first of all, that it is God who initiates and fulfills the reconciliation between sinful humanity and God. **Therefore, it is not God’s desire is not to crush us “dirty glasses” with the hammer of God’s wrath so that we have to turn to Jesus to keep God from doing what God would like to do to us. Rather, at least in my opinion, what we need to be saved from is this erroneous way of thinking about the nature and character of God.**

The doctrine of the atonement – being made one with God – should instead awaken in us first and foremost not terror of God’s wrath, but joyful thanksgiving and gratitude for God’s love. Or as Marcus Borg puts it,

**God...has thus taken care of whatever you think separates you from God;** you have access to God apart from [any form of mediator or sacrificial religious system]. It is a metaphor of radical grace, of amazing grace. **“Jesus died for our sins” had a much different meaning in the first century. It was originally a subversive metaphor, not a literal description of either God’s purpose or Jesus’ vocation.** It was a metaphorical proclamation of radical grace; and properly understood, it still is.

It is therefore ironic to realize that the religion that formed around Jesus would within four hundred years begin to claim for itself an institutional monopoly on grace and access to God.

Because the sacrificial metaphor has often been taken quite literally, we in the church have often domesticated the death of Jesus – by speaking of it as the foreordained will of God, as something that had to happen, as a dying for the sins of the world. But it and the other purposive ways of seeing the death of Jesus are post-Easter retrospective providential interpretations. They matter, they’re important, and, rightly understood, they continue to be a way of proclaiming the gospel. But they should not be allowed to eclipse the historical reason for his execution.

I must admit that my own personal understanding of the meaning attached to Jesus’ death has changed throughout the years, so I can close only with a statement of where I am now in my understanding.

**God did not need Jesus to die in order for us to be forgiven of our sins. Rather, through the interpretation of his death we have come to realize that our**

**sins are forgiven, and that God loves us more than we can ever know and constantly works for redemption and reconciliation in our lives and in the world.**

And what is the end result of such a belief – that we find our lives transformed, led to a new way of thinking, doing and being - and ultimately that's what Easter is all about. So let us put the hammers away.

Amen.

Resources:

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*, 2003.

Shirley Guthrie, *Christian Doctrine*, 1994, Revised Edition.