

THE THEOLOGY OF JESUS

The Bible presents the claim that through Jesus' death and resurrection we have the forgiveness of sin, entry into God's family and the gift of eternal life. But how come?

Theologians down the centuries have sought to try to explain exactly how it is that the Cross of Jesus achieves our salvation. These are called Atonement Theories and they have developed down the years along these different themes:

- Ransom Theory (the idea that mankind was enslaved by the devil, and Jesus's death was a ransom paid to the devil to free mankind)
- Christus Victor (the idea that Christ was defeating sin, death and the devil)
- Anselm's Satisfaction Theory (the idea that mankind had incurred a debt to God by failing to fully honour him, and so Jesus was satisfying that honour-debt)
- Christus Exemplar (the idea that Christ was setting an example of how to live a life of love)
- Penal Substitution (the idea that Jesus was bearing the punishment for our sin, absorbing God's wrath against us, in order to satisfy God's justice)

The latter is the prevalent view today, and one that most of us inherit. We read our Bible's through that lens and that, in turn, tends to colour what we see. The aim of this study is to examine the narrative free of such suppositions and allow the natural, inherent tapestries to emerge.

1. Jesus and the Father.

There are many verses which describe an inseparability between the Father and the Son – for example John 10:30, John 5:19, John 10:38, John 14:10-11, John 17:21-23, Col 1:19; Col 2:9. To describe the Father and Son as “joined at the hip” would be inadequate, it is more akin to “fusion”. In the words of the Nicene fathers they are “of one substance”. So did/could the Father separate himself from the Son when he was on the cross?

In John 8 we see a dialogue with the Pharisees about the crucifixion. Jesus tell them “*When you have lifted up the Son of Man*, then you will know:

- that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me, and
- he who sent me is with me; *he has not left me alone*, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.” (John 8:28,29).

In this exchange Jesus appears to link together the theme of the cross (i.e. being lifted up) and the Father being with him, not leaving him alone.

And there is more.

In John 16 as Judas' betrayal nears, Jesus says to his disciples: "Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave me alone. *Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me.*" (John 16:32)

Twice in connection with his Passion Jesus appears to claim that the Father will not leave him alone. In the epistle to the Corinthians, Paul seems to corroborate that God was there, in Christ, on the Cross (2 Cor 5:19). The passion narratives also illustrate Jesus praying "Father" both before and, most importantly, after what is thought of as a "cry of dereliction".

With no mention of separation, and Jesus' apparent testimony to the contrary, the narrative suggests the Father never deserted Jesus.



Q. But didn't Jesus cry out that he was forsaken?

2. Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.

Jesus' cry is actually **only mentioned in 2 Gospels** (Luke and John omit it altogether). What is more it is never mentioned or referenced again in the entire New Testament. Even though the Apostles were taught directly by Jesus over a period of 40 days after his resurrection (Acts 1:3) they never allude to Jesus' cry. Can it really be a critical piece of the puzzle?

What often goes unnoticed is that the cry occurs at the **end** of the 3 hours of darkness **not at its beginning**, at around the ninth hour (Matt 27:45-46,



Mark 15:33-34). It is as Jesus is *about to die* that he issues this cry followed fairly rapidly with "I thirst", "It is finished" and "Father into your hands I commit my Spirit".

The cry is unmistakably the opening line of Psalm 22. **All 4 Gospel narratives attest to the casting of lots** for Jesus' garments (Matt 27:35, Mark 15:24, Luke 23:34, John 19:23-24). This event is so unique that any Jewish observer would recognise the correlation with Psalm 22:18 - especially on hearing the opening line of that Psalm. Also, the Apostle John, **the only actual disciple on the scene, omits the cry altogether** preferring to explicitly state that

Jesus fulfilled Psalm 22 (John 19:24).

Further, the ninth hour was the hour of prayer (Acts 3:1) when Psalms were often recited. Psalm 22 details incredibly accurately and pertinently Jesus' experiences on the cross it is inconceivable that this Psalm would not have been on Jesus' mind. We can even see Jesus final few words equating to sections in the Psalm ("I thirst" with 22:15, "it is finished" with 22:31).

On the brink of death, Jesus had only the strength to utter a few words. And how better to witness to those watching that this event was the fulfilment of Psalm 22 than to call out the opening line? Given that Jesus never declared there would be (or was) a separation, and the Apostles don't either, is it not possible that the sole purpose of the cry was to witness to Psalm 22?

Q: But didn't Jesus drink the cup of God's wrath?

3. The Cup of Suffering.

In the Bible a cup represents a "lot" or a "portion". It can be bad (Is 51:17, Ezek 23:33) or it can be good (Ps 16:5, Ps 23:5, Ps 116:13, Jer 16:7).

In Gethsemane, as his ordeal closes in, Jesus prays that, if possible, "this cup" pass from him (Matt 26:39). Many have wondered what the nature of this cup is, and some have suggested, picking up imagery from Revelation, that is the cup of God's wrath.

What many fail to notice is that Jesus had already talked of his impending death at the hands of the chief priests and the scribes and referred to it as his "cup" (Matthew chapter 20, Mark chapter 10).

On this earlier occasion when Jesus described his looming trial and death James and John, thinking that Jesus was soon to come into his kingdom, requested to sit on his right and left (Mark 10:37). In the midst of Jesus informing them of his coming tortuous ordeal they are asking to sit in places of honour!

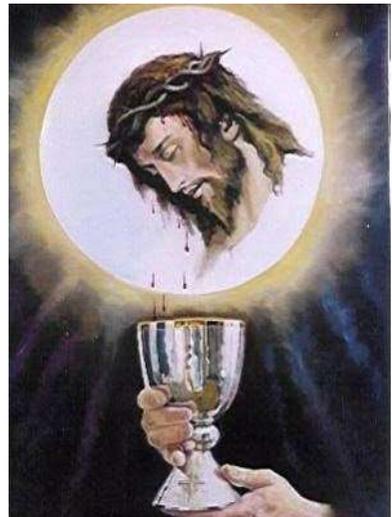
In response, Jesus asks them whether they can drink the cup he is about to drink. Not understanding Jesus is using a metaphor they naively assure Jesus that yes, they can drink his cup.

But then... Jesus responds by confirming that they would indeed **drink the same cup as he!** (Matt 20:23, Mark 10:39).

How can we not have noticed this before?

Nobody would claim that James and John drank the cup of God's wrath. So whatever the cup that Jesus associated with his passion and death was - it was not that!

Sensibly, therefore, down through the ages it has most commonly been thought of as the cup of suffering.



Q: But even if the cup wasn't a cup of wrath, wasn't there still the darkness of God's wrath?

4. The reign of darkness

The sky turning dark from the sixth until the ninth hour is recorded in 3 of the Gospel narratives (Matt 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44-45). It is never mentioned again in the New Testament and there is no interpretation as to what it represented. Despite learning directly from the resurrected Jesus over a period of 40 days (Acts 1:3) the Apostles provide no analysis.



So where can we turn? *The only other mention of darkness is by Jesus himself.* In Luke 22 Jesus says to the Jewish leaders as they arrest him that this was their hour and the hour when 'darkness would reign' (Luke 22:53).

That's all.

Jesus' reference to a looming 'reign of darkness' is the only tangible clue we have in the entire New Testament as a possible explanation for why the sky turned dark for three hours.

It is therefore most likely the sky turned dark because there was a 'reign of darkness'.

Paul will later align the power of Satan with darkness (Acts 26:18) and describes the realms of this world as a dominion of darkness (Col 1:13, Eph 6:12).

From Paul's link between darkness and Satan we can safely posit that this period of darkness would appear to be linked to a battle with Satan.

Q: Isn't the "reign of darkness" merely that of the Chief Priests and Pharisees? Why bring Satan in to it?

5. A Cosmic Battle

Scripture records that after Jesus was baptised by John, he went into the wilderness for 40 days where he was tempted by Satan. At the end of this period Satan left Jesus, but not for good - only **'until an opportune time'** (Luke 4:13). Satan wasn't finished with Jesus.



As the time for his betrayal and crucifixion approached, Jesus talked in terms of a confrontation with Satan.

Jesus stated:

"Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out." (John 12:31)

"the prince of this world is coming but he has no hold over me" (John 14:30)

It certainly appears that Jesus was expecting Satan to come after him again, and that Jesus would cast him out. Satan may rule for a while - but his was not the victory. Jesus stated with confidence "the ruler of this world has now been judged" (John 16:8,11)

If we look for this theme elsewhere we find that the Apostles describe the cross as a cosmic triumph: Jesus 'stripped the rulers and the authorities, making a show of them in public, triumphing over them' (Col 2:15); Jesus 'destroyed the works of the devil' (1 John 3:8), and defeated 'the one who has the power of death, that is the devil' (Heb 2:14).

The gospels and epistles attest to a cosmic battle. Is it not most likely then that the period of darkness responds to Jesus' testimony of a 'reign of darkness' - meaning a cosmic battle with the dark powers?

Q: But the cross was also about the "judgement of this world"? Isn't this where punishment for sin comes in?

6. Jesus is Judge

Firstly, we've just seen Jesus link the judgement of the world with the casting out of Satan, not with the punishment of sin (John 12:31).

Secondly, we discover that long before he got to the cross, Jesus had already been assigned all judgement.



Jesus states:

"..the Father judges no one, but has assigned all judgment to the Son" (John 5:21-23)

and again..

"..the Father ... has given Him authority to execute judgment, because He is the Son of Man" (John 5:27).

Long before the cross, Jesus had been given full authority to judge, including the forgiveness of sin (Matt 9:6).

On the Cross, as Judge of the world, Jesus issues a decisive decree: "Father forgive them, they know not what they are doing". Jesus' judgement, (his decision as judge) is for forgiveness even for those who are murdering him.

Any claim, therefore, that the cross involves God's due punishment for sin requires a) the Father to have taken back the authority to judge from the Son and b) to have gone against the Son's will.

Yet we saw that Jesus was fully submitted to his Father's will (Luke 22:42) and could only ever speak in harmony with the will of his Father (John 5:19, John 12:49-50, Matt 26:42). It seems Jesus' decree had to be "at one" with the Father's will, which means the Father had to also be in favour of forgiveness.

Q: But if the Father was also forgiving sin on the cross, not punishing it, how could justice have been satisfied?

7. God's "justice" is all about mercy.

Some claim that there must be retribution (punishment for sin) or else God could not be "just".

Yet we come across verses declaring that justice and mercy are inseparable (Micah 6:8, Isaiah 30:18, Matt 23:23). It even appears that God's notion of justice requires the love of mercy. Jesus preached what it is to be a child of God (Matt 5:44-45, Luke 6:35-36) and he seems to be saying that God requires mercy above all else (Matt 9:13, 12:7). And Zechariah goes so far as to say that **true justice is to show mercy** (Zech 7:9).

We find accounts of God's justice involving righting the wrong that has been done, restoring the years the locusts have eaten (Joel 2:25).

And there is a thread where God's judgement against wrongdoing merely involves turning the tables - making the guilty experience what they have inflicted on others (Joel 3:4,7; Proverbs 5:22,23; Proverbs 26:27). In these examples it is more about come-uppance than retribution.



We also often times we see that "justice" itself is directed toward not the abuser but the abused (Psalm 72:2, Isaiah 1:17).

Is it perhaps possible that justice, then, is not so much about punishment per se, but about responsibility and restoration?

What we certainly see is Jesus overruling 'an eye for an eye' establishing in its place a new covenant operating under the law of love (Matt 5:38). And we also see that to follow in God's image, to be children of our Father, we must love mercy too, forgiving seventy times seven (Matt 18:22).

Perhaps God's justice is about restored relationships and undoing wrong i.e. mercy, not revenge; forgiveness not retribution.

Q: But didn't God require a sacrifice for sin before sin could be forgiven?

8. Mercy not sacrifice

Firstly, the Bible is riddled with examples of God forgiving sin where no sacrifice for sin is required (e.g. 2 Chron 7:14, Prov 16:6, Isaiah 6:6-7, Isaiah 55:7). Before Jesus' ministry began John the Baptist was calling for people to repent and be baptised 'for the forgiveness of sin'. John's baptism was from God so this could not have been a lie or deception. When John baptised people their sins were surely forgiven? Jesus was also forgiving sins long before his death on the cross. Forgiveness and sacrifice do not always go hand in hand.

We also see it claimed God neither required nor was pleased by sacrifice (Psalm 40:6, Psalm 51:16,17). It appears that God wanted the obedience of faith (1 Sam 15:22, Hosea 6:6); not sacrifices but right judgements, mercy, humility and compassion (Micah 6:6-8, Proverbs 21:3, Zech 7:9).

So why the sacrificial system? We need to look back at the Old Testament. When God brought Israel out of Egypt, they were an idolatrous nation: they already had sacrificial priests (Ex 19:24) and were prostituting themselves to goat idols (Lev 17:7). But God did not initially command sacrifice - the command was to obey him and become a treasured possession, a Kingdom of Priests (Jer 7:22,23, Ex 19:5-6) but the people stubbornly refused (Jer 7:24). They were afraid of God. So God commanded they continue to offer their sacrifices - but make their sacrifices to God alone and on a dedicated altar (Ex 20:20-24) no longer in open fields (Lev 17:5).

The writer of Hebrew clarifies: the law may have required sacrifices and offerings, but they were neither desired by God nor pleasing to him (Heb 10:5,8).

We see testimony that God eventually had his fill of sacrifices to the point that it sickened him (Isaiah 1:11, Prov 15:8, Amos 5:21-22, Isaiah 66:3, Jer 7:21). And Jesus reinforced the unequivocal position, that it was mercy not sacrifice that God desired, quoting from Hosea 6:6 twice! (Matt 9:13, Matt 12:7).

Perhaps God did not need a sacrifice to forgive sin? Perhaps our fear of God meant we did?

In Conclusion

What should be clear by now is that there are many inconsistencies between Atonement Theories and the actual gospel narrative. We have forgotten how to read the text as it is. Without even realising it, we may have filtered out the true narrative and inserted our own - thereby creating God in our image.

Exactly how the cross works may remain a mystery. But we can be certain that this was a rescue mission born of the Father's love for us (John 3:16). We were enemies of God (Rom 5:10), and yet He was not an enemy of us (Rom 5:8, Acts 17:27-28) but reached out in love to reconcile us to Him, even though he knew we would brutally murder him (Mark 10:33-34,). God loved us and gave himself for us, not to satisfy retributive justice but in mercy - to set us free from the powers of darkness and death (Heb 2:14, 2 Tim 1:10). He came that we might have life (John 10:10).

APPENDIX: OBJECTIONS

Q1: What about OT prophesies, like Isaiah 53, that claim God crushed Jesus?
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Firstly we need to examine how the Apostles used Isaiah 53. By examining the New testament to see which verses they quoted in support of the gospel we discover that two verses that today's evangelists use centre stage simply do not appear *at all* in the witness of the Apostles. The NT never references the verse 6 that we are familiar with ("The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all") nor verse 10 ("It pleased the Lord to crush him").

So basing our gospel message on those two verses indicates that we are out of step with the Apostles.

Secondly, the Bible of Palestine in AD30 (the Greek Septuagint, or LXX) does not, in any case, contain these verses as rendered in our Bibles. Our bibles are based on a different source text to that used by the Apostles.

Verse 6 in the LXX reads "the Lord gave him up for our sins". We see Paul utilising this in Romans 8:32, clearly basing it on this version of Isaiah 53:6.

Verses 10, 11 in the LXX read: "the Lord also is pleased to purge him from his stroke..... the Lord also is pleased to take away from the travail of his soul.."

The Apostles, taught by Christ himself and familiar with these verses, never claim the Father desired to cause pain to his son; rather that was man's desire. Their accounts in the NT attest to this more than 40 times*

One further consideration. Isaiah prophesied that we would misunderstand.

When verses 4 & 5 of Isaiah 53 say "we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted, but he was pierced for our transgressions..." many fail to notice that a direct contrast is taking place. The presence of "but" indicates that the previous assumption was wrong. What the passage is actually saying is "**we** esteemed him smitten by God ... **but** [he wasn't smitten by God] he was pierced for our transgressions".

The New Testament fills in the corrective detail that Isaiah could not have known. The Suffering Servant was 'pierced for our transgressions' not by God but by the Roman soldiers, at the behest of the Chief Priests and Pharisees.

We esteemed him smitten by God... **but**...

We got it all wrong. And Isaiah foretold that we would.

**The Bible is abundantly clear it was man who plotted and conspired to kill Jesus. See:*

Matt 12:14; 16:21; 17:12; 17:22-23; 20:18-19; 26:45; 26:59; 26:66; 27:1; 27:20; 27:22; 27:23; 27:25.

Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34; 14:1; 14:10-11; 14:41; 14:55; 14:64; 15:12-13; 15:14.

Luke 9:21; 13:31; 17:25; 18:32; 19:47; 20:19; 22:2; 22:4; 23:10; 23:21; 23:23; 23:33-34; 24:7.

John 5:18; 10:31; 10:39; 11:53; 13:2; 18:31; 18:35; 19:6; 19:7; 19:12; 19:15.

Acts 2:23; 2:36; 3:13; 3:15; 4:10; 4:27; 5:30; 7:52; 10:39; 13:27-28;

Epistles: 1 Cor 2:8; 1 Thess 2:15; Heb 12:3; 1 Pet 2:4.

Q2: What about Jesus becoming a curse for us?

Paul writes: "... he humbled himself and became obedient to death, **even death on a cross**" (Phil 2:8)

Why was death on a cross such a big deal? Because of Deuteronomy 21:23:

"...his body shall not remain all night upon the tree, but you shall bury it in that day; for every one that is hanged on a tree is cursed of God".

The Law of Moses required a blasphemer to be stoned to death by the entire assembly (Lev 24:16), and yet despite their charge against Jesus being one of blasphemy (Luke 22:70-71) the Pharisees strove to involve the Romans and invoke crucifixion (Luke 20:20). They knew that if Jesus was crucified it would imply he was cursed by God - and so couldn't be the Messiah.

Yet when Paul alludes to that Deuteronomic passage he is very selective: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree". (Gal 3:13). Note how he omits any reference to the curse being "by God".

Further both Paul and Peter make a distinct point of demonstrating God's total vindication of Jesus *despite him dying on a tree*. Peter explicitly contrasts Jesus dying on a tree with God then exalting him (Acts 5:30,31). Paul similarly and no less pointedly contrasts Jesus being hung on a tree with God then raising him from the dead (Acts 10:39,40). This contrast is clearly there in order to erase any confusion; despite dying on a tree God didn't curse Jesus, he vindicated him!

For Paul it would have been a huge deal that Christ humbled himself not just to death, but death on a cross. In so doing, Jesus allowed himself to be portrayed in the eyes of all the Jews as cursed by God.

This explains why Paul calls the preaching of Christ **crucified** a stumbling block to the Jews (1 Cor 1:23). Of course crucifixion was a stumbling block!

Q3: But what about the sins God had left unpunished?

Answer: Many quote the following passage in Romans to support the notion that Jesus had to be punished because former (OT) sins were not properly dealt with:

"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished – he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time..." (NIV)

There you go, many say, "he had left former sins unpunished, and in Christ is putting that right so as to be 'just'".

However, the notion that God left anything undone (in this case "unpunished") is entirely absent in the original Greek. What the text actually says is:

"(Christ)... whom God set forth a mercy seat, through the faith in his blood, for the showing forth of His righteousness, because of the passing over of the bygone sins in the forbearance of God for the showing forth of His righteousness in the present time, for his being righteous, and declaring him righteous who is of the faith of Jesus"

Firstly, there is nothing "left unpunished". The text records the "passing over" of sins previously committed (covering over them, we might say, not counting them against us) in an act of "divine forbearance" (i.e. with patience and love). And what is more this was a showing forth of God's righteousness; God cannot act in an unrighteous manner!

Secondly, Christ is a "mercy seat" (hilasterion). In the OT we see that this is the place God inhabits (Lev 16:2) and from which he speaks (Ex 25:22, Num 7:89). It is also the place sprinkled with blood when sacrifices are offered for forgiveness, thereby acknowledging that they have been offered to God and not goat idols. In other words, Christ is how God speaks to us, he is God's presence for us, and also the "seat" of mercy and forgiveness.

Holding the original Greek in mind, then, the most literal reading of this passage is that God has opened up a new and permanent way to meet with him (via Christ who is now our 'Mercy seat'). And having passed over bygone sins in his forbearance (a good thing, surely?) God has (in demonstration of the same righteous faithfulness) repeated that same merciful act once-for-all in Christ.

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