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Living by Faith

from Forerunners4Him



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CHRIST AS VICTOR, VICTIM AND VISION

Three Views of the Atonement

*So much of what the Lord does is holographic. Turn the image just a little and it will appear entirely different. Few things demonstrate this principle better than His death on the cross. What was He doing? Great truths infuse our hearts through these three historically favored perspectives on what happened at the cross. Take care that you don't only hold to one. **We need them all!***



A Lamb for Atonement

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18 ESV

Go to [Our God](#) to read more about our amazing God of Grace.

NOTE: This email newsletter is a brand new companion to Healing Streams' newsletter "A Heart Set Free." Where Healing Streams is all about emotional healing from recovery to mastery, Forerunners is about the fullness of life set before those whose "hearts are free" to pursue the Lord in liberated love and service. These articles will be about salvation, the new life of grace, life in the Spirit, and our fabulous God(s) -- Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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What Happened at the Cross?

It must come as a surprise to everyone who studies the cross of Christ that, historically speaking, there is no one clear idea of what took place there. Surely, this crucial act of God on our behalf is universally understood and agreed upon? Evidently not! No one questions that the cross is central to our salvation or that our sins were forgiven there.



Mysteries at the Cross

However, what actually happened and how it works to save us has been the subject of lively debate and shifting opinions for two thousand years. It seems that every age focuses upon some aspect of the cross which either meets their deepest need or reflects their cultural setting or both. Of the three dominant theories, the second one (with considerable modifications) leads the field in our day.

Should we continue searching for the one and only "correct" theory? My own belief is that the Lord can accomplish many things at once, a trait He amply displayed when He said "Let there be light!" The cross is to redemption what those first words were to creation: the fountainhead of all that would follow. *We should* expect that no one theory would suffice to encapsulate this immense "making new" of the former creation, just as no one science can describe the wide range of the natural order. It may be "messy" to have such a proliferation of theories, but if you want quick closure to all your pressing questions, the Lord probably isn't the One to ask!

We may not have one definitive, final answer but we do have a wide array of fascinating insights and foundational truths. I think that it is just like the Lord to have worked patiently through the centuries and through differing cultural context to bring forth a fuller understanding of what He was doing at the cross. I firmly believe that they all fit together. To explore the question in a more organized way, I have grouped these ideas under three general headings: Christ as Victor, Victim and Vision.

All three interpretations focus on aspects of the cross that are vital to our salvation. Moreover, because our battle is ongoing, it strengthens us to understand and embrace the full array of what has been won for us. One key to understanding these three theories is seeing that there are three "interested" parties which God worked through the cross to address: God Himself, Satan and humanity. It will help to think of these theories *as complementary, not competing.*

For more insight-filled perspectives on our Lord see [Jesus Our Savior](#) at our website.

Christ as Victor

As Victor the atonement consists of Christ's triumph over His enemies and ours. This was the view of the Early Church fathers, beginning with Irenaeus of Lyon, and it held sway for the first thousand years of Christianity. As Victor Christ triumphed in two ways: by ransoming us with His life and by defeating Satan who held us captive.



Jesus Wins!

Unquestionably, these two explanations are marked down in scripture, but they fell out of favor as other theories emerged and as belief in the devil declined in scholarly circles.

The idea of Ransom has a long history in scripture, going all the way back to Job, often considered one of the oldest books in the Bible. In the Hebrew Scriptures there is a clear and consistent foreshadowing of the need for God's people to be ransomed, though how this would happen or by whom is left in the shadows. That mystery is resolved when Jesus appears, but unfortunately for our curiosity, He doesn't tell us how or why. He simply states that by being willing to "give His life" Jesus would ransom us. In this view the "purchase price" of our redemption is in some way a payment made to the enemy: ***Jesus' life in exchange for ours.***

"Even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Matthew 20:28 ESV

Related to this idea of ransom is the view of Christ as the Victor in a spiritual battle waged for our freedom. Here, it seems to me that *in terms of details* we have even less to go on. As with the image of ransom, there is plenty of Old Testament foreshadowing, showing us that battles do indeed have to be fought for the sake of redeeming God's captive people. Think of the Exodus from Egypt and the constant battles over the Promised Land as exemplars of the spiritual warfare between the **Two Invisible Kingdoms** which continue to our own day. In what way, however, was Jesus battling Satan at the cross? St. John emphatically stated that He was, but the Early Church fathers only outlined the theory; they didn't fill it in. Nevertheless, scripture clearly credits Jesus with "triumphing" over the dark powers that had us enslaved.

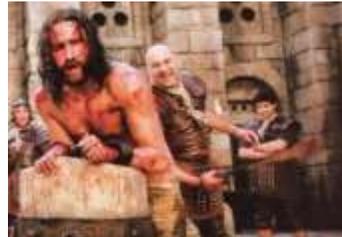
He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. Colossians 2:15 ESV

Let's consider for a moment the broad cultural context behind this accurate (if incomplete) view of Christ as Victor. The Roman Empire set the tone for the age. The power of its sword subdued kingdoms all around the Mediterranean and beyond, uniting them in a universal peace, the *Pax Romana* under the rule of a supreme monarch. It would be only natural to see Jesus similarly, as a conquering King, though one whose kingdom was not of this world. Not only that, but it was an age which readily believed in the activity of those dark powers which the New Testament describes Jesus as fighting. To understand *how* Jesus gained that victory, however, we will have to turn to the second great view of the atonement, ***that of Christ as Victim.***

See more about [Knowing God](#) at our website.

Christ as Victim

As Victim the atonement consists of what Jesus had to suffer on our behalf. Like Christ the Victor, this theory also has two variations. The first to appear was the "satisfaction" theory developed by St. Anselm of Canterbury during the 11th century. In this view it is the sovereign God, not Satan, whose claim is addressed by the atonement. Humanity's sins bring insult and injury to the honor of God.



Punished in Our Place

Just as with medieval codes of honor (note the cultural context), satisfaction must be made. However, because God's glory is so great, only a perfect sacrifice could possibly atone for the affront to His honor. Since the "merits of Christ" far outweigh the debt owed to God by humanity, the sacrifice of Christ fully "satisfies" the requirements of honor. In this view the ransom, or purchase price of redemption, is in some way paid to God. This theory replaced Christ as Victor as the leading view of the atonement for the next five hundred years.

And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Ephesians 5:2 ESV

Through the Reformers, especially John Calvin, the idea of satisfaction was again taken up, but turned away from God's honor towards His justice. Humanity was indeed in debt to God as Anselm would have it, but it was a debt to the moral Law which we have all transgressed. This view, termed "penal substitution," takes seriously the statement by Paul in Romans that the "wages of sin is death." Because of our sins we are legally subject to God's wrath and deserve eternal punishment in hell. ***God loved us too much to let that happen!***

At the Father's request Jesus went to the cross, was punished in our place and died the death our sins required. In this view it is humanity's sin which is the "enemy" to be overcome for sin places us at enmity with God, as well as enslaves us to the evil one. Here, then is the inside story on how Christ the Victor "destroyed the works" of the devil who tempted us into sinning against God in the first place. Jesus "triumphed" by becoming the Victim, an innocent victim, thereby creating the condition for God to overturn His Son's death and strip the enemy of his legal claims. As our representative (or substitute) Jesus' death fully atones for our sins, releasing us from the curse of the law and the punishment we deserved.

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Romans 5:11 ESV

These views of the atonement are called "objective" because they focus upon what Christ was

doing *for* us at the cross, apart from any involvement by us or with us. They neglect what the sight of the cross, received by faith, does for us *on the inside* where the saving transformation needs to take place. To understand that work of the atonement we will have to look through ***the lens of the third view, Christ as Vision.***

Read about [The Temple Background](#) at our website!

Christ as Vision

As Vision the atonement consists of what God accomplishes in us. This internal or "subjective" view of the atonement was first advanced by a contemporary of Anselm, Peter Abelard. Called the "moral influence" theory, it draws our attention to what God uses to get our attention: the death of His Son at the cross.



God's Love Revealed

Nothing convinces us of the terrible reality of our sinfulness or of God's merciful love like seeing Jesus dying there. Looking to the cross we see a Savior who lays down His life for His friends and a loving Father who was willing to sacrifice even His only begotten Son to rescue us.

This vision of "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" changes us, because it enables us to trust to God's love. By Beholding Him, especially in the way divine love is revealed at the cross, we are transformed into His likeness. Not only that, but the example of Jesus in loving us to the point of selfless sacrifice, shows us the true path of life for us to follow. By His example we are inspired to love like He does; by faith in the love He has shown us, we are enabled by the Holy Spirit to become like Him.

But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed... And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 3:16, 18 ESV

I can't help thinking that this view of the atonement will gain ground in the future. The role of vision in the spiritual life can hardly be overlooked in an age as attuned to the visual arts as our own. The connection between sight, inward focus and interior state is being more fully experienced and widely understood by everyone from advertisers to designers to media producers. This will surely awaken in the church the as yet untapped potential of growing "eyes to see" the pathway to transformation that comes to those who learn the secret of **Beholding Jesus** with ever renewed eyes of faith.

Discover fascinating truths about [His Triumphant Resurrection](#) on our website!

FORERUNNERS4HIM

Forerunners4Him is intended to provide inspiration, encouragement, and humor for entering into the life of freedom, joy and peace that Jesus died to give us. Salvation often "drops in out of the blue" but real progress living the new life of faith usually requires the hard work of facing God and deep issues, trying to make sense of the scriptures and gain positive guidance under pressure. Let us help you with that!

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Living by faith requires intentional cultivation...

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