

Peace with God: Theories of Atonement

Readings: Romans 5:1-11, 1 John 4:9-19

This morning I want to continue with our sermon series examining this core value both of Anabaptism and of OMC of peace and peacemaking, wrestling with the question of what does it mean to pursue and experience the peace of God in our context today.

We began the series looking at God's Grand Vision for Peace or Shalom and traced this idea throughout Scripture, seeing that God's heart for all creation is holistic peace, right relationships, things as they should be. And as we've continued examining this theme we've been breaking down this grand concept into the 4 aspects of peace with God, peace with others, peace with ourselves, and peace with creation. I've included here the graphic that Luke showed last week as it depicts this idea.

This morning I want to focus on the peace with God aspect that is spoken to in our passages today where we read about the hope of having **“peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”**, that through Jesus we can **“have a restored relationship with God.”** And that we are able to be **“reconciled to God through the death of his Son”**. Followers of Jesus hold that the death and resurrection of Jesus is central to our faith, that it accomplishes something of eternal significance for us: salvation, redemption...peace with God. Despite all the differences between denominations and churches within Christianity, there is general agreement on this idea: that Jesus, in their life, death, resurrection, and ascension, accomplishes salvation for humanity and brings peace with God.

But, in the words of one theologian, **“What there is much less agreement upon is how and why this is achieved. Christ brought us back to God, but how? Why were we separated from God in the first place? Is the atoning work of Christ about the Son, the Father, or us? For such an important question, the Bible doesn't really give a clear answer. Of course, for each theory one can find ample support in various Biblical passages”**. (Andrew Springer).

Through Jesus the Christ, peace with God is possible, but how exactly that happens, how it all works, has been debated. And so throughout Christian history, individuals and groups have attempted to explain from Scripture how this is accomplished. The theological word for this idea of reconciliation with God, peace with God, is 'Atonement.' (at-one-ment). So when people posit explanations of

how our salvation is accomplished through Jesus, these explanations are often called Atonement Theories.

So what I want to do this morning is briefly describe a few of the main atonement theories that have been emphasized throughout history but then talk about what it means for us today and how this can impact our lives and our experience of deep peace with God. And please note that this is not an exhaustive list, but just a brief overview of some of the historical ideas.

1. **Christus Victor** (or Christ the Victor)

In this theory, emphasis can be put on verses such as: (see also Col. 2:15, Luke 13:10-16)

- Heb. 2:14-15 “He did this to destroy the one who holds the power over death—the devil—by dying. He set free those who were held in slavery their entire lives by their fear of death.”
- 1 John 3:8 “God’s Son appeared for this purpose: to destroy the works of the devil.”

The idea here is that there is a cosmic battle going on between good and evil, God and the devil, and that Jesus’ death and then resurrection somehow works to win the victory over sin, death, and hell for us. So humanity’s salvation comes from this victory that God wins over evil. We are therefore liberated, rescued and restored to relationship with God.

2. **Ransom**

In this theory, emphasis is put upon verses such as Mark 10:45: “**For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**” And 1 Timothy 2:6 that says Jesus ‘**gave himself as a ransom for all people.**”

The idea here is that Jesus’ death is like payment of a ransom to satisfy our debt and to secure our freedom. Now, there are questions here about who the ransom was paid to and why an all-powerful God would have to pay a ransom at all with some saying that the ransom was paid to Satan, who accepted the death of Jesus as payment, but then death couldn’t hold Jesus. Others say the ransom was paid to God the Father. But humanity’s salvation comes through Jesus’ death acting as a payment of ransom, securing our freedom.

3. Moral Influence/Moral Example

In this theory emphasis is put on the idea that Jesus, through his life, death, and resurrection, shows us the extent of God's love which inspires humanity to repentance and moral living.

One theologian says it this way: **“The work of Christ chiefly consists of demonstrating to the world the amazing depth of God’s love of sinful humanity...There is nothing inherent in God that must be appeased before he is willing to forgive humanity. The problem lies in the sinful, hardened human heart, with its fear and ignorance of God...Through the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ, the love of God shines like a beacon, beckoning humanity to come and fellowship.”** (as quoted by Andrew Springer).

Biblical passages that can be pointed to in this theory include: (see also 1 Pet. 2:21, 1 Jn. 4:9-10).

- Romans 5:8 “God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us.”
- John 3:16 “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him won’t perish but will have eternal life.”

In this theory Jesus’ death was not part of some transaction to win our salvation but was a result of God’s extraordinary love and commitment to showing solidarity with humanity in its suffering which inspires humanity to faith and repentance.

4. Innocent Scapegoat Theory

In this theory, emphasis is put on Jesus’ innocence and his death being the result of the mob scapegoating him (scapegoating meaning putting the blame on someone). The trial and crucifixion of the innocent Jesus reveals humanity’s tendency toward violence and scapegoating and what it leads to. Jesus is meant to be the last scapegoat, meant to wake up humanity and inspire us to end this terrible cycle. Stephen Morrison says, **“Scapegoating therefore is considered to be a form of non-violent atonement, in that Jesus is not a sacrifice but a *victim*.”**

Biblical passages that can be pointed to include: (see also Lev. 16, Jn. 11:49-53)

- Isaiah 53:4-6 “It was certainly our sickness that he carried, and our sufferings that he bore, but we thought him afflicted, struck down by God and tormented. He was pierced because of our rebellions and crushed

because of our crimes. He bore the punishment that made us whole; by his wounds we are healed. Like sheep we had all wandered away, each going its own way, but the Lord let fall on him all our crimes.”

- Matt. 27 and Mk. 15 where Jesus is presented as an innocent victim who is rejected and killed.

Our salvation, our peace with God, comes through Jesus willingly taking on the role of scapegoat, bearing human sin and violence, dying, and then being vindicated in resurrection. It isn't so much God needing to be appeased but rather God becoming victim to reveal our sinful tendency to violence and free us from its cycle.

This idea, in some ways, pushes back against the next and last theory I'll talk about that presents God as requiring the violent death of Jesus, using violence to solve the problem of violence and evil.

5. Penal Substitutionary Atonement

Perhaps the most popular atonement theory currently, at least in North America. Verses pointed to in this theory include: (See also Isa. 53:4-6, Heb. 9:26-28, 1 Pet. 2:24-3:18, 2 Cor. 5:21, Gal. 3:13).

- Rom. 3:23-25 “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.”
- 1 John 4:9-10 God “loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

This theory explains salvation in a sort of legal transaction type of way.

Humanity's sin incurs God's wrath and the need for justice. Jesus' death, then, appeases God's wrath toward human sin and satisfies God's need for justice. So, like in a legal sense, an offence was committed and a penalty had to be paid and here, Jesus pays that penalty on our behalf because humanity is incapable of paying it themselves. So we are able to be reconciled to God, with our debt/penalty having been paid by Jesus.

Stephen Morrison states, “**Jesus Christ dies to satisfy God's wrath against human sin. Jesus is punished (penal) in the place of sinners (substitution) in order to satisfy the justice of God and the legal demand of God to punish sin.**”

Now, a couple disclaimers about these theories:

- Again, this is such a brief overview of several theories. There is much more that could be said about each and there are other theories that could be mentioned as well.
- Secondly, it's important to remember that none of these ideas are proposed or established in a vacuum. They are developed within a particular context (place and time) and are often in response to previous theories and ideas. Context is always important!
- Thirdly, we can see that each theory highlights particular passages of Scripture. So we can find all these metaphors and ideas in the Bible. But any metaphor can crumble if pushed too far and each of these theories will have points of contention and bring up questions.

Now, if all these ideas about *how* Jesus' life, death, resurrection, and ascension accomplishes humanity's salvation wasn't enough, there is also plenty of debate within Christianity about *who* this salvation is applied to. Throughout history various Christians have or do believe that salvation through Jesus is for:

- Only those elect who are predestined to salvation.
- Only those who explicitly proclaim faith in Jesus
- Those who explicitly proclaim faith but also those who respond to God as they know God, even if they've never explicitly heard the message of Jesus.
- Those who receive it through the Church and its sacraments.
- Everyone, that eventually ALL will be saved through Jesus. Sometimes called Christian Universalism.

Ok, whose head hurts?!

What I've said to this point is more of a lecture, just giving information, than a sermon so as I wrap up I want to turn to the question of: *Why* does this information matter to me here and now, as I live my life each day in this community and this world with all that is going on? And what I want to say in response is that in some respects I've become less concerned with the details around atonement as I get older, but at the same time I continue to believe that how we go about understanding God's actions in accomplishing salvation, reconciliation, peace with God does matter in that it will impact how we show up in the world. Meaning that, if our emphasis is on the wrath and judgment of God and the depravity of humanity, we will likely show up in the world with a more judgmental, sin-

focused, fear-based posture. And if our emphasis is on the love and grace of God and their commitment to humanity we'll likely show up in the world with a more loving and gracious posture to others.

So as I think about the idea of salvation and peace with God and the different ideas people have put forth to try to explain it all, a couple things come to my mind regarding how this impacts us and how we live. So I want to close with and emphasize a couple thoughts here.

1. First, I believe there will *always* be an element of mystery to faith and that this reality is something we can embrace rather than something we feel the need to resolve or explain away entirely. This points back to our Lenten theme of dwelling in dissonance. This isn't to say we can't seek greater understanding and posit theories but that even in this process I think it is ok to accept the reality of our limited understanding, to have a posture of humility, to answer 'I don't fully know,' or 'I don't completely understand.' We can embrace mystery, we can embrace not-knowing, we can embrace humility. I remember a theologian writing that they were fond of beginning theological discussions with the phrase "I could be wrong, but..." An embrace of mystery can result in us showing up in the world with humility, something our world is in desperate need of and that can aid our efforts in peacemaking here and around the world.
2. Secondly, it strikes me that something each of these theories has in common with the others is this: God initiates. Like we read in 1 John 4:19 "**We love because God first loved us.**" However we understand the process of salvation, whichever theory seems to resonate more with us, it is something God initiates. What this says to me is that ultimately, we can trust God's heart toward humanity. We can trust that God is *for* humanity, *for* us. That God's heart is for our good, for our peace, for our joy. We can trust in the goodness of God.

And if that's true, how would that impact how we show up in the world? I think a faith in this reality of God's goodness, of God's good heart toward humanity, can lead us into a greater sense of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness... all the fruits of the Spirit.

If it is God Themselves that takes the initiative to solve the problem of 'how can humanity experience peace with God?', I think we can live with less fear and judgment which is partly what I think our passage from 1 John communicates

when it says, “**There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear expects punishment.**” If our ‘peace with God’ issue is solved by God then we are better able to experience peace ourselves and let this peace flow through us into the world as we live as peacemakers and as ambassadors of the Christ (2 Cor. 5:20).

My intention in speaking to this is in hope that a trust in the ultimate goodness of God can settle deeper in your spirits and so I want to close by reading Romans 8:31-39 which says:

What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written:

“For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.”^[i]

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,^[k] neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Benediction:

As you go from this place, may the deep love and peace of God settle deeper in your spirits. May you rest in the knowledge that God is for you. And may this knowledge lead you into sharing this love and peace with a world in need. Amen.