



## **Redemption Reconsidered** **The New Testament knows nothing of a "Theory of Atonement"**

This article is published in memory of Dwight A. Pryor who passed away on February 5, 2011.

That Jesus' death was an atoning sacrifice is affirmed repeatedly in the apostolic writings (e.g., [Romans 3:25](#); [1 John 2.2](#); [Hebrews 2:17](#)). But how the Messiah's death and resurrection saves us from sin and reconciles us to God, and why the Almighty chose this method to achieve such an end, is left unexplained.

The need for a logical explanation proved far more pressing to the Western, Roman mindset than to the first-century Jewish apostles. An eleventh-century philosopher named Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, proposed a doctrine of atonement that serves as the standard in Christian theology to this day. Called the "Satisfaction" theory, Anselm averred that Jesus' death "satisfies" the honor God is due as Creator and King—a responsibility deeply breached by the sin of Adam and subsequent humankind. As our representative, the Messiah died for us. His sinless life and selfless sacrifice restored the honor and glory due God's name and thereby expiates our offenses.

A variation on Anselm's doctrine is the prevailing Protestant paradigm, called the "Penal" theory, in which the emphasis is not so much on God's honor as His justice. The wages of sin must be paid, the wrath of a holy God must be propitiated, so that He can act favorably toward us and forgive. In this model Jesus dies instead of us, as our substitute—taking on Himself the penalty required by divine justice.

Theories by nature tend to limit the reality being defined. These theories of atonement, for example, reduce the essential saving work of the Messiah to a legal transaction (justification), with the focus being the individual's guilt.

The New Testament, by contrast, displays a more full-orbed view of atonement. It describes the multiple facets of the saving work of God in the Messiah not in theories but through a series of images drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures. Justification and expiation are among them, though far from dominant. Others include: conflict with and victory over evil, ransom and liberation, sacrifice and suffering, reconciliation and adoption.

Images are windows into which we can gaze and doors through which we can walk to explore the multidimensional mysteries of the work of God. When, for example, John the Baptizer declared, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" ([John 1:29](#)), evocations of Passover and Temple sacrifice would have resonated deeply in the hearts of his audience. The Passover motif, apropos to this season, is pregnant with implications profoundly relevant to every believer's walk of faith.

Here are three examples that receive little notice in the classical Evangelical purview:

1. Passover establishes a redemptive paradigm of grace (contra the bias that “Jews know nothing of grace, only Law”). The Almighty did not send Moses to the enslaved Israelites with the Ten Commandments in hand, saying, “If you keep these laws I will save you!” Revelation (with concomitant responsibility) follows redemption, and both are driven by grace.
2. The Israelites were saved in order to draw near and serve their Redeemer in this world. Redemption created a covenant community that would sanctify the name of the true and living God here and now. Evangelicalism tends to define redemption primarily as a legal transaction focused almost exclusively on the individual, with the goal being the world to come. Revelation is of secondary significance; discipleship is optional.
3. In classical Christian theories of atonement we are freed from the wrath of God. The core issue confronted in the original Passover, however, was freedom from an enslaving evil power. In this light, reconsider [Hebrews 2:14–15](#), that the Pioneer of our salvation died so that “through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.”

All the models of redemption and atonement imaged in the New Testament are treasures to be explored and truths to be affirmed. A fuller and more faithful image of God our Father will thereby emerge.

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