

DISCUSSED | alienation, the worm on the hook, ransom, guilt, divine wrath, genuine love

Atonement 101: *Reviewing the Text, Terms, and Metaphors of Atonement* | BY RICHARD RICE

Reprinted by permission of the publisher from *Reign of God: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., by Richard Rice (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1997), 191–199.

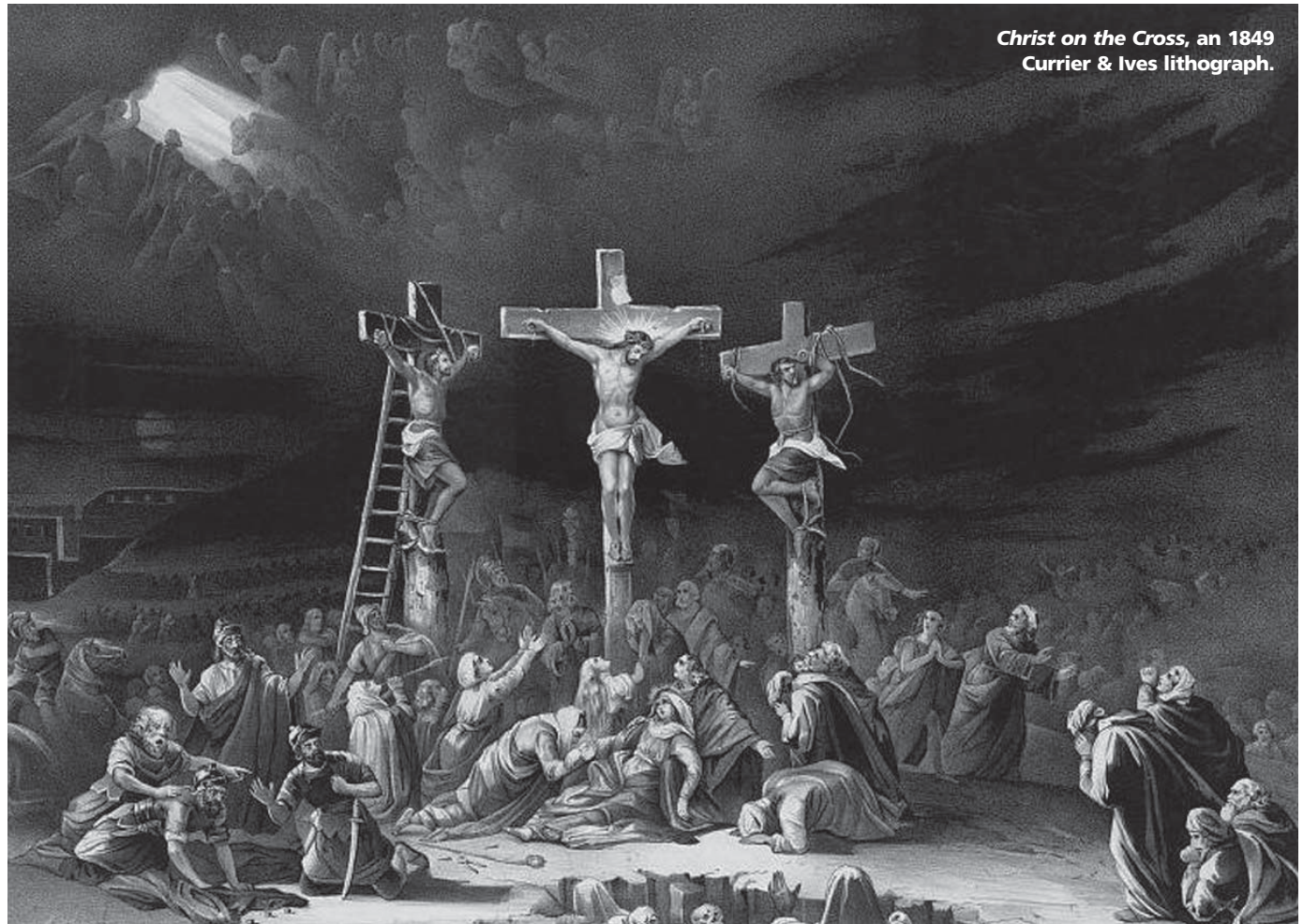
WHAT JESUS ACCOMPLISHED

We now face what is probably the most important question of all: What did Jesus' death accomplish? How does it solve the problem of sin? The New

Testament gives no single answer to this question. There is no one theory of atonement in the apostolic writings; in fact, there are no theories at all. What we find instead are several striking metaphors, or symbols, describing what Jesus did. There are too many to survey here, so we will concentrate on only a few of the most important.¹

Salvation

The most general and comprehensive term for the work of Christ is "salvation," an expression we have already



Christ on the Cross, an 1849 Currier & Ives lithograph.

HTTPS://WWW.PINTEREST.COM/TONYAR52010CURRIER-AND-IVES/

It is also significant that the New Testament always speaks of God as the subject of reconciliation, never as the object.

used a number of times. Romans 1:16 identifies the gospel as “the power of God unto salvation,” and “savior” is one of the important titles early Christians applied to Jesus (see Phil. 3:20). The very name of “Jesus,” in fact, points to His work of salvation (see Matt. 1:21).

This expression recalls the long history of God’s activity on behalf of the Hebrew people. According to the Old Testament, God is the deliverer, or savior, of His people, especially from Egyptian bondage and at the Red Sea (Ex. 15:2).

The Greek word for “save” can also mean “heal,” or “make whole,” as we have noted. This suggests that salvation involves both rescue and restoration. Christ not only delivers us from the power of sin, but also restores us to complete spiritual health.

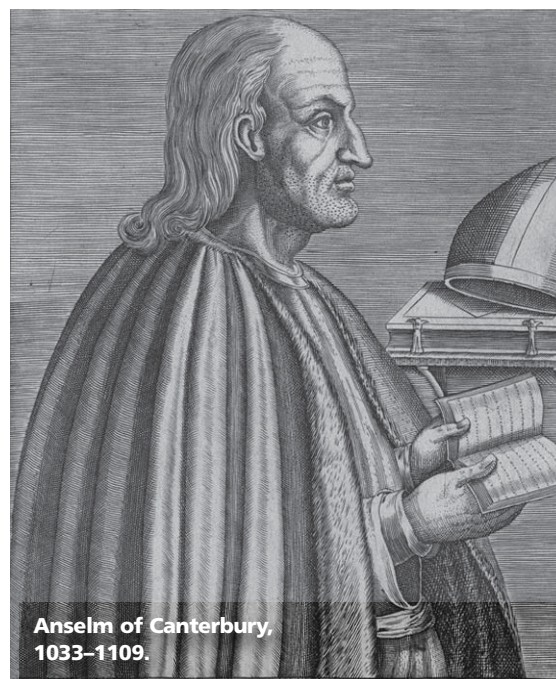
Reconciliation

“Reconciliation” is another important description of Christ’s work in the New Testament. “In Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19; cf. Rom. 5:10–11; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20). In Christ, God overcomes the alienation which sin causes and restores a condition of peace. Because Christ brings us the peace of God, we are able to live at peace with all human beings (Rom. 12:18).

The biblical idea of reconciliation has many facets. For one thing, it is cosmic in scope; it includes everything on earth and in heaven. It is also significant that the New Testament always speaks of God as the subject of reconciliation, never as the object. God reconciles us to Him; we do not reconcile Him to us. Moreover, God seeks us while we are still hostile to Him. He makes the first move to establish fellowship with us. Reconciliation, then, emphasizes God’s initiative in the work of salvation.

Redemption

The New Testament also speaks of Christ’s work as “redemption” (Eph. 1:7; Rom. 3:24). This word has powerful connotations for



**Anselm of Canterbury,
1033–1109.**

people in ancient times. Its basic meaning was to pay a price for freedom. It referred to the act of delivering captives, or liberating slaves from bondage. Like “salvation,” this word has a vivid Old Testament background. It, too, described God’s deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Mark 10:45 is the most important New Testament text to use this expression: “The Son of man came ... to give His life as a ransom for many.”

Scholars are divided as to whether the New Testament concept of redemption includes the idea of paying a price, or whether it is simply another word for deliverance. Either way, this description of Christ’s work makes several important points. For example, it indicates that the work of Christ delivers us from hostile powers—specifically, from sin and its effects. This reminds us of the freedom that Christians enjoy (Gal. 5:1); we are no longer dominated by the forces of darkness or in bondage to sin. At the same time, “redemption” emphasizes the cost of this deliverance. God’s solution to the problem of sin is enormously expensive. For this reason, Paul tells his readers that they were bought with a price; they belong to God (1 Cor. 6:20).

WHY JESUS DIED

We have reviewed several ways in which the New Testament describes the work of Christ, and before that we examined the atoning experience, or the means by which He achieved these things. We now come to what many regard as the most perplexing question in the doctrine of salvation: How does the death of Jesus solve the problems of sins? Granted that God was active in Christ for human salvation, and granted that His effort succeeded, the question remains: Just how did Christ's work achieve its results? What, precisely, made it effective?

Theories of Atonement

Christians have never reached a consensus in answer to this question. There is an orthodox doctrine of the person of Christ, but there is no corresponding doctrine of His work. Looking at the history of Christian thought, we find instead several prominent theories of atonement. Each has influenced the thinking of the church from time to time, but none has ever enjoyed unanimous support. It will be helpful to review the three most important types.²

1. The Ransom Theory One of the oldest interpretations of Christ's work is the ransom theory. Leaning heavily on biblical passages that speak of ransom, early Christian thinkers graphically portrayed Christ battling with the devil and defeating him once and for all. Sometimes they even described Christ as the worm on the hook which finally caught Satan. The atonement, for this theory, is God's dramatic victory over the hostile forces of sin and death.

2. The Satisfaction Theory The satisfaction theory has probably been more influential than any other. It received its classical formulation in the writings of Anselm, a churchman of the eleventh century, and it reflects the thought world of medieval times, with feudal lords and vassals and rigid codes of behavior.

According to this theory, human sin is an affront to the sovereignty of God, and God's honor demands satisfaction. This puts us in a terrible predicament. To use Anselm's words, "Sinful man owes God a debt for sin which he cannot repay, and at the same time . . . he cannot be saved without repaying it."³ Human beings cannot be saved unless God's honor is satisfied, but this is something we are in no position to do. We are only finite, and our debt to God is infinite.

In his famous essay, "Why the God-Man?" Anselm argues that Christ solves the problem by virtue of His two natures. As a human being, He makes payment to God on behalf of the human race. At the same time, His divinity gives the payment an infinite value. Consequently, our debt to God is completely discharged. Divine honor is fully satisfied. According to the satisfaction theory, the incarnation is essential to the atonement. Jesus Christ, as man, bore the penalty for human sin and made satisfaction on behalf of all of us.

One aspect of the satisfaction theory figures prominently in many accounts of the atonement. In fact, it is probably the dominant thought in popular explanations for Jesus' death. This is the element of substitution, the idea that Jesus steps in and takes our place before God. He gets what we deserve; we get what He deserves. He accepts the punishment that our sins incur, and we inherit the privileges that divine sonship involves.

3. The Moral Influence Theory The moral influence theory arose in reaction to the satisfaction theory. It emphasizes the effects of Christ's death on human beings, rather than on God. According to this view, the atonement is a revelation of the love of God, intended to call forth an answering love in humans. Christ's death saves us by vividly portraying God's love for us and moving us to love God in return.

We can specify the central differences in these three important positions by noting where each of them locates the obstacle to

God's
solution to
the problem
of sin is
enormously
expensive.

Just how

did Christ's

work achieve

its results?

What, precisely,

made it

effective?

divine-human fellowship. Each theory has a distinctive view of what it is that makes atonement necessary.

According to the moral influence theory, the obstacle to reconciliation lies within human beings; our misperception of God's character needs to be corrected. Christ removes this obstacle by clarifying God's true attitude toward us.

The satisfaction theory places the primary object of atonement within God Himself. According to views of this type, Christ's death satisfies the demands of God's own nature. Some of these views describe a tension within God between two contrasting qualities. His love, or mercy, makes Him eager to forgive; but His justice, or wrath, or holiness, makes it impossible for Him to forgive freely. Christ's death resolves this tension. With it, God's love provides the atonement which His holiness demands. God is merciful and just at the same time.

The ransom theory seems to place the object of atonement outside both God and humanity. It lies, instead, in the desperate situation human beings are in. We are the captives of alien powers. Sin, death, and the devil hold us in bondage. Christ saves us by breaking into their stronghold and setting us free.

The Theories Evaluated

Each theory of atonement has its strengths and weaknesses, and each view can distort certain features of Christ's work.

The strength of the ransom theory is its emphasis on God's saving initiative. Salvation is God's work from first to last. He is the source, not the object, of atonement. Furthermore, with its emphasis on the dramatic victory Christ achieved over all our enemies, this view has tremendous psychological value. It reminds us that everything has been done to secure our salvation. The path to freedom is wide open. All we have to do is take it.

The weakness of this theory is its literalistic imagery. It tends to portray the atonement as a transaction between God and the devil.

Some versions even suggest that God pays off the devil in order to set us free.

There are objections to the satisfaction theory, too. Many people find it too calculating, too much like a bookkeeping system, as if Christ accumulated credit by dying to pay off our debts to God. Sin, they insist, is a matter of personal relationship. It can't be quantified. It can't be disposed of by manipulating various accounts.

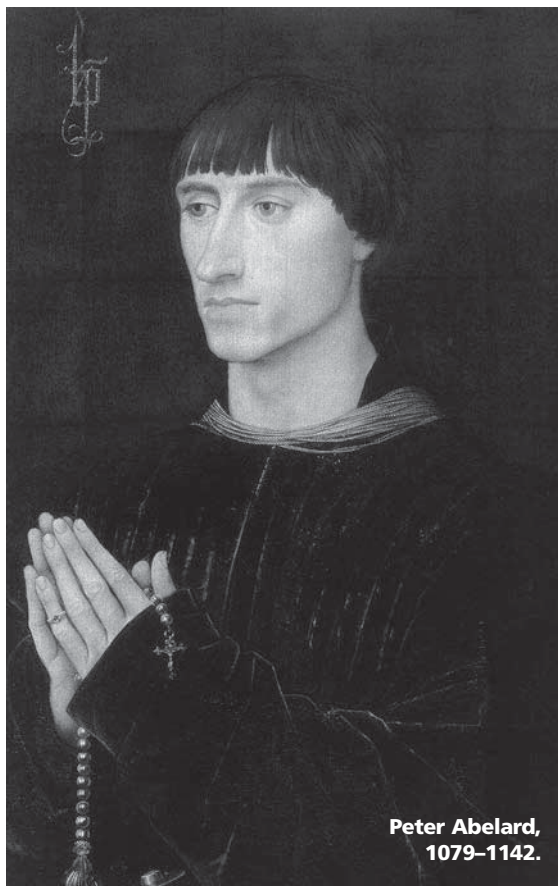
The idea of Christ as our substitute also raises questions. People wonder about the ethics of this arrangement, because personal guilt isn't something that can be transferred from one person to another. No judge in a modern legal system could allow an innocent citizen to go to prison in place of a convicted criminal. How would that serve the interests of justice?

The most important objection to this theory is that it makes God the object of reconciliation. In the satisfaction theory, humanity makes atonement (in the person of Christ), and God receives it. This is contrary to the consistent biblical theme that it is God who reconciles. For the writers of the New Testament, atonement is never something we do for God; it is always something God does for us.

On the other hand, the satisfaction theory underscores the seriousness of sin, as far as God is concerned. It suggests that a part of the process of forgiveness is a manifestation of God's judgment against it. Surely no understanding of Christ's work is adequate which fails to appreciate how repulsive sin is to God.

The moral influence theory has the merit of emphasizing God's initiative in salvation, which is certainly faithful to the Bible. However, some people feel that it slights the costliness of forgiveness, that it fails to account for the enormity of sin in the sight of God. As they see it, sin is objective as well as subjective. It is not merely an unfortunate misperception of God, but a reality that must be dealt with before salvation is complete.

According to its critics, the moral influence theory also has a tendency to detract from the



**Peter Abelard,
1079–1142.**

uniqueness of Christ's accomplishments. For them, this approach treats the cross as merely one of the many ways by which God communicates His love to the world. Since God has suffered from the inception of sin, and since He has always been eager to forgive, the cross did not make an unprecedented impact on God, nor was it indispensable to divine forgiveness. Accordingly, the cross represents a consequence, but not a condition, of God's willingness to forgive—the expression, but not the basis, of His grace. And such a view, they maintain, undermines the importance of what Jesus did.

TOWARD AN ADEQUATE VIEW OF THE ATONEMENT

As these observations indicate, there is no simple answer to the question: How does Christ's work solve the problem of sin? No single proposal seems adequate to the task. How, then, should we interpret the death of Jesus? What should our own view of the atonement be? It

is tempting to pull these various theories together to form one comprehensive explanation, but we could do this only by ignoring their basic differences. Instead, let us begin by listing several themes which any responsible interpretation of Christ's work must consider, and see where that leads us.

The Love of God

The most fundamental theme in any Christian doctrine of salvation must be the love of God. His vast and intense concern for every human being is the basis of His saving activity. This explains why God takes the initiative in meeting the problem of sin. As soon as sin entered the world, God acted to mitigate its consequences. In other words, salvation went into effect the moment it was needed. Some texts even suggest that God formulated a response to sin before it was actually needed. The book of Revelation, for example, describes Jesus as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8; cf. 1 Pet. 1:20).

The Cost of Forgiveness

God's eagerness to forgive must not obscure the spontaneity or the costliness of His love. God's response to sin is no mechanical, matter-of-fact reaction. People often assume that it is easy for God to forgive. A notorious sinner showed no concern for the hereafter. "God will forgive me," he said, as death drew near. "That is his business."⁴ There is no place in Christianity for such a casual attitude. We must never overlook the "difficulty" of God's forgiveness. Our salvation costs God dearly. Only the agony of the cross reveals the scope of divine suffering as a result of sin.

It may seem odd to insist that forgiveness is both natural and difficult for God at the same time. However, it is not always easy to do what comes naturally. A loving parent will "naturally" risk her life to save her child, but this doesn't make the action "easy" for her. So it was with God; even though He responded instantly to meet the problem of sin and will-

**We are
only finite,
and our debt
to God is
infinite.**

**Sin, death,
and the devil
hold us in
bondage. Christ
saves us by
breaking into
their stronghold
and setting
us free.**

ingly gave His only Son for our salvation, He did so at an inestimable cost. We must never lose sight of “love’s hard work.”

The Wrath of God

A careful analysis of divine love also helps us to understand the nature of divine wrath, or justice. As we saw, certain views of the atonement assume that God’s love and holiness are contrary forces, pulling in different directions. God’s love makes Him willing to forgive sinners, but His holiness requires Him to punish sin. The atonement, then, provides a way to meet the

demands of both attributes. The problem is that this idea equates wrath with vengeance and love with indulgence. A better way to interpret their relationship is to see God’s wrath as the expression, not the antithesis, of His love.⁵

Genuine love takes its object with utmost seriousness. Because God loves us, everything about us matters to Him, so He cannot ignore our sins. As one theologian writes, “God must be inexorable towards our sins; not because he is just, but because he is loving; not in spite of his love, but because of his love; not



Clyde Provonsha painted this interpretation of the Investigative Judgment in 1960 for the Review and Herald Publishing Association. It captures well the Adventist belief that Christ’s death and heavenly intercessory role are merged in the atonement process.

because his love is limited, but because it is unlimited ...”⁶ God’s wrath, then, is His loving response to sin. He finds it repulsive, disgusting. It distresses Him to see the ones He loves destroying themselves.

The Influence of God’s Love

In order for us to accept forgiveness, we need to know not only how much God loves us, but also how seriously He takes our sins. If this sounds odd, suppose that you deliberately said something to hurt a friend’s feelings, and then

felt sorry about it and asked forgiveness. Would you feel forgiven if your friend blithely dismissed the incident as if nothing had happened? Probably not. A flippant, casual attitude toward sin does not communicate forgiveness. To experience true forgiveness, we need to know that our sins are taken seriously. A manifestation of God's hatred for sin, therefore, plays an important role in communicating His love to us. It shows us how important we are to Him.

A Synthetic View of the Atonement

Once we bring God's love and wrath together, we see that atonement is not something an angry God demands, but something a loving God provides. As the supreme manifestation of His judgment against sin, the sacrifice of Christ is the supreme demonstration of God's love for sinners. His wrath is thus part and parcel of His love; it affirms the immense value God places on us.

This view of the atonement emphasizes the impact of Christ's work on our perception of God. In some respects, then, it resembles the moral influence theory. But it also stresses the importance of divine judgment in the process of forgiveness, and it insists that reconciliation is entirely the work of God. Thus, it shares some of the characteristics of the satisfaction and ransom theories, too.

Perhaps we need a variety of views of Christ's work. A great natural wonder like the Grand Canyon, or the Himalayas, invites us to look at it from many vantage points. It never ceases to impress us, and no one perspective captures its grandeur. To a far greater degree, Christ's accomplishments defy our powers of description. The more we reflect on the meaning of the cross, the more amazing it becomes. God's condescension in assuming humanity, and His mysterious willingness to bear the consequences of sin, will challenge our minds and stir our emotions forever. Eternity will not be time enough to plumb the depths of love revealed at Calvary.

THE CROSS OF CHRIST AND THE REIGN OF GOD

No aspect of salvation history tells us more about the reign of God than Jesus' crucifixion; for if Jesus is the key to understanding God, as we argued in Chapter 3, and if the cross is the central moment in Jesus' life, as we asserted earlier in this chapter, then the cross is indispensable to an adequate understanding of God. What do we learn about the reign of God from the cross of Christ?

The most obvious message from Calvary concerns the magnitude of God's love. According to the most famous text in the Bible, God loved the world so much that He gave His only Son to bring human beings eternal life (John 3:16). In giving the Son, God gave everything He had to give. He held nothing in reserve. Had the Son's mission failed, there was no alternative plan, no backup. There was no rescue that could have reversed the dreadful consequences. So, everything was "on the line" when the Son entered the sphere of human existence.

Behind the risk of the incarnation lay the risk inherent in divine creation. God created a world whose inhabitants had the capacity to accept or reject His sovereignty over them. A God of love could never be content with sheer domination. It was not enough for Him to have creatures cower before His superior might. Because He loved them, He hoped they would love Him in return, so He gave them the capacity to make their own decisions. Even when they rebelled against Him, His love persisted. He sought, not to punish them, but to achieve reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19–21). The cross reveals the extent to which God went in order to win back His errant sons and daughters.

In revealing the magnitude of God's love, the cross also reveals the depth of God's pain. Identifying God with Jesus leads to the conclusion that what Jesus experienced in the depths of His anguish was something God Himself experienced. As Kenneth Leech puts it, "The cross is a rejection of the apathetic God ... and an asser-

**No judge
in a modern
legal system
could allow
an innocent
citizen to go
to prison
in place of a
convicted
criminal.**

Once we bring
God's love
and wrath
together, we
see that
atonement is
not something
an angry
God demands,
but something
a loving God
provides.

tion of the passionate God, the God in whose heart there is pain, the crucified God.¹⁷ If the Word truly became flesh, if God was indeed in Christ, then the most significant experience Jesus went through was something God endured as well. The cross is nothing less than the suffering of God.

Moreover, Jesus' suffering brings to full expression the agony that God has endured ever since sin entered the universe. To quote Leech again, "There must have been a Calvary in the heart of God before it could have been planted on that hill outside . . . Jerusalem."¹⁸ Only the cross, then, reveals the full extent of what sin and salvation cost the heart of God.

Finally, the cross tells us important things about the nature of God's reign. It demonstrates that God characteristically establishes His sovereignty in subtle and surprising ways. God can even use apparent defeat to gain victory. He employs unimpressive means to achieve grand purposes. From a human perspective, Jesus' great victory was nothing but a personal catastrophe. His mission to the Jews ended in abject failure; He was vilified by His enemies, forsaken by His friends. Yet, according to Christian faith, the drama of the ages turned on this "minor" incident during the Roman occupation of Palestine. Characteristically, then, God does not achieve His purposes through dramatic displays of supernatural power. He does not establish His reign through the application of sheer force. Instead, He works in and through events, many of the outwardly insignificant.

This principle applies in a special way to God's victory over the forces of darkness. He does not counter their blatant displays with His own. He defeats them by absorbing the full force of their power, by appearing to give them victory. He lets them rage and storm until they are completely spent. God ultimately destroys evil by letting it destroy itself.

The cross and the resurrection are the two central facts of Christian faith. Both are basic to the reign of God. The true meaning of the cross emerges in light of the empty tomb. What

appeared to be total defeat turned out to be a glorious victory. Jesus submitted to death only to break its power forever. ■

Richard Rice studied at La Sierra University, the Andrews University Theological Seminary (MDiv) and the University of Chicago Divinity School (MA; PhD). He was a pastor in the Southeastern California Conference, then a member of the religion faculty at La Sierra, and is now professor of religion at Loma Linda University.



In 2014, Intervarsity Academic published his book, *Suffering and the Search for Meaning*. A version of this paper was presented at the 2015 meeting of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies.

References

1. Leon Morris provides an extensive analysis of the various New Testament descriptions of salvation in *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1955). In addition to "reconciliation" and "redemption," he also discusses the meaning of "covenant," "the blood," "propitiation," and "justification." Morris' view of the atonement is noteworthy for its emphasis on divine wrath and for preferring the use of the English word "propitiation," rather than "expiation," to interpret some important biblical passages (see 154).
2. The most influential discussion of the three major theories of atonement is Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969).
3. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, Bk. 1, ch. 25, trans. Eugene R. Fairweather, in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 145–146.
4. Quoted in D. M. Baillie, *God Was in Christ: An Essay on Incarnation and Atonement* (New York: Scribner's, 1948), 172.
5. Many theologians have made this point, among them Anders Nygren. Nygren rejects the idea that the atonement resolves a tension within God between holiness and love, in favor of the view that "atonement is necessary, not because God's love is holy, but because it is love" (*Essence of Christianity: Two Essays*, trans. Philip S. Watson [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960], 117–118).
6. Baillie, *God Was in Christ*, 173.
7. Kenneth Leech, *Experiencing God: Theology as Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 316.
8. *Ibid.*, 300.