

“Rethinking the Cross; Understanding Christus Victor Theory.”

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Sunday, March 24, 2024 *Palm Sunday

It is fitting that on this Palm Sunday—a day spent remembering that Jesus rides into Jerusalem as our humble King—that we look at what kind of victory his death would bring about. Today we take our sixth and final turn of the gem this Lent, by looking at the cross through the angle of what’s called the ***Christus Victor Theory of atonement; in Latin “Christ the Victor.”*** Right off the bat, I want you to know that Christus Victor Theory is really just a reinterpretation of the classical understanding of Ransom Theory, which we talked about a few weeks ago. Swedish theologian, Gustaf Aulén, is well known for his articulation of Christus Victor... but many, many theologians have followed in his footsteps, including Greg Boyd, NT Wright, Eleonore Stump, Denny Weaver, J Louis Martyn, Mike Heiser, and Brian Zahnd... just to name a few.

Now, remember that in Ransom Theory, Christ's death is a ransom paid to the powers of evil, which had held humanity captive since our fall into sinfulness. But God was willing to die to free humanity from their slavery to sin, death, and the devil. And his death does two things... first, it frees humanity by paying the ransom and second, it also beats Satan at his own game, ultimately destroying death through resurrection life. This is how the early church and biblical writers most consistently understood and articulated what happened at the cross, which is why it’s often called the “classic view” of atonement.

But in Christus Victor Theory, the emphasis is shifted *away* from paying a ransom and *toward* God’s victory over evil. As even the meaning of the term “Christus Victor” indicates, the meaning of the cross is understood in terms of the rescue and liberation of humanity and the victory over all the evil powers that hold us captive. In the cosmic battle of good vs. evil, of light vs. darkness, of God vs. Satan ... Christ is victorious, Christ wins the war.

Now, in Christus Victor Theory, WHY Jesus died is of utmost importance. We have to talk about the plight of humanity. Why does Jesus need to save us? What do we need saving from? Theologian Elenore Stump explains this really well. Prior to the cross, humanity is enslaved to the power of sin, they have become prisoners of war to the powers of evil... but this problem is really two-fold. On the one hand, there is a part of each of us that *knows* we’re trapped, that *recognizes* we’re enslaved to sin. We know it and we’re miserable; we’re victims of sin. We hate our chains and we can’t get free. But

then, on the other hand, there's often a part of us that *loves* our enslavement. We *love* our chains, our little idols, and our sinful habits. We're not trying to break free, rather we're addicted to our enslavement, there's a part of us that loves it.

One writer described this as the difference between the characters of 'Edmund' in *The Chronicles of Narnia* and 'Gollum' from *The Lord of the Rings*. Edmund hates his slavery to the White Witch; he's miserable in his captivity and desperate to be free. But Gollum, on the other hand, loves his enslavement to the power of the ring. He calls it, "my precious." Even though it's transformed him into a monster, he'll do anything for it, he's addicted.

John's gospel explains this two-fold meaning well. Hear it now from Eugene Peterson's translation of *The Message* (3:16-21): **"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life. God didn't go to all the trouble of sending his Son merely to point an accusing finger, telling the world how bad it was. He came to help, to put the world right again. Anyone who trusts in him is acquitted; anyone who refuses to trust him has long since been under the death sentence without knowing it. And why? Because of that person's failure to believe in the one-of-a-kind Son of God when introduced to him. This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure. But anyone working and living in truth and reality welcomes God-light so the work can be seen for the God-work it is." -John 3:16-21**

So often humanity chooses to sit in darkness; a darkness that's explained in the gospels as willful ignorance, as spiritual blindness. People saw the light of Christ, but they loved the darkness instead. In John's gospel, unbelief is the epitome of sin. In our sin and unbelief, we remain captives to this darkness, unable to free ourselves, even content to remain in bondage. We are both victims and addicts, sometimes at the same time. We have a little Edmund and Gollum in us all.

Christus Victor Theory argues that this captivity to sin is not just a subplot in the story of scripture, but rather is at the very center of the biblical narrative in both the Old and New Testaments. But as you've heard me say before, please remember that in

scripture, sin is so much less about our personal failings or moral infractions, and so much more about the cosmic power of evil. It's not that whatever terrible thing you said last Tuesday or whatever selfish thing you did yesterday doesn't matter, it's just that those things are only the smoke to the much larger fire. The Bible spends its energy talking about the larger fire, conceptualizing sin as the principalities and powers of Satan, death, and evil. In scripture, humanity is described as under the power of sin (Rom 3:9; 1 Cor 15:56; Gal 3:22). Sin exercises dominion over us (Rom 5:21; 6:12, 7:14, 14) and can even dwell in us (Rom 7:17, 20, 23); we're enslaved to it (Rom 6:6–7, 16–18, 20; 7:14). And sin leads to death (Rom 5:12, 21; 6:23; 8:2).

As captives to this much larger power of evil, we don't merely need a pardon for the deeds that landed us in captivity. We need to be released and set free... "transferred" from the prison of sin and death, to God's kingdom of light and life. It's not that scripture ever denies that our sins need to be forgiven—of course they do! —but it's that scripture is trying to help us understand that the problem is something far more deeply rooted: sinners sin because they have become captive to the power of sin. We need liberation, we need Christ to be victorious.

And thanks be to God, this is what happens on the cross. Christ, the Son of God, came to set us free... to bring life and life abundant... to not only open the prison door but through the power of the Holy Spirit, to just keep extending the invitation, as long as we need it, to live in freedom... Christ has broken every chain. We don't have to be afraid anymore because as the author of Hebrews writes, **"by his death Jesus breaks the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and frees those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."** - Hebrews 2:14b-15

Paul too puts it beautifully when he writes that in Christ, **"God has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins"** -Col 1:13–14. Now, the order of the action is important: God has rescued us; God has transferred us into the kingdom; it is the rescuing work of Christ that brings us forgiveness. Paul does not write, "God forgives us so that he can *then* rescue us." Rather, God rescues us out of darkness—while we were yet sinners—and brings us into the kingdom of his beloved Son and that rescue act—the victory of Christ—that is what saves us. God's victory is what atones for us. Or as Paul says, **"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them."** -2 Cor 5:19

In the Christus Victor view, the primary question to be asked and answered is not, what do WE have to do to be reconciled to God? Instead, the better question is, what has GOD done for us? The answer is that the death of Jesus was necessary, not as a payment to death, or as the penalty for sin, but as the victorious means by which God—who is LIFE and LOVE itself—entered into the farthest reaches of the destruction created by sin—into DEATH itself—so that we could be saved! The victory of Christ is what happens on the cross.

Greg Boyd summarizes the biblical thrust of Christ's victory over evil well:

“According to the New Testament, the central thing Jesus did was drive out the “ruler of this world (John 12:31). He came to “destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8). He came to “destroy the one who has the power of death, that is the devil” in order to “free those who, all their lives, were held in slavery by the fear of death” (Heb. 2:14-15). Jesus lived, died, and rose again to establish a new reign that would ultimately “put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor. 15:25). Though “the strongman” was “fully armed,” one who was “stronger than he” had finally arrived who could attack and overpower him (Luke 11:21-22). While the cosmic “thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy,” Jesus came into the world to vanquish the thief so that all “may have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Jesus “disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them” (Col. 2:15). In a word, Jesus came to end the cosmic war that had been raging from time immemorial and to set Satan’s captives free” (Luke 4:18; Eph. 4:8).

So according to scripture, while we certainly need forgiveness *FOR* the sins we commit, we also need freedom *FROM* the sin we're enslaved to and I'll even add, from those sins that are committed against us. This is exactly what Jesus accomplishes in his life, death, and resurrection. In Christ we can be free and forgiven and healed.

But I imagine, that like me, there are plenty of days that you might not feel very forgiven, very free, or very healed. This world is still a hot mess and on our worst days, we are too. I'm willing to bet that all of us can sometimes hear the voice of the enemy whisper in our ear, “You're not enough. You'll never be free of that terrible thing. You're always going to be this way. Life really is as hopeless as you fear. Did God really say... Did God really set you free? You really should be ashamed. You aren't worth loving.” So many painful lies. Even more, we turn on the news and can read on, and on of all the tragedy

and pain and violence in our world. Like me you might wonder, if Christ has been victorious, why doesn't it feel like that?

During WWII, there are countless stories of people sitting in bombed out cities, or in concentration camps, or as prisoners of war inside jail cells... that after years of violence could only wonder if they'd make it through another day. Would they starve, would they be killed, would it all end in death? But as they sat there in anxiety, in loneliness, in grief and in defeat, on May 8, 1945, the loudspeakers and sirens started blaring: "The Allied Forces have won the war! Germany has surrendered! The war is over!" Prisoners were set free, camps were shut down, people tentatively spilled out into the streets because the war was finally over. It would take them a very long time to rebuild, a very long time to grieve what had been lost, but the war had finally been won.

So, it is with Christ through his death and resurrection. While we still may feel war-torn, fraught with the anxieties and grief of this world that has been ravaged by a long and crippling war with sin and death... the battle is over. The war has been won... and it has been won in victorious fashion because of the cross of Christ. In Christ, we are indeed the champions, we are indeed the victors. Whatever the last death throes of sin, death, and the devil we might face... whatever the enemy may still occasionally whisper in our ears... we are not held captive to evil. As scripture encourages us, we are to pray with authority and in the power of the Spirit; "not today, Satan. I am a beloved, forgiven, redeemed child of God and you have no authority here. Get behind me." Friends, take heart... Scripture declares that there is a final expiration clock on evil. Death really has been defeated but we are still in this in between time—what we often call the 'now and not yet'—while we await the culmination of God's Kingdom at the return of Christ.

Hold fast to this truth: from beginning to end, God is forever lovingly turned toward us for our liberation and resurrection. Sin is powerful; death is powerful; but they are not all powerful. The cross has defeated them all. The war has been won. Or as Paul put it: **"Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."** -I Cor 15:55-57 Captivity is no longer the destiny of those who are in Christ, we have been set free. Indeed, Christ is the victor!