

“Rethinking the Cross; Understanding Atonement Theology: Ransom Theory.”
First Presbyterian Church; Jamie White
Sunday, March 3, 2024

Hear the Word of the Lord from Mark 10:42-45, **“Jesus called them (disciples) together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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.”**”

1 Timothy 2:5-6; **“For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.”** The Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

We are continuing our sermon series, “rethinking the cross: understanding atonement theology” this morning with our third turn of the gem. We started by looking at the sacrificial system, then last week we looked at Moral Influence theory, and today we are looking at what’s called Ransom Theory.

Joe and I hope that this sermon series acts like an invitation. An invitation to embrace the diversity of language that the New Testament and Christians throughout history have used to describe what it means that Christ died for us. I personally find so much comfort in the truth that God is described in some many ways throughout scripture. Salvation is not one dimensional or static.

And yet... I can also imagine the opposite reaction. I wonder if any of you feel like throwing up your hands and saying, “the bible is just too complicated. This sermon series is really hard to follow, and I can’t keep all of these theories straight. Help!”

If that’s you, I want to give you a little encouragement and then put another tool in your hand for understanding atonement theology better. First, I want to encourage you to take a step back and not put pressure on yourself to try and ‘master’ God or to perfectly arrange every aspect of salvation in your mind. Instead, try thinking about love songs. No one thinks love songs are too complicated right? But, because love is so expansive and so full of wonder, we can’t capture it with just one image. And so, sometimes music compares love to being addicted or even going crazy/going mad. Sometimes a song talks about fighting for love. We have songs like “prisoner to love” or “love is a battlefield.” Some describe love in a more physical way, with songs like

“take my breath away” or “love is the heart.” Sometimes love is compared to what seems totally random; “watermelon sugar” anyone?

What I am trying to say is that we understand that these songs can be powerful ways to explain the massive concept of love in ways that actually deepen our understanding of love, rather than confuse us. And so, while we turn the gem, remember that what we are doing is trying to describe God’s love in Christ as displayed on the cross. The cross is so big we need a ton of images and stories to even begin to capture it.

Now, I want to give you a tool that can help when learning about atonement theologies. Whenever I come to an atonement theory, I want to ask three simple questions.

- 1. What are we being saved from?**
- 2. What are we being saved for?**
- 3. What are the means by which we are saved? How does this save us?**

Today, for Ransom theory, here’s where we are headed:

- 1. What are we being saved from? Slavery to Sin, Death, and the Devil (Evil).**
- 2. What are we being saved for? Citizenship in the Kingdom of God. Freedom from sin, death, and the devil.**
- 3. How are we are atoned? A ransom is paid by Jesus’ death.**

I want to give an up-front caveat: we’re going to talk about Satan a lot this morning. Don’t be freaked out. ha-satan: "the satan" is understood throughout scripture as the adversary of God, or the accuser of fallen humanity. Satan and demons, as best we can guess from the limited texts that describe their origin, were originally created by God for goodness but at some point, chose to rebel, leading to their cosmic fall. Please do not picture a scary man with a pitchfork, horns, and red leather outfit. What we’re really talking about is the personification of evil. The New Testament describes the demonic as the “the principalities and powers” bent on destruction and death in our world. So, as we speak this morning, I’d invite you to enlarge your imagination and try not to picture a ‘red devil!’ We don’t have time to do a deep dive on satan today, but we’ve got to bring it up because Ransom Theory deals directly with satan.

Ransom theory is pretty interesting. For instance, when Joe preached on the sacrificial system, he pointed to long arguments in books like Hebrews and Romans, where the logic is explicitly laid out. But we don’t have anything like that for Ransom

Theory. There are clearly passages that describe Jesus' death as a ransom paid for humanity, in fact it is the one and only place where Jesus himself describes what his death means. He says it is a ransom for many. But these passages that mention the word ransom, they don't explain who the ransom is being paid to or why that payment is accepted.

The word translated ransom in our new testaments is **λυτρον (Lutron)** this word especially referred to **a manumission price (a price paid for the freedom of a slave)**. Sometimes it is called a liberty-price. This concept of a ransom has an exchange between two parties intrinsic to the word. So, we know that Jesus is the one who pays the ransom, but it's not immediately clear who Jesus is paying. The early church associated Satan with the one who we are ransomed from. This is the classical account of Ransom Theory. Let's talk about why.

The earliest Christians believed Satan was the one paid a ransom because of two very strong biblical themes. The first, is that Christ's death is described as a ransom. Again, we already covered that this is how Jesus himself describes the meaning of his death. However, the second part of the equation concerning Satan is also quite logical. The gospel accounts are clear that Satan is Jesus' primary adversary. Satan is the one who first opposes Jesus' vocation as Israel's messiah in the temptations of the desert and by the time we get to Christ's Crucifixion we are told that it is *at least in part* being orchestrated by Satan.

But not only that, the New Testament says that:

Satan's rule extends over the whole world (1 John 5:19)

Christ says that Satan was the ruler of that current age (John 12:31, 14:30)

Satan offers Jesus the kingdoms of the world (Luke 4:5-8, Matt. 4:8-10)

Paul describes Satan as "the god of this world" (2 Corinthians 4:4)

So, for the early church the most logical solution was that if we were being purchased, if we were being freed from captivity, then Satan is the most likely oppressor that we need freedom from. So, because of the prevalence of Ransom language and the pervasive sense of the New Testament that Satan is the "ruler of this age" the overall narrative of the gospels is read in this light. Let's explore the gospel narrative as a whole, as a big picture, to understand how this showdown between the devil and Jesus takes place.

Let's start with the temptation accounts of Jesus because this sets the whole stage for Ransom Theory. The temptation accounts of Jesus are an incredibly important part of

the gospel narratives that can often be overlooked. Once Jesus is baptized, he goes into the desert and fasts for forty days and forty nights. At the end of this, Jesus is hungry, and Satan shows up to tempt him, addressing him saying, “if you are the son of God.” Satan then gives him three temptations, all of which Jesus resists.

What’s going on here? The passage is clueing us in on a couple important details. Why does it say that Jesus fasted for forty days and forty nights? For the Jews witnessing these events and the first readers of this gospel it would be impossible to miss that Jesus was reenacting the exodus story. Being baptized in the Jordan and immediately entering the desert for forty days, seems an unavoidable parallel with the Israelites crossing the Red Sea and wandering in the desert for forty years. There is a new exodus story being told and **Jesus is the new Israel**. So what? The significance of this retelling is that Jesus is going to succeed where Israel failed.

Jesus is the new Israel, but this passage is also pointing to **Jesus is the new Adam**. Romans 5 explicitly says that Jesus is a new Adam. Adam represents humanity before Jesus, but now Jesus is the one who stands up for humanity. Sin and death enter the world through Adam, but life comes from Jesus, the new Adam. This moment of resisting the temptations of Satan is where that reversal begins. Adam and Eve are tempted by the ancient serpent and thus plunge humanity into slavery to sin, death, and the devil. But then Jesus comes along, reenacting the story of Israel and of Adam and so of all humanity. So, the temptation account sets the stage for the entire drama of salvation.

For a moment, let’s try and forget what you know about the story. Try and forget what you know about Jesus. We know that Israel is waiting for their messiah, they know that God promised to redeem them with this new King who would set things right. If Israel knows this is coming, then Israel’s adversary Satan also knows this is coming and so he is waiting and watching.

The moment that most likely grabs Satan’s attention is when John the Baptist begins preaching that the kingdom of God is near. Then he baptizes this guy Jesus and out of the sky a dove descends, and the voice of God the Father declares that “this is my Son, in whom I am well pleased.” This is why it is significant that Satan says, “if you are the son of God” because he is referring to Jesus’ baptism. Satan is clued in that God is doing something... and it seems like the promised messiah might be emerging.

So, Satan goes to his tried-and-true playbook. Tempt the humans, they fail every time. Even the greatest of God’s servants can’t resist the promises of power, money,

status, etc. So, this episode of the temptation of Jesus is Satan trying to cut God's plan off at the knees. Just like he did with Adam, Cain, Noah, Abraham, David, and so on and so forth. But then something unexpected happens, something that has never happened. This Jesus human resists the temptations, the human is a worthy champion of God. And so, Satan retreats and begins to scheme and plot. And over the course of Jesus' ministry Satan tries to derail Jesus. He sends demons and opposition, but Jesus passes every test and defeats every challenge. Jesus is the new Adam and the new Israel, and he starts to remake Israel around him by choosing 12 disciples just like the 12 tribes, and then he sends out 70 disciples like the 70 elders that Moses appoints to rule over the people. And when these seventy go out they say that they have power over the demons and Jesus affirms what they are saying and adds, **"I saw Satan fall from the sky like lightning."** -Luke 10:18

Satan is backed into a corner. Humanity is starting to get their act together and it is all because of this Jesus character. Satan is getting desperate; he's losing his grip. All of his old tools don't work on this Messiah. Temptation and opposition, nothing is derailing God's plan for salvation. And so, Satan decides the only way to foil God's plan is to kill Jesus. Little did he know, killing Jesus would be his downfall.

Satan is so desperate to stop Jesus that he accepts Jesus in place of the rest of humanity. Jesus offers his own life as a ransom for the freedom of all of humanity. But Satan misses one crucial detail, killing Jesus wasn't going to end God's plan of salvation, it would become the cornerstone of God's plan. Satan thought he was winning on Good Friday and didn't realize he was laying his own trap.

Now, this is the critical part where we don't have passages in the gospels that explicitly lay this part out. You might be scratching your head like, "ok, this makes sense, but I am missing that story in the bible where Jesus and Satan sit down and negotiate this trade."

Fair point. However, no one who advocates for ransom theory would say that if you set up a video camera during Jesus' life you could have captured a literal negotiation where this was all hashed out. This is a cosmic mystery, and the language is metaphorical. Ransom theory belongs to the genre of narrative storytelling, not to reproducible scientific experimentation.

But like each atonement theory, there are some important critiques we need to consider in Ransom theory. I want to respond to two of the most common critiques because I think they can be incredibly illuminating.

Critique 1: paying Satan a ransom gives him too much credit. It is problematic to say that Satan has a legitimate claim over us, and it implies that Satan is owed something from God.

1. Now, this only stands if we take this as a singular atonement theory hyper-literally.
2. However, we also need to temper what we mean by saying that Satan had dominion over us.
3. Here I like to use the example of a childhood playground dispute. Think of capture the flag or even freeze tag. The losing team of children can end up as hostages as part of the game rules that they agreed to. Now imagine that my 5-year-old decides to play with a group of older, bigger kids and then up a hostage in the game. There is a real sense that a gaggle of children have dominion over my child. But there is also the reality that at any point I could simply push past a bunch of 10-year-olds and grab my child, anytime I wanted to. It would be inappropriate for me to overpower children though. What would be far more appropriate would be to deescalate the situation. Probably the best situation would be to actually play by their rules and win the game. This would secure my child, but it would also deescalate with the children and perhaps even win them over. This is akin to what God accomplished in paying a ransom to Satan... he beat the devil at his own game.

Critique 2: Winning salvation by an injustice (deceit/tricking the devil) isn't appropriate of God.

1. This also only stands if we take this hyper-literally.
2. However, it also depends on what we mean by "trick." One version of this would be that God actually conceals things from Satan or lies. However, I think the far more likely version is that Satan is self-deceived. Satan is so blinded by his own deceptions that he can't see the deeper truths involved when dealing with God. Satan believes that power is the greatest good in the world and this blinds him to the deeper goods.
3. Lord of the rings example: Only the hobbits could have taken the ring into Mordor because Sauron doesn't recognize them as a threat. He would expect a Gandalf or Aragorn to try and defeat him. This is the same type of blindness Satan has.

4. Narnia Example: The white witch accepts the swap of Aslan for Edmund because enemies like the white witch hold power as the greatest good and therefore death is their greatest tool (and greatest fear). The white witch truly believes that by killing Aslan she would win the war. However, she didn't recognize the deeper magic that Aslan represents which is love.

These critiques have led to an expansion of ransom theory to include not just satan, but all of sin, death, the devil, and evil. Jesus, being the author of life, cannot stay dead. So, like we quote in the creed, he descends into death—going all the way down—and defeats it from the inside. Jesus defeats death by death.

We know that evil and sin and death are still prevalent today... we still struggle with these daily ourselves... but here is the hope of the cross of Christ: whatever it is that binds you up, Christ can break every chain. Whatever it is that feels like you just can't quit doing, the power of sin does NOT have ultimate authority over you. God has defeated sin, death, and devil. Jesus has paid our ransom. In Christ you are set free. Amen.