

Ten Ways God Works Through the Cross and Resurrection to Provide Salvation¹

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God's saving work through the cross and resurrection is richer and deeper than any of our explanations of it. To claim that one theory of the atonement is the full and complete explanation is limiting. We need more of the cross, not less. Unfortunately many advocates of the penal satisfaction theory of the atonement claim it is *the* one explanation. In addition most articulations of penal satisfaction are shaped and formed by our society's understanding of justice. This diminishes other biblical imagery of atonement and leads us to place the emphasis on retribution rather than on the richer and more transformative biblical concept of restorative justice. Allowing the broader biblical narrative to shape our understanding of the atonement enables us to more readily experience the full saving significance of the cross. A richer, deeper, more broadly biblical atonement teaching would greatly aid and enrich evangelism, discipleship and mission today.²

Someone recently said to me, "You have written a book on the atonement,³ it was very helpful, but if Jesus' death on the cross does not provide for our salvation by appeasing God and satisfying God's demand for punishment, how does the cross save? Could you give me a brief answer?" Rather than giving a single answer I sought to give the person a sense of the depth and breadth of the saving significance of the cross by listing a number of explanations and images. I have added an item or two to the list, but basically what follows is the list I gave to that person "off the top of my head." In this article, in contrast to the original answer, I have, provided a brief explanation of each point. What follows is not exhaustive in two senses. First, the list could be lengthened, especially through adding images—biblical and contemporary. Second, the explanations of each point are sketches—hopefully enough to help readers understand my points, but certainly not enough to answer all the questions you may have.⁴

SAVED FROM WHAT?

The Bible portrays God's saving action as wide and deep. We observe God saving people from

¹ This article is an excerpt from and adaptation of an article which was published, in different forms, in *Direction: A Mennonite Brethren Forum* (Spring 2007), and *Global Dictionary of Theology* (InterVarsity, 2008).

² For a short article giving real life examples of the benefits of a broader and deeper understanding of the atonement see: <http://www.mbseminary.edu/baker/atonement>

³ Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000).

⁴ I set out to answer the question of how salvation is accomplished without using the concept of penal satisfaction. I decided, however, to not explicitly mention penal satisfaction and contrast it with what I am doing at each stage. I only mention it once. I recognize that some readers will have many questions about how I can critique, and leave out, something that, from your perspective may be the one and only explanation of the atonement. I have explained my position on penal satisfaction at length in a book and in chapters in books, and refer you to those writings Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts*; Mark D. Baker, "Embracing a Wider Cross: Contextualizing the Atonement" in *Out of the Strange Silence*, ed. Brad Thiessen (Hillsboro, KS: Kindred, 2005) 29-47; and Mark D. Baker, "Contextualizing the Scandal of the Cross" in *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, ed. Mark D. Baker (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 9-26.

many things, including: slavery, oppression, hunger, illness, hopelessness, injustice, guilt, shame, death, and demonic oppression. God demonstrates an interest in what we might call an integral salvation that leaves out no part of our lives. When we look beneath the surface of the things listed above that we are saved from, our exploration eventually gets back to sin and the disruption of relationship described in Genesis 3. At that moment of listening to the lie of the serpent and failing to trust and obey God, Adam and Eve became alienated from themselves, from each other, from God and from creation. The ripple effect of that alienation and sin has spread out through history and all of creation.

The biblical concept of sin is broad and deep. Sin is missing the mark (Rom. 3:23). It is rebellion against God, also likened to marital infidelity (Hos. 8:1; Jer. 3). It also is described as not living up to one's potential (Prov. 1:24-25, 29-33). Sin is transgressing the law (Daniel 9:11; I John 3:4). Sin is ungratefulness, idolatry and failing to honor God; it is picking the wrong way, or losing one's way (Jer. 3:21; Rom. 1:21-23). Sin contaminates; it makes one unclean or impure, and thus separated from the Holy God (Is. 6:5; Lam. 1:9). Sin is as an enslaving force (Rom 6:12; 7:14). We could go on, but this is enough to communicate that if sin is the problem, then the solution, the cross and resurrection, will also have to be just as broad and deep. As we turn to look at a number of ways God delivers us from sin, it is important to remember that we are not just saved *from*, but also saved *for*. God works through the cross and resurrection to save us for justice, righteousness and participation in God's Kingdom mission.

HOW IS SALVATION ACCOMPLISHED?⁵

Jesus suffered, in our place, the ultimate consequences of our sin.

How did God act to save us? Perhaps the simplest answer is the biblical statement that Jesus died for us; he died for our sins (Rom. 5:6; 1 Cor. 15:3; I Thess. 5:10). One way of understanding the meaning of these phrases is to recognize that those who killed Jesus acted out a tragedy in which we all are involved. Jesus proclaimed a message of radical graciousness, acceptance, and abundant life that contrasted with a culture of exclusion, oppression, and death. Jesus lived out the message he proclaimed. Many, however, resisted and rejected the kingdom of God as lived and proclaimed by Jesus. In response Jesus spoke words and parables of judgment.

In doing so, however, he did not retract his message of unconditional love or his invitation to all to join him at the table with others sharing food and fellowship. Rather out of loving concern he warned people of the consequences to themselves, and others, of rejecting God's graciousness and rooting themselves ever more firmly in a society of tit-for-tat reciprocity, in a religiosity of status seeking and drawing lines of exclusion and, fundamentally, in a paradigm that mistakenly imagined a God of conditional love. Jesus warned them they would suffer, as well as cause others to suffer, the very real punishments of that religiosity and society and live in fear of the "God" they believed in.

The religious and political systems of the day punished and killed Jesus, and Jesus took on himself the judgment that he had warned others about. Jesus had not sinned, but he bore the

⁵ Although this article focuses primarily on the saving significance of the cross and resurrection my intention is not to separate the cross and resurrection from the life and teachings of Jesus. In fact my hope is that the explanations offered will, in a way that penal satisfaction does not, make it clearer how Jesus life and teaching are integrally related to the atonement and the cross and resurrection.

ultimate consequences of our sin, of our lack of trust in God. The alienation described above leads to death. It is the wages sin pays (Rom. 6:23).⁶ Jesus' death was the consequence of an alienation that was not his but ours. His death had a substitutionary character. He suffered in our place to save us from experiencing the ultimate consequence of our sin.

Looking at the cross in terms of the Old Testament we can say that, in our place, Jesus suffered the ultimate exile that should have been ours. The cross and resurrection create the possibility of a return to the promise land which for us is the kingdom of God—being indwelt with God's Holy Spirit as part of the people of God.

God raised Jesus from the dead and triumphed over death

Jesus died, but death did not have the final word. The most common explanation of the means of salvation in the early centuries of the church portrayed God defeating death and forces of evil through the cross and resurrection (Hebs. 2:14-15).⁷ In a substitutionary way Jesus did something for us we could not do for ourselves. He took the sin and death of the world on himself, let it do its worst to him, absorbed it on the cross and rose victorious. We are united with him in his triumph over sin and death (Rom. 5 and 6; I Cor. 5:21-22). It is true that one expression of God's wrath, similar to what is described in the previous subsection, is turning people over to suffer the consequences of their sin (Rom. 1). In this victory, however, we see God's wrath expressed as an active and holy opposition to sin and death.

God pays the price and forgives

If you have been wronged or hurt you have two options. As Tim Keller describes, one option is revenge and retribution, seeking to make the other person suffer and pay for the suffering caused you. "Cycles of reaction and retaliation can go on for years. . . [W]hen you try to get payment through revenge the evil does not disappear. Instead it spreads."⁸ The other option is to forgive, to not make the person pay. Forgiveness, however, is not free. There is always a cost when a wrong is committed. "Forgiveness means bearing the cost instead of making the wrongdoer do it, so you can reach out in love to seek your enemy's renewal and change."⁹

Someone must bear the cost of our sins. Through life with Israel God repeatedly suffered, bore the pain and forgave. That history came to a climax at the cross. Humans did the absolute worst to God. Rather than lashing out with retaliation and making us pay, in an ultimate way Jesus pays the price. He absorbs the pain, violence and shame into himself and forgave. The depth of the offense at the cross means that God's forgiveness of that offense also penetrates to the very depth of human sin. God has and will forgive the worst we can do. We are freed from the burden of guilt.

⁶ Through the lens of penal satisfaction many interpret this verse as saying that God is the one who pays out the wages for a sinful life: death. It can be read that way. It also, however, can be read as saying that sin itself pays the wages: they payment sin makes to those who sin is death. Or one could read the devil, or death itself as being the paymaster handing out the wages. The verse clearly communicates that the payment for a sinful life is death, it is not clear on who hands out the payment.

⁷ This explanation of the atonement is commonly called *Christus Victor*. See *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 117-125.

⁸ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 188.

⁹ Keller, 192.

God, however, does much more than decree forgiveness and place a human in a different column in a legal ledger in heaven. Forgiveness is a precursor to reconciliation. God responded to the cross with restorative forgiveness bringing people back into right relationship. We observe this concretely when the resurrected Jesus returned to the disciples as a forgiving presence—intent, not on scolding, or seeking revenge for their betrayal and desertion, but on reaching out in love and restoring relationships. The powerful waves of that forgiveness extend to us today as the living Jesus Christ continues to respond to human betrayal and rejection with forgiveness.

Jesus frees us from shame

Through Jesus' life, death and resurrection God liberates not only from guilt, but also from shame. Whereas we feel guilt for an act that transgresses a boundary, we feel shame in relation to others for being inferior and not meeting expectations. The objective consequences of an act of disobedience are accusation and punishment or retaliation; the objective consequences of failing to meet expectations and being inferior are disapproval, ridicule, rejection and often exclusion. Forgiveness or pardon frees us from guilt. The remedy for shame includes removing disgrace, offering a new identity, restoring honor and overcoming exclusion through reincorporation.

Societies, distorted by sin and influenced by powers of evil, often shame people inappropriately. In the gospels we repeatedly observe Jesus liberating people from the shame of being labeled unworthy, unclean or inferior. He embraced and included the excluded; he freed them from shame by honoring them and giving them a new identity. These actions by Jesus threatened the status quo and those who had done the shaming. They sought to stop him through the ultimate act of exclusion—death; and not just any death, but the extremely dishonorable and shameful death of public crucifixion.¹⁰

Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection adds to the liberating work already seen in his life. First, it adds weight and significance to the new identity he had offered to the shamed. He was so committed to their inclusion he was willing to die rather than accept the norms and practices of those who shamed them. Second, through the resurrection God validates Jesus and thus also his actions of loving acceptance. Third, through Jesus' death on the cross God has fully identified with humans in our experience of shame and has experienced the shameful exclusion we fear. The cross, however, offers more than a promise of God's solidarity and God's knowing what it means to experience shame. The cross exposes false shame and breaks its power to instill fear. On the cross Jesus was inappropriately shamed, and the cross and resurrection exposed the powers and the lies they used to falsely shame Jesus (Col. 2:15). Jesus' death and resurrection invite and enable us to live in freedom from this dehumanizing shame that he disregarded on the cross (Heb. 12:2; 1 Pet. 2:6).

At the same time, however, there are things for which humans should feel shame. What could be more shameful than crucifying God incarnate? Those who sought to shame Jesus were in fact the ones who behaved most shamefully. Jesus' disciples and followers also acted

¹⁰ Although crucifixion was physically painful, in the Roman era, people dreaded crucifixion first and foremost because of its shameful character. It was designed to be an instrument of contempt and public ridicule. Romans reserved crucifixion for insurrectionists, foreigners, and slaves. They did not crucify Roman citizens because it was considered too dishonorable (Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal*, 26-27; Kraus, 216).

shamefully by betraying, denying or abandoning Jesus. Yet God did not respond by shaming them, but by taking actions to heal the shame they felt and to restore relationships. Love banishes shame. On the cross and after the resurrection Jesus responded with relationship-restoring acts of love and acceptance.

Although, through familiarity, many of us may more easily see biblical pronouncements of salvation from guilt, the remedy to shame described above is apparent as well. For instance, John E. Toews points to Paul writing about salvation as liberation from shame:

God “makes peace” (*we have peace with God*, Rom. 5:1), love is extended (*God shows his love for us*, Rom. 5:8), reconciliation occurs (*while we were enemies we were reconciled to God . . . we are reconciled and saved by his life*, Rom. 5:10), a new identity is given (*we are children of God*, Rom. 8:16, who have been adopted as sons and daughters, Rom. 8:23).¹¹

In exposing the misplaced shame and lovingly revealing and responding to the true failure of us all, Jesus, the “friend of sinners” (Luke 7:34), removed the stigma and hostility which alienates us from each other and God.

Saved by Jesus’ blood

In one sense to say we are saved by the blood of Jesus is a general statement and another way of communicating we are saved by Jesus’ death. In the Old Testament blood represents life, and thus in the sacrificial context it represents the giving of life (Lev. 17: 11, 14). The saying, “saved by Jesus’ blood” does also have a more specific meaning rooted in Old Testament sacrificial practices. In the Old Testament sacrifices had a variety of uses.¹²

One use of blood sacrifice in the Old Testament, as well as in other cultures, was in making and sealing a covenant (Gen. 15; Ex. 24:1-9; Lev. 7:16). Jesus’ blood, shed on the cross, is described as “the blood of the covenant” (Mark 14:24; Heb. 10:29). It can be seen as God’s commitment to keep the new covenant established by Jesus Christ (Col 1:20). This meaning is a central aspect of the Lord’s Supper. To drink the cup of wine is to participate in the covenant offered to us through Jesus’ blood (1 Cor. 10:16; 11:25). Through his sacrificial death, Christ identified fully with human reality but transformed it through a once-and-for-all covenant which enabled the gift of the Holy Spirit and provided the possibility and promise of eternal life, life in all its fullness.

From Leviticus we know of different types of sacrifices (burnt offering, cereal offering, peace/fellowship offering, sin offering and guilt offering), and we have detailed information on how the sacrifices were to be performed. The text gives some information on what they accomplished, but very little on how they accomplished it. For instance we know that the sin offering made atonement and the person offering the sacrifice was forgiven (Lev. 4:26; 5:13).

¹¹ John E. Toews, *Romans* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004), 147

¹² For a brief overview of Old Testament sacrifices and their relation to Christ’s death as sacrifice see: John Goldingay, “Old Testament Sacrifice and the Death of Christ” in *Atonement Today*, ed, John Goldingay (London: SPCK, 1995), 3-20; available at: http://documents.fuller.edu/sot/faculty/goldingay/cp_content/homepage/MainFrame.htm#OT501; Elmer Martens, *God’s Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology*, 3rd. ed., (N. Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 1998), 48-80; R. Larry Shelton, *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* (Tyrone, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 53-75.

From the text we can state that through the sacrifice there is forgiveness and restoration of relationship, but the text says very little about how the sacrifice brings about that restoration. Therefore, as Elmer Martens states, “a theology of sacrifice must in large measure be inferred.”¹³

For instance we know that the person offering the sacrifice was to lay a hand on the head of the animal. What happened through that action? One possibility is to see it as identification. R. Larry Shelton writes, “In offering the sacrifice and in identifying with it, the sinner changed his attitude toward God. As the offerer turned back to God and repented, he himself became the gift-sacrifice to God through identification with the sacrificial animal. In response to human repentance and self-offering, God accepted the animal sacrifice as a token of his reception of the offerer who had identified with it.”¹⁴ In addition to identification John Goldingay states that in some offerings the action transfers the stain of the sin from the one offering the sacrifice to the animal being sacrificed. The stain of sin is transferred and destroyed.¹⁵ Possibilities rich with meaning and potential for interpreting Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross, but we are inferring and thus must be cautious and humble. It is one thing to proclaim Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice that provides atonement, another thing to explain the mechanics of how that happens.

Although still limited, there are instances where Leviticus gives us information on how sacrifices bring atonement. One is the explanation of the scapegoat ritual on the Day of Atonement. Israel’s sin was placed on a goat through laying hands on its head. The scapegoat was then released to “carry on itself all their sins to a remote place” (Lev. 16: 22). Similarly Jesus freed us by bearing our sin (John 1:29; Heb. 9:27-28). Also it is clearly stated that sacrificial blood was used to cleanse and purify from sin (Lev. 8-9, 16). Jesus’ shed blood cleanses us (Heb. 1:3; 9:12-14; 9:22; 10:19-22; 1 Pet. 1:2; 1 John 1:7). Jesus’ blood wipes away the stain of guilt and shame and thus enables restored relationships. “Jesus’ death both creates and cleanses a new temple, the people of God . . . indwelt by God’s own Spirit” (1 Cor. 3:16).¹⁶

Justification through Jesus’ faithful obedience

“Justification by faith” has been a central doctrine for Protestant theology. It interprets Paul as using a courtroom metaphor to communicate that our guilt has been wiped away, and we are declared innocent. This was Luther’s experience. His striving did not alleviate guilt or bring him peace with God; peace came when the Spirit led him to understand and experience that divine grace through faith brings justification and peace with God.

Without contesting the authenticity of Luther’s experience, we must ask if we err by reading Paul through the lenses of Luther’s personal experience and our Western legal system’s understanding of justice and. In our context an impersonal code of laws provides the means for the judge to weigh the case. Crimes have victims, yet in criminal cases the central issue is how the accused measures up against the legal code. Restitution to and reconciliation with the victim are not the focus. With this understanding of justice we quite naturally think that for God to justify an individual is to pronounce him or her as “not guilty”—that is, to view the person as if

¹³ Martens, 52.

¹⁴ Shelton, 56.

¹⁵ Goldingay, 10-11.

¹⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The Atonement in Postmodernity: Guilt, Goats and Gifts,” in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2004), 399-400.

he or she had met the standard of the justice.

In contrast, the Hebraic concept of justice seen in the Old Testament has a relational foundation. The basis of judgment is how faithful one is to agreements, obligations, or covenants with other people and with God. To act justly is to be faithful to the people one is committed to by agreement or covenant. The relationship, not an impersonal law, is central. Old Testament law is relational in the sense that God gave it within a covenant relationship as an expression of God's intention for life and relationships within the Israel. Therefore, a person would be seen as just by God if he or she lived in a way that demonstrated faithfulness to Israel's covenant with God.

As Paul makes clear we have all sinned or failed to be just in our relationships with God and others (Rom. 3:23). Jesus, however, was obedient, faithful and just at every point and in every way that we have failed—faithful even to the point of death. Paul proclaims that we are justified not by our actions, but by God's grace through the faithful actions of Jesus (Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:24-26). Therefore, in contrast to our failing to be just, God proves to be just by being faithful to God's covenant commitment to bless and save Israel, and through them save others.

Both Romans and Galatians address the issue of salvation within a broader discussion of the relationship between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians. In Galatians Paul specifically addresses questions about the role of Jewish laws and traditions in defining one's inclusion within the people of God. In this broader context of Galatians and Romans, and through the lens of a Hebraic relational understanding of justice, it is clear that to be justified is not simply to be declared innocent of having broken laws and thus to be placed in proper relationship with standards recorded in an impersonal code. Rather, to be justified is to be placed in proper relationship to God—to be made a full participant in the community of God's people. (Justification is only one of the metaphors that Paul can use to describe this act of inclusion by grace; for example he uses "adoption," in Gal. 4:5 and Rom. 8:15).

Understood from the relational Hebraic perspective the verb "to justify" (*dikaion*) includes a sense of making straight, of straightening out or restoring relationships that have been twisted or broken. In the Old Testament God provided a system of sacrifices to restore and straighten relations between God and the people of God. In Galatians Paul affirms that he, Peter, and the other Jewish Christians agree that this straightening out of relationship comes through Jesus. Therefore, as a metaphor of salvation, to say that someone is justified communicates a sense of inclusion within the people of God and a straightening or rectifying of relations with God and others in the community of faith.

To argue that Paul interpreted words related to "justification" from a Hebraic perspective does not mean that the classical Protestant understanding of justification as addressing a person's burden of guilt is wrong; rather it points to it being too limited. A clear example of justification dealing with guilt, but not only guilt is found in Leviticus 6. Clear directions are given on using an offering to deal with the guilt one feels for stealing something from a neighbor. The offender was instructed, however, not just to go to the priest and make an offering, but also to make actions of restitution to the neighbor with the aim of restoring the relationship. A more Hebraic perspective of justification adds breadth, depth, and actuality to our understanding of justification.

In regards to the issue of penal satisfaction we can affirm that Paul does use a legal metaphor for atonement, but not necessarily one that pictures God demanding punishment as a

condition for salvation. A key question to ask is what courtroom we imagine as we read in Romans 3 that through Christ Jesus' sacrifice of atonement God proves to be just. Those who read this through the lens of a contemporary Western courtroom understand Paul to be saying that God has met the standard of justice by demanding punishment.¹⁷ Through the lens of a Hebraic "courtroom" we understand Paul to be saying that God is considered just because God was being faithful to a covenant, to the divine promise to provide salvation.¹⁸

The cross stops the cycle of violence

Humans have often sought to increase their status and security through violence, oppression, and labeling others as inferior. This has led to whirling cycles of violence and tit-for-tat actions. Jesus challenged this way of life and his refusal to spin along in the same direction as others created tension and hostility. This came to a head at the cross when alienated people caught up by the principalities and powers attempted to put a stop to Jesus once and for all through bribery, falsehood, humiliation, and a violent and shameful death. Jesus did not react violently against those forces, but instead acted like a rock in a river that absorbs the energy of the whirlpool and stops it.

In a definitive way the cross broke the cycle of increasing alienation and violence because it absorbed the worst act of violence in the world—the killing of God incarnate. God did not respond to this by lashing out with a vengeful counter blow, but with forgiving love, thus responding to the root causes of a violent society. The ultimate act of hatred was answered with the ultimate act of forgiving love. Jesus' life and his death on the cross break the cycle and extend the liberating, healing, and humanizing love of God in a way that made newness of life and transformation of all reality a real possibility and promise for all creation. Christians know that whirlpools of sin are not ultimately the most powerful force and that, enabled by the Spirit of Jesus, they can resist their drag, and stand together as a rock that stops whirlpools.¹⁹

¹⁷ Unfortunately many allow the penal satisfaction theory of atonement and Western approaches to justice to shape their understanding of biblical sacrifice. Through these lenses sacrifices in the Bible are understood as payments to appease an angry God. If, however, we seek to allow the Bible itself to shape our understanding of sacrifice we come to a different understanding. While God's anger and wrath are important biblical themes, they are not themes related to sacrifices. There is no instance in the Old Testament describing God turning from or withholding wrath because a sacrifice was offered. The word "anger" hardly appears in the book of Leviticus. Sacrifices do not relate to anger, but the to a holy God's revulsion to sin or the repulsiveness caused by the stain of human sin (John Goldingay, "Your Iniquities Have Made a Separation Between You and Your God" in *Atonement Today*, ed. John Goldingay (London: SPCK, 1995), 50-52).

¹⁸ For a more in depth explanation of this view of justification see: Mark D. Baker and J. Ross Wagner, "Reading Romans in Hurricane-Ravaged Honduras: A Model of Intercultural and Interdisciplinary Conversation," in *Missiology* 32 (July 2004) 367-383, available at: <http://www.mbseminary.edu/baker/articles> ; James D. G. Dunn and Alan Suggate, *The Justice of God: A Fresh Look at the Old Doctrine of Justification by Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich., USA: Eerdmans, 1993); Richard B. Hays, "Justification," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freedman (New York, NY, USA: Doubleday, 1992) 3:1129-33.

¹⁹ The whirlpool metaphor is not a biblical image, but it is based on Jesus' life, and there are scripture passages that point to the truths communicated by this metaphor. Jesus did not resist or retaliate (John 10:17-18; Matt. 27); there is saving and transforming power in the apparent weakness of Christ being crucified (I Cor. 1:18-31); the powers are disarmed through the cross (Col. 2:15); and Jesus' death is described as transforming a situation of hostility and enmity to a situation of peace (Eph. 2:13-18). I have borrowed the whirlpool metaphor from Vernard Eller, *War and Peace from Genesis to Revelation* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1981), 159-164.

The cross disarms the principalities and powers

Using principality and power terminology (Rom. 8:38; 1 Cor. 15:24; Eph. 1:21; 3:10; 6:12; Col. 1:16), Paul writes of Jesus: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:15 TNIV). The earthly leaders and institutions, as well as the spiritual powers that used them, certainly thought they had won the day when Jesus breathed his last breath. Yet, they had not conquered Jesus. Not only had Jesus broken the cycle of violence, but also, until his last breath, he refused to cower, to be shamed and give in to their pressures to live life according to their values and priorities. The cross opens up the possibility that one does not have to obey the powers. The resurrection was not only a defeat of the powers in the sense that Jesus came back to life, but also a validation for Jesus’ way of living. Thus the powers are exposed both as failures and liars. Their way is not the way of God, and they can be resisted. Ironic as it may seem, the New Testament proclaims that in the weakness of the cross the power of God is revealed (1 Cor. 1:18-25; 2:6-8). The cross reveals other powers to be pseudo-powers.

Today the whole range of powers and forces of evil, from demons and evil spirits through Mammon and enslaving religiosity, to institutions used by the powers, continue to act as if humans have no choice but to follow and obey. But their claim is a false one. Jesus has triumphed over the powers. The lie of the powers has been exposed by the cross. Therefore, humans can be freed from their influence when they come to recognize and to treat the powers as the mere “things” they are.

The cross judges

Some mistakenly view judgment as the opposite of salvation, and view God’s punishment as only retributive not corrective. That is, however, too narrow a view of judgment because judgment is essentially speaking the truth about and rectifying a situation. For those who are being oppressed, judgment is good news. Judgment shines a light on and exposes the unjust actions of their oppressors with the aim of changing the unjust situation. The cross acts as perhaps the brightest light of judgment. It makes starkly clear the error of the ways of the powers who killed Jesus. As we have seen above they are exposed, and a rectification which began at the cross and resurrection will be consummated when Christ returns.

The cross also, however, speaks truth about us and shines a bright light on our sinful ways. In Jesus the powers and people of his day crucified God incarnate, crucified a fellow human, not just any human, but one who lived authentically as the human we were created to be. We too have turned our back on God and rejected God. We too have hurt and lashed out at our fellow humans, and we too have hid, covered up, and hence rejected the human God created us to be. Thus we are all crucifers and we stand exposed by the judging light of the cross.

How can this judgment be saving good news? Having a wrong exposed is painful, but it is also a step toward living in an alternative way. Even so, this judgment would just be condemnation if not for the fact that the cross is not just an instrument of judgment, but also a place of forgiveness. Our repentance and salvation are rooted in experiencing both.

The cross reveals

Jesus’ life and death on the cross reveal to us what it means to live as an authentic human

being created in the image of God. The scandal of God-incarnate hanging on the cross in weakness, nakedness, and humiliation has saving potential for us (I Cor. 1:18-31). It invites us to be the finite and limited humans God created us to be. It invites us to recognize, embrace, and truthfully represent ourselves in all our fleshly physicality, our emotional complexity, and our frightened vulnerability. The resurrection validates the life Jesus led. In a sense through the resurrection God says to us, “this is the life to imitate.” It is an invitation to live in freedom from the voices and powers that tell us we must mask our true humanity. God does not promise that if we will live as the true human we were created to be we will not suffer; quite the contrary, Christian existence as authentic loving humans in the midst of evil invites reviling, suffering.

But the resurrection is a promise that in an ultimate sense Jesus has died for us, in our place, so that we are no longer enslaved to masking and hiding our humanity as a way to protect ourselves. We can freely live as authentic humans without fear. Life, not death, has the final word. The cross also underscores what Jesus’ life reveals: to be authentically human is to be for others. Rather than a self-oriented lifestyle of grasping, lording it over others, and resolving conflicts through force, Jesus models a lifestyle of sharing, service, and nonviolence.

Jesus reveals not only true humanity, but also is the fullest self-revelation we have of God. Jesus clearly reveals God’s loving commitment to save. Jesus healed, liberated, and confronted oppressing powers; he communicated love and acceptance to those experiencing rejection and marginalization. He was so committed to these saving actions that he did not waver from them even when they led to his death. God’s love for us was so great that Jesus was willing to die, and God the Father was willing to let his Son die, to provide salvation. The cross reveals to us a God who is unrelentingly for us (Rom. 8:31-39). This revelation saves us from living with mistaken concepts of an accusing vindictive God that we must appease (John 3:16-17).

CONCLUSION

An advantage of listing aspects of the saving significance of the cross is that it communicates the breadth and diversity of what God accomplished through the cross and resurrection. A disadvantage is that splitting the work of the cross into a list diminishes the sense of coherence between these various aspects. In another article, “Two Foundational Stories of the Cross: How They Affect Evangelism,” I aim for coherence and seek to bring these various aspects together in a unified narrative.²⁰

This article has sought to point to the meaning of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It has not, however, exhausted it. We could add other metaphors and explanations of the saving significance of the cross and resurrection, and we could delve deeper into the meanings of the ones listed above. The cross and resurrection exceed our attempts to explain them.

It is crucial at this time that we take ideas like those described in this article and develop images and presentations that can be used in sermons, tracts, Sunday school classes, youth meetings and evangelistic conversations. A collection I edited, *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of Atonement*,²¹ provides a number of images of atonement that people have used in ministry settings. I invite you to borrow images from that book and also to

²⁰ Available at: <http://www.mbseminary.edu/baker/atonement>

²¹ Mark D. Baker, ed., *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

join me in seeking to develop other ones.

This article and other resources on the atonement are found at:
www.mbseminary.edu/baker/atonement

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