

Jesus and Salvation

1. What is the role of Jesus in salvation?

Jesus's role in salvation is to facilitate atonement, which is the process by which the relationship between God and human beings is restored. For Christians, Jesus's sacrifice on the cross makes forgiveness possible, which, in this case, refers to being pardoned by God for sinful behaviour. Whilst all Christians agree on these broad brushstrokes, debate rages about precisely how atonement happens; in other words, there is much disagreement over the mechanics. Crudely put, Christians agree that the crucifixion is something that produces human salvation but disagree about how exactly it works, leading to various hypothetical suggestions.

Ransom theory: many early Christians subscribed to ransom theory. They believed that Jesus's death was a ransom payment to God or Satan (depending on the particular variety) to free people from death. For various reasons, this theory has not aged particularly well, and now virtually no Christians explain salvation by referencing it.

Satisfaction theory: a more enduring hypothesis is satisfaction theory, the idea that Jesus's death was a sacrifice that provided God with just compensation for human sin (i.e. Jesus's sinless death satisfied God's need for justice). Both ransom and satisfaction theory trace their origins to the twelfth century and beyond; however, not all of them are this old.

Scapegoat theory: this relatively recent development is the hypothesis that Jesus's death involved him absorbing all human sins (just as the scapegoat did in Judaism on the Day of Atonement or Yom Kippur). Some Christians believe that Jesus released them from their sins through this process, just as Jews thought the scapegoat did for them.

Atonement

The process by which the relationship between God and human beings is restored by Jesus.

Forgiveness

The process by which someone is pardoned for something they have done wrong.

2. How does the role of Jesus in salvation work?



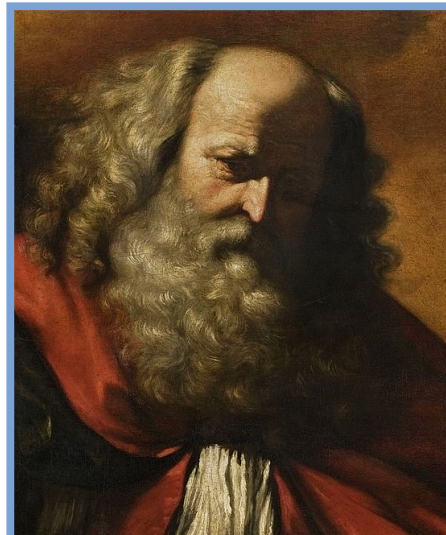
Satan: according to ransom theory, tricked into releasing humanity from death.

Ransom theory: in the most famous formulation of ransom theory, proponents argue that Adam and Eve sold humanity into bondage to Satan and eternal death by sinning in the Garden of Eden. In order to save humanity from Satan, God the Father gave his son, Jesus, as a ransom payment. And in a final twist, Satan was actually tricked because the bonds of death were too weak to keep God the Son in bondage. This theory has not aged particularly well despite considerable early popularity. First, there is the issue of God the Father needing to pay a ransom to Satan for humanity. He is omnipotent, more powerful than Satan, so why is this necessary? Second, God the Father knew that Jesus would break the bonds of death, so this theory presents him as a dishonest dealer, which all Christians now argue is incompatible with his nature.

Satisfaction theory: a more popular hypothesis since the first half of the second millennium is satisfaction theory. According to its proponents, God requires satisfaction for human disobedience (which Christians commonly call sin), which is why the just punishment he metes out for it is death. However, Jesus's sinless death satisfied God's need for justice and released humanity from the need to suffer sin's consequences. Evidence for this way of thinking about salvation can be found in a passage about the Suffering Servant from Isaiah (a figure many Christians believe prophesied Jesus). Here, readers find the words, "Out of his anguish he shall see; he shall find satisfaction through his knowledge. The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities." According to Christians, this verse presents the idea that Jesus will make humanity righteous by suffering for their iniquities (i.e. sins) spelt out in scripture. Likewise, in Hebrews, Paul the Apostle wrote that "Christ has offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins." This passage compares Jewish sacrifices at the Temple with the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. Paul the Apostle argued that Jewish sacrifices could not take away sin (or its major consequence, death); however, Jesus's sacrifice does, once and for all time.

3. **Why** is the role of Jesus in salvation important?

How Christians conceive of Jesus's role in salvation reveals a lot about the nature of God the Father. They learn from his apparent desire to absolve humanity from the consequences of sin by sacrificing his only son that he is both benevolent and forgiving. Likewise, Christians infer that God the Father wants a personal relationship with them. In Genesis, the story of original sin presents God's personal relationship with Adam and Eve, which was ruined by the first sin (the act of disobedience in which they ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and were expelled from the Garden of Eden as a result). Christians claim that God wants to restore this relationship and that his sacrifice of Jesus demonstrates how important a personal relationship is. However, in satisfaction theory, God's role as a just judge is emphatically underlined. Humanity's sins require proper punishment, and to relent on this point would be to stop being a just judge. Conversely, ransom theory implies that God is weak and dishonest, which are not qualities Christians think he embodies, so this theory has fallen out of fashion.



God the Father

George Thinks

We know a lot about salvation and why it's important already, and we know a lot about Jesus, so why are we revisiting the overlap? In essence, because this is at the heart of most Christian claims and some of the oldest arguments in Christianity. Christians confidently assert that we're saved, but not accidentally or just because God loves us; sophisticated hypotheses like satisfaction theory remind us that God is a perfectly just judge, so he can't simply let us off the hook. He has to satisfy his need for sin to be punished, and Jesus is the only person who can step in to suffer it sinlessly on our behalf. And so it's also at the heart of arguments about who Jesus was as well. Some early Christians thought Jesus was born a man, not God the Son, and only elevated to divine status later. But if this were the case, Jesus wouldn't be a sinless sacrifice: he would be tainted by original sin (which many Christians believe we're all born with), and, as a human being, he would have been unable to live an entirely sinless life before he was elevated to divinity, or so the argument goes. I don't want to get bogged down in too much detail here because it goes way beyond an introductory course. What I want us to reflect upon is the fact that these claims, and they're not all the same, have significant consequences for what Christians think God is like, which goes right to the heart of the Christian faith.

