

Theology 101: Redemption

John 14:1-7

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus said to him, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.”

Easter Sunday was a month ago, but we will keep up our white cloths for another two weeks. At Christmas, we take four weeks to prepare (advent) and about two weeks after to celebrate Christ’s birth. But the Easter Season is much longer. We take six weeks to prepare (Lent) and another seven weeks after to celebrate. That’s more than twice as long, yet I’m willing to bet most of us really understand Christmas better than Easter.

I mean, what’s not to understand about Christmas? A baby was born. A baby who would grow up to become a really important man. But at Christmas, we don’t really need to understand a whole lot more than that. But by the time Easter rolls around, we do need to understand the man that baby has become. We need to understand his life, his death, and his resurrection.

In our Scripture reading today, even the disciples did not understand. Jesus tells them, “I’m going away, but don’t worry, because I’ll come back to get you. And you already know how to get there.” And God bless Thomas, who says what we’re all thinking. “Jesus, we don’t know where you’re going, much less how to get there.” Jesus simply responds, “I am how you get there.” Now Philip hijacks the conversation and turns it in another direction, which I find a little disappointing. I wish Thomas had spoken up and asked for a little clarification. How is Jesus the way? How does that work?

Well, the short answer is that Jesus became the way for us to return to God through his life, death, and resurrection. But that’s about as clear as the answer Jesus gave. We’ve had 2,000 years to try to figure this out, but there are some things that are so simple yet so complicated that

we really struggle to comprehend. But I'm going to try to help us all make sense out of it this morning. How is Jesus the way?

There are three primary schools of thought when it comes to understanding the cross. The one most people are familiar with is the idea of substitutionary atonement. This theory essentially says that Jesus was a substitute for us. That we have sinned and owe a debt to God, but Christ made that payment on our behalf. This understanding goes back to the temple sacrifice system instituted by the early Israelites. If one of God's people broke a commandment, in order to return to good standing with the covenant, they brought a sacrifice to the temple. The sacrifice was usually a mid-sized animal, though poor people were allowed to bring smaller offerings and grave sins required larger offerings.

But even sacrificing a bull only covered the most recent sin. The system was cyclical. Sin, sacrifice. Sin again, sacrifice again. The substitutionary view of atonement declares that Jesus was the final sacrifice. That not only was he human, he was also divine, and he willingly sacrificed himself on our behalf. That was such a great sacrifice that his blood was able to cover the guilt or debt of all human sin. Then, now, and into the future.

Now, all of the three major views of the cross have their roots in the Bible and can also be found in Christian teachings and hymns. We read about substitution in many places, including 1 Peter 2:24, which says, "Jesus himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." Most songs and hymns about the cross express this understanding, including our own hymn 325, Hail Thou Once Despised Jesus. Let's go ahead and turn our hymnals there and sing verse two. Hymn 325.

The substitutionary teaching of the cross probably hasn't tripped any circuit breakers in your brain, because we do hear it in so many of our hymns. But it isn't the only teaching, and it's

not even the earliest teaching. In fact, it didn't appear until fairly late in Christian history, during the 11th century. The honor of the earliest teaching goes to the theory known as Moral Influence. Quite simply, this teaching says that the real work of salvation was accomplished in Jesus' life and teachings. His obedience, martyrdom, and resurrection serve to inspire us and encourage us to return to the life and teachings that brought Jesus to that point. So this teaching finds significance in the cross, but it places more emphasis on Jesus' life than on his death.

This was the primary teaching of the early church, often the only view any Christian ever learned all the way through the 3rd century. And it's no wonder it had such popularity, when over 30 New Testament passages refer to how we should change our lives based on Jesus' teachings. Not only should we change our lives, additional Scriptures reveal that one day we will be judged according to the changes we made and actions we took.

Although this is the earliest way Christians found meaning in Jesus' death, it is probably one of the least discussed today. It remains a prevalent idea in the Eastern Orthodox Church, but during the Protestant Reformation (when Martin Luther and friends separated from the Catholic Church), this model was dismissed as a teaching that watered down our dependence on God and underestimated the power and evil of sin. For men who taught that we are saved by faith alone, this sounded a lot like we are saved not by Christ, but by our own actions. More recently, more Christian leaders and teachers have been reclaiming the transformative power of the Moral Influence model. They point to several Bible readings, including Acts 17:30-31:

While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.

Although most of our hymns help us to understand substitutionary atonement, we do have examples of the Moral Model as well. So let's turn to hymn 163, Ask Ye What Great Thing I Know and sing verse 2. Hymn 163.

Okay, have you wrapped your head around these first two models? They are essentially kind of opposites in how they view the problem of sin and its ultimate solution. Substitution claims that sin is so evil, and God so good, that God cannot accept any sin. No repentance is good enough. There must be a sacrifice to make things right. But Moral Model claims the opposite. That repentance and a changed life is good enough. The sin is still evil and God good, but God is so much better than evil that God has the power to overlook it when someone has turned away. Substitution says God cannot forgive sin until he has received payment. Moral Model says God can forgive sin without any kind of payment.

So is the third model a middle way, something that kind of mediates between these two opposites? Sorry, it's not that easy. Those two sort of balance each other out, but the third method is completely other. It's called the Ransom Theory, or Christus Victor. This one's a little harder to explain. Adam and Eve, when they lived in the Garden of Eden, were subject to God and his rule. When they disobeyed, sinned, and were kicked out of the garden, they were no longer God's subjects. They became slaves to Satan, and brought the whole human race with them.

In order for us to escape slavery and return to God's kingdom, someone had to pay a ransom for us. God, naturally, wanted us back, but he was unwilling to negotiate with a terrorist. Essentially. So he proposed to the devil that his own son, Jesus, be the ransom. I'll trade you my perfect, divine son in exchange for all of the human race. Satan accepted, and so Jesus had to die. Of course, in the end, the joke was on Satan, because Jesus didn't die. He couldn't die; he was

divine. God knew that ahead of time, but the devil was tricked. It's kind of like paying a kidnapper's ransom with a bounced check or counterfeit money.

This theory has some controversy around it. If God is God, and Satan is decidedly less than him, how could it be that God should even have to pretend to pay Satan a ransom? I mean, couldn't God just claim what's rightfully his and take humans away from the devil? It turns out, that's another interpretation of this theory. Humans were enslaved to evil and sin and death. Jesus was fully human and fully divine. As such, he was exposed to and tempted by sin, but overcame it because he was never fully enslaved. And after his crucifixion, his resurrection proved that he also overcame death. And so in the epic battle of good versus evil, Christ was the victor by overcoming sin and death. And to the victor go the spoils, so Jesus liberated the rest of the human race.

In Mark 10:45, we read, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many." And we sing this theory with hymn 172, My Jesus I Love Thee. So let's turn to hymn 172 and sing verse 2.

The first two theories are about reconciling rebellious people with a loving God. The third theory is about good overcoming evil in order to save people, who are essentially pawns in the whole story. All three are grounded in Scripture, and all three have been taught for significant periods in Christian history. And in all three, Jesus is clearly the way. The truth that leads to life. Even if we still, like Thomas, aren't quite exactly sure how that works. Amen and amen.