

Jesus – what did he do? (A look at the Atonement)

At the core of the Christian Good News is the message that Jesus 'saves us from sin'. So why all this fuss about sin?

According to the Bible:

God is in control of the world

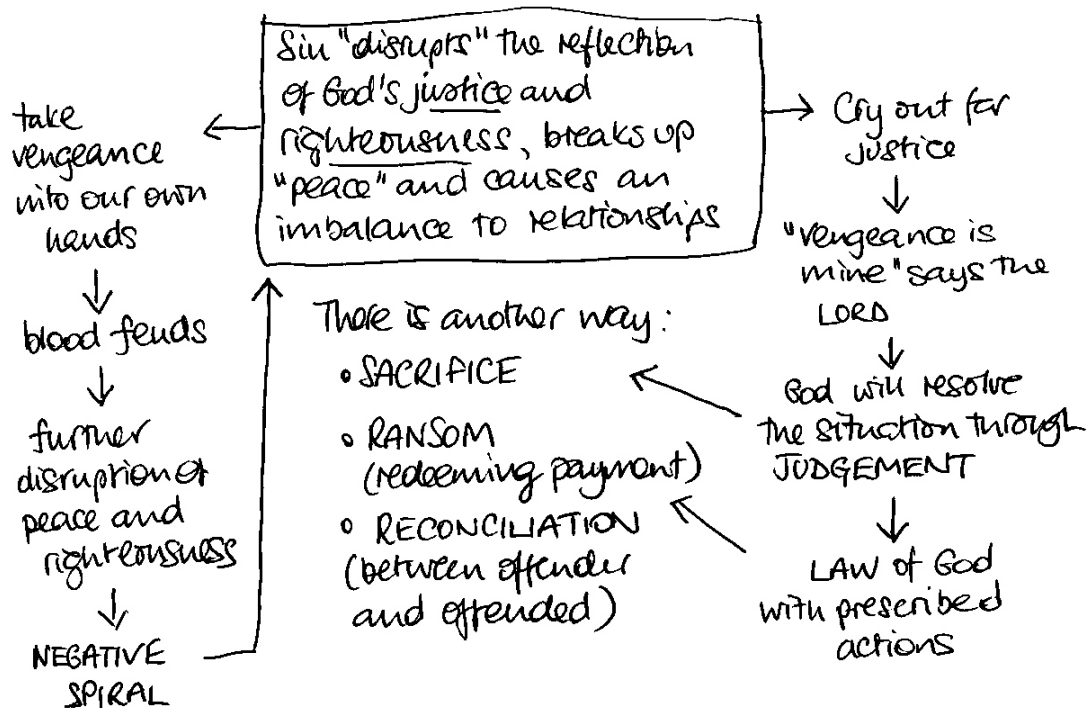
God is good,
God is *righteous*

Human beings are responsible creatures and share responsibility for creation. They should reflect God's nature and desires in the world

So in the light of this:

SIN = human beings falling short of God's qualities and desires for the world. In the words of St Paul, *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* (Rom 3:23)

Practical Effects of Sin



Problems with the Old Testament System noted by the New Testament

1. It applies only to Israel and those who subscribe to the Law of Moses, what about the rest? Problem of *exclusivity*.
2. The problem of repetition and subsequent debasement of 'the system': it can become automatic, repetitive and empty.
3. It doesn't resolve large-scale injustices, especially global ones: the injustices committed by nations to other nations, by the rich on the poor, etc.
4. It doesn't deal with the problem of sin as endemic to the human condition, just the lives of those who presently participate in the community and the Law.
5. How can we be sure that we've covered the requirements incurred by every single sin in our lives? – ultimately, nobody can do this. So the system isn't *comprehensive*.

The first Christians proclaimed:

Jesus Christ died:

- 'for sin' – so his death relates to the Old Testament's methods
- 'once for all' – deals with the issues of repetition and comprehensiveness
- 'for the sin of the whole world' – deals with the issue of exclusivity

So the earliest Christian proclamation is:

- Universal in scope
- fulfils and extends the calling of Israel (and is predicated upon it)
- Jesus died for everyone, so ...
- ... everyone needs to hear and respond, by turning away from sin and following Jesus as the one who has saved them (Saviour) and thus has a claim upon them (Lord)
- Jesus 'rescues us from the coming judgement on sin' by his death

A quick guide to sacrifice

Animal sacrifice is universal in agricultural societies, involving the giving of costly source of food, sustenance and recognition of the irreplaceable value of a life.

Atoning Sacrifice (Greek: *Hilasterion*)

- the giving of a life
- to remove the effect of sin: morally and ritually
- symbolism of blood – the source of life
- heals the moral disruption caused by sin

Community/Fellowship Sacrifice

- the Passover Lamb
 - the Eucharist
- ...both mark out and protect a people by blood and participation in the sacrifice

The Scapegoat ('Escape Goat')

- Part of the ritual of the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 15)
- Sins of the community are 'laid' on the scapegoat, who carries them away into the wilderness
- Note the 'sin bearing' language used in association with Jesus' death

Other metaphors used in the New Testament

- Ransom/Redemption
- Exchange/Substitution – 'for us', emphasising the sinlessness of Jesus
- Example language
- Legal Language ...

'I can't get no satisfaction': the Legal Metaphor

St Paul describes salvation through Jesus' death as JUSTIFICATION. By *justification* he means that the legal imbalance between the sinner (me), and the sinned-against (God, others, the community or the planet) has been *resolved* in God's sight by the death and resurrection of Jesus. As a result of justification, we are looked on by God as though we are as righteous as he is. We are accepted by God. We are in full fellowship with God. We are at a state of peace with God and with the world. It is '*just-as-if*' we had not committed sin. St Paul says that this happy state comes through the death and resurrection of Christ for us, and received through faith, not by any corrective act on our part.

But which legal system do we have in mind?

- *Hebrew Law*: there is no 'public prosecutor', it assumes a pre-existing set of community relationships which have been disrupted and are in need of repair, God is an active participant in the 'trial', pleading the cause of the innocent, the sinned-against and the weak. He is not an abstract judge. He gets involved
- *Latin/Western Law*: Emphasises the *neutrality* of the justice system, 'justice' is abstracted from relationship, a case is 'proven' or 'not proven', a penalty is given out, with little attempt to reconstruct covenantal relationship.
- Anselm (1033-1109) - *the Moral Law*: God's justice upholds the Universe. Since sin is a 'disruption' of this natural justice, God needs to correct it, otherwise he will be working (along with the sin) against his nature and against the natural order of creation. Reflected in 'deep magic' in C.S. Lewis' *The lion, the witch and the wardrobe*.
- Calvin (1509-1564) – *Penal Substitution*: God needs to punish in order to fulfil the demands of his justice. He punishes Jesus, instead of us, by allowing him to die, for us, on the cross.

The legal metaphor may not have the problems associated with explaining sacrifice, but it can 'take over' our understanding and lead it in directions far removed from the original New Testament context. Paul's understanding of JUSTIFICATION is primarily theological, with ritual overtones, not legal. We are regarded by God as

righteous just as God is righteous. Legal systems can quickly develop a cause-effect life of their own.

The Triumph of the Cross

Probably one of the oldest ways of speaking about the cross, particularly after the NT period.

Our sin leads to our ‘entrapment’ in an unresolvable legal and moral dilemma, where the law ‘works against us’ by condemning us, but not saving us. The ‘demands of the law’ mean we are trapped, and in turn these can oppress us in a cycle of condemnation and sin, which leads to spiritual death. Another interpretation: the Devil is God’s disobedient henchman, who has been empowered by human disobedience to have authority over humanity and the world.

Jesus death ‘unmasks’ and ‘disarms’ these powers, because he suffers unjustly under them, and is raised by God in an act of cosmic justification. The curse of the law is undone. The power of sin is broken. The Devil is defeated. Death is defeated.

Is Atonement Necessary?

From a biblical perspective, YES, because:

- Justice is important to God, it cannot be passed over
- Sin is universal, God does not favour one person over another by ignoring any sin
- People need justice, otherwise they turn to vengeance and war
- Forgiveness has a cost for those who have been ‘trespassed against’
- It’s the only fair reason why God can ask us to forgive others if we are to be forgiven
- It is the best basis for reconciliation: between God and us, between each other, and between the different, often-warring, parts of ourselves.

The growing forgetfulness of Christianity taking place in the West is leading to various ‘atonement-free’ ways of social justice, usually operating on the basis of:

- Everyone suing each other for damages
- Fear in taking initiative or admitting responsibility
- Inability to forgive or to possess the strength or ethical basis upon which to forgive
- No moral or ethical basis to support reconciliation (except pragmatism)
- Access to justice is dependent on funds available
- A slide towards draconian penal systems

Christianity proclaims a God who forgives but is prepared to pay the cost of that forgiveness himself, by suffering on the cross for the sins of everyone. Only that way can God insist that, through often deeply hurting as well as hurtful, we must forgive the sins of others, just as we have had our sins forgiven by God. The cosmic, ultimate price for this reconciliation has been paid by God himself, in Jesus’ suffering upon the cross.