

Romans Part 13 – Chapter 3:21-31

Sunday, May 15, 2022

With input from Bob Wilken, Dallas Theological Seminary, Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry, Bonnie Kristian, J Vernon McGee

Romans 3:21-31

²¹ *But now the righteousness of God has been **manifested** (become obvious or apparent through an appearance -Oxford) apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it (the law gave witness of righteousness but does not provide righteousness)*

— ²² *the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory (Shekinah Glory: the dwelling or settling of God's divine presence) of God, (Paul makes two categories: sinful man who requires God's righteousness in order to be forgiven from sin and be indwelt with the Holy Spirit, AND God's glory which includes His holiness and perfection.*

We have heard “God is holy and cannot allow sin in his sight.” But is this biblically accurate?

John 1:14 (NKJV) And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

Dr. Bob Wilken, Dallas Theological Seminary:

Here's a good question which came in from a radio listener:

In a book I read my children, it says “God is perfect and holy and anyone who sins cannot be in His presence.” I know this is a concept I have been taught somewhere else before. I heard it brought up in passing on one of your radio shows (it had nothing to do with the topic). Is this a concept taught in the Bible? And if so, how come in the Book of Job, Satan was able to appear before God? And isn't God everywhere (around us sinners)? Does it say or suggest in the Bible that God cannot be around sin or sinners? Thank you.

I am impressed both by the question and way in which the interrogator answers it herself. I agree.

The evidence she cites is some I was going to cite. Yes, in Job 1:6 and 2:1 we find that “the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord.” Then Job adds, “and Satan also came among them.” The “sons of God” refers to angels. This probably refers to unfallen angels. However, in Gen 6:2, “the sons of God” refers to fallen angels. Compare 2 Pet 2:4. At the very least, the chief fallen angel, Satan, was allowed in God's presence. Possibly some of his followers were present as well.

Job 1:6 and 2:1 prove that God can be in the presence of sinners.

Plus, God's omnipresence means that God has been in the presence of sinners since the fall of one third of the angels. He will always be in the presence of sinners (Heb 4:13).

Think about the Great White Throne Judgment in Rev 20:11-15. All unbelieving sinners of all time will be judged by Christ. While I think the judgment likely occurs on earth, it is certainly true that God the Father and God the Holy Spirit will be watching the proceedings. If God cannot be in the presence of sinners, then there can be no judgment of sinners.

Believers still sin (1 John 1:8, 10). So, if God can't be in the presence of sinners, then He cannot have fellowship with believers. The Bible nowhere says that God cannot be around sin or sinners. If that were so, then the incarnation never could have happened. Jesus is God (John 1:1), that is, the second member of the Trinity. He was around sinners all the time.

I'll add a question of my own: Why do many say that God cannot be in the presence of sinners? They say that because they misunderstand a few passages.

Here are a few of those texts and my brief explanations:

“You [God] cannot look upon wickedness” (Hab 1:13a). The prophet is disturbed that God has showed him that wicked Babylonians (Chaldeans) will be attacking Israel and taking it into exile. His point is not that God does not *see* wickedness. It is that He does not *look favorably upon the wicked*.

Note Hab 1:13b, “Why do You look on those who deal treacherously?” He is asking why God would allow the Babylonians to destroy Israel.

“As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Ps 103:12).

This does not mean that God cannot see us unless we are sinless. It means that when He forgives, our forgiven transgressions do not bar us from fellowship with God. But even if we are out of fellowship with God, He sees us and is wooing us back to Himself (Luke 15; Jas 5:19-20).

“My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matt 27:46). That is a quote of Ps 22:1. The Lord Jesus is not saying that God has ceased to see or hear Him because He was now bearing the sins of the world. If God could no longer see or hear Him, then this cry would make no sense. Instead, the Lord is calling the attention of those at the cross to Psalm 22. By citing the opening words, He was citing the whole Psalm. It begins with a reference to the cross but ends with the triumphant reign of Messiah (vv 29-31). So that is not only a cry of pain and suffering, but also a statement that He went to the cross of His own volition and that He knows that these next six hours will be the most victorious hours in all of history.

²⁴ *and are justified* (just as if we never sinned – our position in Christ)

Justification:

(1) the act by which God moves a willing person from the state of sin (injustice) to the state of grace (justice),

(2) the change in a person's condition moving from a state of sin to a state of righteousness

(3) the act of acquittal whereby God gives contrite sinners the status of the righteous.

by his grace as a gift,

Ephesians 2:8-9 was written around 62AD, Romans was written around 57AD:

“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Continuation of verse 24:

*through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood,*

One definition of **Propitiation** is God focused and concerns reconciliation (it literally expiates sin, in particular our guilt); atonement is man focused and concerns cleansing. But atonement is more:

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We just celebrated Easter, the culmination of the week in which Christians commemorate the death and resurrection of Jesus and celebrate what this means for our salvation. However, the connection between Christ's death and our salvation — and how these events can reconcile God and humanity — isn't exactly intuitive.

The basic story Christianity tells goes like this: God creates humans and wants to have a loving relationship with us. Instead, we sin and make that friendship impossible. So, God comes to Earth to live as an ordinary human, die a terrible death, and rise again. That makes it so we can be friends with God. *Wait, what?*

The Easter story seems so elementary, but some super-important details are missing in there. Like, how does Jesus' dying help anything? Why couldn't God just forgive us, like he's always telling us to do for other people? And if God is all-powerful, why did he need to live on Earth at all? Couldn't he just make a big announcement in the clouds or something?

How we answer these questions is called **atonement theology**. Theories of the atonement are ways we fill in the gaps in that basic story, showing how, at Easter, Jesus atones for our sins. It's how we explain what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus actually *do* — why God became a human to repair our broken relationship.

Over the course of church history, Christians have answered these questions in four primary ways that I'll explain in chronological order. These atonement models are called *Christus Victor*, satisfaction theory, moral exemplar, and penal substitution.

Christus Victor

For the first thousand years of Christianity, the church explained why God became human through a family of atonement stories we together call *Christus Victor*, which is Latin for "Christ the victor" or "Christ victorious." Each of these stories differs a little in the metaphor it uses, but they all portray God as a triumphant rescuer: Jesus redeems us from slavery, ransoms us from evil, revives, restores, and reconciles us. Jesus defeats our enemies — sin, death, and the devil — and reigns victorious over the growing kingdom of God.

If you're familiar with C. S. Lewis's Narnia series, and particularly *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, you know *Christus Victor*. Just like Aslan sacrifices his life to rescue the traitor Edmund, defeats the White Witch, and frees all Narnia, so Jesus sacrificed his life to rescue sinful humanity, defeat Satan and even death itself, and free all creation to be restored to a relationship with God. *Christus Victor* says that, like Edmund, in sinning we've both betrayed God and become victims

of evil, but God loved us even when we were his enemies, so much so that he willingly died to rescue us.

This view of the atonement shows up in all the early church heavyweights, the very first Christian theologians who lived closest to the time of Jesus. For instance, one early theologian named Irenaeus explained that God came to Earth so he "might kill sin, deprive death of its power," and restore life and freedom to all humanity. Similarly, Athanasius wrote that Jesus "brought death to nought" and was raised as a "monument of victory over death and its corruption."

This is a vision of a self-sacrificial God who overcomes our treachery and evil's bloodlust with his love.

Satisfaction theory

Right around the end of our faith's first millennium, a theologian named Anselm of Canterbury showed up and changed everything. In a book called "Why did God become human?" Anselm answered that question very differently than Christians had for centuries.

His theory imagined God as a medieval lord with a bunch of unruly peasants who have "so offended [God] that not one of them, by any action of his own, can escape the penalty of death." The tricky thing to understand here is that Anselm isn't saying God is petty or unforgiving. The medieval world was a dangerous place, so a lord's main job was to maintain order and safety. Anselm saw God's main job as maintaining the order of the universe and our sin as a dangerous disruption of that order. It's not that God is holding a grudge, but that he *has* to punish our sin or the universe will go haywire.

The other complicating thing here is that in Anselm's time, the punishment for a crime depended on the criminal's social status. If a lord committed a crime against another lord, his punishment would be a lot lighter than if a peasant did the same thing to the same victim. That's why, when Anselm thinks about us sinning against God, he decides that only God himself — Jesus — can make up for what we did.

Only God is God's equal, so only God can atone for sin against God. (This is confusing today because our criminal justice system doesn't work this way, but it made perfect sense back then.) So Anselm says this is why Jesus became human: Because he was God, his death was important enough to restore order to the universe. But because he was also human, he got humanity off the hook at the same time.

Moral exemplar

About a century after Anselm totally revolutionized the way Christians understood the cross, another theologian, Peter Abelard, was unhappy with the new theory. Abelard — who is best remembered for a tragic love affair that gives *Romeo and Juliet* a run for its money — couldn't accept Anselm's perspective, but he didn't like *Christus Victor*, either.

He instead came up with a new theory called moral exemplar, which, as the name suggests, pictures Jesus as our moral example. The central point here is God's love. Abelard said when our sin made a loving relationship between God and humans impossible, God became human to demonstrate the depth of his love by his suffering and death.

As we observe the love of Christ on the cross, we're motivated to reconcile with God and model our lives after Jesus. Because of Christ's example, Abelard wrote, "we cling both to him and to our neighbor by the indestructible bond of love."

As much as he wrote to refute Anselm, Abelard's theory retains a big feature of Anselm's view: In both, the devil has disappeared. Where *Christus Victor* sees forces of evil holding us in bondage to sin and death, for Anselm and Abelard, salvation is about overcoming a conflict between God and humanity. The barrier to reconciliation is not any external evil but God's commitment to order (for Anselm) or humanity's commitment to sin (for Abelard).

Abelard's approach never attracted as much of a following as the other theories — some people even claimed it was heresy when it was first introduced. Since then, however, the moral exemplar view has become popular among some Protestants and Catholics alike, and it can even work as a sort of add-on theory that complements one of the other three.

Penal substitution

The most recent major atonement theory, penal substitution, dates to the Protestant Reformation and theologians like John Calvin, the Reformer who founded the Presbyterian church. This view draws on Anselm's satisfaction theory, but by the time Calvin was writing, the medieval society that inspired Anselm no longer existed.

Gone, then, are the rebellious peasants who can't make up for what they did to the medieval lord. Instead, Calvin describes a courtroom with God as angry judge eager to punish human sinners. "We could not escape the fearful judgment of God," Calvin explains, but God spares us death because "the guilt which made us liable to punishment was transferred to the head of the Son of God." Calvin's and Anselm's theories are often grouped together as a single view of the atonement — sometimes theologians even combine the names into "penal satisfaction" — but they come out of very different cultures and turn on very different ideas of God's goals and intentions. With Anselm, sin is a big deal not so much because God is angry at us, but because our behavior is threatening the whole order of the universe.

But with Calvin, we are all "sinners [who] were obnoxious to the judgment of God," and "without Christ God is in a manner hostile to us, and has his arm raised for our destruction." In fact, Calvin adds, we should expect love only from Jesus ("we look to Christ alone for divine favor and paternal love"), and we can't expect love from God the Father, whose relationship to humanity is based in his righteous law. God is our enemy before Jesus dies, and his goal in the atonement is justice, not rescue.

My view

I grew up in the heart of American evangelicalism, where Calvin's theory is the most popular way to explain Easter. I remember hearing the courtroom analogy a lot as a kid. It's like we're on trial, my Sunday school teachers said, where God the Father is the judge and Jesus is our defense attorney. The judge is angry at all the bad things we've done and sentences us to death, but then Jesus steps in and says, "No, kill me instead." So God kills Jesus, and then we don't have to die and go to hell.

But I also read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. For a long time, I didn't realize the story C. S. Lewis told wasn't the same as the courtroom story. What I did know was that I loved it, and I loved the Jesus it showed me. As I got older and started studying theology, I found out Lewis wasn't just using a creative analogy — he was also sharing *Christus Victor*, the oldest understanding of the meaning of the cross.

Once I started reading what those earliest theologians said about Jesus and why he became human, I saw a huge contrast between *Christus Victor* and the penal substitution theory I'd been taught. In Calvin's paradigm, God the Father is the one holding up reconciliation. He's angry and he has to vent

his wrath on somebody before he'll be in a relationship with us. He's the one who demands we die, and he's the one who kills Jesus in our place.

But in *Christus Victor*, God loves us. Not just Jesus — *all* of God is love, *all* three persons of the Trinity. Our betrayal and captivity to evil is what makes reconciliation impossible before Jesus becomes human. And like Narnia's White Witch, it is the devil, not God, who wants us dead. Instead of an angry judge who won't compromise his law to save us, the earliest Christians saw God as a loving rescuer who is willing to sacrifice himself on our behalf even though we made ourselves his enemy.

Today, I find that story far and away the most persuasive and biblical theory of the **atonement**, and it is a defining piece of my faith. With Irenaeus, I believe that at Easter we celebrate how Jesus "set free the weak, and endowed His own handiwork with salvation, by destroying sin. For He is a most holy and merciful Lord, and loves the human race."

What is the depth of Christ's Victory (*Christus Victor*)? - Pascal-Emmanuel Gobry

Jesus had his last meal with his disciples on the evening of a Thursday (commemorated as Holy Thursday or Maundy Thursday which comes from the latin word 'mandatum', or 'command' which refers to the instructions Jesus gave his disciples at the Last Supper). He was arrested during the night, tried Friday morning (Good Friday), condemned, crucified, and died before sundown on Friday. And, according to the Gospel accounts, he was bodily raised from the dead on the third day — Sunday, the day of Easter.

We Christians are crazy enough to believe that God can be killed, but not so crazy as to believe that God must stay dead.

Belief in the bodily — literal, not metaphorical — resurrection of Jesus Christ is the belief on which every other Christian belief rests. It's how we know that this bizarre 1st-century preacher was not just a preacher, but actually the Son of God. He rose from the dead.

Indeed, the Oxford historical scholar and Anglican bishop N.T. Wright has argued very thoroughly that the only way to explain the sudden and baffling growth of early Christianity, despite Jewish and Roman opposition, was that Jesus of Nazareth really did rise from the dead. There was no notion of bodily resurrection from the dead in Jewish or Greek or Roman religion. And in the history of 1st century Judaism, when there were plenty of people who claimed to be the Messiah, nobody ever, ever claimed that a would-be Messiah who had been killed by the occupier was the Messiah, for the self-evident reason that according to Judaism, the Messiah would not fail.

We have a patronizing way of thinking that people in the 1st century might very well believe that someone rose from the dead because they were primitives who believed in fairy stories. This is a cultural prejudice. If anything, everything about their religion and culture made 1st-century Jews even less likely to believe in a bodily resurrection, or that a crucified man could be a Messiah.

The best and perhaps only explanation for the fact that a bunch of 1st century Jews suddenly, inexplicably, started running around claiming that their crucified prophet was the Messiah and had risen from the dead, Wright argues, is that they saw him bodily risen from the dead. Now, though Wright's scholarship is very well regarded, this is nowhere near empirical "proof" of Jesus' resurrection. And obviously, you could line up many scholars who don't believe in the

resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is just to emphasize that, yes, Christians believe it actually happened. Literally.

But Christians celebrate Easter not just for historical reasons. They believe that Jesus' triumph over death on Easter wasn't just his triumph — it was ours, too. This is a bit harder to explain. Christians believe that the death and resurrection of Jesus changed the world not just at a historical level — which it clearly did — but also at a supernatural level.

Christians differ on the precise mechanics, but they agree on this general outline: By willingly going to the cross and then rising from the dead, Jesus of Nazareth, who is the Son of God, somehow tweaked the constants of the spiritual universe, so that sin and death are, by this action, in a fundamental way, destroyed.

Now, Christians will readily admit that sin and death seem to be as powerful as ever. But we see this almost as the comical staggering of a stage character who has just been stabbed. Sin and death have been revealed to be things we can overcome.

Back to Romans 3:25

previously: *(for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood)*

to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.

J Vernon McGee: For four thousand years the world waited as the Seed of the woman travelled down history to be born of a virgin - crushing Satan, sin and death. And for two thousand years God passed over the sins of all who trusted in the promised Messiah - the prophesized the Savior - the perfect Man.

The blood of Christ is sufficient to pay for the past, present and future sins of all who trust in His name, but the blood of Christ was also sufficient to pay for the sins of all the old testament believers, who by faith trusted God to send His promised Savior.

God has never winked at sin but has withheld His judgement on sin to be poured out at the appointed time over Christ Jesus our Savior. He graciously restrained judgement by passing over the sins previously committed, so that ALL who believe on His Son, would be saved.

²⁶ *It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*

²⁷ *Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. ²⁸ For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law. ²⁹ Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, ³⁰ since God is one— who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith. ³¹ Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law.*