

The Cross and the Kingdom: Salvation and atonement in Jesus' teachings

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1. THE DEATH OF JESUS IN THE SYNOPTICS

a. Jesus' predictions of His death

There are 3 major explicit predictions by Jesus of His death and resurrection:

1. Following Peter's confession (Matt 16:13-23 // Mk 8:31 // Lk 9:18-22)
2. Following the transfiguration (Matt 17:22-23 // Mk 9:31 // Lk 9:44)
3. Following the conversation with the rich young man (Matt 20:17-19 // Mk 10:32-34 // Lk 18:31-33. Only Matthew's account specifically mentioned crucifixion as the means of death).

In addition to these Jesus explicitly predicted His crucifixion just prior to His anointing at Bethany (Matt 26:1-5). While the anointing is recorded by Matthew, Mark and John only Matthew records the crucifixion saying.

None of these predictions of His death give a *reason* for it in terms of atonement or salvation.

b. The parable of the tenants

Matt 21:33-46 // Mark 12:1-12 // Luke 20:9-19

All 3 synoptics record: "they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance'" and "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard this parable, they knew he was talking about them".

One significant aspect of this story is that the son represents the landowner as his agent. According to the well-known Jewish principle of agency (*shaliach*) by rejecting the son they were in effect rejecting the father. This is spelled out in Luke 10:16 "He who listens to you listens to me; he who rejects you rejects me; but he who

rejects me rejects him who sent me."

Jesus is the *shaliach*, the agent or emissary of God, but not God Himself, although He acts with the full authority of God.

c. The ransom saying

Matt 20:28 // Mark 10:45

"The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom (Gk. *lytron*) for many".

The only other occurrence of "ransom" in NT is 1 Tim 2:6 (*antilytron*). The word can denote the price paid to free slaves while the related verb *lytroo* can mean deliverance in a general way without implying anything about payment. While the "ransom saying" may be saying that deliverance of many was accomplished at great cost, this saying does not specify to whom the ransom is paid. It may, or may not, be a reference to His death (to give ones life in service does not necessarily mean to die).

d. Other sayings

There are several sayings and metaphors which imply suffering and rejection and resurrection, including:

The Temple saying

"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up"

John 2:19-22 cp. Mt 26:61 // Mk 14:58; Matt 27:39 // Mk 15:29

The Jonah saying

Matt 12:38-40; 16:1-2; Lk 11:29-32

The baptism metaphor

Matt 20:22-23 // Mk 10:38-39 // Lk 12:50

The cup metaphor

Matt 20:22-23 // Mk 10:38-39; Matt 26:39 // Mk 14:36 // Lk 22:42; John 18:11.

These sayings are primarily eschatological while none of them necessarily suggest atonement.

e. The Last Supper

During Jesus' last meal with His disciples He prayed over bread and wine and said "This is my body" and "This is my blood" (Matthew 26:26–28; Mark 14:22–24; Luke 22:19–20). For many Christians, especially Gentile believers, that could only mean that Jesus referred to himself: Bread and wine were tokens of Jesus body and blood. To many Christians later in history these words would mean that the bread and wine *literally* became His body and blood when believers consumed them.

The traditional understanding of the bread and wine, known in many churches as *Eucharist* or *Communion*, is that Jesus was telling His followers to eat bread and drink wine *as if* they were his own flesh and blood. The celebration of "Holy Communion" or "breaking bread" was to be a memorial of Jesus' voluntary death as a sacrifice offered for the sins of mankind. The bread and wine were intended to be visible reminders of His body which was nailed to the cross and His blood which was shed there.

But is that plausible within the context of first century Judaism? What Jew would tell another to drink blood, even symbolic blood? The thought of drinking blood, even animal blood, was blasphemous. To imagine drinking human blood and consuming it with human flesh could only make the blasphemy worse. Yet there is no hint in the accounts of the last supper that Jesus' disciples were shocked or even puzzled by this saying.

So what did Jesus mean?

Throughout the Gospels (especially in Luke) there is an emphasis on the meal table in Jesus' teachings. In contrast to the meals of the Pharisees in which only the ritually pure could participate and from which the blind, crippled and diseased were excluded together with the "sinners" (including those with heretical doctrines), Jesus was welcoming and inclusive. He taught "when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind" (Lk 14:12). He ate with "sinners" and refused to wash His hands after being in contact with common people and before eating.

Jesus' meals were also meant to be a taste of the kingdom to come. The prophets taught that in the kingdom to come God would "share His table" with "all peoples" on his holy mountain (e.g. Isaiah 25:6–8). Jesus shared that hope:

"Many shall come from east and west, and feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of God." (Matthew 8:11; Luke 13:28–29)

Unlike the Pharisees, Jesus' meals were inclusive. He avoided any exclusive practices that would divide the people of God from one another and accepted all the people of God at His table, including tax agents and other suspicious characters, and even notorious sinners. The meal for him was a symbol of the kingdom of God and everyone was to have access to it.

It's important that we see the last supper not only in the context of Jesus teaching about the Kingdom of God, but also in the **immediate context**. Jesus had just created a furore at the Temple by driving out the animals being sold for sacrifices, and the money-changers. He objected to merchants selling sacrificial animals in the vast outer court of the Temple (and no doubt He objected even further to the fact that the chief priests were making a personal fortune from this trade).

The Gospels record several dramatic moments when Jesus challenged religious practices:

1. His first recorded miracle was to convert water used for ritual purification into wine which was to be drunk in celebration (John 2:1-11. Note especially verse 6).
2. He declared all foods clean (Mark 7:19)
3. By refusing to wash His hands before a meal He declared all people clean. In other words, there was no need to wash away their 'contamination' before He could eat. (Luke 11:37-40; Matt 15:2; Mark 7:1-4).
4. He worked on the Sabbath (John 5:16-18).
5. By driving sacrificial animals from the Temple courts He declared an end to Temple sacrifices.

To the priests and the religious authorities this last action was the most radical of them all, and threatened their livelihood.

Soon after this "cleansing" of the Temple, Jesus again celebrated a meal as a foretaste of the kingdom, just as he had before. But he added a new dimension of meaning, related to His actions at the Temple. Jesus said over the wine, "**This** is my blood," and over the bread, "**This** is my flesh".

Jesus' words should be understood in the context of His actions at the Temple. He cannot have meant, "This is my own body and blood"; that would have been shocking and would have been understood as blasphemous. Jesus' point was that, as true worship and sacrifice could not be practiced at the Temple it was no longer possible or necessary to perform animal sacrifices. The common elements of a meal were to be the new 'offerings' to God: **wine would replace the blood of sacrifice, and bread would replace the flesh of sacrifice**. These were His substitutes for the animal sacrifices at the Temple. When he said, "*This* is my blood, *this* is my flesh," he meant that the wine and bread were replacing the blood and flesh of animals being sacrificed at the Temple.

On another occasion, when questioned by a teacher of the Law about the greatest commandment, Jesus answered that it is the *shema*, the commandment to love the God Who is One, and to love your neighbour. The lawyer replied: "To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." Mark adds: "When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God'." (Mark 12:32-34). He is clearly teaching here that as one comes closer to understanding that love is more important than Temple sacrifices, one comes closer to the kingdom of God.

Jesus was in effect saying that by sharing meals in anticipation of the kingdom, He and his followers offered more acceptable worship than what was offered in the Temple. The wine was better blood, the

bread better flesh, than Temple sacrifices that were being controlled by the religious authorities to line their own pockets.

No where else does Jesus speak of His own death as an 'atonement'¹. In sharing bread and wine at the last supper He is not speaking of His own death as a human sacrifice. We should remember too that this was Passover and Paul makes a connection with the timing and speaks of Jesus as "Christ our Passover lamb" (1 Cor 5:7). But the Passover lamb was **not** offered as an *atonement* or as a sacrifice for sin. It was **not** a sin offering. Every part of the lamb was to be consumed in a meal in which everyone was to participate: the whole family together with neighbours. There had to be enough people present to ensure that nothing was left over (Exodus 12:4, 10). This was a festive meal, a celebration of freedom. People often confuse the Passover lamb with the sin offerings and think of "Christ our Passover lamb" as a sacrifice for sins. This has led to further confusion about the meaning of the "body" and "blood" references during the last supper.

For many Christians the primary focus of Communion is on the *death* of Christ as an atonement for sins. This is especially so in relation to the communion 'cup' as a symbol of shed blood. However, it's important to note that the Passover lamb was **not** sacrificed as an atonement, and Jesus' reference to the wine as a symbol of blood was to the "blood of the covenant". Sacrifice in confirmation of a *covenant* was never for *atonement*.

Jesus is, however, saying that this is a radical change in the way God is to be worshipped. He says of the wine: "This is my blood *of the covenant*." (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24. Compare Luke 22:20 and 1 Corinthians 11:25 which speak of "new covenant.")

When Jesus referred to His blood as 'the blood of the [new] covenant', He was referring to the sacrifice which sealed a covenant. He is undoubtedly linking the

¹ I'm not suggesting that Jesus' death wasn't an atonement, but rather that Jesus never referred to His own death in these terms.

blood with which Moses sealed the covenant in Exodus 24:8 and the *new* covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34. The words in Jeremiah refer to the community of God's people receiving God's law in their hearts and minds and is *contrasted* with the exodus from Egypt which was being celebrated at that time in the Passover meal ("It will **not** be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt"). Jesus undoubtedly had Jeremiah's words in mind at this Passover-celebration from Egypt, and Jeremiah revealed that the new covenant will be different to the old, as the new community of the covenant-people will be different from the old community. The emphasis again is on the Kingdom. For Jesus the 'last supper' was the first of a new type of Passover - a remembrance of the deliverance from the bondage of sin and the institution of the new covenant and a new community of covenant-people. This meal was a foretaste of the Messianic banquet of which he had spoken so many times.

2. THE DEATH OF JESUS IN JOHN

a. The Lamb of God sayings

John 1:29

John [the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

John 1:36

When he [John] saw Jesus passing by, he said, "Look, the Lamb of God!"

Lambs were sacrificed daily as burnt offerings "to make atonement" (Lev 1:4). Lambs were also slain at Passover but the Passover lamb is never said to make atonement.

John is most likely to have Isa 53:7 in mind ("he was led like a lamb to the slaughter") as the lamb here is used metaphorically of the suffering servant who "will bear [the] iniquities" of many (v. 11).

Another possibility is that this is an allusion to the ram which was sacrificed in place of Isaac (Gen 22:8).

John says this lamb "takes away the sin of the world". 1 John 3:5 uses a similar expression: "he appeared so that he might take away our sins". To "take away sin" can mean either to remove it by making atonement for it, or bearing the penalty attached to the sin, or to abolish sin.

b. The "lay down his life" sayings

John 10:11, 15, 17-18 "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep".

John 15:13 "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (but cp. v. 12 "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you" which shows that this saying is intended for the disciples and not necessarily referring to Jesus' death as an atonement.)

The use of the same expression in 1 John 3:16 provides an insight into its meaning. "This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers." The next verse offers an example of how we "lay down our lives for our brothers". "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" If John is here suggesting that by meeting our brothers' material needs we are "laying down our lives" for them, then there is no implication of sacrificial death in these words. (See also John 13:37, 38 where Peter offers to lay down his life.)

The Greek word *tithemi* occurs 96 times in the NT. It is translated: lay (up, aside, or down, or as 'lay a foundation'), appoint, put, set, ordain, commit, advise, purpose, settle. It doesn't necessarily mean "to die" and its use elsewhere seems to be against this.

c. The "lifted up" (*hypsoo*) sayings

Either crucifixion or exaltation (or both) may be implied by *hypsoo*.

John 3:14

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.

John 8:28

So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.

John 12:32 - 34

But I, when I am lifted up from [ek out of] the earth, will draw all men to myself." He said this [Gk. *lego* refers to a systematic discourse, i.e. 'he said all this ...' referring to the preceding discourse, not just the preceding verse] to show the kind of death he was going to die. The crowd spoke up, "We have heard from the Law that the Christ will remain forever, so how can you say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this 'Son of Man'?"

3. The crucifixion

Jesus was crucified on a charge of sedition (Luke 23:2; Matt 27:11, 29, 37; John 19:12, 14). It was a political execution.

He was crucified alongside others sentenced for political crimes ("malefactors" or "robbers" interprets a word which refers to *insurgents*, not thieves). Earlier Jesus quoted Isa 53:12 "It is written: 'And he was numbered with the transgressors'; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. Yes, what is written about me is reaching its fulfillment" (Lk 22:37).

On the way to His crucifixion "a large number of people followed him, including women who mourned and wailed for him. Jesus turned and said to them, "Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for me; weep for yourselves and for your children. For the time will come when you will say, 'Blessed are the barren women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!' Then they will say to the mountains, "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!" For if men do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?" (Lk 23:27-31).

This riddle about the green and dry tree is pointing us towards the events that would fall on Jerusalem within a generation. Josephus records how that so many people were crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem during the siege of AD 70 that

the surrounding countryside was stripped bare of timber. In His crucifixion Jesus was identifying Himself with the fate of His people.

The crucifixion of Jesus was a political execution which foreshadowed the terrible things which would be inflicted on the people of God in the near future. His death was representative of His people, and He identified Himself with them.

4. The Gospel in the Gospels

The synoptic Gospels consistently tell us that Jesus' mission was to preach the Gospel of the Kingdom (e.g. Matt 4:23; 9:35; Mk 1:15; Lk 4:43; 8:1). The Kingdom of God is mentioned over 100 times in all four Gospels. While the death of Jesus is recorded in detail in all the Gospels, very little is said about it in terms of atonement-theology. In fact, even while dying on the cross Jesus discussed the coming Kingdom with one of the men crucified with Him (Lk 23:42-43) and gave him an assurance of the grace of God.

Theologians and evangelists who preach the death, burial and resurrection as the *whole* Gospel struggle to find the Gospel in the gospels and in the teachings of Jesus. No wonder then that the popular *new International Version* translates *euaggelion* as "Gospel" throughout the New Testament except when referring to the teachings of Jesus – there it is translated "good news". In other words, the subtle implication is that Jesus simply spoke of "good news" while Paul taught the *real* Gospel! Hence C.S. Lewis declared that the Gospel is not in the gospels! ²

We cannot separate the crucifixion of Jesus from the teachings of Jesus. The Gospel is not declared in the event while absent from the sayings. On the contrary, for Jesus the crucifixion was a decisive event in the end of the present evil age. He encountered head-on the religious and political leaders of His day, refusing to use their weapons, and He ultimately had the victory.

² Introduction to J. B. Phillips' *Letters to Young Churches*, Fontana Books, pp. 9, 10

Why did Jesus have to die?

Was there no other way for God to save mankind?

The death of Christ is often explained either as a debt being paid - that is, His death paid the price of our sin - or as one innocent person dying in the place of other guilty people who have been condemned to die (that is, as a substitute). These are two different metaphors, but they often get confused and used together in explaining the 'atonement'³, or how Christ's death brings about our salvation. It's one thing to speak about a 'debt' being forgiven, but to then mix this up with a capital punishment for a criminal offense would be to confuse the metaphors.

If we stick to the language of debts being paid then Jesus must have paid the debt to someone - if indeed He paid a debt. This is quite different from someone dying as a substitute in place of another for a crime.

Paul used a variety of metaphors from the marketplace, the slave trade, the law courts and the Temple, because no one analogy is adequate or complete in itself. No one metaphor was adequate for him, and no metaphor should be pushed too far.

However, Jesus himself never spoke of His death as an 'atonement'. The Gospels record only one brief saying which possibly alludes to His death in atonement-theology terms - the 'ransom saying' of Mark 10:45 (parallel Matt 20:28), which may, or may not, be a reference to His death (to give one's life in service does not necessarily mean to die). Jesus' references during the last supper to His blood being shed to seal the new covenant are the language of *covenants*, not *atonement*. So it's actually doubtful whether Jesus ever referred to His own death as an atonement.

³ The word "atonement" occurs in the NT (KJV) only once (Rom 5:11) where it is a translation of *katallage* which appears 4 times in the NT. It is translated "reconciling" in Rom 11:15 and "reconciliation" in 2 Cor 5:18,19.

On the other hand, Jesus spoke frequently of God's forgiveness, His abundant generosity, and His graciousness. There is nothing in any of His parables, stories or sayings which suggests that a price of any kind had to be paid to secure God's forgiveness. The stories which refer to debts being forgiven all emphasise the undeserved kindness shown by the one forgiving the debt. If any debt was owed by Adam or his descendants because of his sin or theirs, then the debt was owed to God. If Jesus death was to pay a debt then the debt must have been paid to God, and that would put God in the position of demanding the death of His own Son in order to satisfy a debt to Himself. The other alternative would be Anselm's satisfaction theory which had the debt being paid to the devil, which I personally think is absurd.

If Jesus suffered the penalty for the crimes committed by others, then He suffered the punishment for sins which was due. There is no need for forgiveness then, because the sentence has been carried out. We are free, not because we have been forgiven, but because someone else took our place.

As I see it, the only way we can understand forgiveness is to see it as a gracious act of God in NOT demanding payment or punishment for our sins. If we use the metaphor of a debt, then the debt is **paid** and is not forgiven. If we use the language of capital punishment then the sentence has been carried out and the guilty party has a substitute who dies in their place, but the crime is not forgiven. Neither of these analogies explains what actually happened: **God chose to forgive our sins even though there was absolutely nothing we could do to merit or deserve His forgiveness, and even though it would be impossible for us to find a substitute who could suffer the punishment which our sins deserved.**

As I see it, **Jesus' death was a demonstration of how far God's love would go in order to save us**, not what God demands in order to be satisfied. Several Scriptures point us in this direction:

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates **his own love** for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Galatians 2:20

The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who **loved** me and gave himself for me.

Ephesians 5:2

Christ **loved** us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

1 John 3:16

This is how we know what **love** is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.

1 John 4:9

This is how God showed his **love** among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.

1 John 4:10

This is **love**: not that we loved God, but that **he loved us** and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

John 13:1

Jesus knew that the time had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.

The death of Christ is primarily a **demonstration of the love of God**. It was not an act to appease an offended deity. It was not a mechanistic or legalistic sacrifice to satisfy the requirements of any religious law. It was not a demonstration of what "the flesh" deserved. **It was an act of love**. As the *shaliach*, the agent or emissary of God, Jesus was demonstrating in His own life and death the love of God, effectively doing what God could not do himself.

William Barclay puts it very beautifully in *The Plain Man Looks at the Apostles' Creed*:

"But why the death of Christ? If Jesus had stopped before the cross, it would have meant that there was some point beyond which the love of God would not go, some limit to his love. But in Jesus [i.e. through His *agent* – my

comment] God says: 'You may disobey me; you may grieve me; you may be disloyal to me; you may misunderstand me; you may batter me and bruise me and scourge me; you may treat me with savage injustice; you may kill me on a cross; **I will never stop loving you.**' This means that the life and death of Jesus are the demonstration and the proof of the limitless, the undefeatable, unchangeable, unalterable, infinite love of God." (My emphasis).

This is the most beautiful summary I have ever read of the motivation beyond the cross.

Final comments

"To believe that God raised Jesus from the dead is also to believe that Jesus died for the sins of all. The theory of orthodox Christianity notwithstanding, the New Testament presents no authoritative theory of the atonement, in terms of why Jesus' death may have been necessary for the forgiveness of sins. What is clear is that, in view of Jesus' death, the Christian conscience does not condemn Christians for their shortcomings, as if they were guilty of transgression, but, instead, admonishes and encourages them to act consistently with what they are: the people of God (see Rom.8:1-17,31-34; Heb.10:1-25). This, again, is the maturity of life in God's kingdom: not fear, which has to do with punishment, but love, which comes from faith and hope (see I Jn. 4:18)."

Robert Hach, **Restoring the New Testament Pattern**

"In spite of the rich variety of imagery employed in the NT for coming to terms with Jesus' death, the history of reflection on the cross is littered with attempts to discern its significance in narrow terms. In reality, just as the crucifixion of Jesus is the most historically certain of the events of Jesus' life, it is also the most widely interpreted."

Joel Green, **Death of Jesus** in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Intersity Press 1992, p. 153