

Understanding Theology in 15 Minutes A Day for 40 Days

Day 26

What Is the Basis of Salvation?

Who needs to be saved? *Everyone!* Not one person has escaped sin's devastating effects, and no one can do anything about this on their own. This was the subject of chapters 15 and 16. Finally we come to the solution to the universal problem: the doctrine of salvation.

The basis of salvation for any and every individual is Christ's death—and *only* Christ's death. This truth is known as the sufficiency of the death of Christ. Anything we sinful humans might contribute to our own salvation is excluded. When Jesus said on the cross, "It is finished" (**John 19:30**), he meant it. The gospel—the good news of salvation—is succinctly stated in **1 Corinthians 15:1–8**:

By this gospel you are saved ... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared [to the disciples and hundreds of others].

vv. 2–5

The good news is that anyone can be saved by believing that Jesus died for their sins, was buried, and was resurrected.

The significance of his death could be compared to a diamond with many facets. Each describes an effect of Christ's work, either on God the Father or on individuals in need of salvation.

What the Death of Christ Was

The first and central concept is known as *substitutionary atonement* (penal substitution or vicarious atonement). This has to do with what Christ's death *was*—its essence. The sinner, having broken God's law, deserves legal punishment, namely, death (**Genesis 2:17; Romans 5:12; 6:23; James 1:15**).

The death of Christ solves this problem in terms of atonement, which means "the making right of a wrong." When that wrong is between a human and God, atonement can only be accomplished through death (Hebrews 9:22). The terms *substitution* or *vicarious* mean the one sacrificed dies in the place of or instead of the sinner.

This concept was introduced through the Old Testament sacrificial system. For example, in **Leviticus 17:11**, God says, “The life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life.” But animals were never a sufficient substitute for humans, who are created in the image of God (**Hebrews 10:4, 11**). God provided animal sacrifices as a theology lesson regarding the seriousness of sin and the means of dealing with it, and in anticipation of what was to come.

Only one who is truly human could die in the place of another. That is why Jesus “*had to be made like them, fully human in every way ... that he might make atonement for the sins of the people*” (**Hebrews 2:17**). He tells us in **Mark 10:45** that his death was truly a substitute:

“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Paul says, in **1 Timothy 2:6**, that Christ “*gave himself as a ransom for all people.”*

The Greek word translated *for* in both verses specifically means “in the place of” or “instead of.” Many other texts speak of the substitutionary nature of the sacrifice (e.g., **Matthew 20:28; John 1:29; Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13; 1 Peter 3:18**). The effect on God the Father of Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice was that his justice—a part of his very nature—was satisfied (**Romans 3:25–26**). God, being holy and righteous, *did* punish sin as he *had* to do. The effect on sinners is that Christ, in our place, paid the penalty for our sin; he was punished instead of us (**Isaiah 53:5; Romans 4:25**). As a result, we can be purified from every sin (**1 John 1:7**).

What the Death of Christ Did

Whereas substitutionary atonement primarily has to do with what his death *was*, other New Testament concepts focus on what Christ’s death *did*. One result is *reconciliation*, the changing of a relationship from hostility to peace. The death of Christ heals the sin-caused rift in the sinner’s relationship with God; through Christ, the sinner and God are brought together (**Romans 5:10–11; 2 Corinthians 5:18–20; Ephesians 2:13–16; Colossians 1:20**).

Another result of Christ’s death is *propitiation*. Because of sin, the sinner is under God’s wrath and will ultimately experience it (**Romans 1:18; 2:5, 8; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6**). *Propitiation* refers to turning away wrath, and this is what Christ’s death accomplished. “God

displayed [Christ] publicly as a propitiation in His blood” (**Romans 3:25**; see also **Hebrews 2:17**; **1 John 2:2**; **4:10** [all NASB]). Through Jesus, we can be delivered from God’s wrath (**Romans 5:9**; **1 Thessalonians 1:9–10**).

Another result of Christ’s death is *redemption*. This effect of what Jesus did is that sinners, slaves of sin, are set free (**Romans 6:6, 16**; **7:14**). Sinners not only are redeemed from sin but also are rescued “from the dominion of darkness” (**Colossians 1:13–14**), Satan’s control.

Closely connected to this is that Christ’s work on the cross has actually defeated Satan, demons, sin, and death (**Colossians 2:13–15**). And it gets even better: Believers, set free from unrighteousness, are now, blessedly, *slaves of righteousness* and of *Christ* (**Romans 6:17–22**; **1 Corinthians 7:22**; **Ephesians 1:7**).

So the central idea of Christ’s death as the basis for salvation is that it was a substitutionary atonement to accomplish redemption, reconciliation, and propitiation for the sinner who turns to him in faith.

Through the centuries, many have objected to this essence of Christ’s death because, they say, it is abhorrent due to its violence (blood and death) and unjust due to Jesus’ being completely innocent (he lived a perfect, sinless life). There is truth in both reactions. It was necessarily violent, though, because of sin’s sinfulness; the seriousness of sin means it can be addressed only through serious means. Also, the objection of injustice overlooks the truth that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us” (**2 Corinthians 5:21**). Jesus became sin as, by God’s doing, he bore our sins and sinfulness.

Other Ideas on the Death of Christ

Some have rejected the significance of Christ’s death as a *substitutionary* sacrifice and understood it in other ways. For instance, a number of early church fathers (theologians in the centuries after the first century) understood Christ’s death primarily in terms of a *ransom* paid to Satan. If Satan had held sinners captive, the death of Jesus was the ransom paid to free his captives; this view was based on texts like Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45, and 1 Timothy 2:6, which use the term *ransom* of Christ’s death. However, they do not indicate who received the ransom, and more likely this is the Father himself, the one wronged by sinners, rather than Satan, who by the death of Jesus was not enriched but rather defeated.

Others have seen Christ's death as being more for the benefit of sinners than for the benefit of God himself. For example, the *moral influence* view of the atonement is that the death of Jesus demonstrated God's love for sinners. The reformed sinner's proper response to such overwhelming love is love for God in return, in the form of obedience, which results in acceptance by God. What is right here is that the cross of Christ does reveal God's love (**John 3:16**). The problem, though, is that human obedience can never overcome human sinfulness and result in God's acceptance (Ephesians 2:8–9).

A more extreme version of this theory has been called the *example* view. More than the death of Christ, it was his life that provides an example of righteousness and obedience for us to follow in order to be accepted by God. However, again, this assumes that sinners can make themselves acceptable to God, which Scripture clearly rejects.

INTERESTING FACT

What religion or ideology has as its symbol a notorious means of execution? The very idea sounds ludicrous. Yet Christianity's universally recognized symbol is exactly that. In this case, though, the cross, along with the empty grave, is not symbolic of death and defeat but of life and victory! *"The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God"* (**1 Corinthians 1:18**).