



“For our sake, God made the One who was without sin to be sin, so that by this means we might become the very holiness of God.” 2 Corinthians 5:21

What is it about Jesus’s death and resurrection that means we are forgiven and promised resurrection?

You might be thinking right now that you know the answer. And why doesn’t pastor know the answer. Well, in fact, the answer that you have is one of many possibilities. Scripture holds many different metaphors and symbols for Christ from sacrificial lamb to living water to bread and wine. Scholars throughout the millennia have used scripture and theology to suggest ways that Jesus’s death and resurrection mean forgiveness and salvation.

The first thing that must be understood is that for humanity to be saved, Jesus Christ had to be fully human and fully God. For the first few hundred years after Jesus’s crucifixion and resurrection, Christian leaders and scholars wrestled with that exact idea. For a firm statement of faith to be crafted, the Church had to address heresies that Jesus was a man body with a God soul or God pretending to be a man or half and half God/man. It wasn’t until the 4th century that a group of scholars referred to as the Cappadocians determined that Christ could only heal humanity, if he was fully human and he only had the power to implement the healing, if he was fully God. It wasn’t until the next century that what we call the Nicene Creed was completed.

Since then, scholars have developed several theories to explain how the crucifixion led to our salvation. This is probably the part in which you will hear what you were raised to believe. The first is Ransom Theory. In this theory, Satan has us under his control and God paid for our release with the death of Jesus. The next is Christus Victor, or victorious Christ. This theory depicts Christ as a warrior fighting against “the evil enemy of God.” Christ defeats the evil one freeing us from the darkness. The next one, which is very popular, is the Satisfaction Theory. This one was developed by Anselm in the 12th century. In this theory, we, as sinners, are infinitely guilty. Our guilt or sin must be paid for, but we don’t have the currency to pay the bill. Only Godself can satisfy the debt.

Next, we have the Moral Influence Theory. I will be honest with you that when I first heard this one, I wasn't impressed, but I'm coming around. Developed by Abelard, also in the 12th century, this idea is that it is "Christ's love expressed in his suffering that frees us from the power of sin and ensures us the freedom of God's children." Jesus's death out of love for us moves us to want to be better people and give up our sin.

The Penal Substitution Method came about during the reformation period. This builds on the satisfaction theory. More than just paying our sin debt, Christ is punished on our behalf. We, in fact, deserve to suffer and die on the cross, but Jesus did it instead. Jumping to the 20th century, we find the Last Scapegoat Theory. This one acknowledges the ancient practices of killing/sacrificing to satisfy the wrath of people and gods. In this theory, Jesus Christ was the last scapegoat dying to appease conflict.

The final theory, and my favorite, is the Nonviolent Christus Victor Theory. This was developed by a Mennonite theologian, J. Denny Weaver, who as far as I can tell, is still living. In this he looks at the Christus Victor theory with fresh eyes. He describes it as Jesus Christ living to demonstrate or even bring about the will of God on earth. "His death was not the will of God but was instigated by the powers that opposed the reign of God."

You can agree with any of these theories and not be wrong, but at the same time, all of them are imperfect explanations for the mystery of Christ's work on that cross two thousand years ago.

I definitely see Christ's death as the result of humanity's violent ways and not as a conflict between Satan and God. When I read Genesis chapter 3, I see original sin as humanity learning how to be evil. It was through our knowledge of evil that Jesus died on the cross. Then he was resurrected as proof that death/evil don't get the last word. Some of Abelard's explanation that God's expression of love is through suffering resonates with me in that we then learn that love has the ultimate power. The world, with its emphasis on power and might demonstrates evil winning, but Jesus and his power through love has the last word.