

The Atonement: *An Introduction*

JEREMY TREAT



SHORT STUDIES *in*
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Edited by Graham A. Cole & Oren R. Martin

“Jeremy Treat wants us to reflect deeply on the beauty of the cross. He wants us to see that the good news is much bigger than we thought, that reconciliation is further flung than we dared imagine, that the Savior to whom we are united is no less than the victorious King of all things. I can’t imagine a more trustworthy guide to show us this view. With the skill of a scholar and the prose of a pastor, he takes us to the mountaintop and invites us to gaze on our great assurance.”

Jen Wilkin, author; Bible teacher

“Jeremy Treat has written a brilliant yet accessible introduction to the doctrine of the atonement. He shows what Jesus’s cross is about, how the cross saves, why it matters, and how it relates to the Christian life. This is a learned yet eminently readable book on a complex topic. A great starting place for anyone who wants to wrestle with the meaning of the cross and how it relates to theology as a whole.”

Michael F. Bird, Academic Dean and Lecturer in New Testament,
Ridley College, Melbourne

“Jeremy Treat reminds us of what every thoughtful Christian should know about the atonement while calling us to understand the cross, to worship, and to pick up our cross and follow the Master.”

D. A. Carson, Cofounder and Theologian-at-Large, The Gospel
Coalition

“Jeremy Treat is a model pastor-theologian. He lives and ministers in the heart of Los Angeles, one of the most dynamic, complex, and influential cities in the world. But his context hasn’t tempted him to shrink away from offering the church robust teaching and theological substance. In *The Atonement*, we see Treat’s pastoral heart and scholarly mind on full display. He invites us to revel in the glory of Christ crucified, explore the cross in all its profundity and life-changing potency, and return to it again and again as fuel for worship and whole-life discipleship. This is a thoughtful and accessible reflection on the heart of the gospel, indeed the heart of God. Highly recommended!”

Todd Wilson, Cofounder and President, The Center for Pastor
Theologians

“This is a master class in short, clear, and accessible systematic theology. Jeremy Treat shows us why we need to see the atonement from numerous angles to fully grasp its beauty—and then he shows us how, with a clear exposition that maintains both coherence and practical application. A superb introduction.”

Andrew Wilson, Teaching Pastor, King’s Church London

“Jeremy Treat represents the best of a new generation of pastor-theologians: deep but easily accessible, faithful but not shrill, cross-centered but not neglectful of the kingdom. Here is an atonement doctrine for the church—and for the world.”

Joshua M. McNall, Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology,
Oklahoma Wesleyan University; author, *The Mosaic of Atonement*
and *How Jesus Saves*

“Evangelicals are a people of the cross—but do we understand the fullness of what this means? Jeremy Treat invites us into a rich, complex, and unified account of Jesus’s atoning work—one that we can spend a lifetime meditating on and that can guide not only our study of Scripture and theology but also of the life of the church.”

Adam J. Johnson, Associate Professor of Theology, Torrey Honors
College, Biola University

The Atonement

SHORT STUDIES IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Edited by Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin

The Atonement: An Introduction, Jeremy Treat (2023)

The Attributes of God: An Introduction, Gerald Bray (2021)

The Church: An Introduction, Gregg R. Allison (2021)

The Doctrine of Scripture: An Introduction, Mark D. Thompson
(2022)

Faithful Theology: An Introduction, Graham A. Cole (2020)

Glorification: An Introduction, Graham A. Cole (2022)

Justification: An Introduction, Thomas R. Schreiner (2023)

The Person of Christ: An Introduction, Stephen J. Wellum (2021)

The Trinity: An Introduction, Scott R. Swain (2020)

The Atonement

An Introduction

Jeremy Treat

 **CROSSWAY**[®]
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

The Atonement: An Introduction

Copyright © 2023 by Jeremy Treat

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law. Crossway® is a registered trademark in the United States of America.

Cover design: Jordan Singer

First printing 2023

Printed in the United States of America

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The ESV text may not be quoted in any publication made available to the public by a Creative Commons license. The ESV may not be translated into any other language.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com. The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

All emphases in Scripture quotations have been added by the author.

The illustration on page 5 was vector traced from *Ancient Rome in the Light of Recent Discoveries* by Rodolfo Lanciani (1898), Wikimedia Commons.

The illustration on page 11 is adapted from *Seek First: How the Kingdom of God Changes Everything* by Jeremy Treat. Copyright © 2019 by Jeremy Treat. Used by permission of HarperCollins Christian Publishing. www.harpercollinschristian.com.

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-7569-3

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-7572-3

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-7569-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Treat, Jeremy R., 1980- author.

Title: The Atonement : an introduction / Jeremy Treat.

Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, [2023] | Series: Short studies in systematic theology | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022044542 (print) | LCCN 2022044543 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433575693 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433575693 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433575723 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Atonement.

Classification: LCC BT265.3 .T74 2023 (print) | LCC BT265.3 (ebook) | DDC 232/.3—dc23/eng/20230412

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022044542>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022044543>

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24 23
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my mother, Joyce Treat

Contents

Series Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	1
<i>The Foolishness of the Gospel</i>	
1 The Story of Atonement	15
<i>From a Garden to a Kingdom</i>	
2 The Heart of Atonement	37
<i>The Great Exchange</i>	
3 The Achievements of Atonement	61
<i>A Multidimensional Work</i>	
4 The Coherence of Atonement	95
<i>An Integrated Accomplishment</i>	
5 The Community of Atonement	117
<i>Reconciled and Reconciling</i>	
6 The Life of Atonement	137
<i>Taking Up Your Cross</i>	
Conclusion	157
Further Reading	159
General Index	161
Scripture Index	169

Series Preface

The ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus reputedly said that the thinker has to listen to the essence of things. A series of theological studies dealing with the traditional topics that make up systematic theology needs to do just that. Accordingly, in each of these studies, a theologian addresses the essence of a doctrine. This series thus aims to present short studies in theology that are attuned to both the Christian tradition and contemporary theology in order to equip the church to faithfully understand, love, teach, and apply what God has revealed in Scripture about a variety of topics. What may be lost in comprehensiveness can be gained through what John Calvin, in the dedicatory epistle of his commentary on Romans, called “lucid brevity.”

Of course, a thorough study of any doctrine will be longer rather than shorter, as there are two millennia of confession, discussion, and debate with which to interact. As a result, a short study needs to be more selective but deftly so. Thankfully, the contributors to this series have the ability to be brief yet accurate. The key aim is that the simpler is not to morph into the simplistic. The test is whether the topic of a short study, when further studied in depth, requires some unlearning to take place. The simple can be amplified. The simplistic needs to be corrected. As editors, we believe that the volumes in this series pass that test.

While the specific focus varies, each volume (1) introduces the doctrine, (2) sets it in context, (3) develops it from Scripture, (4) draws the various threads together, and (5) brings it to bear on the Christian life. It is our prayer, then, that this series will assist the church to delight in her triune God by thinking his thoughts—which he has graciously revealed in his written word, which testifies to his living Word, Jesus Christ—after him in the powerful working of his Spirit.

Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin

Acknowledgments

My life has been deeply impacted by the people who have taught me about the cross and even more by those who have lived the way of the cross. I am especially grateful for my family. My wife Tiffany is my best friend and my greatest support. Nothing I do in ministry lacks her influence. My daughters—Ashlyn, Lauryn, Evelyn, and Katelyn—are the greatest joy in my life. I hope they read this book someday. But even more, I hope they think I am a better dad than author.

I'm also filled with gratitude for my church family, Reality LA. This book has been shaped not only by study and research but also by preaching the cross and shepherding people at the foot of the cross. I'm honored to be a part of such a faithful church, let alone to be one of its pastors.

Several people contributed directly to this book. Many thanks to Uche Anizor, Hank Voss, Fred Sanders, Matt Jensen, Adam Johnson, Derek Rishmawy, and Bijan Mirtolooi, who read early drafts and gave helpful feedback. Graham Cole and Oren Martin have been wonderful general editors, and Chris Cowan's editorial insight enhanced the manuscript significantly.

I dedicate this book to my mother, Joyce Treat. My mom is the embodiment of grace and grit. Not only has she taught me about the love of God, but she has also modeled a cross-shaped life of humility, sacrifice, and love. I would not be who I am

apart from God's cruciform grace at work in and through my mother.

Ultimately, I give all glory to God. For me, the cross is not merely a topic to be studied; it is good news that has renewed my life. My prayer is that this book helps the church understand the depths of the gospel so that we might truly live for the glory of God.

Introduction

The Foolishness of the Gospel

*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.*

I CORINTHIANS 1:18

*The Lord's plan for dealing with sin is shocking in
its unexpectedness. It will not involve force or some
military champion imposing righteousness on the people.
Rather, the Lord's solution to sin is for his servant
to take human sin on himself and to offer himself
as a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of others.¹*

PAULSON PULIKOTTIL

The good news of Christ crucified was being proclaimed in the heart of Los Angeles, but I was hearing it from a different perspective than ever before. I had the week off from preaching, so I sat with our congregation, listening to one of my fellow pastors preach 1 Corinthians 2 on the cross of Christ:

1. Paulson Pulikottil, "Isaiah," in *South Asia Bible Commentary*, ed. Brian Wintle (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2015), 906.

2 *Introduction*

“I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). I had heard the words before, but as I listened on this day my eyes were fixed not on the preacher, nor on the young creatives surrounding me, but on the scar-laden head of the man sitting directly in front of me.

Like railroad tracks traversing the desolate land of his scalp, each scar told a story of pain and loss. And since this man was a part of our church, I knew the stories all too well. The first scar was from surgery at age six shortly after his childhood innocence was shattered by the words “brain cancer.” The next scar came at age thirty-four when the cancer returned, and another scar was added just a few months later when an additional surgery was necessary. The most recent scar came from removing two glioblastoma tumors from the brain. After a week of chemotherapy, he had saved up all his energy to come to church. And while I trust that he was comforted by the sermon on the cross, he himself was a living illustration to our church of its meaning: God’s “power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9). From one perspective, people merely saw the scars, the frailty, the weakness. But from another perspective, this man’s greatest problem in life had already been solved, his future hope was completely secure, and he was presently being transformed from one degree of glory to the next in a way that would make the angels blush. “The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (1 Cor. 1:18).

As I looked around the congregation, I realized that we are not all that different from our friend with cancer. We are all wounded; our scars are just not as visible. We are all dying; we simply have not been told how much time we have. We have all fallen short of the glory of God and experienced the pain from our own sin and the sins of others. Yet, in Christ crucified, there is the hope of complete and utter renewal. In the crucified

Nazarene is the power for healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation—not only for one man, and not only for our church in Los Angeles, but also for the whole world.

As followers of Jesus, we cling to the truth that God is making all things new by grace. But he is not doing it from afar. The Father has sent the Son in the power of the Spirit with a mission to ransom sinners and renew creation. Yet he is doing so in the most breathtaking way.

The Folly of the Cross

The crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the most significant event in the history of the world. By dying in our place, the Son of God accomplished all that is necessary for the reconciliation of sinners and the renewal of creation. But how could the death of a fairly unknown Jewish carpenter alter the course of history? Why would the crucifixion of this man—when Rome crucified tens of thousands—bring healing and hope to the lives of others? How could a gruesome execution by the state be considered *good* news? To ponder these questions is to stumble into the doctrine of atonement.

People today do not gasp at the idea of a crucifixion. We should. Crucifixion was a form of capital punishment invented to slowly torture and publicly shame criminals. As opposed to beheading, which was a quick death, crucifixion intentionally kept the victims alive long enough to plunge them into the depths of human suffering. Beyond the pain of the nails through the main arteries near the hands and feet, those hanging on the cross would spend hours or even days pulling themselves up in order to breathe, scraping their already-scourged skin on the wood of a rugged cross. So agonizing was this form of punishment that a word was later invented based on its severity: *excruciating*, which literally means “from the cross.”²

2. Cicero claimed that crucifixion was the “most cruel and disgusting penalty.” M. Tullius Cicero, *The Orations of Marcus Tullius Cicero*, trans. C. D. Yonge (London: George

When the Bible talks about crucifixion, however, it emphasizes not physical pain but rather social shame. Reserved for the scum of society (rebels, slaves, and outcasts), crucifixion was a public spectacle meant to humiliate and dehumanize the victim. Crucifixion usually happened along busy Roman roads, with those crucified placed in the most vulnerable position—naked, arms stretched out, and alone—in order to be taunted and mocked as they struggled for breath. Those being crucified were stripped not only of their clothes but also of their dignity. A century before Jesus, for example, a slave revolt in Rome led to six thousand people being crucified along a 130-mile stretch of a road leaving Rome.³ The near-lifeless bodies, along with those already being eaten by vultures and vermin, served as a billboard to the world declaring the power of Rome.⁴

Since the cross was a monstrous symbol of death and defeat in the first century, it is no wonder that early Christians were mocked for worshipping a crucified Savior. The cross of Christ was “a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23). The Jews were looking for a conquering Messiah who would overthrow Rome and establish a political rule. The notion of a suffering Messiah would have been scandalous to their ears. They wanted someone who would triumph over their enemies, not be executed by them. The Gentiles (particularly

Bell and Sons, 1903), 2.5.165. Josephus referred to it as “a most miserable death.” Flavius Josephus, *The Jewish War*, in *The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus, the Jewish Historian*, trans. William Whiston (London: W. Boyer, 1737), 7.6.4. For the Jewish people, crucifixion represented the curse of God: “A hanged man is cursed by God” (Deut. 21:23). For background on crucifixion, see Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977); Tom Holland, *Dominion* (New York City: Basic Books, 2019), 1–17.

3. Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World*, 55.

4. Perhaps the closest modern parallel to crucifixion is lynching. James Cone observes that Christ’s enemies killed him “by hanging him on a tree” (Acts 10:39), and he discusses the similarities between lynching and crucifixion: “Both the cross and the lynching tree were symbols of terror, instruments of torture and execution, reserved primarily for slaves, criminals, and insurrectionists—the lowest of the low in society.” James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 31. Such a comparison highlights the scandalous nature of the cross and the shame endured by Jesus.

the Greeks) sought salvation through philosophy and wisdom. The thought of a king being crucified was foolishness to them, something only a madman would believe. The picture of the good life was a contemplative philosopher, not a dying criminal.

The mainstream view after the crucifixion was that Jesus was a failure, his followers were fools, and the cross was a defeat. That is certainly what an early graffiti drawing reveals about the way Romans thought about Christians. The drawing depicts a worshiper looking up at Christ dying on the cross. However, in place of Christ's head is the head of a donkey. Below the drawing reads the Greek inscription, "Alexamenos worships his God" (see figure 1). This second-century graffiti represents the foolishness of a gospel proclaiming a crucified Messiah.⁵



Figure 1 Tracing of the Alexamenos graffiti.

5. The graffiti was discovered in a building in Rome annexed to the imperial palace on the Palatine. It is now displayed in the Palatine Museum. An image of the graffiti can be viewed at "Scratched Graffiti with Blasphemous Crucifix," Palatine Museum, Parco archeologico del Colosseo, <https://parcocolosseo.it/en/opere/scratched-graffito-with-blasphemous-crucifix/>.

While early Christians were mocked for their belief in the cross, Christians today have often domesticated the cross to make it more palatable for a modern society. Whether placed on a calendar in a Christian bookstore, tattooed on an arm, or elevated above a city skyline, we have tamed the cross and turned it into a decorative pleasantry. But only when we see the horror of the cross will we be ready to understand the glory of the cross.

The Glory of Christ Crucified

When Jesus was crucified, it appeared that his mission had been brought to a devastating halt. From an earthly perspective, the cross was weakness and foolishness. But through the lens of faith, the glory of God shines from the cross like a thousand suns compared to the candle of this world's glory. The love of God through the cross of Christ subverts the wisdom and power of this world, revealing a kingdom that is different than people would expect but greater than they could imagine. The cross is not weakness but rather power controlled by love. The death of Jesus is not foolishness but rather God's wise way of saving the unjust while upholding his justice. This is the awful beauty of the cross.

Herein lies the paradox of the gospel. The self-giving love of God transformed an instrument of death into an instrument of life. The cross is the great reversal, where exaltation comes through humiliation, glory is revealed in shame, victory is accomplished through surrender, and the triumph of the kingdom comes through the suffering of the servant. As Lesslie Newbigin says, "The reign of God has indeed come upon us, and its sign is not a golden throne but a wooden cross."⁶ The cross is *good* news because it is God's way of rescuing sinners and restoring the world.

6. Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 127.

Faith Seeking Understanding: The Doctrine of Atonement

The doctrine of atonement is the church's attempt to understand the glory of Christ crucified in a way that cultivates worship and catalyzes discipleship. This is what theology is about: faith seeking understanding in service of faithful living. What does it mean that Jesus died "for our sins" (1 Cor. 15:3)? How did his death two millennia ago shape the trajectory of eternity? How does the crucifixion of Christ reveal the wisdom and power of God? The doctrine of atonement seeks to answer these questions not only for our heads but also for our hearts and lives.

Unfortunately, many churches today have exchanged biblical doctrine for pop psychology and costly discipleship for do-it-yourself spirituality. We need a recovery of "sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel" (1 Tim. 1:10–11) that we might be "transformed by the renewal of [our] minds" (Rom. 12:2). And where better to start than the doctrine of atonement, which is the "heart of the gospel"⁷ and "the Holy of Holies of Christian theology"?⁸

Theology is first and foremost about helping the church pray, worship, and live faithfully to the glory of God. Only in a secondary (and derivative) way does theology confront heresies and contemporary challenges. The primary goal of the doctrine of the atonement is for the church to understand more of the depths of the gospel in order to worship the triune God and live according to his gospel. The goal of this book, therefore, is not intellectual mastery but whole-life discipleship, bringing us to the foot of the cross in worship.

7. Kevin Vanhoozer, "Atonement," in *Mapping Modern Theology: A Thematic and Historical Introduction*, ed. Kelly Kapic and Bruce McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 176.

8. Robert Culpepper, *Interpreting the Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1966), 11.

Traditionally, the doctrine of atonement addresses how God has reconciled sinners to himself through Christ's death on the cross. Christ deals with sin in a way that takes what is torn asunder and makes it one again. In other words, his death brings about "at-one-ment" between God and sinners. I uphold this approach but expand it in two ways.

First, the scope of Christ's atoning work must be broadened beyond humanity to the whole creation. As Colossians 1:19–20 says, "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross." Christ's work on the cross brings about "at-one-ment" with God and sinners within a broader story of the "at-one-ment" of heaven and earth.

Second, the cross is central but must not be solo in the doctrine of atonement. The centrality of the cross is evident from the preeminence of the passion narratives in the Gospels and its prominence throughout the rest of Scripture, casting a shadow backwards over the entire Old Testament and giving vision forward for the church in the New Testament. From the bruised heel of Genesis 3:15 to the slain Lamb of Revelation 5:6, the Bible is the story of a crucified Messiah bringing God's reign on earth as it is in heaven. The apostle Paul summarizes his entire message with the words "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23). For these reasons, Athanasius is right to say that the cross "is the very center of our faith."⁹ The cross is the climax of the Christian story and the center of Christian theology.

To call the cross *central* does not mean that it is the *only* moment of the atonement but rather the most definitive. When Paul summarized the Christian message as "Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23), he was not dismissing the importance of the in-

9. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. and ed. a Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 48 (4.19).

carnation or resurrection (as is evident from the rest of 1 Corinthians). The cross is the center that represents the whole of the Christian faith.¹⁰

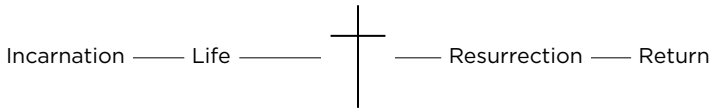


Figure 2 The cross is central but must be understood within the comprehensive work of Christ.

The various aspects of Christ’s ministry ought not compete but rather complement one another in Christ’s kingdom mission. Fleming Rutledge playfully compares the death and resurrection of Jesus to a ham and cheese sandwich: “If you’re making a ham and cheese sandwich, you don’t ask which is more important, the ham or the cheese. If you don’t have both of them it isn’t a ham and cheese sandwich. Moving from the ridiculous to the sublime, you can’t have the crucifixion without the resurrection—and vice versa.”¹¹ The same is true for the whole of Christ’s work. If you lose the incarnation, life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, or return of Christ, then you lose the gospel.

The focus should be on understanding the particular role of each aspect of Christ’s work and discovering how these aspects fit together as a whole. The incarnation, life, death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Christ form a single entity, ultimately finding coherence in the Son himself who is sent by the Father and anointed by the Spirit.

To summarize: *The doctrine of atonement is the church’s faith seeking understanding of the way in which Christ, through*

10. These elements will be unpacked especially in chapter 2. It is worth noting here that “resurrection” in this visual also entails the ascension and session of Christ.

11. Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 64.

all of his work but primarily his death, has dealt with sin and its effects to reconcile sinners and renew creation.

The Approach of This Book

We must avoid two pitfalls that plague atonement theology today. On the one hand, there is the error of one-dimensional reductionism, which focuses on one aspect or theory of the atonement to the exclusion of all others—as if Christ *either* bore our punishment *or* conquered evil *or* demonstrated his love as an example. But to reduce Christ’s atoning work to one aspect is to truncate the gospel and diminish God’s glory in salvation.

On the other hand, the common reaction to one-dimensional reductionism that we must also avoid is disconnected plurality. This approach celebrates the many dimensions of Christ’s atoning work but lacks integration and balance, resulting in a smorgasbord approach based on preference or context. Although contextualization is essential with the atonement, the dimensions of Christ’s work are not alternative options but rather overlapping aspects of a comprehensive work.

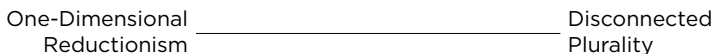


Figure 3 Atonement theology must avoid the opposite errors of one-dimensional reductionism and disconnected plurality.

Here is my approach to the atonement in a nutshell: The death of Christ is a multidimensional accomplishment within the story that begins in the garden and culminates in the kingdom. While the achievements of the cross (forgiveness, victory, adoption, and so on) are unending, the heart of the cross, out of which everything flows and finds its coherence, is Christ dying in our place for our sins. The atoning work of Christ not only

reconciles sinners to God but also to one another, calling us into a life of taking up our crosses as we follow our King. In other words, we need a kingdom-framed, substitution-centered, multidimensional, integrated, communal, life-changing approach to the doctrine of atonement.¹²

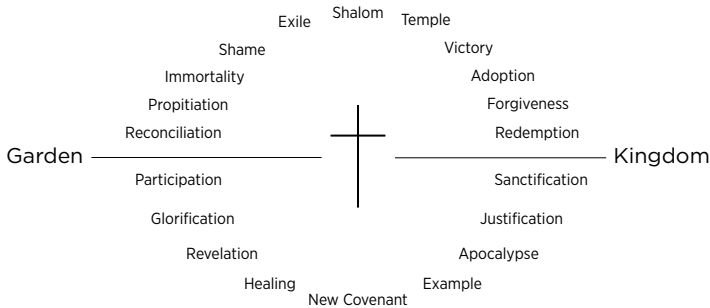


Figure 4 The atonement is a multidimensional accomplishment.

Triune Atonement

From beginning to end, Christ’s atoning work is thoroughly Trinitarian. While the doctrine of atonement focuses on Jesus, one must remember that Jesus is the Son of the Father who is empowered by the Spirit to accomplish the triune mission of redemption. Jesus is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15) and “the exact imprint of his nature” (Heb. 1:3). Therefore, we must affirm the principle of inseparable operations—that is, that the external works of the Trinity are undivided (*opera*

12. I find “theories” to be an unhelpful approach to the doctrine of atonement and prefer instead to focus on the many dimensions of the atonement. “Theory” language was not used in the doctrine of atonement until the 1850s as the Enlightenment influenced theological method and theologians sought to find their place in the modern university system. Adam Johnson demonstrates how “theories” impose a scientific structure from the Enlightenment on God’s revelation in Scripture. Furthermore, he argues that it is anachronistic to use “theory” language for the history of the doctrine, as if, for example, Irenaeus was presenting a “theory” of recapitulation. See Adam J. Johnson, “Theories and *Theoria* of the Atonement: A Proposal,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 23, no. 1 (March 2021): 92–108.

trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa). As Gregory of Nyssa says, “Every operation which extends from God to creation . . . has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit.”¹³

Many theories of atonement have gone awry because they are insufficiently Trinitarian, often pitting the Father against the Son and leaving out the Holy Spirit altogether.¹⁴ Yet Scripture is clear: God’s kingdom mission, with atonement at the heart of it, is a unified work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 7:39; 2 Cor. 5:19; Gal. 1:4; Col. 1:19–20; Heb. 9:14). The doctrine of atonement unravels without the doctrine of the Trinity. As Hans Urs von Balthasar says, “The events of the cross can only be interpreted against the background of the Trinity.”¹⁵

A Multigenerational, Multicultural Approach

To learn about the doctrine of atonement is to join a conversation among the saints who have been led by the Holy Spirit in understanding the depths of the cross from generation to generation. While I have been shaped by many different traditions, the greatest influences on my understanding of the atonement are the North African church father Athanasius, the Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck, and the English pastor theologian John Stott.¹⁶ My hope is that this book reflects

13. Gregory of Nyssa, “On ‘Not Three Gods,’” in *Dogmatic Treatises*, in vol. 5 of *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: Cosimo Classics, n.d.), 334.

14. Many of the critiques regarding divine violence and “cosmic child abuse” are in response to theories of atonement that are not sufficiently Trinitarian. While not having space in this brief volume to engage those critiques, I hope to provide an account of the atonement that does not fall prey to them.

15. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Action*, vol. 4 of *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 319.

16. See Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*; Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003); John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

their collective influence. Furthermore, since the atonement is a global accomplishment, it will be best understood from a global perspective. For this reason, I have sought to interact with majority world scholars throughout my research and writing and have benefited greatly from these brothers and sisters throughout the world.¹⁷

The Secular Longing for Atonement

Our sin-ridden world is longing for atonement. Do not let secularism make you think that we have evolved beyond such a need. As Charles Taylor argues, secularism is not the absence of religious belief but rather a whole new set of beliefs, redirecting our deepest longings onto something other than God.¹⁸ While we have attempted to suppress our longing for atonement, it keeps pushing through, even if in different, less traditional ways. For example, the innate longing for atonement can be seen in popular article titles, such as “Anger and Atonement during a Pandemic” and “Spain’s Attempt to Atone for a 500-Year-Old Sin.”¹⁹ *The New York Times* revealed their “Word of the Day” for May 16, 2011, as “atone,” and the newspaper noted that forty-three of its articles over the previous year had talked about atonement.²⁰ As another example, consider the advice of a New Age guru: “The only way to atone for the past is to do something meaningful in the present.”²¹

17. For a helpful introduction to global theology, see Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church Is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2007).

18. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2007).

19. Daniel W. Drezner, “Anger and Atonement during a Pandemic,” *Washington Post*, September 30, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/>; Kiku Adatto, “Spain’s Attempt to Atone for a 500-Year-Old Sin,” *The Atlantic*, September 21, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>.

20. “Word of the Day: Atone,” *The New York Times*, May 16, 2011, <https://archive.nytimes.com/learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/16/word-of-the-day-atone>.

21. This quote is commonly attributed to Deepak Chopra, although the original source is unknown.

Our society is aching for atonement. How can we deal with our guilt and shame? How can we be set free from our past? How can all that is wrong be made right? The assumption in these questions is that *we* can atone for our sins. But the message of Christianity is not about what we ought to do for God but what God has done for us. The good news is that God has sent his Son, empowered by the Spirit, to atone for our sins and make right all that our sin has made wrong. And the gospel goes far beyond merely “making amends” (which is how the word “atonement” is often used today). Through the sacrificial death of Christ, forgiveness, freedom, healing, and restoration are available not only for broken people but for all of creation. This is good news.

The Story of Atonement

From a Garden to a Kingdom

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.

MARK 1:15

The cross, standing between creation and final consummation, is not an accident. . . . It is, on the contrary, the supreme instance of the manner in which God's power operates.¹

JUSTO L. GONZALEZ

My wife looked at me, scissors in hand, and said, “I’m going to cut off your head.” Based on this statement alone, you might assume that my wife is a bloodthirsty maniac who was about to decapitate her husband. She’s not. She is kind, loving, and

1. Justo L. González, *Mañana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 93.

godly. But you wouldn't know that because a statement derives its meaning from the broader story of which it is a part. Here is the story: My wife was scrapbooking and needed a picture of our daughter by herself. When she could only find a picture with me in it, she looked at me with an I-love-you-but-I-have-to-do-this look, and said, "I'm going to cut off your head."

My point is simple and equally applies to the doctrine of atonement: the story or context in which a statement or event occurs reveals its meaning. What, then, is the meaning of the statement "Christ died for our sins"? We must have the right story.²

The Wrong Story

Many end up with the wrong doctrine of atonement because they have the wrong story or framework. Let's look at a few common examples of unhelpful frameworks before going to the Scriptures for the right one.

Going to Heaven When You Die

I went to church camp in junior high and heard a common gospel presentation: "You're a sinner and are going to hell. But while your sin has made a great chasm between you and God, the cross bridges the chasm so you can come to God. Christ died for your sins so that you can go to heaven when you die."

There is much to be commended in this story—namely, the reality of sin and the cross as God's solution. However, while the individual elements of the story are true, the way they are put together (and what they leave out) leads to a devastatingly unbiblical narrative. There are at least five ways this story falls

2. Kevin Vanhoozer rightly warns of the temptation "to regard narrative simply as the pretty packaging of historical content to be torn off and discarded." Kevin Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 282. Theology arises from narrative. But narrative is not merely a vessel for theological content but rather shapes the content and is part of the content itself.

short. First, this is a “sin and salvation” story that culminates in a disembodied existence. The biblical story, however, bookends sin and salvation with creation and new creation. The final goal is not an immaterial heaven but a renewed creation. The story of the Bible is not about leaving earth for heaven but rather the kingdom of heaven coming on earth. Second, this story is thoroughly individualistic, focusing solely on “me and God.” This is a far cry from the biblical story of God redeeming a people to create a new family. Third, this is ultimately a story of how we can come to God, whereas Scripture is primarily a story of how God has come to us. Fourth, this story works apart from the Trinity, which makes it not distinctly Christian. Fifth, there is no place or need for Israel and the Old Testament in this story. So while there are truths in the story, the story itself is incomplete, resulting in a me-centered, over-spiritualized, non-Trinitarian view of the cross. This “gospel presentation” has been shaped as much by Greek Gnosticism and Western individualism as by the story of Scripture.

Making the World a Better Place

In the seventeenth century a new story began to emerge in the Western world. We are no longer in the Dark Ages of religious superstition and fairytales but have been enlightened by modern science, technology, and humanity’s potential to bring the world to its appointed end. How does this story of human progress shed light on the cross?

Nineteenth-century German theologians sought to answer this question, and their work greatly influenced American pastors such as Walter Rauschenbusch in New York City. Subscribing to the enlightenment narrative while trying to maintain Christian identity within it, Rauschenbusch rejected substitutionary atonement (along with the bodily resurrection of Christ

and the inspiration of the Scriptures) and redefined the gospel in terms of what we do to care for the marginalized.³

While there are elements of truth in the social gospel movement (especially its emphasis on God's heart for the poor and marginalized), it is a cautionary tale of Christian morals being hijacked by an unbiblical narrative. In this story, the cross is often ignored entirely or at best is reduced to an example of identifying with the broken. The emphasis is not on what Christ has done for us but on how we can make the world a better place.

The American Dream

A temptation for many cultures is not merely to reject the gospel but to enlist it as a way of achieving greater cultural goals. In the United States (and beyond) the greater goal is the American Dream, with its suburban vision of 2.3 kids and a well-manicured lawn, or the urban version of casting off the oppressive structures of society and discovering yourself. In either case, the master narrative is one of individual happiness, and the gospel becomes another way of rounding out the spiritual side of an otherwise holistic self-improvement project.

This approach also has elements of truth, particularly the God-given good of family and the individual rights that come with human dignity. The narrative, however, reflects late modernity (a reaction against enlightenment metanarratives), which rejects the idea of truth altogether and encourages individuals to create their own personal vision of flourishing. Within this framework, the cross becomes a key that unlocks your potential, helping you become your best self and achieve your dreams. Self-fulfilment supplants self-denial and the cross becomes another instrument for building our personal kingdoms.

3. Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Macmillan, 1917); see esp. chap. 19, "The Social Gospel and the Atonement."

Looking for the Right Story

We have seen thus far that the meaning of the cross is determined by the narrative within which it is understood. The wrong story leads to the wrong doctrine of atonement. Christians believe that the one true story of the world is the story of Scripture. When Paul discussed the meaning of Christ's death with the church in Corinth, he said that Christ died for our sins "in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3–4). This does not merely mean that the suffering of the Messiah fulfilled a few prophecies here and there but that it is the climactic fulfillment of the whole story. The grand narrative of Scripture must be the framework for how we understand what took place at Golgotha.

How, then, can we summarize the story of Scripture? While there are many ways, let's take our lead from the opening words of Jesus's ministry: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). The Bible is the story of the kingdom of God.⁴ So how does the kingdom story bring meaning and coherence to Christ's death on the cross? Before answering that question, I will provide a concise definition of the kingdom of God and then share several reasons why it is a helpful framework for atonement.

The Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is a vast, expansive idea—not the kind of thing to yawn over. But I will offer a concise working definition in eight words: The kingdom is *God's reign through God's people over God's place*.

4. The theme of the kingdom is paramount in the Old Testament, especially in Psalms and Isaiah, which deeply shape the New Testament. The kingdom of God is the number one thing Jesus talked about, and Paul's teaching is summarized as testifying to the kingdom of God (Acts 28:23, 31). For a further exploration of the theme of the kingdom of God, see Jeremy Treat, *Seek First: How the Kingdom of God Changes Everything* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019).

God's Reign

Far too often when people talk about the kingdom, they speak of something akin to a kingdom without a king. But the kingdom is first and foremost about God. God is King! God reigns! In fact, the phrase “kingdom of God” in Greek could also be translated as the “kingship of God.” The vision of the kingdom is not a utopian dream but rather a vision of the world re-ordered around God’s royal grace.

God's People

God reigns over his people, and he reigns through his people. We are, after all, made in his image, meant to reflect his compassionate rule. Sin, however, fractured humanity’s relationship with God and corrupted the goodness of God’s creation. But God did not give up on his kingdom project. God will reclaim his reign over all of creation, and at the heart of the coming of the kingdom is the reconciliation of the King’s people.

God's Place

The kingdom is a vision of God’s reign *on earth* as it is in heaven. It began in a garden. But the garden kingdom was meant to become a global kingdom, where people from every tribe and tongue flourish under the merciful kingship of God. And while the idea of saving souls is correct, it is not complete. God is a great King who has promised to renew all things (Rev. 21:5).

Jesus and the Kingdom

All the promises of the kingdom are fulfilled in Christ. *God’s reign* is embodied in Christ. *God’s people* are those who are in Christ. *God’s place* of a renewed creation begins with the

resurrected body of Christ. Jesus is Israel's Messiah—the anointed King—who came to establish God's kingdom. And yet, Christ brings the kingdom in a way that subverts the world's expectations and yet fulfills humanity's deepest desires. In this kingdom, the throne is a cross, and the King reigns with mercy and grace.

Why the Kingdom Is a Helpful Framework

Aside from the fact that the kingdom is one of the primary ways of telling the metanarrative of Scripture, there are four reasons why it serves as a helpful framework for the doctrine of atonement.

Grounded in the Old Testament

Framing the atonement with the kingdom story grounds Christ's work in the story of Israel and highlights his identity as the seed of Abraham and the Son of David. Jesus is not a generic superhero but is rather the Jewish Messiah who came to fulfill God's Old Testament promises. Furthermore, New Testament language regarding atonement is meaningless apart from its Old Testament background. "Redemption" is rooted in the exodus, "sacrifice" is grounded in the Levitical system, and so on. A doctrine of atonement not anchored in the Old Testament will drift into a meaning far from the story of Scripture.

Connected to Community

The concept of a kingdom is intrinsically communal and, therefore, undercuts the temptation to develop a doctrine of atonement in light of an individualistic, privatized spirituality. Christ's atoning work is aimed at a covenant people who are ransomed into the kingdom of God.

Embracing Comprehensive Salvation

Atonement theology, especially at the popular level, has been plagued by reductionism. Whether limiting Christ's work to a purely spiritual salvation or only focusing on one of the dimensions of his work, many have truncated the breadth of Christ's atoning death. A kingdom framework gives a comprehensive view of salvation, encompassing the renewal of heaven and earth while embracing the many dimensions of the atonement.

Tethered to Discipleship

After Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom of God, he immediately called his first disciples to himself (Mark 1:14–17). The proclamation of the kingdom includes the call to follow the King (discipleship). This prevents our atonement theology from slipping into impractical theorizing and calls us to follow the crucified Messiah.

The Story of the Kingdom

The kingdom of God is the master narrative that gives meaning to the cross. It is a comprehensive vision (God's reign over all of creation) with a core focus (God's covenant relationship with his people). The cross is the climax of a story that begins in the garden and culminates in a kingdom. We will now look at that story, divided into five chapters: the garden kingdom, the rival kingdom, the promised kingdom, the cross-shaped kingdom, and the eternal kingdom.

The Garden Kingdom

The story begins in a garden. Although the phrase "kingdom of God" does not come until later, the concept of the kingdom has its roots in the soil of Eden. God is presented in the creation

narrative as a King who reigns through his word. He speaks, and it is so. But he is not like the earthly kings we have become accustomed to throughout world history. He reigns with love. He uses his power to bless. He delights in his creation. And after declaring everything he created “good,” God makes humanity and exclaims, “Very good” (Gen. 1:31). The apex of the King’s creation is not majestic mountains or awe-inspiring oceans but rather man and woman together before God.

Adam and Eve are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:27), which means not only that they reflect God and, therefore, have intrinsic dignity and value but also that they are meant to represent God’s rule on earth. This begins in the garden of Eden, where God places Adam and Eve to enjoy the goodness of his creation. However, not only did God give them an invitation to delight, he also gave them a mandate to “work” and “keep” the garden (Gen. 2:15). But contrary to popular opinion, Adam and Eve were not meant to stay in the garden. They were called to “fill the earth and subdue it” (Gen. 1:28). This is royal language. God is King, but he reigns through his image-bearing people. The command to subdue does not mean to exploit the earth—quite the opposite. It means to responsibly steward and care for the King’s creation.

Eden, therefore, is the starting point. While Eden was a beautifully ordered garden, the rest of the world was wild and untamed. God’s creation was good, but it was made with potential built into it. Adam and Eve were called by God to go from the garden and cultivate the earth, making it more like Eden. In other words, they were to Edenize the world. God’s creation in Genesis 1–2 was not a final product but rather an unfinished project—a kingdom project.⁵

5. Psalm 8 interprets Gen. 1 in this way, recounting how in creation God crowned humanity with glory and honor and gave them dominion over the earth.

Genesis 1–2 presents a comprehensive view of the purpose of the world where God reigns, humanity thrives, and all of creation reflects the glory of God. At the heart of this comprehensive vision is the relational union of God and his people, as well as the cosmic union between heaven (the dwelling place of God) and earth (the dwelling place of humanity). Eden offers a vision of heaven on earth, God dwelling with his people.⁶

How does the creation portion of the story affect our understanding of the atonement? It is immensely important yet often overlooked. The Bible is a story that begins with creation and ends with new creation, and in the center is the King on the cross, making all things new. To say that the cross is at the center is not merely a statement of its utmost importance but also of its place. The crucifixion of the Messiah gains its meaning from that which comes before and after it.

So while we begin with Christ crucified as the supreme revelation of God, a solution (the doctrine of atonement) assumes a problem (the doctrine of sin), which presupposes an original purpose (the doctrine of creation). Creation reveals God's purpose of establishing his kingdom over all the earth, and this must shape the very mission for which Christ came.

Athanasius begins *On the Incarnation* by discussing the significance of creation for salvation.

We will begin, then, with the creation of the world and with God its Maker, for the first fact that you must grasp is this: the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning. There is thus no incon-

6. Adam's task to "work" and "keep" (Gen. 2:15) the garden is the same role—and is described with the same words—as the role assigned to the priests in the temple (Num. 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6). This is a clue to a deep meaning embedded in the creation narrative. Eden is like a temple where heaven (the dwelling place of God) and earth (the dwelling place of man) come together. Adam is a priest-king called to rule by serving in the Edenic temple.

sistency between creation and salvation; for the One Father has employed the same Agent for both works, effecting the salvation of the world through the same Word Who made it in the beginning.⁷

Just as the world was created by the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit, the world will be recreated by the Father through the Son in the power of the Spirit. Salvation, therefore, is the restoration of creation. The goal is not merely to get back to Eden but rather to recover the vision of Eden: the kingdom of God.

If a doctrine of atonement skips over creation and begins with the fall, then it will miss the scope of God's original intent and likely end up with a gnostic view of salvation that extracts the spiritual elements of what is meant to be a comprehensive, enmeshed world. The atonement is about the reconciliation of all things (Col. 1:20).

The Rival Kingdom

Instead of representing God's rule over creation, Adam and Eve submit to the rule of one of God's creatures, the serpent. This sin not only separates fallen humanity from God but also derails God's calling on humanity to extend God's gracious reign throughout the earth. Rather than spreading the blessings of God's kingdom, they are exiled from the garden, which leads instead to spreading the curse of sin.

The gravity of humanity's sin cannot be overstated. God's diagnosis in Genesis 6 was that "the wickedness of man was great in the earth" and that their hearts were "only evil continually" (Gen. 6:5; cf. Ps. 14:3). Herman Bavinck captures the severity of sin in the story of Scripture: "Sin ruined the entire

7. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. and ed. a Religious of C.S.M.V. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 26 (1.1).

creation, converting its righteousness into guilt, its holiness into impurity, its glory into shame, its blessedness into misery, its harmony into disorder, and its light into darkness.”⁸

Sin is a multidimensional problem within the story of God establishing his loving rule over all creation. Since sin is the problem for which Christ’s atoning work is the solution, we must have a biblical and comprehensive grasp of its nature. Three questions need to be answered:

- What is sin?
- What is the primary impact of sin?
- What are the multidimensional effects of sin?

First, what is sin? The most common Greek word for sin (*harmatia*) means “to miss the mark.” As we have seen, the mark—God’s intended purpose for humanity—is to know him and represent his loving rule throughout the earth. Sin, therefore, is not merely a mistake or a moral flaw. Sin is a personal rejection of God as King and a relinquishing of the responsibility that humanity was given to rule over the earth on God’s behalf. While humanity was made to live for God’s kingdom and to glorify his name, sin is our attempt to build our own kingdoms and make a name for ourselves.

The rejection of God as King always comes with the attempt to replace him with something else on the throne. The Bible often speaks of this replacement with the language of idolatry. An idol is anything we look to in place of God for our identity, security, and satisfaction. Sin, therefore, is not merely doing bad things but is also making good things into ultimate things. And while people often assume that idolatry only applies to ancient people kneeling before handmade gods, it is just as prevalent in

8. Herman Bavnick, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 29.

our culture today. Modern people worship the idols of money, sex, power, career, and reputation.

Yet, if I am the one who chooses the idols I serve and who decides what is right and wrong, then the ultimate object of my worship and devotion is not the idols of money, sex, or power—it's me. Sin is our attempt to dethrone God and enthroned ourselves. The word *autonomy*, which represents one of the highest values in our culture today, means “self-rule.” Sin is substitution—the attempt to replace the divine King with the sovereign self so that individual desire reigns, personal choice is the authority, and freedom is defined by independence.

Second, what is the primary impact of sin? The answer in the narrative of Genesis 3 (banishment from the presence of God) is reaffirmed throughout Scripture: the primary impact of sin is the separation of God and humanity (Isa. 59:2). In place of intimacy, unity, and life is now hostility, division, and death. Humanity, created to delight in the love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is alienated from God and under his righteous judgment (Rom. 2:1–5).

This sin-induced separation, however, is not restricted to the divine-human relationship. Immediately after humanity is cut off from God in Genesis 3, we learn in Genesis 4 of the violent opposition of brother against brother. Furthermore, because of human sin, heaven and earth have been torn asunder. In all, sin brings separation between God and humanity, division among people, and the rupture of heaven and earth.

Third, what are the multidimensional effects of sin? Sin brings in its wake disaster in many forms, revealing what African theologian John Pobee calls the “many-sidedness of sin.”⁹ It is imperative to recognize the multidimensional nature of sin, for a narrow view of sin will lead to a narrow doctrine of

9. John Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 107.

atonement. Acknowledging the complex and integrated nature of sin, however, will lead to a complex and integrated understanding of Christ's atoning work.

Because of sin against God, people are

- unable to see the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:4);
- enemies of God (James 4:4);
- deserving of God's judgment (Rom. 1:18);
- under the sway of the devil (Eph. 2:2);
- enslaved to sin (John 8:34);
- condemned (Rom. 5:16);
- stained morally (Zech. 3:3);
- covered in shame (Jer. 17:13);
- bound to the law (Rom. 7:6);
- ignorant of the truth (Rom. 1:18);
- exiled (2 Kings 17:6–7);
- spiritual orphans (Rom. 8:15);
- part of the evil age (Gal. 1:4);
- physically ill (Mark 2:3–12);
- far from God (Eph. 2:13);
- in need of an example (Matt. 5:14);
- spiritually indebted (Col. 2:14);
- alienated from the life of God (Eph. 4:18);
- dead in transgressions (Eph. 2:1);
- hostile to God and others (Rom. 8:7).

The effects of sin do not remain disconnected from one another as if the result of unrelated destructive forces. Rather, the cumulative effects of sin come together under the sway of an evil power to form a sinful kingdom in opposition to God. The devil is a pretender king who rules with deception, temptation, and accusation. Humanity, made to flourish under God's rule, has voluntarily chosen to enlist in the kingdom of darkness and is now under the influence of the world, the

flesh, and the devil. The irony is that in all our attempts to rule ourselves and build our own kingdoms, we end up submitting to the rule of another, the serpent king who deceived our parents in Eden. The deception of autonomy was his plan all along: to allure us with self-rule so that in thinking we run our own lives, we increase in our rebellion against the good and holy King.

How does the doctrine of sin shape the doctrine of atonement? First, we must properly diagnose the problem (sin) in order to rightly understand the solution (atonement). Second, sin is first and foremost against God but is multidimensional in its effects. We should, therefore, expect a doctrine of atonement that reconciles God and humanity *and* deals with the various effects of sin. Furthermore, a significant implication of a thorough doctrine of sin is that the death of Christ is *necessary* for God to deal with sin and restore his purposes for creation. This is a true litmus test for various doctrines of atonement. Is the death of Jesus absolutely necessary to deal with sin, or is it merely a gesture on behalf of humanity in need of help?

The Promised Kingdom

The sin of humanity is grave, but it cannot thwart God's purposes. In response to rebellion in the garden, God promises that the seed of a woman will crush the serpent while being wounded in the process (Gen. 3:15). This serpent-crushing King will reverse the curse, reconcile God and sinners, and realize God's original purpose of establishing his kingdom over all the earth. However, while the royal vision remains, the kingdom will come into a fallen world through surprisingly different means. A pattern emerges from this point onward whereby victory comes through suffering, exaltation through humiliation, and ultimately the kingdom through the cross.

The rest of the Bible is the story of God keeping this promise of a sacrificial, serpent-crushing King. Through the unfolding plot of the Old Testament, we begin to see how the ruin of humanity's sin will be overcome by the reign of humanity's Savior. The light that would one day shine on the cross of Christ casts a shadow all the way back to this great promise.

The story unfolds in the Old Testament, showing that God's kingdom comes in the most counterintuitive ways: humility, service, and sacrifice. God promises Abraham that he will reverse the curse and bless all the families of the earth, and then he symbolically commits to bearing the covenant curse himself (Gen. 15:17–21; cf. Jer. 34:18). Joseph's ascension to royalty is characterized by suffering, and he exercises his reign over his brothers with forgiveness. In the exodus, God sets his people free *from* slavery and *for* his kingdom through the means of a sacrificial lamb (Ex. 12). The book of Ruth reveals how God uses an overlooked outsider to bring redemption to his people. David's royalty is characterized by righteous suffering (Ps. 22), and he conquers an evil giant through humble means (1 Sam. 17). Zechariah tells of a humble king who will reign over creation and redeem his people with the blood of his covenant (Zech. 9:9–12).

The book of Isaiah is the apex of the Old Testament's revelation of how the kingdom will come in a counterintuitive way. Isaiah 52:7–12 announces the good news of God's reign and how the divine King will bring about a new exodus, delivering his people from bondage and redeeming them into his kingdom. But how will the kingdom come? "Behold, my servant" begins the song recorded in Isaiah 52:13–53:12. The victory of the kingdom comes through the suffering of the servant. By bearing the sins of his people, the servant will bring about a new exodus and establish God's reign.

The kingdom vision of Israel was majestic and lofty, but the Old Testament ends modestly with only partial fulfillment, far from anything like a King ushering in a new era of salvation. But the promise remains. The anticipation builds. How will God's kingdom come, and who will be the anointed Messiah?

The Cross-Shaped Kingdom

Jesus began his ministry by announcing that the kingdom of God had arrived and was being fulfilled in him (Mark 1:14–15). He gave sight to the blind. He cast out demons. He healed the sick. He forgave sin. He brought in the outcasts. Could this be the fulfillment of Israel's hope for a Messiah who would restore God's reign on earth? Yes. But Jesus was not only revealing his identity as the Messiah, he was also redefining it.

In the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus is first identified as the Messiah, he immediately reshapes his disciples' expectations by saying that as King, he must suffer (Mark 8:31). On the way to the cross, Jesus predicts his death and resurrection three times, each time revealing more of the nature of God's kingdom and showing how it shapes their lives as disciples. After the third prediction, when Jesus redefines greatness by serving, he says to his disciples, "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). Jesus was bringing together two threads of the Old Testament to create a new tapestry of a crucified Messiah. Like the Son of Man from Daniel 7, Jesus would establish God's everlasting kingdom over all the earth. However, like the servant from Isaiah 53, he would accomplish this through his atoning death in the place of his people. The cross is the crowning achievement of Christ's kingdom mission.

The way Mark tells the story of the crucifixion makes clear that Christ's kingdom mission did not cease at the cross. In order to

mock him as a pretender king, the Roman soldiers give Jesus a purple robe, a scepter, and a crown of thorns. Above his head is written “King of the Jews.” Yet Mark is showing through irony that the one mocked as king truly is King. The crucifixion is a coronation, where Christ is exalted as the rightful ruler of the world. The cross is a throne from which Christ rules the world with grace.

According to Paul, Christ’s death in our place deals with our sins in a way that forgives our trespasses (Eph. 1:7), satisfies God’s justice (Rom. 3:21–26), defeats the devil (Col. 2:13–15), demonstrates God’s love (Rom. 5:8), and unites heaven and earth (Eph. 1:10). Hebrews 2:5–10 presents Jesus as the last Adam who has restored God’s royal design for creation and regained the crown of “glory and honor” (Heb. 2:7) for humanity through his death on the cross. Revelation says that Christ is the King who “has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom” (Rev. 1:5–6).

Unfortunately, this deep biblical connection between the kingdom and the cross has frequently been overlooked. In fact, a wedge has often been driven between kingdom and cross, with whole camps rallying around each side: the kingdom crowd advocates for social justice and the cross crowd for personal salvation. But while many feel the need to choose between kingdom and cross, Scripture presents a mutually enriching relationship between the two that emerges in the story of Israel and culminates in Christ the crucified King. The kingdom and the cross are not in competition. Christ brings the kingdom by way of the cross. The cross establishes and shapes the kingdom. To put it simply, the cross and the kingdom are held together by the Christ, who brings God’s rule on earth as it is in heaven through his atoning death on the cross.

The death of Christ is the decisive moment, though certainly not the only significant moment in the coming of the kingdom.

The kingdom was present in Jesus's life, proclaimed and embodied in his ministry, established by his death, and inaugurated through his resurrection. The kingdom is being advanced by the Spirit through the church and will be consummated in the second coming.¹⁰

The Eternal Kingdom

The vision of hope offered in the book of Revelation is grounded in the work of the crucified Messiah. In Revelation 5:5–6, John is told about a Lion, but when he turns, he sees instead a Lamb. The slain Lamb is at the throne being praised with the following song:

Worthy are you to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed
people for God
from every tribe and language and people and nation,
and you have made them a kingdom and priests to
our God,
and they shall reign on the earth. (Rev. 5:9–10)

This is a glimpse of the eternal kingdom of God. Multitudes of people from every nation have been set free and brought together as one family. These are people who have been washed clean, made new, and are filled with joy as they worship their King. They are God's people. And how did all of this come about? The blood of Jesus. The kingdom of God comes through the blood of the Son of God. Miroslav Volf says, "The world to come is ruled by the one who on the cross took violence upon himself in order to conquer and embrace the enemy."¹¹

10. In the next chapter, we will look closer at each of the aspects of Christ's work.

11. Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 300.

Revelation, however, does not end only with the union of God and sinners. The renewing effects of Christ's atoning death reach as far as the effects of the sin to which it is a response. Sin not only separated God and humanity but also rent asunder heaven and earth. Revelation 21 is a picture of the union of heaven and earth, coming together like a bride and groom: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man" (Rev. 21:3). The atonement brings about the union of God and sinners within the story of the union of heaven and earth.

This eschatological vision for the future ought to deeply shape the doctrine of atonement. For what reason did Christ come? What was the end goal? The telos was not merely forgiving sin so that humanity could try again within a broken creation. The vision—from the beginning—was the full realization of God's reign on earth as it is in heaven. The cross is set within a story that culminates in God's gracious reign through his reconciled people over a renewed creation.

Living by the Story

In this chapter we have sought to understand the cross within the story of the kingdom of God. It is natural, however, when people hear a story to wonder what their place is in the story. Thankfully, Scripture is clear on our role. Through the blood of Christ, not only have we been ransomed into the kingdom but also made a royal priesthood. As Peter tells the dispersed exiles, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

The identity of a royal priesthood explodes with meaning when understood within the story of the kingdom. Adam was called to be a royal priest in Eden, working and keeping the

garden and subduing the earth. When Israel was brought out of slavery from Egypt, God declared to them, “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests” (Ex. 19:6). But where Adam and Israel failed, Jesus perfectly fulfilled the role of a royal priest. And now, those who are in Christ are called to be a royal priesthood, to worship our King and work for his kingdom purposes. By God’s grace, we are a people who stand at the intersection of heaven and earth, proclaiming God’s gracious rule and embodying the righteousness and justice of his kingdom in our lives.