

What Happened on Good Friday? Exploring the Meaning of the Cross

Study #3: Satisfaction

Notes and Scripture Texts

In the last study we looked at the theme of redemption through the lenses of Jesus death on the cross as a recapitulation, a ransom, and a victory. We saw in scripture that these motifs particularly arise from God's deep love for us. In this study we turn our attention to the theme of satisfaction.

While all conceptions of atonement embrace the love of God as an important motivation for this action, the focal point of the satisfaction motif is on God's justice. This position says that the death of Jesus is to make restitution in order to satisfy the anger of God against human rebellion. Since one of God's attributes is justice, God does not simply ignore, gloss over, and forgive affronts to justice without restitution. This relates to the legal concept of balancing out an injustice. A key figure in the development of this idea is Anselm of Canterbury (d.1109).

Colossians 2:13-14: And when you were dead in trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive together with him, when he forgave us all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us with its legal demands. He set this aside, nailing it to the cross.

A related idea is that of Jesus as our merit. In this conception, Jesus redeems human beings by meriting or earning grace and salvation on their behalf. This was controversial for some because it seemed to suggest that salvation had some basic connection to works: How it can be an act of God's free mercy and yet Jesus earns human salvation through meritorious good works?

This legal element is important in this view due to the role good works played in the judgment of God in the New Testament. In every passage where the immediate context is the final determination of eternal life, the basis for that judgment is always deeds. James 2:24 reads, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone."

Romans 5:18-19: Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Questions for Reflection:

What do you think of the idea of satisfaction? How do you understand it? Does it make sense to you? Why or why not?

How do you respond to the idea that God gets angry and has wrath toward human beings? Do you believe this is true? What difference does it make?

Do you think of Jesus life and death as meriting salvation for human beings? Is this necessary? Why or why not? What difference does it make?

Have you ever thought about the connection between the meaning of the cross and culture? Can you think of contemporary examples?

How do you understand the justice of God? How does it relate to the cross? Do you see any difficulties with this idea? What are the implications for your life?

What is particularly significant to you in this study?

What questions do you have?