

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ

Lecture 14

The Ransom Theory

We are discussing the doctrine of the atonement, and we've just begun a survey of Christian thinking about the atonement over the centuries. We want to start with the church fathers.

To review what I said last week: the dominant view among the church fathers was that Christ's death was a sacrificial offering to God, and this was often construed in terms of substitutionary punishment. For example, I quoted from the church father Eusebius in his treatise, *The Demonstration of the Gospel*. Eusebius wrote,

The Lamb of God . . . was chastised on our behalf, and suffered a penalty He did not owe, but which we owed because of the multitude of our sins; and so He became the cause of the forgiveness of our sins, because He received death for us and transferred to Himself the scourgings, the insults, and the dishonor, which were due to us, and drew down on Himself the apportioned curse, being made a curse for us. And what is that but the price of our souls? And so the oracle says in our person [quoting Isaiah 53] "By His stripes we were healed," and "The Lord delivered him for our sins."

That's from *The Demonstration of the Gospel*, chapter 10, section 1.

Similar sentiments were expressed by church fathers such as Origen, Cyril of Jerusalem, John Chrysostom, Cyril of Alexandria, and others. For example, Origen, who is usually associated with the so-called ransom theory of the atonement, actually connects the idea of sacrifice with penal substitution as he found it in Isaiah 53. This is what Origen had to say:

What has never been related in any history, is that one suffered death for the whole world and that the whole world was cleansed by this sacrifice whereas without such a sacrifice it must perforce have perished. Christ could only receive on the cross the burden of the sins of all . . . "He took on Him our sins and was smitten for our iniquities . . . the punishment awaiting us fell on Him instead . . . we are healed by the sufferings of His cross. His Father delivered Him . . . for our misdeeds, He was led to the slaughter for the sins of the people. . . ."

John Chrysostom similarly wrote, "Men ought to have been punished, but God did not do so. They ought to have perished, but he gave his son in their stead so although we ought to have been punished and perished instead Christ was punished and perished on our behalf." And John Chrysostom gives this very revealing analogy. He says,

A king seeing a robber about to receive his due [that is to say, the robber is about to be punished for his crime] sends his beloved and only son to death and lays on him not only the penalty but also the crime and this he does to save the guilty one and to promote him afterwards to high dignity.

Here Chrysostom affirms that Christ not only bears the penalty (the punishment) for our sins, but that also our guilt is imputed to Christ and he bears that as well.

This is completely contrary to the way in which the church fathers are typically represented in the secondary literature. In fact, I'm having to revise what I've already written in the first draft of this book I'm writing because I've come to see that the focus on the so-called ransom theory of the atonement is not a focus that belonged to the church fathers themselves.¹ Rather it's modern scholarship which has focused on this aspect of the church fathers' doctrine and made it appear as though this was the entire atonement theory held by the church fathers when in fact, like the biblical material itself, the church fathers had a multifaceted theory of the atonement that did include ransom as part of it but (as we've just seen) also included vicarious suffering, sacrificial offering, penal substitution, and so forth.

Joseph Mitros, in a recent review of the literature, says this:

By way of summary, one may say that the sacrificial theory of salvation combined with the idea of penal substitution constituted the mainstream of thinking in the . . . fourth century and the motif of the Isaianic servant of Yahweh [the servant of the Lord is Isaiah 53] made up its commonly accepted background. Though innocent himself, Christ, the Son of God, took upon himself our sins and accepted the punishment due to us for them. By becoming man, the new Adam, he had become the representative of all men then as a high priest and victim in offering his life as a propitiatory sacrifice Christ reconciled men to God.

In light of this, one might ask why is it then that modern scholarship focuses so myopically on the ransom facet of the church fathers' statements? I think it must be due to the sheer peculiarity and curiosity of the church fathers' statements on the ransom theory. They are so odd and so out of step with contemporary thinking that modern scholarship tends to focus on that as though that were the emphasis of the church fathers when in fact this is just one facet of a very multifaceted and rich doctrine of the atonement.

Let's look more closely at this aspect of the church fathers' thinking that is commonly known as the ransom theory.

For about nine hundred years from the time of Irenaeus and Origen up until the time of St. Anselm the ransom theory was popular among the church fathers. According to this theory the sacrifice of Christ's life served as a ransom to deliver man from the bondage to Satan and from the corruption and death that were the consequences of sin. The church fathers tended to interpret Jesus' ransom saying (remember Mark 10:45 that *the Son of Man has come to give his life as a ransom for many*) very literally to mean that he made a payment in exchange for which human beings were set free from bondage. Much as a ransom payment might be made to terrorists who are holding a group of hostages in order to get those hostages liberated, so the sacrifice of Christ's life was a ransom given to liberate human beings from bondage to sin and death.

This interpretation naturally raised the question as to whom the ransom was paid. The obvious answer to this question seemed to be the devil – Satan – because it was the devil who held men in bondage. 2 Timothy 2:25-26,

God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth, and they may escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will.

Here he says that human beings have been ensnared by the devil and are in bondage to him.

Similarly in 1 John 5:19 we have a very sweeping statement: "We know that we are of God, and the whole world is in the power of the evil one." According to 1 John 5:19 the entire world lies in bondage to Satan.² So God agreed to give over his Son to Satan's power in exchange for the human beings that he held captive.

Not all of the church fathers agreed with this ransom theory. Gregory Nazianzus, for example, was sharply critical of the ransom theory. He did not want to make Satan the object of Christ's atoning death. It seemed inappropriate to say that Satan would be the one to whom atonement is directed. But most of the church fathers agreed with Origen who wrote,

To whom gave he his life 'a ransom for many'? It cannot have been to God. Was it not then to the evil one? For he held us until the ransom for us, even the soul of Jesus, was paid to him, being deceived into thinking that he could be its lord, and not seeing that he could not bear the torment of holding it.³

As Origen's statement revealed, the fathers typically thought of this arrangement between God and Satan as a very clever ruse on God's part. He tricked Satan into making this exchange. You see, as the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God could not

² 10:15

³ *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* 2.13; *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* 16.8

possibly have been held captive by Satan. But by his incarnation – by becoming a man – Christ appeared to be just as weak and vulnerable as other human beings who were under Satan’s control, and it was only after the captives had been freed by Satan that the Son of God manifested his full divine power by rising from the dead and breaking the bonds of death and hell and thus escaping from Satan's power.

Gregory of Nyssa, one of the other Cappadocian church fathers, gives the following very colorful analogy to illustrate how God cleverly deceived Satan. He says,

In order to secure that the ransom in our behalf might be easily accepted by him who required it, the Deity was hidden under the veil of our nature, that so, as with ravenous fish, the hook of the Deity might be gulped down along with the bait of flesh.⁴

Here he says that Christ’s flesh is like the bait to lure Satan and inside is hidden this hook of the deity of Christ that will ensnare Satan and in fact undo him.

One of the most interesting features of the ransom theory as espoused by the church fathers is their widespread conviction that Christ’s incarnation and death were not actually necessary for man's redemption. God chose to bring about our liberation from Satan’s power by Christ’s death and ransom payment but he didn’t have to. St.

Augustine, one of the Latin church fathers, wrote very bluntly, “they are fools who say the wisdom of God could not otherwise free men than by taking human nature, and being born of a woman, and suffering all that he did at the hands of sinners.”⁵ So according to Augustine, if you think that the incarnation and death of Christ was necessary for our redemption you’re a fool. He didn’t think it was necessary. Given his omnipotence God could have freed people from Satan’s power directly. Being omnipotent it would be child’s play for God to liberate us from a creature like Satan. There wouldn’t need to be any ransom payment. So the entire arrangement of making this ransom payment in order to free us was simply the choice of God’s will. This is the way he contingently chose to bring about our redemption but it wasn't necessary.⁶

George Smeaton, who is a 19th century theologian who has written a couple of fine books on the subject of the atonement, conjectures that the reason that the church fathers held this view is that they were focused primarily upon the consequences of sin, mainly death and mortality and corruption, rather than on sin itself. They were focused on how God overcame the consequences of sin rather than sin itself. They held that God in his omnipotence could deal with those consequences of sin without any atonement. So Christ’s death was not required on this view by God’s justice as later thinkers like Anselm and the Reformers were to say. It wasn’t a matter that God’s justice required this

⁴ *Catechetical Oration* 24

⁵ *On the Christian Struggle* 100.11

⁶ 15:07

to be done, it was simply a decision of his will. So Smeaton says of the church fathers, “They separated God’s free-will from the moral perfections of His nature – rectitude, wisdom, and goodness.”⁷ They focused upon God’s freedom – his arbitrary ability to redeem human beings as he wants – without connecting it to these essential attributes of God like rectitude, goodness, and wisdom. So they held that God freely chose to take on a human nature in Christ as an appropriate way to deal with human mortality and death.

In saying this the church fathers, especially in the East (the Greek-speaking church fathers), tended to shift the emphasis away from Christ’s death to his incarnation as the principal means of overcoming our corruption and mortality. By taking on a human nature himself Christ redeemed our nature and brought immortality and eternal life to our nature. So Christ’s death became merely the climax to his life. The real point of emphasis was the incarnation whereby our mortal nature was imbued with divinity, and corruption and death was overcome. It was primarily the divine person’s assuming a human nature that brought healing and immortality to our nature (and this emphasis continues in Eastern Orthodoxy today), and thereby the centrality of the cross in the New Testament proclamation of the Gospel is lost. I think this is one of the weaknesses in Eastern Orthodoxy that the emphasis is shifted from the death of Christ and the cross to the incarnation as the fulcrum of Christ’s atoning work.

START DISCUSSION

Student: You mentioned early in the ransom theory that Satan was tricked, if you will, into not realizing the deity of Christ in the ransom. However in Scripture it states that when the demons were sent away from those possessed they ran in fear proclaiming *we know who you are*. So if Satan’s minions knew who he was how could he have been tricked into believing that?

Dr. Craig: Right. I think it would be hard to defend the view biblically that Satan was not aware that Christ was divine. But maybe he didn’t sense what that meant. It might have seemed that he had stooped so low in taking on our mortal nature that now he was limited and weak in virtue of having that nature and was no longer in his full divine abilities. There is an interesting passage in 1 Corinthians 2:8 where speaking of the cross Paul says, “None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:8). “The rulers of this age,” I’m sure, refers to Satan’s powers and those who control this world.⁸ So the church fathers might be able to defend the view that Satan did not truly, fully understand what was going on in the incarnation and the crucifixion.

⁷ Smeaton (1870), p. 509.

⁸ 20:12

Student: That would have been a great weakness, I think, in Satan's power if he could not recognize that Christ is the Son of God. Even when he tempted him I think he knew he was tempting the Son of God to submit to him, and he said, *I do not go by man's will but by the will of God.*

Dr. Craig: Right. The very fact that Satan would attempt so foolish a project as trying to tempt the Son of God into worshiping him and serving him suggests that he didn't have a very full understanding of what was going on in the incarnation. Otherwise he would have seen that that was a futile endeavor.

Student: It is interesting that you said Augustine emphasized that God *chose* this method for our salvation. Was there anyone who took the opposite position?

Dr. Craig: If you look at that quotation that I read from Origen, it does suggest the opposite view. Let me highlight the phrase in Origen that jumped out at me. He says, "Without such a sacrifice the world must perforce have perished." There he is suggesting this was necessary; that apart from this sacrificial death there would have been no salvation. There are other passages that Mitros in this article that I quoted from refers to that similarly suggest the necessity of the atoning death of Christ. Again the picture is not as monochromatic as it is often painted in the secondary literature.

Student: I think the cross is to stop the continuous accusation. Satan is our accuser. So without righteousness he can continuously accuse us and the righteous God has to take that into consideration.

Dr. Craig: On the basis of our justification, on the basis of Christ's atoning death, no grounds remain for accusation. I think that's correct. But of course Satan may be rather foolish and may continue to accuse the brethren anyway. There are passages that refer to Satan as the accuser of the brethren, and we know how he accused Job, God's righteous servant in the book of Job, before God. So I think you're right in saying objectively speaking no grounds for accusation would remain as a result of the work of the cross.

Student: I am interested in your opinion about a more modern theologian, C. S. Lewis, who, if you look at the line in *The Witch and the Wardrobe* it seems to be a combination of the penal substitution and the ransom theory. Aslan substituted himself for the sins of Edmund but he was still at the same time kind of being paid as a ransom to the queen. If you also look at *The Space Trilogy* the main protagonist is named Ransom in that book. What are your thoughts about C. S. Lewis' viewpoints?

Dr. Craig: I am not a Lewis scholar but I think that is a very interesting point. It would not be surprising given Lewis' deep appreciation of the church fathers and Christian history. He does seem to combine them there, doesn't he, at least in *The Chronicles of Narnia*.

Student: I think Satan's limitation in this atonement theory – all these different facets – is that Satan doesn't know the future so he doesn't know the effect of the incarnation. He knows about us and he knows the past, but he doesn't know the future. So that's his limitation.

Dr. Craig: Yes, that would seem to be correct.

Student: It would seem like a pure ransom theory would be just too surprisingly un insightful for a biblical scholar to hold without holding other parts. So I wonder if they're more viewing it as sort of a metaphorical thing in that Satan doesn't actually have power but that as, someone else was saying, he is an accuser who is trying to sort of represent the justice of God to our disadvantage.⁹ When they say that Satan is being baited and that we're essentially being ransomed from Satan it is as if God has kind of given a domain to Satan even though God at any point can take that domain from him and he's more sort of somebody who holds no actual power even though he's given the amount of power that God holds. So it seems to me that anybody who has actually studied the Scriptures in depth would, if they're holding a pure ransom theory, they're more thinking of Satan as sort of being that placeholder than actual powerholder.

Dr. Craig: I think you're absolutely right that no one, as far as I know, would defend this sort of ransom theory that I've described this morning that the church fathers enunciated. But the idea that they themselves meant it merely metaphorically, I'm not convinced that is true. One reason would be that the subsequent critics of the ransom theory like Anselm and Abelard – these medieval theologians who overthrew the ransom theory – took the church fathers at face value, as meaning this literally that Satan held us in bondage and God gave this ransom payment to him to set us free. They argue very vociferously against this idea that Satan had absolutely no rights over human beings and that it would be immoral for God to submit to his demands and to make a ransom payment to him. After the critique of Anselm in the 11th century, the ransom theory more or less disappears from church history. This was popular during the first nine hundred years, as I say, but then as subsequent theologians offered criticisms of it, it more or less disappeared. Today those who want to rehabilitate the ransom theory (and there are some) would, I think, do exactly what you said – interpret it more metaphorically. They would want to say things like *by his death on the cross Christ overcame the powers of sin and death and hell and has given us eternal life and freedom and set us free from the things that held us captive*, and would not interpret it in this literal sort of hostage-taking arrangement and ransom payment that the fathers seem at least to have taken in a literal way.

Student: I apologize. This question is very basic and fundamental, but I'm not familiar with what Satan's abilities and limitations are in a general sense. I'm just curious where his boundaries are.

Dr. Craig: If we think of Satan as some sort of angelic creature that has fallen (which is the usual way in which he's understood), he would have all of the sorts of limitations that are inherent to being a creature. He would be contingent. He would be dependent upon God moment by moment for his existence. He would be limited in power, limited intelligence, evil, not probably omnipresent but able to be spatially located. So all of those sorts of limitations would seem to apply to Satan just as they would to a normal angelic creature. That's what it would seem. As you think about angels, they appear and disappear in this world of space and time. But it's not as though they're omnipresent in the way that God is.

Student: Just to clarify, even though Satan cannot be everywhere at one time, he does have his minions that go out. So it is not as if there aren't evil forces simultaneously throughout.

Dr. Craig: Correct.

Student: Wouldn't God be the ransom holder because isn't he the one that's actually requiring death for sin?

Dr. Craig: That isn't what they thought.¹⁰ When we look at the church fathers, remember Origen said, *Was the ransom paid to God? No*. Because he wasn't holding us captive. The ransom had to be paid to someone who was holding us captive. Remember in the ancient world the idea of making a ransom payment was typically a payment made to buy back prisoners of war who had been captured or to set free slaves from their captivity. So the idea here was that it wasn't God who was holding us prisoner. It had to be somebody else, and so the ransom payment wasn't made to God. On the contrary it was God who was making the payment by sending his Son. Now, as we'll see, subsequently thinkers thought that this was, in fact, a perverse consequence of the ransom theory – that the atonement is directed towards Satan rather than toward God. That did seem to stand things on its head. That was one of the weaknesses of the ransom theory that I think led to its demise. It seemed to get things upside down.

Student: The ransom is paid for the standard of righteousness. So God's righteousness is there, and the accuser uses that to imprison sinners. So a ransom is paid to uphold that righteousness to release the sinners.

Dr. Craig: I think you're trying to bring in later concerns about righteousness and justice that weren't part of the original theory. As Smeaton said, the theory focused upon the

consequences of sin more than sin itself. So it didn't emphasize things like meeting the demands of God's righteousness. That would be other aspects of the atonement, not the ransom part. The ransom part was meant to describe our redemption from the bondage of sin and death and hell and the devil.

END DISCUSSION

With that we'll close. Next time we will look at St. Anselm's satisfaction theory which effectively undid the ransom theory so that it never really appeared again prominently in church history.¹¹

¹¹ Total Running Time: 33:13 (Copyright © 2017 William Lane Craig)