

During this season of the Church year called Lent, we're in a series called Venom. Lent is the time the Church sets aside to prepare ourselves for Easter by facing the reality of our sinfulness. This year, we've done that in the context of creation. We began the year by looking at Genesis 1-2, at the stories there of how God created us. We saw that God created the world with a certain logic, a rhythm that makes everything make sense and work together.

But for the last several weeks, we've been in Genesis 3, in the story of the Snake that convinced us to reject God's Way in favor of our own. We saw that's what Sin really is - not a list of dos and don'ts, but a rejection of God's desires for us. Not only does Sin sever our relationship with God, our connection to life, and not only does it poison our relationships with other people, but - as we saw last week - the Shadow of Sin looms large over the whole world.

When we're confronted with the truth that we broke the world, our natural impulse is to want to fix it. On a national level, this means we try to pass legislation, create movements and causes that make the world a better place. On a personal level - especially in Churches, maybe - this is the impulse to try harder. To do better. To surround ourselves with some more rules that help us reign in that creature inside us, that tendency to give in to our lesser desires.

But then there are those moments like we talked about last week, those moments when we come face-to-face with the reality of evil. Maybe it's when we experience crippling, systemic poverty for the first time. Or some especially heinous crime like a school shooting. Maybe it's a devastating natural disaster. Or something more intimate, personal: a massive moral failure that wrecks your life and the lives of those you love. The fall of a respected mentor or leader. The death of a loved one. A destructive habit you can't quit.

It's different for everyone, but there are these moments when you come face-to-face with the terrible power of Sin and our utter helplessness in its face. In those moments, we understand the words Paul wrote in Romans 7:

I have discovered this principle of life-- that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? -- Romans 7:21-24 (NLT)

Paul says, Sin is too big! Too much! No matter how hard I try, I can't get away from it. I can't conquer it. I can't overcome it. In other words, I can't choose God's Way.

Who can rescue me? Theologians call this question the Atonement. That's the \$20 word for what we've been building towards during this whole series. Essentially, Atonement asks, How are we made one with God again? Since we strayed from God, since we're now trapped in Sin and Death, how do we get back?

And he gives us his answer in the next verse:

Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. -- Romans 7:25 (NLT)

I made a promise to those of you who've been here during this series: that talking about Sin is good because then we get to talk about Jesus. Here's where the payoff starts. Paul tells us that Jesus rescues us from Sin. Jesus saves us from Death.

I assume that surprised exactly no one in here (you are gathered with a Church to worship Jesus, after all). Everyone knows more or less that Jesus' death is important to us. Most of us even know that we say Jesus' death is how we are saved.

But... how? How did a guy dying 2,000 years ago rescue us from something? And, does it really matter if we understand? Can't we just say, Yay Jesus?

We need to have a right understanding of the Atonement. It's not just a dusty, academic question. When we get it wrong, we stay trapped in Sin, and when we get it right, we find a freedom we didn't think was really possible. So the Atonement actually matters a lot.

Because we don't settle for "I don't know". As humans, we fill in the gaps in our knowledge with our own experiences. So when we see that gap between God and us, we fill in the gaps with our own ideas, our own theories. And that gets us all kinds of unhelpful places.

If you're a Type A person, you end up thinking you have to earn Jesus' death, that you have to meet a quota of good deeds, be righteous enough to earn what Jesus did for you. As though God is saying on the cross, Come on guys. You gotta meet me halfway here!

Or if you've come from some rough places, you may not think yourself capable of love. You may be convinced there's no way across the gap at all.

Or maybe you're a bit too entitled. Maybe you don't even see a gap. You don't see that there's anything about you that needs to be fixed.

None of those perspectives are true. So for the next few minutes, I want to take you through a few of the major metaphors the Scriptures use to explain what happened on the Cross. All of these examples illustrate the Atonement. This is how Jesus makes us one with God again.

Over and over, Biblical writers look at what happened on the Cross and they say, Well, what Jesus did for us is like this... only better. It's like that... only better! The Biblical metaphors for Atonement introduce us to Jesus. They take something way too big, too good, too amazing for us to wrap our minds around and they give us some pictures that help us get it.

Romans is a perfect example, especially if you've been here for these last two series. Leading up to the passage we just saw, Paul puts Jesus' rescue in terms of Genesis 1-3.

When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned... Now Adam is a symbol, a representation of Christ, who was yet to come.

But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. And the result of God's gracious gift is

very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins.

For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ. Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous." – Romans 5:12-19 (NLT)

Paul says, What Jesus did is the mirror image of the story of Adam. Adam chose to follow his own way, so introduced Sin and Death into the world. Jesus chose to follow God's way, so he's bringing Righteousness and Life back into the world! Paul says, it's like we're all the first Adam. We all choose our own way like Adam chose that tree. We all listen to the snake and have the venom of Sin in our veins. We all are marching toward Death.

But Jesus became that Adam for us. Jesus died in our place, took the Death we'd chosen for ourselves. Now we're free to live with God again. It's like that.

Paul also describe us as slaves. The slavery metaphor is a great instance of Paul using a metaphor that worked better then than it does now. The people to whom Paul was writing were surrounded by slaves every day. Some of them probably owned slaves, some of them probably were slaves.

We still get the metaphor because we have an intellectual understanding of slavery, but it's not quite the same as living in a world of slavery.

Nonetheless, Paul says that when Adam sinned, he sold us all into slavery. Now we're all slaves to Sin - it's like even when we want to live rightly, to do good, we can't. Because we're slaves. And Jesus' death sets us free. He buys us out of slavery.

So Paul says, It's like you're a slave. And you can't do what you want. You're not free. But then, on the Cross, Jesus died to free you. And now, you're free to follow God. It's like that.

In another place, Paul describes us like a conquered people. He says, It's like Sin and Evil and Death came in with their armies and crushed you, and now you're living under an occupation force. And on the cross, Jesus defeated the armies of Evil. He ran them out and now you can live freely again, under the good rule of your true King.

Jesus used a debt metaphor. In one of his parables, he describes us as owing an insurmountable debt to God - like 10 trillion dollars. We're not talking Student Loan debts that take you a decade or two to pay off. We're not even talking credit card debt that's gotten out of control.

Imagine you owed 10 *trillion* dollars. More money than probably even actually exists in the world. And Jesus says God is the kind of God who just forgives that debt. Erases it.

Jesus says it's like you're in insane debt and through the Cross, God just forgave it all. You're free from your debt. It's like that.

Or here's one from our day: Imagine you show up to school, and there's a test that you knew about, it's the final exam and you need an A to pass the class. And even though you knew about it, you didn't study. You're not prepared at all. No good excuse, you just slacked off. So you bomb it hard. So hard. Your answers are so off they don't make letter grades low enough for what you got. You're going to fail the class and there's no way you're getting out of it.

The teacher's handing the exams back and you see Jesus, that immigrant kid who sits next to you. You're not sure where he's from, but he's definitely not from around here. He's the crazy smart kid who's better than every one else in the class, always blowing the curve. And you see that *he* got an F-- and you're really worried because if *he* bombed the final then you know what you're in for.

You get your exam back and you got an A on it. That's not possible, you think. So you look at the top and you see Jesus' name on the exam. Of course, that explains it. You look over at Jesus' test and sure enough, there's your name by that F--. But Jesus isn't complaining.

In a moment of courage, you approach the teacher, figure you'd better explain the mix-up. And the teacher says, No, this is right. Jesus offered to switch grades with you. He's taking the failing grade and you receive his success. He passed and replaced your failure with his victory.

And you think, That's incredibly unfair.

Well, exactly. The Cross is sort of like that. But even better.

The Cross is like Jesus succeeding where Adam failed.

It's like a slave being set free.

It's like our king conquering the army that conquered us.

It's like being released from a debt a billion times larger than we could ever imagine paying down.

It's like receiving credit for someone else's perfect work.

Are you starting to get the picture? When we were hopelessly, hilariously lost, so trapped in Sin that nothing we could do could even *start* to get us free, God freed us.

When our Sin kept us from God, God entered into our Sin. God became one of us. To rescue us. To do for us what we had no hope of doing for ourselves.

The Atonement isn't about being good enough for God. It's not about checking enough boxes or maintaining a habit long enough to get God's approval.

That's why we need to understand the Cross. The whole point is that there's *nothing* we could do to help ourselves. In the face of Sin, we have no hope for ourselves. No chance of being good enough or strong enough to overcome it on our own.

We're dead. We're slaves. We're conquered. We're debtors. We're failures.

We're sinners.

There's another metaphor the Scriptures use - one that's pretty confusing to us because today we don't do animal sacrifice. Most of us get our meat from Kroger. But in the ancient world, meat came from Temples.

Everything in the ancient world revolved around the meal. Who you ate with showed everyone what kind of person you were. And the ancient peoples knew they were sinners, just like we do. They knew that they had sold themselves into slavery, amassed a debt they couldn't pay. The way they made themselves right with God was through sacrifice.

The idea was you brought an animal to the Temple to give to God. So you'd give the animal to the priest and the priest would slaughter it and give part of the animal to God (by burning it on the altar). Then the priest would give you back the rest of the animal to take home to your family.

When they sat down to eat that animal, the family understood that now they're sharing a meal with God. By accepting your offering, God is accepting you at his table. An accepted sacrifice means all is forgiven, so that when you and your family sit down to eat that animal, you're eating a meal that symbolizes God's forgiveness of your sin.

But the sacrificial system pointed out a big problem: the next time you sinned, you'd have to bring another animal. The sacrifice forgave your Sin, but it didn't actually fix the sinner. So the writer of Hebrews describes what Jesus did on the cross as a kind of sacrifice:

The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves. The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship. If they could have provided perfect cleansing, the sacrifices would have stopped, for the worshipers would have been purified once for all time, and their feelings of guilt would have disappeared. But instead, those sacrifices actually reminded them of their sins year after year...

He's pointing out the deep flaw in the sacrificial system: it doesn't actually change us. In another metaphor, we might say it doesn't actually free the slaves. It doesn't actually kick out the conquering army. It doesn't actually keep the debtor from accumulating more debt. Down in verse 10, he shows that what God did on the Cross is new and different:

God's will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time. Under the old covenant, the priest stands and ministers before the altar day after day, offering the same sacrifices again and again, which can never take away sins. But our High Priest offered himself to God as a single sacrifice for sins, good for all time. Then he sat down in the place of honor at God's right hand. There he waits until his enemies are humbled and made a footstool under his feet. For by that one offering he forever made perfect those who are being made holy. -- Hebrews 10:1-14 (NLT)

According to the writer of Hebrews, what Jesus did on the cross is like a sacrifice, but new, and better. Because those sacrifices didn't actually take care of Sin. But on the Cross God defeated Sin once and for all.

In the Atonement, God made it possible once and for all for us to be freed from Sin. To leave the destructive paths we're on and be reunited with God's Way.

Rather than worshippers bringing sacrifices over and over and over but never being changed, God became the sacrifice. No meal that we brought could ever be enough, so God provided the meal.

Communion Set Up

That is why we gather around the communion table each week during Lent. This table is the hope in the midst of our sin. Our promise that even though Sin is strong, God is stronger.

When Jesus was gathered the night before he died, he broke bread and gave it to them. He said, Take and eat. This is my body, broken for you.

When we take the wafers, we remember that Jesus was broken for us. When we were trapped in our Sin, God came to us. God rescued us. God forgave us. God provided a meal that would transform and change us and redeem us.

After he broke the bread, Jesus took a cup and passed it around. He said, This wine is my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of Sin. Drink it all.

When we dip the wafer in the grape juice, we remember that we could not reach God. We were so lost, so trapped, so hopeless. But God came to us. God became our Sin. God brought life where we brought death. God brought freedom where we only knew slavery. God forgave where we only knew debt.

Benediction

You were dead. Now you're alive.
You were slaves. Now you're free.
You were conquered. Now you're victors.
You were debtors. Now you're forgive.
You were failures. Now you're winners.
You were sinners. Now you're saints.

Go forth and live like it, in the name of the one who has atoned for you, the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.