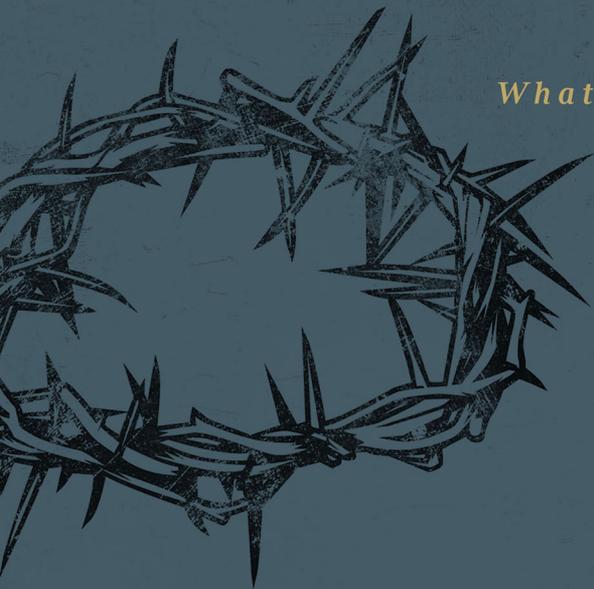




# SAVIOR

*What the Bible Says*

*about the Cross*

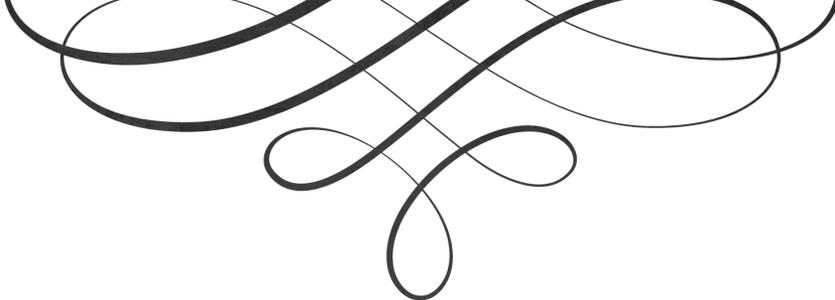


MAGREY R. DEVEGA



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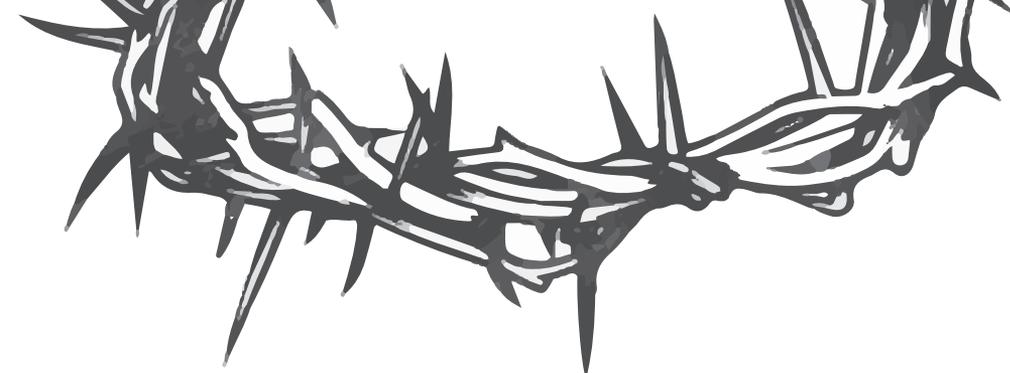
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# CHAPTER 1

## **SUBSTITUTION: JESUS TAKES YOUR PLACE**





## CHAPTER 1

# SUBSTITUTION: JESUS TAKES YOUR PLACE

*1 Peter 2:20-24 • Romans 3:23-26*

*A trembling soul, I sought the Lord,  
My sin confessed, my guilt deplored;  
How soft and sweet, his word to me,  
“I took thy place, and died for thee.”  
Eliza E. Hewitt, “He Took My Place”*

In the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam is a print in etching and drypoint called *The Three Crosses* by the famous Dutch artist Rembrandt van Rijn. It is a powerful depiction of Jesus on the cross, with the two thieves on each side. It is composed with stark grays and blacks, except for the beam of light shining from the heavens, signifying the inbreaking of God’s holiness cast into a world of sin.

But what’s most fascinating about this painting can be found off on the side. In the dark shadows of the crosses, off in the fringe of the painting, is a figure. He is barely recognizable, face buried in his hands, overcome with emotion.

The identity of this figure is debated, but some have concluded that this humble, grieving person is none other than Rembrandt himself, whom he painted into this scene in stirring recognition of his own role in Jesus's crucifixion. He acknowledged that he was responsible for the very sins that ultimately put Jesus on the cross. In that self-portrait Rembrandt was expressing not just feelings of grief and guilt, but ultimately also of gratitude. For Jesus had taken his place and done something that he could not do for himself.

That is at the heart of the idea of substitutionary atonement, the most prevalent understanding of the cross among most Christians today.

Substitutionary atonement is the idea that Jesus saved us by taking our place, bearing the fate that we deserved. It is an appropriate starting point for our journey together.

## A WORLD BASED ON RULES

The framework of substitutionary atonement is built on the idea that actions have consequences, and wrongful actions deserve punishment. This is a concept, after all, that we learn at any early age, from our parents and our teachers: live by the rules, and you'll be okay. Break them, and you will cause harm to yourself and others. Think about the times you've learned lessons like these. If you don't look both ways before crossing the street, you might get hurt. If you touch a hot stove, you will get burned. If you don't wear a coat outside when it's cold, you might get sick.

If you act within the guidelines, you'll usually be fine. If you don't, things will go wrong. This principle is not just a handy precept to teach our kids. It is based on a fundamental view of the world and an understanding of the way life ought to work. And this idea

influences our concepts of justice and fairness. It is the idea that if there is to be order and decency in the world, then the guilty must be punished in order for wrongs to be righted. Those are the rules; changing them will cause nothing but chaos and anarchy.

In the popular comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, by Bill Watterson, young Calvin and his best friend Hobbes often play their favorite game, “Calvinball.”<sup>1</sup> It is a game whose only permanent rule, according to Calvin, is “that you can’t play it the same way twice.” Each time they play, Calvin and Hobbes up the ante on spontaneous, often ludicrous rules in the middle of the game, like opposite poles, time-fracture wickets, the “very sorry song,” and the “invisible sector.” Final scores are just as meaningless as the rules themselves, with games ending with “oogy to boogy” and “Q to 12.”

Watterson said, “People have asked me how to play Calvinball. It’s pretty simple: you make up the rules as you go.”

Now, it’s one thing for a six-year old boy with a clever imagination to play a game with inconsistent rules. But it’s hard to imagine a world where Calvinball is the order of the day, in which the rules change on a whim, and the only steady, reliable idea is that no rules are permanent.

So, much of the first five books of the Bible, which we know as the Torah, are the Israelites’ counter to a Calvinball worldview. In particular, the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy spell out in vivid detail the rules for right and proper living in relation to God and to other people.

There are 613 commandments, to be exact, with Jewish tradition claiming that the 365 “negative” commandments (“Thou shalt not...”) correspond to the same number of days of the solar year, and the remaining 248 “positive commandments (“Thou

shalt...”) correspond to the number of bones in the human body.<sup>2</sup> In total, it is the instruction manual for how one is to live. Keep these commandments, and you will live. But break these commandments, and there must be a punishment.

In Calvinball, the worst that happens is that Calvin and Hobbes feud and bicker over who won. But in life, breaking the rules requires restitution, or the whole order of the world falls apart.

But to take it one step even further, when humans break the rules that God has established, it is not just human beings that are on the line. It is God’s very character and commitment to justice that is on trial. For if we believe the first thing we learn about God in Genesis, which is that God’s primary activity in the world is to bring order out of chaos and that God’s intent for this broken world is that it be restored back to its original state of goodness, perfection, and holiness, then it is God’s resolve that is called into question whenever human beings sin.

So, that is where Jesus enters the picture.

*What Jesus performed was a self-sacrifice,  
a willingness to assume for us the  
punishment that we deserved so  
that we would not have to.*

“No one has greater love,” Jesus said in John’s Gospel, “than to give up one’s life for one’s friends” (15:13). What happened on the cross was not just a sacrifice, used to fulfill an ancient blood atonement system. What Jesus performed was a self-sacrifice, a willingness to assume for us the punishment that we deserved so

that we would not have to. Or to express it another way, a willingness to pay an infinite price, which no human is capable of paying, to satisfy the debt we owe to God for our sin.

## SUBSTITUTING YOUR NAME

One of the more vivid stories involving substitutionary atonement is from the evangelical publishing company Bible Truth Ministries, which tells the story of John Coutts, a nineteenth-century sea captain. An irreligious person throughout his life, Captain Coutts contracted an illness while on board his vessel. He was not ready to die.

Desperate, Coutts sent for his first mate, a man named Williams, and ordered him to pray for him. But Williams refused, admitting to his captain that he did not know how to pray. Coutts then ordered Williams to retrieve for him a Bible, which Williams refused a second time, acknowledging that he was not a religious man.

Coutts then called for the second mate, a man named Palmer, hoping that he could be of help. “Palmer, I’m not going to get better,” Coutts told him, “and I’m not going to last until we reach port. I want you to pray for me. Ask God to have mercy on my sinful soul.” But the second mate responded in the same way, saying he did not know how to pray and that he also did not own a Bible.

The captain then ordered that the whole vessel be searched for one person who could pray for the captain or provide him with a Bible. Finally, one of the sailors identified a young helper in the galley named Willie Platt.

The sailor asked him, “Willie, do you have a Bible?”

“Yes, sir,” Willie responded. “But I only read it on my own time.”

“Don’t worry. Just get the Bible and go to the captain’s cabin. He’s dying and wants a Bible.”

Willie reported to the captain, Bible in hand. The captain acknowledged that his time was limited, and that he was sorry for the sins of his past. He asked Willie to pray that God would have mercy on him and that he might read something from the Bible that might offer him comfort.

Willie remembered a passage from Isaiah 53 that his mother had read to him before he left home. He read to the captain verses 4-6, about how Jesus bore the captain’s sins so that he did not have to bear them himself:

*It was certainly our sickness that he carried,  
and our sufferings that he bore,  
but we thought him afflicted,  
struck down by God and tormented.  
He was pierced because of our rebellions  
and crushed because of our crimes.  
He bore the punishment that made us whole;  
by his wounds we are healed.  
Like sheep we had all wandered away,  
each going its own way,  
but the LORD let fall on him all our crimes.*

The captain, realizing the power of those words, and the promise of his salvation that they contained, ordered Willie to read the words again. “Stop, boy!” he cried. “That sounds like it! Read it again.”

Willie read the passage a second time. And the captain responded, “Aye, that’s good—that’s it, I’m sure.”

Sensing the wave of openness and relief that was settling into the captain’s heart. Willie Platt went further. “Captain, when I was

reading that verse at home, my mother made me put my name in it. May I read it to you that way?”

“Yes, boy,” the captain said. Put your name in right where your mother told you, and read it to me again.”

“It was certainly [Willie’s] sickness that he carried,” Willie recited, reading the whole passage, and concluding with, “by his wounds [Willie] is healed.”

The captain, with a growing peace in his heart, asked Willie to read it once more, but this time substituting the captain’s own name in the passage.

“It was certainly [John’s] sickness that he carried...by his wounds [John] is healed.”

The captain dismissed Willie, closed his eyes, repeating the words of Isaiah 53:5 in his mind and heart, substituting his own name into the passage, even as he acknowledged that Jesus Christ had substituted himself for the captain. With that sense of peace washing over him, the Captain John Coutts eventually passed away, recognizing his Savior, grateful for what he had done for him.<sup>3</sup>

## SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT IN THE BIBLE AND HISTORY

The power of that story explains why substitutionary atonement has been so popular and prevalent throughout the history of the church. Many Christian thinkers have understood the cross in this way, with Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) being one of the most influential. Anselm drew on the legal ideas of his own days, especially those surrounding debt and how to repay or satisfy debt, to explain why substitutionary atonement was necessary. Ultimately, he said, it

was the character of God that was at stake, and this amounted to an infinite debt that must be repaid:

But God cannot properly leave anything uncorrected in His kingdom. Furthermore, to leave sin unpunished would be tantamount to treating the sinful and the sinless alike, which would be inconsistent with God's nature. And this inconsistency is injustice. It is necessary, therefore, that either the honour taken away should be repaid, or punishment should be inflicted.<sup>4</sup>

Later, the reformer John Calvin (1509–1564) grounded his understanding of the atonement on Anselm's work, describing how Jesus Christ was the only suitable substitute for the punishment that was meant for human beings:

Therefore, our Lord came forth very man, adopted the person of Adam, and assumed his name, that he might in his stead obey the Father; that he might present our flesh as the price of satisfaction to the just judgment of God, and in the same flesh pay the penalty which we had incurred.<sup>5</sup>

Advocates of substitutionary atonement draw their support from the deep well of biblical texts, particularly in the Old Testament. There we see the central role that the sacrificial system, and blood atonement in particular, played in the righting of human injustice. In the Torah, we see how the worldview of the Israelites was governed by the idea that when we are separated from God, then something has to die in order to bring us back into a relationship with God. One way to interpret God's acceptance of Abel's offering, and not

that of his brother Cain, is to recognize that Abel's offering was an animal and therefore it involved the shedding of blood. Though we may find God's favor of Abel odd because the sacrificial laws had not yet been introduced, it was an early indication that for humans to be in right and proper relationship to God, something had to die.

Skip ahead to Exodus, and we remember the story of how the Israelites were held captive in Egypt under the oppression of Pharaoh. And what was the final act of God that finally guaranteed freedom for the Israelite slaves? The killing of the firstborn males in Egypt, with the exception of those Israelites who sprinkled a lamb's blood on their doorposts. And when the angel of death passed over those houses where an animal's blood had been spilled, those people were saved from punishment. The blood of the lamb assured that the people in that household would be spared.

And then, of course, there is much of the rest of the Pentateuch—Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—in which God gave the Israelites detailed instructions on how to make blood sacrifices in order to satisfy the punishment that was due to humans because of their sin. In particular, there are texts like Numbers 15, which cover even the sins that are committed unintentionally:

*If an individual sins unintentionally, that person must present a one-year-old female goat for a purification offering. The priest will seek reconciliation in the LORD's presence for the person who sinned unintentionally, when the sin is an accident, seeking reconciliation so that person will be forgiven. There will be one set of instructions for the Israelite citizen and the immigrant residing with you for anyone who commits an unintentional sin. (vv. 27-29)*

By the time we get to the New Testament, and the authors of the Gospels and Epistles began to reflect on what the cross means for the world, most of them did so through the lens of that ancient sacrificial practice. They interpreted passages like Isaiah 53 in much the same way as Captain John Couatts did, understanding Jesus as the one who suffered on our behalf, and his blood became the suitable satisfaction of the punishment that we deserved or a repayment of the debt we owed. Consider these passages from the Epistles:

*He carried in his own body on the cross the sins we committed. He did this so that we might live in righteousness, having nothing to do with sin. By his wounds you were healed.*

*(1 Peter 2:24)*

*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us—because it is written, Everyone who is hung on a tree is cursed. He redeemed us so that the blessing of Abraham would come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, and that we would receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*

*(Galatians 3:13-14)*

*God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God.*

*(2 Corinthians 5:21)*

## SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT IN SONG

Many of our great hymn writers understood the work of the cross in this way, vividly portraying the Crucifixion to underscore

the shedding of Christ's blood as a way of eliciting gratitude that Jesus took our place. The most stirring example is "O Sacred Head, Now Wounded":

O sacred Head, now wounded,  
with grief and shame weighed down  
now scornfully surrounded  
with thorns, thine only crown. . . .

What thou, my Lord, hast suffered  
was all for sinners' gain;  
mine, mine was the transgression,  
but thine the deadly pain.<sup>6</sup>

Even brighter and more triumphant hymns like "To God Be the Glory" give a nod to the substitutionary work of Jesus, using legal and courtroom language to explain how Jesus assumed the punishment that was ours to bear:

O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood,  
to every believer the promise of God;  
the vilest offender who truly believes,  
that moment from Jesus a pardon receives.

Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,  
let the earth hear his voice!  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord,  
let the people rejoice!  
O come to the Father thru Jesus the Son,  
and give him the glory, great things he hath done!<sup>7</sup>

And of course, much of our sacramental theology points to substitutionary atonement by highlighting the role of Jesus's blood

in bringing about the forgiveness of sins. In The United Methodist Church, when the presiding clergy lifts up the bread and the cup, they utter words that are directly drawn from both the Gospels and Paul, who understood the elements as a vivid reminder of Christ's sacrifice for us:

On the night in which he gave himself up for us  
he took bread, gave thanks to you, broke the bread,  
gave it to his disciples, and said:  
“Take, eat; this is my body which is given for you.  
Do this in remembrance of me.”

When the supper was over, he took the cup,  
gave thanks to you, gave it to his disciples,  
and said:  
“Drink from this, all of you;  
this is my blood of the new covenant,  
poured out for you and for many  
for the forgiveness of sins.  
Do this, as often as you drink it,  
in remembrance of me.”<sup>8</sup>

## “KILLED IN A TRAITOR’S STEAD”

One of the great literary references to Christian substitutionary atonement is in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the classic tale by C. S. Lewis. Its climactic scene contains a powerful and intentional allegory for the self-sacrificial work of Jesus. The enchanted world of Narnia had been cursed by the evil White Witch, who rendered the land a perpetual, snowy, and gloomy winter. She also enticed Edmund, one of the four child protagonists from the Pevensie family, to join her side.

After Edmund's siblings Lucy, Peter, and Susan successfully convinced Edmund of the White Witch's true evil ways, the White Witch declared Edmund a traitor, a sentence punishable only by death.

“You at least know the Magic which the Emperor put into Narnia at the very beginning. You know that every traitor belongs to me as my lawful prey and that for every treachery I have a right to kill. . . . And so,” continued the Witch, “that human creature is mine. His life is forfeit to me. His blood is my property. . . . unless I have blood as the Law says all Narnia will be overturned and perish in fire and water.”

“It is very true,” said Aslan, “I do not deny it.”<sup>9</sup>

In response, the great Aslan, a powerful kingly lion who had befriended the Pevensie children and whose presence threatened the power and reign of the White Witch, struck a deal with her. He would offer himself in the place of the traitor.

With the children secretly watching from a distance, the White Witch and her forces proceeded to torture and kill Aslan on the Stone Table, an act of self-sacrifice in which Aslan assumed the punishment on himself that had been intended for Edmund.

After his death, Aslan's body disappeared, leaving only a fractured Stone Table for the children to approach, grieving over the loss of their great friend. Then suddenly, a resurrected Aslan appeared before them, triumphant over death as well as the forces of the Witch.

When the puzzled children beckoned him for an explanation, Aslan offered some words that are an apt description of the power of substitutionary atonement theology:

“It means,” said Aslan, “that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor’s stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backward.”<sup>10</sup>

This is the power of Christ’s self-sacrifice. It calls us to name the unavoidable state of our guilt, because of the sins that sentence us to certain punishment. But it also reminds us that God in Christ has taken our place, assuming the painful price in his own body, so that the system of justice can be appeased, and our lives can be spared.

Jesus did for us what we could not do for ourselves. He, the “willing victim,” was killed in our traitorous stead. And God did not give us what we deserved. That’s the heart of substitutionary atonement.

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## THE LIMITATIONS OF SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT

Of course, substitutionary atonement has its detractors, and you might be one of them. No single image of how Christ's death brings about salvation is complete and all encompassing; every one of them has its shortcomings. It would be understandable if the imagery of bloody sacrifice simply doesn't resonate with you.

There are those who deem this idea as being far too antiquated, too distant from our contemporary worldview. We can be grateful that our legal system in particular, or our civic life together in general, does not require sacrifices in order to preserve order and decency. Especially in an age when there is far too much violence around us, and our news headlines and popular culture sometimes use bloodshed to sensationalize current events, many shun blood imagery as a reinforcement of our addictions to violence.

Despite the fact that many of our hymnals contain such titles as "There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood" and "There Is Power in the Blood," many people are simply turned off by such songs and what they deem to be too graphic for our modern sensibilities.

There is also a risk in misapplying this understanding of Christ's death. Because Jesus has taken our place and assumed the punishment we deserved, one might conclude that there is nothing more that we can or should do in response. In his book *The Great Omission*, author and theologian Dallas Willard used the label "vampire Christians" to describe followers of Jesus who are obsessed with blood atonement imagery, while failing to assume responsibility for their own diligent commitment to Christ.<sup>11</sup> They extract the personal benefit of Christ's blood sacrifice, without feeling the need

to offer anything in return. The result can be a misguided portrait of the Christian life that demands little of our commitment because it required nothing of us for our salvation.

As we will discover in each of these chapters, each understanding of Christ's death has its merits as well as its limitations, and we can be free to extract the benefits of their rich traditions while acknowledging their drawbacks.

But for all the reservations one may have of substitutionary atonement, it does elicit one important response that is an important aspect of Christian character: Gratitude.

You and I can be grateful that Jesus did for us something that we could not do for ourselves, which we could not earn and did not deserve.

## A RESPONSE OF GRATITUDE

Several years ago, when I was pastoring a church in Iowa, I learned quite an important lesson in a rather embarrassing way about grace and not getting what I deserved.

I had just finished making a pastoral visit on the south end of town when I stopped by a local gas station to pick up a bottle of iced tea before returning to the office. The attendant rang up my purchase, took a look at me, then paused.

He said to me, "You need to know that you drove off last week without paying for your gas."

"What?" I said, completely incredulous. "You're kidding! I did that?"

"Yes," he said. Apparently, at some point the prior week, I had come in, pumped gas, and then driven off without paying for it. He

recognized both my face and my vehicle, and he was certain that it had been me.

I was absolutely shocked to hear the news. I had never pumped and ran in my life before (at least I don't think so!). And it was just not like me to even think about doing something like that. But I had no reason to disbelieve him, let alone try to prove him wrong. So, I started to pull my wallet out of my pocket when he said something that totally floored me.

"I just wanted you to know that I paid for your gas out of my own pocket."

I was stunned. I thanked him profusely. I stumbled over my words, overjoyed that he had not called the police, put the surveillance tapes on social media, or broadcast my deed to the local news. I quickly imagined what it would have been like for the town newspaper to lead with the headline, "Local United Methodist Pastor Becomes Thief."

I thanked him again. And again.

"It's okay," he told me. "I knew you would be back here someday for me to tell you. So I covered you."

I walked away from that conversation feeling the most sheepish I'd felt in a long time. But I was also filled with immense gratitude. I had not gotten what I deserved. And this man had given me something I could not earn.

Looking back at that event now, I can make lots of theological connections to substitutionary atonement. For all of its blood imagery and graphic violence, this understanding of Christ's death elicits a singularly pure response: a feeling of gratitude, recognizing that God has done something so amazing for us.

In Christ, God gave us something we didn't deserve and didn't give us the punishment we should have received. Instead, Christ himself assumed our punishment, "covered us," in a sense, much like that gracious gas station attendant did for me.

And what's more, the gas station attendant didn't even ask me to pay him back. As much as I tried, he told me not to bother. Perhaps it was because it was not worth his trouble to look back at the old purchases. Perhaps it was because this was a small Midwestern town, and people just kind of look out for each other when they mess up.

Ultimately, I think it was because of the generosity of the attendant himself, who knew that someone had to take the fall for my mistake, and he was willing to do it himself.

The only response to that is sheer, unbridled gratitude.

It's true that substitutionary atonement has its drawbacks. None of these approaches to the cross are perfect, which is why there are so many in Scripture and in the traditions in the church throughout our history. But this idea does succeed in eliciting the kind of grateful response to God that I think we need to express more often.

It is captured beautifully in the hymn by Charles Wesley, "And Can It Be that I Should Gain."

And can it be that I should gain an interest in the  
Savior's blood!

Died he for me? who caused his pain! For me? who  
him to death pursued?

Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God,  
shouldst die for me?

Amazing love! How can it be that thou, my God,  
shouldst die for me?



## SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT IN SUMMARY

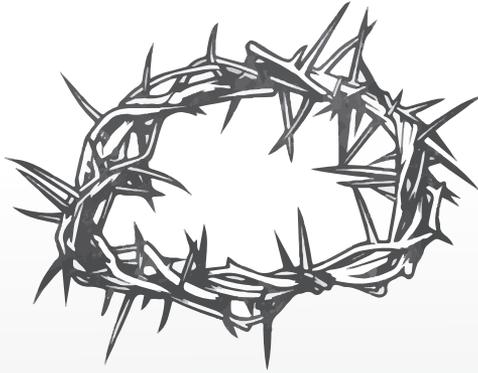
**Definition of Sin:** Sin is a violation of God's intended order for creation and violates the very nature of God. We owe an infinite debt for this violation and, therefore, deserve punishment for our sin.

**Definition of Salvation:** Jesus died in our place, repaying our debt, so that we don't have to.

**Pros:** Substitutionary atonement is rooted in numerous biblical passages and has been an important part of the Christian tradition for many centuries.

**Cons:** Blood imagery contradicts our modern sensibilities and can feed our culture's addiction to violence. It can lead us to follow Christ passively rather than actively.

**Response:** Substitutionary atonement can elicit a deep sense of gratitude to God, that Jesus did for us that which we could not do for ourselves.



## REFLECTING ON THE CROSS

When was there a time that someone  
did something for you that you  
could not do for yourself?

What are your impressions of  
substitutionary atonement?  
What do you find appealing?  
And what do you struggle with?

How might you live with greater  
gratitude for what Jesus did for you?

If you've ever scratched your head, trying to understand how Jesus's death saves us, this book is for you. Pastor Magrey deVega is one of the most thoughtful and insightful pastors I know. In *Savior*, deVega instructs and inspires as he unpacks the significance of the atonement.

**ADAM HAMILTON**, Pastor and Author of *Incarnation: Rediscovering the Significance of Christmas*

More than engaging information, *Savior* is an invitation toward transformation. Will you find freedom in Jesus? Will you partner with God to liberate others? A must-read for anyone ready to learn and to find themselves liberated in the process.

**RACHEL BILLUPS**, Senior Pastor, Ginghamburg Church

Many people today question the notion of God as an angry, jealous father, eager to punish humanity. In this book Magrey deVega resists that image by offering a well-thought-out, accessible study of multiple atonement theories. The result is a rich, worshipful encounter with the true meaning of salvation—God making all things new in Christ.

**ELAINE A. HEATH, PH.D.**, President, Neighborhood Seminary

The Bible uses many images to understand the meaning of Jesus's death and resurrection. In *Savior*, Magrey deVega guides us through these images to achieve a richer understanding of the Christian faith. By exploring the mystery of salvation through the cross, we can deepen our love for God and others and strengthen our commitment to follow Jesus.

ALSO AVAILABLE: A LEADER GUIDE AND A DVD TO CREATE A SIX-WEEK SMALL GROUP STUDY.



**Magrey R. deVega** is the Senior Pastor at Hyde Park United Methodist Church in Tampa, Florida. He is the author of several books, including *Almost Christmas*, *Embracing the Uncertain*, *One Faithful Promise*, and *Songs for the Waiting*. Magrey is also the Leadership Editor for the Covenant Bible Study by Abingdon Press, overseeing the weekly small group classroom experience. He is a graduate of United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio, and Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, and the father of two daughters, Grace and Madelyn.

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