

Salvation

Imagine the infant Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in Mary's arms in Bethlehem. Now imagine that a menacing silhouette suddenly appears in the doorway. It is one of Herod's soldiers, who has been sent to Bethlehem on orders from the king to destroy all male children less than two years old (Matthew 2:16–18). His mother clutches the babe desperately in a futile attempt to stop the insanity, but the soldier prevails and takes the child out to the town center, where he unceremoniously slaughters the baby along with the other children. Mary, another victim of the outrageous political violence of her era, finds the corpse of her dead son among the carnage. Weeping and mourning, she commits the body to an appropriate burial place. In this imaginary scenario, would the death of the child Jesus still have religious significance, or would it simply be a horrific crime? Would the murdered infant still be our savior?

This exercise helps to illustrate the problems Christians face when they attempt to articulate Jesus' saving work solely in terms of his death. While no Christians have ever argued that a scenario like the one offered above would be redemptive, the example helps to draw attention to the Christian tradition's emphasis on the death of Jesus—often divorced from his life and ministry—and helps us to understand how this emphasis can be problematic. Christians claim, "Jesus died for our sins"; what does this mean?

With this question we enter a branch of theology traditionally called **soteriology**: discourse about how Christ saves us (the Greek word *sōtēr* means "savior"). Even the word *save* raises questions: from what are we saved, and why do we need saving? Since Christians affirm that Jesus saves us from sin, any account of Jesus as Savior requires an account of sin. As we shall see, one's understanding of sin will structure one's account of how Jesus saves. For example, if one conceives of sin as tantamount to a disruptive noise that wakes a sleeping god (as in the Babylonia creation story, *Enuma Elish*), then one might expect that salvation would entail placating, appeasing, putting to bed, or possibly even killing the irate god. If, on the other hand, sin is understood as a crime against the sovereign ruler of the kingdom, then perhaps a kind of punishment is in order, one that fits the crime. In this chapter we examine some of the most popular images of sin and the corresponding approaches to soteriology that have flourished in the Christian tradition.



Soteriologies: A Simplified Comparative Chart

NAME OF MODEL	MAJOR FIGURES	UNDERSTANDING OF SIN	SUMMARY	SOME STRENGTHS AND SHORTCOMINGS
Prophetic	Isaiah Luke	Sin is failure to exercise mercy toward the oppressed and marginalized, thus forgetting God's covenant. The effects of sin are oppression and violence.	God acts in history, through concrete events and people, to rescue the righteous and judge the wicked.	This model emphasizes the concrete realities of sin and death, but it can also ignore the moral significance of the individual in favor of a long-term communal approach to sin and salvation.
Sacrificial	Paul and the author of Hebrews	Sin compromises God's holiness, God's justice, and the mercy God has shown Israel.	The sacrifices of the temple were designed to foreshadow the work of Christ, whose blood, like that of the bulls and the goats, unleashes the power of divine forgiveness and reconciliation.	This model integrates Israelite temple theology with the story of Jesus, thus providing for continuity between the covenants, but it fails to incorporate the significance of Jesus' life and ministry for his saving work.
Ransom (Patristic)	Origen, Augustine	Sin is offering one's allegiance to the devil rather than to God. Sin results in the subjugation of humanity to the devil.	The devil has dominion over human beings. Christ, in the disguise of human flesh, gives himself over to death so as to take the place of human beings in death. As the devil seizes Jesus, he discovers that Jesus is without sin and cannot be touched by death. The devil, having overplayed his hand, must sacrifice his dominion over all human beings.	The playful and vivid imagery of this model is wonderful, but the logic of such a theology of deception hardly seems worthy of the God of Israel.
Divinization	Athanasius	Sin is turning away from God, our Creator. The result of this turning away includes the loss of the divine image with which human beings were created.	God became human in Christ. This union restores the divine image and raises human beings to participate in God's own life, a life beyond the fear and ignorance in which sin thrives.	This approach incorporates the entire life of Christ in an account of redemption, but it also employs a range of images and metaphors that lack theoretical rigor—how does divinization happen?



Soteriologies: A Simplified Comparative Chart (*continued*)

NAME OF MODEL	MAJOR FIGURES	UNDERSTANDING OF SIN	SUMMARY	SOME STRENGTHS AND SHORTCOMINGS
Vicarious Satisfaction	Anselm	Sin violates God. Anselm uses the notion of honor to convey this. Sin has the effect of disordering the universe God has created.	The death of a sinless human being is an offering to God, but the infinite offense that humanity has committed requires an act of infinite value, so Jesus, as the God-man, makes satisfaction for our sins.	Anselm introduces a “theoretical” approach to soteriology, but both his search for the necessity of the Incarnation and his focus on the death of Jesus limit its value. Also, the social setting for his theory raises questions, as does the minimal role played by conversion.
Moral Exemplar	Abailard, Julian of Norwich	Sin is a failure to love God above all. It results from and also causes us to forget God’s love for us.	The cross is a sign of God’s love for us. It calls us to remember God’s love and turn away from sin.	Abailard and Julian focus on the love of God, the teachings of Jesus, and the importance of conversion, but they do not adequately differentiate Jesus from other martyrs.
Penal Substitution	Luther, Calvin	Sin is a violation of divine law. The sanction for such violation is death.	Christ takes our place. Christ dies so human beings do not have to die.	This approach emphasizes the complete gratuity of God’s salvation, but also makes God the origin of Jesus’ suffering. Also, it is not clear what role conversion has in this approach .

The text and chart are from *Jesus Our Salvation: An Introduction to Christology*, by Christopher McMahon, PhD (Anselm Academic, 2007), pages 153–154 and 173–174.

