

MOTIFS OF CRUCIFIXION:

CHRISTUS VICTOR

Romans 6:3-4

Romans 7:24-25

Romans 8:31-39

Ephesians 6:10-17

I Peter 5:6-10

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on The Third Sunday in Lent, March 20, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This is part in a series entitled "Motifs of Crucifixion," drawn heavily from a book written by Reverend Fleming Rutledge.¹

SCRIPTURE

Romans 6:3-4

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

Romans 7:24-25a

Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Romans 8:31-39

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written,

*'For your sake we are being killed all day long;
we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered.'*

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Ephesians 6:10-17

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. As shoes for your feet put on

¹ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015).

whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

I Peter 5:6-10

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters throughout the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you.

When I was a child, I had little interest in playing with toy soldiers or guns. I rode my bike a lot and when I received a protractor and compass drew a lot of baseball stadiums, but I didn't grow up hunting or going to the shooting range. I have always said that in God's infinite wisdom, he spared the United States of America from me being called upon to defend it, as I don't think I would have been an effective member of the armed services.

But late in college, when my mind turned to matters theological, I learned what are called the "theories of the atonement." They are five in number, and they seek to explain how the death and resurrection of Christ leads humanity to be reconciled to God – how his death on the cross atones for human sinfulness and for our specific sins.²

- In one theory, Christ gives his life as a "*ransom to the devil*" to buy us back from the Evil One who has kidnapped us.³
- In another, Christ gives his life *in our place* so that God's honor, having been violated by human sin, is restored.⁴
- In another, because God's *justice* requires that someone be punished for the sins we have committed, Christ takes the punishment so that we are spared.⁵
- On the other end of the spectrum, Christ's willingness to give his life for us – the supreme act of *love* – leads us to God through the moral influence it has on us.⁶
- A final theory, articulated fifty years before I began seminary, maintains that sin does not reign simply *within* the human heart but is a force that *permeates* the entire created order. The universe is a battlefield between the Power of God and the Power of Sin, Evil, Death. Christ enters that battlefield, loses his life in the most brutal way possible, but ultimately prevails. Through undergoing death, Christ overcomes the power of Sin. *Christus Victor: The Victorious Christ*.⁷

² A good summary of these views is found here: <https://andrewspringer.medium.com/five-views-on-the-atonement-of-christ-d71dddca9b84>.

³ This view is associated with St. Gregory of Nyssa, in the 4th century BCE, and finds scriptural expression in Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45, and I Timothy 2:5-6.

⁴ St. Anselm of Canterbury, in *Cur Deus Homo* (1099) formulated this view.

⁵ This view was developed by John Calvin in the 16th century and expanded considerably – with great emphasis on penal substitution – in the 19th century. Scriptural roots are Isaiah 53 and Romans 3:21-26.

⁶ This was developed by Peter Abelard, a contemporary of Anselm, and has scriptural roots in I Peter 2:22 and John 13:13-16 and 15:9-17.

⁷ This was developed by Gustav Aulen and published in *Christus Victor* in 1930.

I could stop there and you will have gotten the core of the Gospel as I believe it. But I want to elaborate a bit in terms of what this core implies about our lives, our world, our future.

I.

To say that Sin is a power is to say that it is larger and stronger than something we as individuals do or don't do, say or don't say, feel or don't feel. Sin is greater than our individual experience. New Testament writers have arresting images to describe Sin as a *power* more than an action, as a *force* more than an orientation of our hearts.

- The First Letter of Peter writes: *Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour.*
- Paul uses such phrases as “principalities and powers” and “rulers of this age” to describe Sin, Evil, Death.
- And Mark uses “Satan and his legions,” making the figure known generically as “the adversary,” “the tempter,” or “the evil one” into a proper name – *Ha Satan* – “Satan.”

These gifted writers use images, metaphors, symbols to describe a power with which they have become painfully familiar. We cannot tell the degree to which they are speaking literally, but we can know the death and destruction in the wake of the power they describe.⁸

II.

Yet these Biblical writers were not helpless or hopeless in the face of this power. When Paul concludes a major section of his letter to the Romans, he reaches lyrical heights with the affirmation of victory and promise brought by the crucifixion and resurrection. In Paul's soaring rhetoric, Christ is victorious over:

- Hardship
- Distress
- Persecution
- Famine
- Nakedness
- Peril
- Sword

Paul proclaims Christ victorious over:

- Death
- Life
- Angels
- Rulers
- Things present

⁸ See “Excursus: Satan in the Old Testament,” in *The New Interpreter's Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 747.

- Things to come
- Powers
- Height
- Depth
- And anything else in all creation

In Paul's mind, all these forces are cosmic in origin: They come from outside us, invade our hearts and souls and minds and emotions, our institutions and economic systems, our civilizations and ways of governance, our education and our arts.

And his counterpart Peter adds: Like a "roaring lion," the Power of Sin, Evil, Death stalks us, pounces, carries us off into a cave and imprisons us. Such imprisonment leads Paul to cry out:

*Wretched man that I am!
Who will deliver me from this bondage to death?*

But before Paul clears his throat or dabs his pen into his inkwell, he bursts forth:

*Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!
(Christ will deliver me from this bondage to Sin and Death.)*

You see: Paul knows the victory has already been won. He knows the battle has been decided and the white flags are being stitched. He knows that all those powers that weigh him down – and infect his world – are vanquished foes. And Paul can only respond to this incredibly good news by falling down on his knees with words of worship:

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

III.

But how is it, we ask, that the most degrading and humiliating death constitutes a victory? We know how resurrection is victorious. But how is crucifixion victorious?

For this I turn to the theologian who has been instrumental in leading me in this series. Fleming Rutledge acknowledges that in the earliest writings of the church, an emphasis on "the gruesome and accursed manner in which the Son of God died" is largely absent. But she thinks it is possible that

the genocides of the twentieth century [which of course have continued into our own century] have changed the moral landscape....

Is it not possible [she asks] that this neglected aspect of the death of Christ is now for the first time becoming a necessary part of confronting what we now know about the human capacity for radical evil?

She adds:

Had [Christ] died a more merciful, less deliberately dehumanizing way, it would not be possible to see in his death the sum of all horrors.

And Rutledge concludes:

...there is a *correspondence* between the horrors of crucifixion and the nature of the Sin that is being fully unleashed in those horrors, precisely as Sin is being overcome in the torment of the Savior.

In order for God truly to overcome the very worst, the Son underwent the very worst.⁹

“What is not undergone is not overcome.”¹⁰

IV.

This overcoming leads New Testament writers to a sense of strength, hope, and confidence, as they enlist in the divine militia liberating the world from the power of Sin. The writer of Ephesians captures this spirit well:

...be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power.

Put on the whole armour of God....

...fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness...

...take the shield of faith...the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit...

These words are lyrical. They celebrate all that *Christus Victor* brings.

V.

For four weeks we have been watching one of the most intense and visible manifestations of Evil in our lifetimes. One of the senior members of our church shared with me his assessment that with the Russian invasion of Ukraine at a time when there is precious little diplomatic infrastructure or internal debate within the rule of Vladimir Putin, we are at a more dangerous point than we were even during the Cuban Missile Crisis – which he lived through as an adult and I as a child.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine is not the only outbreak of Sin, Evil, Death occurring in the world, but for the simple reason that it is cruelty inflicted on a continent with whom we are so historically linked, it has been an eruption of evil into what Milton described as our “world of light and bliss, among/[our] Gods who live at ease.”¹¹

⁹ Rutledge 563-564.

¹⁰ Here she rephrases Gregory of Nazianzus, who said “What is not assumed is not healed.” *Epistle* 101.32. See Rutledge 564n65.

¹¹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, Book 2 (1667).

Since the onset of COVID, there is a house in our neighborhood which posts on a tasteful bracket in the front yard a “Joke of the Day.” It may be part of a national effort, but Friday’s joke read:

Morning Routine:

1. Wake up.
2. Check on Zelensky.
3. Drink coffee.

This “joke of the day” is poignant, profound, cynical, hopeful, offensive, Seinfeldian. Above all it indicates how much we care about what is happening to Ukraine and its people, as well as how much the invasion has interrupted our “world of light and bliss,” our “Gods who live at ease.”

President Zelensky’s courage and leadership,
The unbroken courage of people of Ukraine,
The courage of Dr. William Novick,
A veteran pediatrician from Tennessee,¹²
Who has traveled to Lviv to operate on infants
With air raids and gunfire in the background –
These are *signposts* of victory already won.

In this sense they are like
Waters of baptism
Poured on the heads of infants.

They are like bread broken and wine poured last Sunday
When we experienced the fullness of Communion
For the first time in two years.

They are signifiers and sealers of *Christus Victor*,
Reminding us that crucified and risen,
Christ is victorious,
That we,
That the people of Ukraine,
That the entire human race,
May walk in newness of life.

Amen.

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GEHmozI0kbI>.