

Atonement and Salvation

*The Extravagance
of God's Love*

Eric M. Vail



BEACON HILL PRESS
OF KANSAS CITY

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Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City
PO Box 419527
Kansas City, MO 64141
www.BeaconHillBooks.com

ISBN 978-0-8341-3571-0

Printed in the
United States of America

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Cover Design: Sherwin Schwarztrock
Interior Design: Sharon Page

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Vail, Eric M., author.

Title: Atonement and salvation : the extravagance of God's love / Eric M. Vail.

Description: Kansas City, MO : Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2016. |

Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016013881 | ISBN 9780834135710 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Salvation—Christianity. | Atonement.

Classification: LCC BT751.3 .V35 2016 | DDC 234—dc23 LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016013881>

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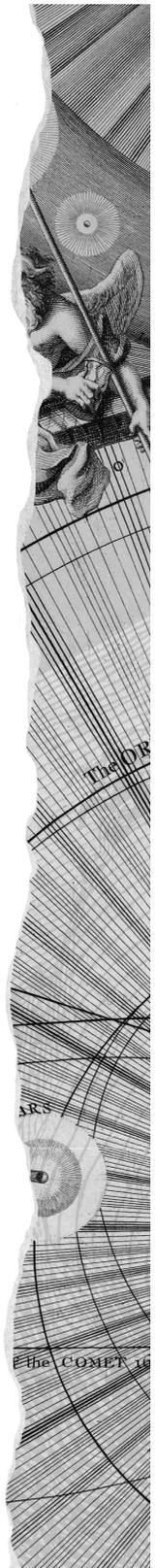
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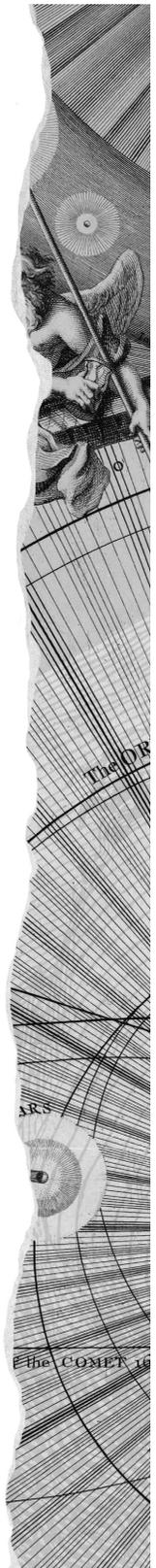
Atonement and Salvation

I hear it everywhere. Christians are so thankful for God’s saving work in their lives. I hear their words of thanksgiving at church, in the classroom, over shared meals, and even at the softball field. In these testimonies and prayers of thanksgiving, I hear both joy and bewilderment at the love of God worked out through Christ. It reminds me of the head-scratching giddiness expressed in the hymn “Such Love.”

*That God should love a sinner such as I,
Should yearn to change my sorrow into bliss,
Nor rest till He had planned to bring me nigh—
How wonderful is love like this!
Such love, such wondrous love!
Such love, such wondrous love!
That God should love a sinner such as I—
How wonderful is love like this!¹*

The contrast between our helplessness in sin and the extravagance of God’s love overwhelms us. Salvation is a gift. We sense how great a gift it is because of how unworthy we are. God’s love does not add up in our minds, yet we know God has given it. So we live with joyful, baffled thankfulness.

I would be sad if this book robbed us of that feeling of wonder at God’s gift of love. Certainly we will explore various facets of the saving work of God and grow in our understand-



ing. Nevertheless, I hope we do not lose our awe at the generosity of God's love. My prayer is that, by exploring how deeply and widely God labors to draw creation into God's purposes, our thankfulness and awe will multiply! Rather than *comprehend* God's love, I hope we will *be excited to walk deeper* with God in these mysteries of the faith. Understanding salvation is not a neat package I can wrap up and give to you. Salvation is a work of God still unfolding in the world and in our lives. I offer these chapters to expand our imagination and excitement about that unfolding salvation. That means a conclusion is a less fitting goal than a well-considered response given with our lives.

Setting the Table

Up to this point I have been using the word *salvation* instead of *atonement*. Salvation is what we experience out of atonement. The experience of salvation rests upon atonement. Atonement lies in the background of salvation. It is difficult to pull them apart and treat them separately. Let me illustrate.

Salvation happens in many ways because it comes in all kinds of life circumstances. Here are some examples at the beginning of the Scriptures. The earth was saved from being desolate (Gen. 2). Cain was saved from anyone seeking revenge against him (chap. 4). Noah and his family were saved from the destruction of the flood (chaps. 6–9). Abraham and Sarah were saved from barrenness (chap. 19). Sarah was saved from being violated in other men's households (chaps. 12, 20). Hagar and Ishmael were saved from dying as outcasts in the wilderness (chaps. 16, 21). Egypt and its neighbors were saved from famine (chaps. 41–50). The Israelites were saved from their slavery to Egypt (Exod. 1–14). There is diversity in what salvation looks like as situations warrant.

Salvation, nevertheless, can be summarized in this way: the preservation or granting of life in the face of deadly or life-grinding circumstances. Salvation has a different flavor depending on the specific need. It might mean provision in the midst of scarcity, hope in the midst of despair, rest in the midst of exhaustion, rectification in the midst of injustice, fertility in the midst of barrenness, liberation in the midst of oppression, healing in the midst of sickness, reconciliation in the midst of estrangement, kindness in the midst of cruelty, understanding in the midst of confusion, or peace in the midst of contention. Name the ailment, and salvation will look and feel appropriate to that situ-

ation. Even so, all salvation directs us toward true life where death is scratching and clawing at our heels.

God's work of atonement is more specifically God's work of reconciliation. Years ago that cemented in my mind when I saw the word *atonement* broken down as *at-one-ment*—which means “being in accord.”² Being away from the Lord, who is the very beginning and source of life, gets us into all the life-draining, deadly circumstances from which we cry out for salvation. Sometimes those circumstances are of our own making as we walk apart from the Lord. Other times, we are swallowed in the deathward currents from others' alienation from God. All creation is truly interconnected in that way.

It is common to think about atonement as being strictly between God and humankind; that is, the sole purpose of atonement is “to deal with disruptions in the divine-human relations.”³ However, God created us so that all of our relationships would move in the same direction: as expressions of love, whether toward God, self, or neighbor. It is not possible to love God and be at odds with our neighbor or love our neighbor and be at odds with God. We cannot simultaneously move in different directions. Our life and love takes its pulse from God, our Creator and Sustainer. We are either people whose lives are in accord with God and neighbor in a loving, lifeward direction, or we are people who struggle in the wilderness of our alienation from God and neighbor.

An example of this comes early in Genesis. Something goes amiss between Cain and God in Cain's offering of his first crops (we are not told what the problem is). Cain could come into line with God. God is clear in God's instruction to Cain; “If you do well, will you not be accepted?” (Gen. 4:7a, NRSV). There is hope. Yet Cain refuses to be reconciled to God even though God warns him of the consequences of staying out of step with God: “And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door” (v. 7b, NRSV). Cain chooses to remain estranged from God, and this takes parallel expressions in Cain's other relationships: Cain murders Abel. When we do not stay in God's love, we will live unlovingly toward God and neighbor. Being reconciled to God in love is at the heart of atonement, yet it cannot be separated from the second great commandment, which is “like” it⁴—love for neighbor.

There is more involved in atonement than a snap decision that we will now cooperate with God. It may require God waking us up and breaking down our hostilities toward God to even get started. It can

also entail massive cleanup efforts, lots of assistance, and the introduction of new habits in order for God to help us be willing and able to live in genuine accord with God's love toward God, self, and neighbor. As an example, perhaps you have seen the long road a married couple journeys to restore their relationship to one accord after years of unhealthy habits or infidelity. Now imagine all that would be necessary for all humanity and all creation to be reconciled to healthy expressions of love in relation to God and neighbor. It will take nothing less than a mighty, creative work of God to untangle all those knots!

Being reconciled (at-one) with God lies at the heart of life-fostering salvation. God is working toward this from beginning to end. God illuminates our afflictions and kindles our hunger for God. We know our fears, sorrows, anxieties, and illnesses. We experience death's suffocating grip in many ways, and we cry out to God to deliver us. God loves the world. God loves God's creation. God desires that all creation flourish in life-fostering relationships of love. Bringing all creation into full salvation (from all our ailments) and continuing in that blessing of life is inseparable from atonement with God. When we are at-one with God, who is love and who is our life, we will walk in the light. We will be completely and finally saved.

Those Who Have Gone Before

The major church-wide councils have given Christians important guidance on doctrine. There are many doctrines for which the councils have set parameters for us. However, no matter how important God's saving work is, no church-wide council has met to hash out a formal statement on this doctrine. The closest thing we have to that is the middle portion of the Nicene Creed. This is how it reads.

For us and for our salvation
he [the Son of God] came down from heaven,
was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary
and became truly human.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.⁵

This might seem startling. We are accustomed to focusing our thoughts about salvation on Christ's death. Yet this stanza of the creed on what the Son is doing "for us and for our salvation" tells the whole story of the Son's incarnate life, some of which is yet to be completed. This creed is one of the key unifying confessions of Christians around the world and through the centuries. This stanza on salvation includes the statements that "he came down," "was incarnate," "became truly human," "was crucified," "suffered death," "was buried," "rose again," "ascended," "is seated," and "will come again" (to judge and to reign with no end). Since this list includes so much more than our customary focus on Jesus' death, we will spread out our exploration of these saving actions across the chapters of this book. We will see where these things are expressed in the Scriptures and how all of the Son's operations are "for us and for our salvation."

While the Nicene Creed tells us many movements by the Son that are redemptive, it tells us nothing about *how* those actions are redemptive. There is no theory of atonement given here. The creed does not tell us which biblical metaphor is *the* metaphor above all others to explain how Jesus saves. Is Jesus the Suffering Servant? Is he the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep? Is he the Light of the World? Is he the Sacrifice for our sin? Is he the Scapegoat? Is he Israel's Messiah? Is he the Great Physician? Is he the Passover Lamb? Is he the Ransom for many? The Bible uses all these metaphors (and more!) to illustrate how Christ saves, as mentioned in the many points of the Nicene Creed. Even so, never has the church, in all its centuries, met together to crown one salvation metaphor as king. Perhaps this itself is wisdom. The church affirms the diversity of the biblical witness. There is no single metaphor that trumps others or is the test of orthodoxy.

Diversity

We have already noted that salvation addresses different issues in different situations. We have also noted that God is working out salvation throughout the many events in the Son's incarnate life and beyond. Also, there are various dynamics to what God is accomplishing in those events of Christ's life. It is not as if each event does just one thing. In the New Testament alone there are over a dozen metaphors used to help

us understand facets of the saving work of God in Christ. Here are just a few samples found in the New Testament out of the Old Testament.

Passover Lamb—the blood marks all of God’s people in preparation for the time of judgment.

Purification Sacrifice—purges the contamination of sin and is the dedication of one’s life.

Scapgoat—takes away sin; garbage removal.

Suffering Servant—fulfills all righteousness in the midst of our deficiencies.

Christ the Reconciler—God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.

High Priest—guides us in the things of God and mediates on our behalf all the way to the heavenly sanctuary.

Bread from Heaven—feeds us so we will have intimate fellowship with God.

In the first four centuries of Christianity, two dominant images were used. Both are arguably biblical.

Recapitulation—takes up creaturely life and re-creates it; a renewal and/or restoration of creation (this concept was articulated by Irenaeus in the second century and Athanasius in the fourth century).

Ransom—liberation from the chains of sin, death, and the devil (articulated by Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century).

From the Middle Ages onward, there have been great changes in Western Christianity concerning where emphasis is placed in understanding atonement. New theories have been formed with sensibilities consistent with their times and contexts. The list of atonement theories continues to balloon globally. Here is a very limited sampling.

Moral Influence—demonstrates God’s love to overcome sinners’ fear (Peter Abelard, twelfth century).

Vicarious Satisfaction—pays the debt of honor we owe God (Anselm, twelfth century).

Penal Substitution—takes the punishment in our place (John Calvin, sixteenth century; Charles Hodge, nineteenth century).

Ransom—liberation from the chains of sin, death, the devil, the Law, and the wrath of God (Martin Luther, sixteenth century).

Knowledge of God—a form of moral influence with a modern emphasis on knowledge as restorative (H. Richard Niebuhr, twentieth century).

Removal of Alienating Shame—removing *han*, as understood in some eastern cultures (late twentieth century).⁶

It is again worth noting that no single metaphor has been crowned as king over all others. There are so many complexities to the ways sin and death corrode our lives that it is wise to imagine God is at work from many different angles to bring us into accord and save us from all deadly erosion. We can imagine just how multifaceted God's work is when we think about the many terms we may use to describe all that God is doing for us. This is just a selection of terms that get at different facets of God's work.

Justification—stand rightly before God; forgiven.

Regeneration—new birth, recapitulation.

Adoption—adopted by the Spirit through Christ as a child of the Father.

Healing—restored to full health and fitness.

Redemption—rescued from the clutches of sin and death to live under God's rule.

Reconciliation—brought back to God from our alienation and estrangement from God.

Liberation—freed from bondage and/or injustice to live in full human integrity.

Sanctification—being made holy.

Jubilee—restoration of families and/or individuals decimated by hardships.

New Creation—healed of sin's damages and fitted for everlasting life in loving communion with God and neighbor.

The many metaphors to illustrate what God is working in each of the movements of the Son's incarnate life, and the many effects of God's work, might sound overwhelming. To go through everything God does in Christ comprehensively is too lofty a goal. However, I believe we can accomplish two things. First, I will lay out the overall picture of God's saving and atoning activity. At least we will then know where the pieces fit and have some context for deeper study. Second, I will explore the dynamics of God's work in such a way that, when we are done, we may at least feel that we have held the heart of it in our hands. If we get acquainted with the character of the heart, we will have a better sense of how to think through other issues.

Mapping Our Journey

The focus of this investigation is to mine the Scriptures for images of the atonement rather than to track the development of thought on this doctrine across Christianity's history. Given the increasingly global nature of Christianity, it is more helpful to gain our bearings from the Scriptures than by following the evolution of ideas about atonement mainly in the Western and Northern hemispheres. We will examine the legacy of Western Christianity in a few places. However, reflection on the images within the Scriptures will dominate.

The journey will begin with looking at the broadest saving work of God for all creation—from creation to eternity. Chapters 2 and 3 of this book are devoted to those creation-wide themes. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 shift the focus from all creation to humankind. We will examine humankind's function in the world, how God has been working to redeem humankind, and the results of Christ's deliverance for all the nations (and creation). In chapters 7, 8, and 9 we arrive at themes that may be more traditional territory. We will explore the significance of Christ as our atoning sacrifice in chapter 7. Justification, regeneration, and adoption will be explored in chapter 8. In chapter 9 there are a handful of biblical images that help us fill out significant facets of Christ's saving work; some examples include Christ's roles as Physician, Intercessor, Suffering Servant, and Scapegoat. The final chapter does not pull everything together in a tidy package so much as it clarifies some ideas that have been addressed directly to that point.

Throughout this journey I admit that I cannot help but read the biblical texts as a North American, Wesleyan theologian. A great number of reflections on atonement in the last five hundred years have been framed according to rules laid down by the Reformers. The traditions that dominate the Protestant theological landscape of my own continent are predominantly an outflow of the Reformation. There has been exciting work in biblical studies, over the past four decades in particular, that helps us peel away the rules imposed on Bible interpretation and get to know the biblical texts on their own terms. Together we will take an excursion through the fascinating imagery poking out of the biblical world, which I hope will excite readers, especially those from a Wesleyan tradition, to see how well those images fit with our understanding of salvation. I pray this exploration will be a rich journey for readers into the marvelous wonders of God's saving, atoning activity.