

*The*  
WARRIOR  
SAVIOR

A THEOLOGY *of the* WORK *of* CHRIST

OWEN STRACHAN

  
P U B L I S H I N G  
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# Foreword

THE VERY HEART of the Bible is the glory of God revealed in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Most specifically, the fullest display of divine splendor is witnessed in the saving death of the Son of God on the cross. Here is the center of gravity in all the Scripture—the sin-bearing, wrath-absorbing sacrifice of the Lamb of God at Calvary.

The victorious death of Christ is the very heartbeat of the Bible—it pumps life into all who believe in him. It is the centerpiece of human history, the dividing line of mankind that separates the eternal destinies of every soul.

In the death of Christ, we see the attributes of God most vividly put on display. Here is the greatest demonstration of the holiness of God, which cannot accept sinners as they are in their sin. Here is supremely showcased the love and grace of God in the perfect provision of his Son to rescue those who cannot save themselves. Here is seen the righteousness of God, providing the covering for sin that is desperately needed. Here is revealed the wrath of God, which must punish the sins of those under the curse of the law. Here is evidenced in fullest expression the other attributes of God—his sovereignty, righteousness, truth, omnipotence, immutability, and much more.

The apostle Paul understood the absolute priority of the cross when he wrote that “we preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23). Again, he exclaimed, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2). Though Paul expounded every major area of doctrine, he was firmly committed to the truth that the death of Christ is the highest apex and loftiest pinnacle of biblical truth. This place of unrivaled preeminence must be true in every believer’s life and ministry—which is why we are instructed to come to the Lord’s Table again and again until he returns.

We can never plunge too deeply into this bottomless ocean or soar any higher than this exalted truth of our crucified King. It is no wonder

that Paul prayed that believers “may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (Eph. 3:18–19). It is impossible for us to wrap our minds around the immense vastness of this heart-inflaming truth—“Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15).

Once in heaven, we will gaze in utter wonder and amazement at Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, slain from before the foundation of the world (Rev. 13:8). Throughout all eternity future, we will behold his nail-pierced hands and spear-wounded side and be forever astonished that one so perfectly holy would die for sinners so wretchedly unholy. We will fall down before his throne and ascribe to him the endless praise that belongs to him who overcame all our adversaries. The triumph of Christ in his saving death will be the focal point of our worship throughout the ages to come. We will never advance beyond this glorious sight of beholding our sovereign Savior, who secured redemption for his chosen bride.

Given these truths, I commend to you this book, *The Warrior-Savior*, written by Owen Strachan, a skilled and reliable theologian. He will take you yet deeper into your understanding of the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross. I believe that as you read each chapter, your soul will be stirred to greater love for him who suffered, bled, and died for perishing sinners. So I encourage you to savor each page, because its truths will cause your spirit to soar to the heights of heaven.

May this volume leave an indelible mark on your walk with Christ.

Steven J. Lawson  
Dallas, Texas

# Acknowledgments

THIS BOOK IS dedicated to Jeff Moore. Jeff is what every dear friend is: a gift from God, living iron that sharpens iron, a counselor who brings wisdom and levity and godly devotion into one's life. Besides this, Jeff is a watchman on the wall and a brother born for adversity. Jeff's research contributions also strengthened this book a good deal, and I am grateful for them. With a great God up ahead of us, and men like Jeff to stand shoulder to shoulder with, we fear no evil, and we press forward.

I wish to thank—in all due gratitude—my editor, John Hughes, who believed in this book, managed the editorial process, and helped this book in every possible way. In addition, I thank Karen Magnuson, copyeditor, whose sharp eye and editorial skill helped the project in many ways. Rarely has an author so profited from his editors' suggestions, nudges, and insights. Thank you, John and Karen, for your partnership in this project, and for being such an integral part of the continuing solidity and excellence of P&R, a publisher originally sprung from the fresh streams of the Westminsterian modern Reformation.

It is a delight to have Steven Lawson write the foreword. Dr. Lawson is a worthy heir to, and proponent of, the Reformation tradition. He exemplifies what I call the *sufficientist* vision of theology that is grounded in *sola Scriptura*. He is an outstanding preacher and theologian, and like many others of my generation I look up to him, learn from him, and hope to emulate him as he emulates Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).

My wife, Bethany, has been a tremendous support and blessing to me in this endeavor. Bethany is God's greatest earthly gift to me. She is a truly excellent wife to me and mother to our three precious children. With them, she fills my life with good things and ensures that when I come home after a long day of writing (hundreds of days, even), awaiting me are good cheer, happy kids, and a Godward focus. I love this woman more than words can say, and my love only deepens each year that the Lord gives us.

In this last respect, I am reminded of how such a statement makes so little sense to the natural mind. So much is limited in our world, with love at the top of that list: limited parental love, limited sibling love, limited kindness to others, limited patience and forbearance with opponents, and on it goes. But in the atonement theology of God's Word, love is not limited. Love is definite, but that definite love is so deep and all-consuming that the human mind cannot comprehend it. This love, furthermore, does not grow smaller the more we study it; it grows bigger.

So to the God and Savior who has loved a wretch like me, I offer my final and ultimate thanks.

# Introduction: Toward a Cross-Centered Theology

*He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried. (Nicene Creed, A.D. 381)*

CONSCIENCE IS A powerful thing. Every human person has one; this is a crucial working of God's common grace, his kindness to all people that stops short of salvation. The conscience enables us to know right and wrong, whether we encounter the moral wisdom of the Bible or not. From an early age, as sinful people, our consciences send up flares to us when we do right and when we do wrong. In the quietness of our own lives, we live out a storm of a moral existence whether anyone else knows of our turbulence or not. Our secret thoughts, our whispered words, our quick actions—all these pass before the God-given conscience, which is not silent.

The conscience, in fact, is a tremendous problem for us. In our natural state, sin comes easily and fluidly to us. We are good at sinning from a young age. We think, furthermore, that we can handle our sin, that we can master it, that we can manage it. But no such easy management obtains. One of the classic literary studies of the power of conscience is Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. In this work, a man named Rodion Raskolnikov commits a terrible crime: the murder of two women. He tries to convince himself that this evil deed need not rule his life, but that does not prove to be the case. Over the course of a lengthy internal study, Raskolnikov is in no way the master of his conscience. He is, quite to the contrary, its prisoner.

Dostoyevsky studies this experience unsparingly. He gives voice to the encroachment of guilt as time wears on in Raskolnikov's life. Despair and dread overtake the man:



A special form of misery had begun to oppress him of late. There was nothing poignant, nothing acute about it; but there was a feeling of permanence, of eternity about it; it brought a foretaste of hopeless years of this cold leaden misery, a foretaste of an eternity on a square yard of space.<sup>1</sup>

In the course of trying to handle his just guilt, Raskolnikov finds that he cannot live life normally and cheerfully. He is well and truly mastered by his sin:

He had a terrible longing for some distraction, but he did not know what to do, what to attempt. A new overwhelming sensation was gaining more and more mastery over him every moment; this was an immeasurable, almost physical, repulsion for everything surrounding him, an obstinate, malignant feeling of hatred. All who met him were loathsome to him—he loathed their faces, their movements, their gestures.<sup>2</sup>

The evil alchemy working through Raskolnikov leads him to only one end: hatred. He hates himself, he hates others, and he hates God. Sin does not prove containable; the poison of guilt that flows from unconfessed and unaddressed sin takes hold of Raskolnikov and drains the life from him. Dostoyevsky writes these penetrating words as a summary of the protagonist's darkened days: "If he has a conscience he will suffer for his mistake. That will be his punishment—as well as the prison."<sup>3</sup>

Such is the human condition: we are both taken captive by sin and mastered by it. We are not okay; we are not able to curate or tend our sin in a manageable way. We might think we are, and this might seem doable for a time. But sin is both a condition and a power, as the Scripture reveals. It is the state in which we find ourselves, a state that we cannot change by our own power; it is also a malevolent force that treats us as its prey, working its dark magic to force our cooperation with it in the fullness of our will. Sin is not a small thing; sin is a tormentor, an unexorcised demonic power, the seed of our destruction that we all carry within us.

1. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1927), 431.

2. Dostoyevsky, 114.

3. Dostoyevsky, 268.

## The Power of the Cross

But this is where the story takes a sharp turn. Sin has neither the final word nor the strongest word in the Bible and in Christian theology. The good news for sinners accused justly by their consciences is this: there is a remedy, a divine aid, for our condition. It is the loving forgiveness of almighty God. This forgiveness is not small or isolated; it does not merely make salvation possible. This forgiveness is large and lavish, and it makes the salvation of sinners certain. We are not asked by God to contribute to this project of redemption in any way. We do not add our good works, religious or otherwise, to the work of God. We do not bring anything to the table, so to speak, except our sin, our guilt, and our total condemnation. But when we get there, we find that God has brought everything—everything needed for nothing less than eternal forgiveness and unbroken covenant love.

The means of this forgiveness is the cross of Jesus Christ. It is the one appointed sacrifice that perfectly satisfies the Father's wrath, cleanses sin, overcomes guilt, breaks the power of death, and destroys the reign of terror exercised by the devil. The cross of Christ is what every single person needs most. It solves the single greatest problem we have—our sin problem, which yields our guilt problem. The power of the cross, and the need of the cross, is so great that we can say this without blinking: without the cross, we have no hope. It is not just that there is a lot of hope in the cross; it is that there is hope in the cross alone. Going all the way to the burning center of the truth about Christ's death, there is hope in the *blood* alone.

The atonement of Jesus Christ is the hinge of history.<sup>4</sup> It is the event that all the ages before it anticipated; comprehended with the resurrection, it is the event that all the ages to come celebrate. The cross of Jesus Christ is part of a much longer tapestry of redemptive history and atonement theology. But the cross of Jesus Christ is not merely one node of many, one event of several, that matter for us as God's people. The cross of Jesus

4. As Steven Lawson notes, it was William Tyndale who first coined the word "atonement" in his English translation of the Bible (his translation of the New Testament was first published in 1525). See Steven J. Lawson, *Pillars of Grace: AD 100–1564, Long Line of Godly Men* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2011), 396. Faithful Bible translation plays no small role in the defense and transmission of the Christian faith, as Tyndale's noble example shows.

Christ is where God purchased us back from the dead through the death of his spotless Son. It is not too much to say this: the cross is the center of our Christian faith. Quoting Martin Luther, “the cross *is* our theology.”<sup>5</sup>

### The Cross as Revelation of God’s Character

In the cross, we see the fulfillment of the plan of atonement prepared before the foundation of the world by God the Father. The atonement is where we go to see the character of God on spectral display. It is there that the holiness and love of God meet and kiss. The cross is not thus a mere historical event; it is God’s greatest sermon preached through act. It shows us that wrath is our just deserts for sin, but that love overcomes that wrath in the penal substitutionary atonement of the Son. God is not a God who judges us and leaves us to our lonesome, like Raskolnikov, drowning in guilt and shame. God is the God who justly stands in perfect righteousness over we who are—totally unclean—and who then provides that very same righteousness *for us and our salvation* through the finished work of Christ.

So it is that we see that the cross reveals to us who God is, what God hates, what God accepts, and how God loves. Without the cross, without intense attention to the cross, the entirety of Scripture’s narrative does not make sense. We cannot understand how God’s holiness will be upheld, yet also how God will draw near to such an evidently sinful people in love. We cannot make sense of the promise in the garden that Satan’s serpentine head will be crushed. We cannot understand how all the threads of kingship, priesthood, and prophecy intertwine and come to elegant climax. We cannot understand how all things will be made right, and how guilty people like us can stop wandering and eventually come home to the Father.

It is right and good and very instructive to study the attributes of God, but we must take care: we must always make sure that our study of God flows directly from the warp and woof of Scripture. Our study of God is not cool and clinical, conducted in a sterile laboratory where logicians extract ideas and store them in ice-chilled test tubes. Our study of God is

5. Martin Luther, “Lectures on the Psalms” (1519/21) (Psalms 1–22), in *Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Herman Bohlau, 1892), 5.176.32, 32–33 (emphasis added), available in German at <https://archive.org/details/werkekritischege05luthuoft/page/12/mode/2up>; see also 40.3.193.

conducted through the rough, rollicking, mysterious, exciting, dramatic, and vivifying narrative of Scripture. There are twists and turns in this narrative; there are strange and unpredictable characters; there are breathtaking interventions; there is a Warrior-God who fights evil at all turns—but in his own time—in order to form and preserve a people for himself. This narrative winds its way through many environments, many cultures, many places, but it all bears down on one epochal event: the cross.

If we have the cross, then, we grasp the mind and heart and character of God. We see that God is no abstract being, unmoved and uncaring, but is a God who hates sin but loves sinners. This Copernican discovery of theology and spirituality is wholly dependent on Scripture. You cannot arrive at it through the pathways of the logicians, the philosophers, the therapists, the moralists, or the activists. There is only one way to discover the true meaning and eternal significance of the cross. It is through Scripture and Scripture alone.

### **Four Key Convictions of This Book**

In the pages that follow, we will explore atonement theology from different passages of Scripture. We will labor to understand atonement exegetically in order to understand atonement theologically. This harvest will, we pray, help us to appropriate the atonement devotionally, for the spiritual transformation and doxological reorientation of our souls. We will proceed in these pages to examine not only numerous texts, but several key ideas that surface in those texts. We will state four of these at present in abbreviated form, and return to them throughout the course of our studies.

#### **First, God is the one who is wronged by sin.**

As we will see, God is the one most wronged and offended by sin. Sin—transgression of God’s character and law—has many terrible effects, but the greatest of these is that it dishonors the one who created us and rules us. Sin thus necessitates an effectual means of restoring our relationship with God. We have formed a breach that we cannot make right. We see this ultimately in the cross, where the Son is forsaken by the Father in order to clear the guilty.

**Second, God is the one who makes atonement in order to forgive sin.**

Wonder of wonders, God *wants* to make a way back to himself for wayward creatures like us. This is not because we deserve such kindness; we deserve nothing but eternal judgment for our sin. It is because God is loving, gracious, merciful, and kind beyond imagination—beyond reckoning, beyond what the finite human mind and soul and heart can comprehend. God is the one who institutes—as we will shortly see—various forms of atonement in order to satisfy his own personal holiness, and in no way to set it aside, in making the way for us to know him once more.

**Third, the depth of God’s love for us is portrayed in Christ’s cross.**

To understand just how much we are loved, we must look to the cross. The love of God for sinners is the costliest love there is. The price of our atonement was nothing less than the life of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. This love is thus not a creaturely love; it is not limited, fractured, and flickering like our love for others. It is love that is iron-strong and that comes directly from God himself. It is the caring, adoring, attentive, and fatherly love that is unlike any other love. It is the love that we desperately want but cannot find in this heartless world; it is a love that not only communicates the greatest affection, but is transformative, changing us from darkness to light, saving us from hell and sending us rocketing to heaven.

**Fourth, we have victory over sin, Satan, the flesh, the world, and hell.**

In the atonement, as we will see, Christ takes the form of the slain Lamb. He dies as a substitute sacrifice for us to propitiate (or satisfy) the wrath of God and to expiate (or cleanse) the guilty, among other glorious effects that we will study below. But we must not sever the identity of the Lamb from Christ’s simultaneous identity as the Lion (see Rev. 5:4–12). In the cross, Christ dies to overcome the devil for us, to take cosmic dominion of all things, and to secure his claim as the Alpha and the Omega. Too often, we split substitutionary atonement from what is called *Christus Victor*, but we must not do so, for Scripture does not do so. Instead, by the cross, we gain victory over all the forces of darkness. We are liberated, freed, healed, and made new.

In our study, as we have already alluded to, we will see the battle between God and the devil as a battle of *powers*. Sin is not a person, in technical terms, but in the Bible, sin, fear, and death are forces of evil orchestrated by Satan to ruin the world, oppress image-bearers, bedevil the church, and ultimately oppose the will of the Father and the work of the united Godhead in the fullest possible fashion. But here is the wonderful news: the cross is sufficient to overcome all this. The cross is a greater power; it is divine power in action to forgive sin, as we will explore.

### **The Burden of This Book**

Having sketched some of the preliminaries, we ask a question that hangs in the air: Why this book? Why now? The answer does not owe to a polemical instinct. This book, to put it squarely, is not a polemical work. Nor am I writing in the midst of a current firestorm over the atonement. My interest in writing this book arises because I love the cross of Jesus Christ. It is the very means by which my forgiveness was made certain. The cross is perennially important; it never goes out of circulation as a doctrine that demands our attention, our careful biblical handling, and our worshipful devotion.

At the level of theological interest, some years ago I was struck by the separation that often obtains in evangelical atonement theology. This separation is between the support of penal substitution, the biblical doctrine that conceives of Jesus as the substitute sacrifice who dies in our place under the penalty of our sins, and what is called *Christus Victor*, the triumph of Christ over the powers of darkness. Put another way, much evangelical theology emphasizes that Christ in his first coming was Lamb, but downplays the truth that he was also Lion in his first coming.

It is gloriously true that Jesus died as the slain Lamb for us. But Jesus also died as the head-crushing Lion. These two realities, I believe, must not be pulled apart. We will not belabor this point here, but in my study of Scripture, I saw these two biblical teachings overlapping, cohering, and together revealing the richness of the cross-work of Christ. As I taught on this material while doing a PhD class on the atonement, presenting academic papers on the cross at the Evangelical Theological Society, and authoring a journal article on the cross, I desired to write a book that would bring these threads together.

My goal was not to gain academic plaudits. My goal was to produce a book that would go deep into the Word and doctrine in order to strengthen the church's confession and faith. I conduct all this exploration with full awareness that I am the undeserving benefactor of a long line of faithful theologians and pastor-theologians who have contended for biblical atonement and proclaimed it in love. I am thinking of the historical church across the ages, including thinkers such as John Stott, J. I. Packer, John Calvin, Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, Charles Spurgeon, J. Gresham Machen, John Murray, J. C. Ryle, John Gill, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Steven Lawson, John MacArthur, Mike Ovey, and many others I could name.

Each of these men just mentioned wrote (and preached) rich and searching theology. Each of them entered into numerous important conversations and even debates of their day. But they did so with an eye toward God's people; their goal was neither to receive praise from the academic guild nor to win as wide an audience and as capacious a "brand" as they could get. These men, in general terms, were not after breadth; they were after doxological depth. They wrote and preached theology with tremendous insight, great evangelical warmth, and attention to the joyful imperative of worship. Theology for these men was not an end unto itself; it was a gateway to joy, a means of glorification of God, and the very lifeblood of lived spirituality.

I do not belong in this group—not by a long shot. In the ages to come, the closest I will likely get to them will be standing on the perimeter of their circle, eavesdropping on their glorified conversations, listening to Spurgeon belly-laugh at numerous intervals. But while I can lay no claim to the erudition or achievements of this group, I do indeed seek to employ both their method (in general terms) and their contributions. We'll cite important judgments from many of these men later on, but can say a word about their method: all these men worked from the biblical text up. They did not agree on all matters of doctrine, but their method was strikingly similar. It was a textual method, a biblical method, a method driven first by exegesis, by close reading of the Scripture.

The men named above were not always the *au courant* voice in their day. Some of them fell out of favor with the theological spirit of the age and were maligned, disrespected, and put at a distance from their more respectable and adaptable peers. Others faced even greater consequences

than this: for teaching and preaching sound doctrine, including the doctrine of Christ crucified, they suffered, even greatly. But here is the plain truth of the matter: because they stood upon God's Word as their ultimate and foremost authority, their theology and their proclamation still speaks.

They may not necessarily have served as the leading voice of the acceptable theology of their day; in some cases, they may even have stood alone. But in doing so in service to God's truth, they ironically did not stand alone in terms of the long line of faithfulness. In numerous instances, their willingness to endure trials in order to promote and defend biblical atonement doctrine brought them into a truly exclusive gathering. This gathering was not convened by popularity, acclaim, academic horsepower, or contextually pleasing doctrine. It was convened by God and by faithfulness to his Word.

By God's kindness, may we who stumble in many ways (as they all did) emulate these faithful men as they imitated Christ (1 Cor. 11:1).

### **The Method and Outline of This Book**

*The Warrior-Savior* is first and foremost a work of biblical doctrine. We work across the canon to construct from Scripture itself a faithful vision of the cross of Christ. In the chapters to come, we will weave together the strands of penal substitutionary atonement on the one hand and *Christus Victor* on the other. As noted, we will work first at the level of exegetical theology, examining what individual texts teach us about the atonement and its import. The method employed, second, builds toward biblical theology. That is, we come to understand how sacrifice and kingship texts do not stand on their own, isolated from one another, never synthesized, but instead demand interweaving and coordination.

The Bible has many parts but is a whole; so too do individual doctrines have many parts that must be woven together to constitute a whole. This method yields, third, conclusions at the level of systematic theology. That is, by working from the text to the metanarrative, we can then safely and securely arrive at definitive principles of biblical atonement. We see that Christ offers himself as a sacrifice even as he conquers the devil as a Warrior. He drinks wrath without mixture of mercy at Calvary so that we drink mercy without mixture of wrath in



eternity. He endures the forsakenness of the cross so that we will know only acceptance by the Father.

But all this is tracking well ahead of where we begin in these pages. Our march through Scripture proceeds chronologically. We begin in the Old Testament and study the promise of the head-crusher in Genesis 3:15. (A tree ruined us, it turns out, but this is not the Bible's last word on trees.) In this, the Bible's first text on the salvation of God's people, we have a clear indication of a victorious Warrior who will defeat Satan, but at a terrible cost. The Bible's first note of redemption sounds like *Christus Victor*, as chapter 1 will show.

We next consider the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham in chapter 2. We will consider how this text foreshadows at the theological level the sacrifice of the greater Isaac by the greater Abraham. In chapter 3, we look at the Passover and the exodus, seeing in the sequence of events a rich foreshadowing of the atoning and triumphing work of Christ. In chapter 4, we study several offerings in Leviticus with a special focus on the Day of Atonement. We gain fresh perspective on just how central this day was for Israel, and how much it revealed not only about the evil of sin but about the character of Yahweh.

In chapter 5, we train our attention on three notable deliverers of God's people: Samson, Elijah, and King David. Samson shows us how God acts to destroy the forces of darkness and uses death toward that end. Elijah shows us how God's spiritual power is greater than the powers of the devil. David shows us how God fights for his people when they seem overmatched, and how God uses not the esteemed things of the world, but the humble elements of the earth to effect victory. Given that the New Testament identifies Christ in Davidic terms—linking the shepherd boy to Christ more than any other Old Testament figure—we will make a strong case for David as a living window into the Warrior dimension of Christ.

In chapter 6, we treat the Bible's core passage on atonement, Isaiah 53. Here we first learn of the agony of the Messiah on the cross, the realization dawning on us that what the slain animals experienced on the Day of Atonement was far milder than what the Suffering Servant would taste. We also glean the startling implications of the bearing of sin for the Father and the Son. We then move to the New Testament. Our subject in chapter 7 is Jesus as Prophet and King. Here we examine the links between David

and Christ as revealed in the Gospels, primarily. We see that the conquest and exorcism of Satan kicks off with the virgin conception, begins to peek through in the early life of Christ, and comes barreling into view during the ministry of the Son of God.

In chapter 8, we consider Jesus as Priest, studying how he made propitiation for his people's sins. In chapter 9, we consider how the cross devastates the kingdom of darkness. Here we zero in on Christ's victory over the powers that Satan wields under the sovereign oversight of heaven. The victorious Christ emerges in full as we think here as well about his resurrection, ascension, and enthronement. In chapter 10, we look at three glorious accomplishments of Christ's death: Christ's role as our obedience, our ransom, and our redemption. In chapter 11, we extend such consideration to Christ's role as our expiation, our reconciliation, and our moral example.

We move from here to a treatment of the resurrection and ascension in chapter 12 before concluding with some practical thoughts on how the atonement shapes our lives. Following this, we provide an appendix with some views of the atonement that call for consideration and examination.

## Glossary of Key Terms

Before we conclude, we do well to line out definitions of a number of important concepts from the outset.

**atonement.** The payment of God's penalty against sin such that estrangement between God and man is overcome and loving fellowship obtains.

***Christus Victor.*** The biblical vision of the atonement that comprehends Christ's death as a victorious triumph over the devil and all evil powers, a triumph realized through the propitiation and expiation of sins.

**expiation.** The biblical vision of the cross that emphasizes the guilt-removing, sin-purifying, and soul-cleansing nature of the cross-work of Christ.

**penal substitution.** The central biblical vision of the cross-work of Christ in which Christ takes our place (substitution) on Calvary and pays our penalty (death) for transgressing God's law.

**propitiation.** The biblical vision of the atonement that emphasizes the satisfaction of the wrath of God through the death of Christ.

**reconciliation.** The biblical vision of the cross that emphasizes the cessation of alienation and hostility between God and man because of the work of Christ.

**redemption.** The buying back of a helpless person from a condition of bondage.

**resurrection.** The resumption of life the third day following Christ's atonement, entailing the assumption of a glorified body by Christ and the beginning of a resurrected people.

**righteousness.** Legal holiness, before a holy God, that is the opposite of legal condemnation.

**sin.** Any want of conformity to the character, will, and expressed command of God.

## Conclusion

The cross of Christ is the one appointed means to overcome sin, a guilty conscience, and a captive existence. Gifted authors such as Dostoyevsky well mapped the human condition, at least in a generally human dimension. What the Russian author wrote about in literary form the Scripture treats in fullness of revelation. Our condition is worse than we know in Adam, but our salvation is greater than we know in Christ.

In the pages to come, we will study selections from the Word of God. We will build, with God's help, an atonement theology. We will hear from numerous sound exegetes and theologians as we go, for we do not apprehend or understand biblical truth in a vacuum. Instead, with gratefulness for many sound thinkers and preachers who have gone before us, we study Scripture with the historical church, sitting together at a large oaken table of inquiry in the great hall of wisdom. We do so not for our own advancement or reputation or mere curiosity, but so that we may know God's truth and experience God's transforming power.

This world is filled with evil. But a greater figure has entered than the devil. A Warrior has come into this place. He is a Warrior unlike any other, for he is a Savior. He is just one Man, the God-man; but he is the only Man we need. The personal God has sent a personal Deliverer to

make personal atonement for our personal sins. In this our hope is won; in this our conscience is saved. The conscience is a powerful thing, but the cross is more powerful still.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Why do we say that Christian hope is located in Christ's blood alone?
2. For what reasons is it important that Christian theology proceed from Scripture directly?
3. How does true biblical Christianity contrast with other systems of redemption in which man either saves himself or helps save himself?
4. What does it mean for Christians to have a cross-shaped worldview?

### For Further Study

Steve Lawson, "The Saving Power of God," message given at Ligonier Ministries National Conference, 2008, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wfcnk4FFnng>.

Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Psalms*, 1519/21 (Psalms 1–22), in *Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimar: Herman Bohlau, 1892), available in German at <https://archive.org/details/werkekritischege05luthuoft/page/12/mode/2up>.

J. I. Packer, *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

# 1

## The War between the Seeds

*The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.  
(Rev. 22:2)*

IT WAS A tree that damned us. It was a tree that redeemed us. And it will be a tree that heals us in the age to come—time beyond all time.

Trees are not the central motif of the Bible. But trees figure directly in the grand story of Scripture, and we do well to keep our eyes on them in theological terms. Where we find the three great epochs of all time, we find trees. I do not mean that we spot a tree, somewhere in the background, visible only to the especially alert. I mean that we find trees in the very middle of the metanarrative. It is not too much to say that the great shifting plates of biblical history turn on trees. God makes trees. God, we can fairly say, loves trees. He is the original forester. And wherever God has history on a hinge, turning according to his divine will, he places trees front and center.

But we have run slightly ahead of ourselves. Before the trees even take root and flower in all their glory, the Bible begins with peace—peace that we can scarcely imagine in our fallen world. All around us war rages, people fight, and nations rise and fall. We ourselves are little centers of war as well: as Christians, though made into a new creation by the grace of God, we wage daily war in a self-contained sense (Gal. 5:24–25). Knowing the truth, we nonetheless battle false thoughts. Re-created by the Spirit, we nonetheless experience the surge of ungodly desires from within. Remade emotionally, we yet feel powerful but wrong emotions. War goes on *out there*, absolutely. But war also rises and falls *in here*, in our own soul.

The creation knew no such conflict in its earliest days. In six days the Lord God made the heaven and the earth. The Spirit played midwife

to creation, aiding in the execution of the Son's work of divine making (Gen. 1:2; John 1:1–5; Heb. 1:2). Adam, the first man, was a priest and a king unto God. He lived and ruled under the divine regency of his Maker. His wife, Eve, came into existence from Adam's own body. God made the first couple, married in the flowering garden of Eden, to unite in marriage and carry out a mission of dominion on the earth (Gen. 1:26–28).

From the start, the existence of man was a purposeful one. God made the human race to fill the earth with children, steward the creation, and honor his great name by living under his perfect rule. Man did not chart his own course or determine his own fate; from the beginning, man was under rule, the rule of God, and a glad obedience it was.

### **The Beautiful Beginning**

The first chapter of Genesis is the beginning of a glorious adventure story. The second chapter of Genesis is a love story between Adam and Eve. The third chapter of Genesis is a horror movie, at least much of it. To understand the tragedy that unfolds in chapter 3 of Genesis, we should briefly consider God's mandate for Adam specifically.

We read this mandate in Genesis 2:15–17. First, we hear that “the LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it” (v. 15). Adam had a charge from God to cultivate Eden as a garden, showing that he had to work unto God as a constitutive element of his manhood. Eden was made well by God; it was “very good,” as with all the earth, per Genesis 1:31, but the garden called for tending, stewarding, and care. Adam was in truth a priest-king of creation, and as such had to cultivate and protect Eden.

G. K. Beale helps us understand Adam's priestly role here: “The two Hebrew words for ‘cultivate and keep’ are usually translated ‘serve and guard [or keep]’ elsewhere in the Old Testament.”<sup>1</sup> As priest of Eden, Adam had to tend the garden in terms of getting his hands literally dirty; he also had to guard this terrain. Eden was unspoiled, but Eden needed

1. G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 66–67.

protecting.<sup>2</sup> Beale nails this down: priestly service “in Israel’s later temple included the duty of ‘guarding’ unclean things from entering (cf. Num. 3:6–7, 32, 38; 18:1–7), and this appears to be relevant for Adam, especially in view of the unclean creature lurking on the perimeter of the Garden and who then enters.”<sup>3</sup>

Eden at this time had no marring or pollution from sin. But this does not mean that Eden was perfect in the sense of being impenetrable by evil. In fact, the man himself was warned of the possibility of falling away from God, as Genesis 2:16–17 shows: “And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’” Eden was a paradise, but Eden had a real danger in it: apart from the snake that we soon meet, it was the danger of Adam’s own heart wandering from God and eating of the forbidden tree. From the start, God sought faithfulness on the part of his people through testing. He gave them a forest-garden overflowing with beauty and gladness, trees spilling unblemished fruit, but he also gave them a prohibition—one delivered under the starkest terms: death from disobedience.

In giving this warning, God taught Adam about his gracious and holy character. In truth, the first word spoken here is a generous one, steeped in kindness. Too many trees to count existed to feed Adam.<sup>4</sup> Here is a God of tremendous love, filling the life of his image-bearer with delicious goodness.<sup>5</sup> But here too is a God of real moral solidity, dictating terms to

2. Raymond Ortlund Jr. suggests that the sense of “keep” here is best understood as “guard.” Raymond Ortlund Jr., “Male-Female Equality and Male Headship,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 100 (see chap. 2, n36).

3. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission*, 69.

4. R. Kent Hughes addresses the richly kind nature of this word to Adam: “God’s word to him was first permissive: ‘And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden”’ (v. 16). Adam was to partake of everything in the garden to his heart’s content, which included the tree of life. This is lavish, extravagant abundance, and Adam could take from the tree of life if he wanted it. Everything was there for him—everything he could possibly want.” R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 54–55.

5. Henri Blocher concludes, “All the trees of the garden represent all the riches of the earth, placed at mankind’s disposal.” The God that the biblical text reveals is a God of great kindness: “God reveals himself in this first provision as the God of superabundant grace, the opposite of the castrating father of our pitiful fantasies, the bestowing Father who rejoices in the happiness

his creation. Before we know the name of God the Father, we witness the nature of a father here: directing his loved one toward blessing, but also warning him of real danger and peril. Joy would not come from moral autonomy (via eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil). Joy would come from moral submission, living under the rule of God by rightly exercising self-rule.

The Lord gave Adam yet another gift: a wife. The Lord made the man and the woman equal but distinct. She was of his flesh and bone and as such deserved great cherishing and care. She was made to partner with Adam in fulfilling the dominion mandate, and her role was vital: to bear and nurture children in a distinctly maternal way. For all time to come, the man would pursue a woman of beauty like Eve, leaving father and mother to make a new family. She would be his “helper” (Gen. 2:18) and would demonstrate that role in too many ways to count, aiding and strengthening him by her wisdom, grace, and skill. He would “hold fast” to her, counting her life dearer than his own, leading her and their children to know the Lord by divine grace (v. 24).

### **The Attack on the Image-Bearers**

First came peace; then came war. In the mysterious appointment of God, a cunning snake entered the garden. God placed the first couple under the reign of his inerrant word, but the snake—Satan in slithery form, per Romans 16:20 and Revelation 20:2<sup>6</sup>—offered a counterrevelation and a counterrule. The serpent targeted the woman, bypassing the man, who had been constituted the “keeper” of Eden. Creation order mattered nothing at all to this devilish snake. As we see in Genesis 3:1–5, the serpent upended everything that God had established to this point:

Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the LORD God had made.

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of mankind.” Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1984), 121.

6. These texts read: “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you” (Rom. 16:20) and “And he seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan, and bound him for a thousand years” (Rev. 20:2).



He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” And the woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.’” But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

This was no ordinary animal. It could both talk and exercise shrewdness. The devil in his first manifestation is no bumbling fool but a very “crafty” twister of words. His first question implicitly accuses God of ungenerous stinginess, which is the opposite of what is true about the character of God. The woman does not answer with full specificity here, and she adds a detail about touching the forbidden tree that is not recorded in the original prohibition.

The passage truly explodes with audacity, however, when the satanic snake directly counters God’s own word: “You will not surely die” (Gen. 3:4). The serpent entices the woman to make the very mistake he made: to put herself on the level of God, and judge God, and go against God, seeing herself as the rightful authority of her existence. Here is the creature rebelling against the Creator, trying to jump the gulf between them. God made Satan and invested him with great power and agency. But Satan could never stand in heaven on the level of God. Satan was, is, and always will be a created being. Satan found no comfort or peace in this truth. Satan despised this truth and rebelled against it. He wanted to “be like God” (v. 5).

Eve’s temptation proceeded from Satan’s fall. Hating his natural state and wanting to be like God, Satan convinced the woman—and the passive man by her side—to make the very same decision and enact the very same fall from grace. Commenting on the human rebellion here, Henri Blocher says it nicely: “what is at stake is independence from the Sovereign Father. To seek to have it meant revolt for mankind.”<sup>7</sup> Emulating the fall from grace of Satan, the woman believed the wicked snake over the wise

7. Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 137.

Creator. She rejected divine revelation and embraced the devil's antirevelation. She trusted the wicked promises of a malevolent being over her gracious Father. She took the fruit, ate it, and gave it to Adam. He ate it without a word recorded in the biblical text, offering no rebuke to the snake, no protest, and certainly no head-crushing response.

Immediately, the curtain fell. The man and the woman acquired self-knowledge that was not theirs to unlock. They felt shame instantaneously about their nakedness, and undertook a physical remedy—leaf coverings—for a spiritual malady (Gen. 3:7). All this transpired because the serpent had waged war. We talk today about *culture war*, but that is a distant fragment of the conflict that rages beyond: it is *cosmos war*, which began in earnest in Eden. All history to come will unfold as a great battle between God and the devil, a clash impossible to overestimate in spiritual measure.

As the book of Revelation will unveil, Satan has become “the deceiver of the whole world,” a description that helps us unearth a great truth about his accusation: it is a deception as well (Rev. 12:9). God gives truth, but Satan brings only deception. Instead of the reign of reality as defined by God, Satan ushers sinners into a shadow realm, an empire of lies built on crafty counterrevelation. As in heaven, as in Eden, so now: the war of the worlds is truly a war of words.

### **When the Lord Comes Around**

In Genesis 3, the snake spoke first. But the snake did not have the last word in Eden, just as the devil will not have the last word in history. The God of heaven and earth came down and spoke second. He showed something vital about his character: the biblical God is the God who is there. This God judges the earth, just as he said he would; he does so by coming close. This God is transcendent but hair-raisingly immanent.

The true God sets up a courtroom in the garden. He does so, though, by engaging his image-bearers in a series of questions and answers—a process by which they retain their dignity and return to moral responsibility. There is no escaping this; God will have justice whether Adam wants it or not. Indeed, Adam did not want it, for he hid with his wife from the Lord, fully aware of his transgression. So God called Adam to the stand, not letting

him shirk responsibility any longer: “Where are you?” The “you” here is singular in the Hebrew, and the Lord issued this call “to him” (Gen. 3:9). This matters theologically: though both Adam and Eve sinned, Adam was held to account in a representative sense. This mirrors creation order: Adam was made first by God, and Adam was the “head” or authority of his wife, as the New Testament will substantiate (Eph. 5:22–33).

Adam could not hide from God. He responded to the Lord by indicating fear and shame over his nakedness (Gen. 3:10). The Lord then asked two more questions, asking Adam who had told him of his nakedness and whether he had eaten of the forbidden tree (v. 11). Adam answered by blaming the woman and the Lord himself: “*The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate*” (v. 12). A more shameful sentence we can scarcely imagine. The man who had relinquished his divine call to protect his wife and his home was still, even in the presence of God, relinquishing it. It was the woman’s fault, first, and God’s own fault, second, and only at the end of the sentence did Adam’s role in the whole awful affair emerge.

The Lord next addressed the woman, asking what she had done. The woman blamed the serpent, putting his action first and her action second, though she spoke truly—far better than she knew, in fact—when she said: “The serpent *deceived* me” (Gen. 3:13). Yes, deception won out, and has been advancing ever since. It was just one scene in Eden, but the dynamics of sin that played out in that garden have yielded nothing less than an entire cosmos under bondage, every living thing affected, every square inch now fallen.

### **In Destruction, the Promise of Victory**

When God shows up, the hiding stops, and justice rolls down. But as we will see, the God who comes to earth is not only pursuing a mission of justice. This God is, even more, about to unleash a great rolling flood of mercy. This will characterize his dynamic work on earth for all history to come: sin will be dealt with and judgment stored up for the last day, but the Lord will, in great love, gather a people for himself—a people who do not deserve his covenantal kindness but who receive it beyond all measure nonetheless.

The Lord's intention to deliver his covenant people first becomes clear in his judgment on the serpent. In the *protoevangelion* (or "first gospel") of Genesis 3:14–15, we learn that God will indeed join battle with the serpent and enter a competitor into the fray that will destroy the devilish snake:

The LORD God said to the serpent,  
 "Because you have done this,  
     cursed are you above all livestock  
     and above all beasts of the field;  
 on your belly you shall go,  
     and dust you shall eat  
     all the days of your life.  
 I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
     and between your offspring and her offspring;  
     he shall bruise your head,  
     and you shall bruise his heel."

This is no negotiation; it is a sentencing. Here the Lord God speaks to Satan and dictates the terms. Under divine judgment, the serpent now lives "cursed" above all the creatures of the world, slithering here and there, eating "dust" for food (Gen. 3:14). As later texts will reveal, this curse—until Jesus overturns it once and for all—will never lift, never stop, and never come undone. As we have observed, just one sin set the world on fire, and it burns to this very day. But just one word of judgment promises the devil the very same fate. There is no gospel, no salvation, no second chance for this evil being. This is a curse that will carry the devil all the way to the lake of fire.

The serpent declared war on God and his image. Now God declares war on Satan *through* his image. It is the will of God to "put enmity" between Satan and the woman (Gen. 3:15). The serpent and the woman thus enter protracted conflict that none but God can address and repeal. This conflict extends further: it rages between the devil's "offspring" and the woman's "offspring," in singular form. This matters for two major reasons. First, the conflict is not directly waged by the woman. She is not the

one who battles the devil himself. It is “her Seed” (NKJV) who fills this dangerous role.

Second, this in no way entails that the woman has no place in this conflict. Victory comes through “offspring,” and human offspring come through a woman, and a woman alone. God here places great weight on childbearing; nothing less than the Warrior-Savior would come from a woman’s womb. To save his people from the devil, God does not go outside the body, but works from within it. The curse has come through human appetite, but salvation will come through the painful labor of childbearing.

The woman’s Seed will visit destruction on the snake. But he will do so only in a way that honors humanity and redeems the body. What a gleam of redemption this is from the earliest days of the earth. The woman’s action—enabled by her husband’s shameful abdication of authority—gave birth to sin. But the woman, in ages to come, will give birth to the Savior. Adam, the image of God, will give way to the second Adam, the greater Adam, who will succeed where the first failed and forgive where the first fell (see Rom. 5:12–14; 1 Cor. 15:42–49).

### **The Crushing of the Serpent’s Head**

In order to get there, though, great and terrible violence must break out. An awful war must be fought. In Genesis 3, God himself guarantees it. God calls for it. First comes the prophecy of the righteous Seed’s effect on the serpent: “*he shall bruise your head*” (v. 15). The Bible’s very first word about salvation, and the intervention of God in the terrible plight of man, is this. This word sets the tone for the remainder of the narrative.

All the rest of the story traces back to the divine verdict in a smoldering Eden. God’s commitment to the human race and to his solemn promise in Genesis 3:15 will never fail. Not only does God’s love not fail, but his future covenants made with Abraham, Moses, and David extend, amplify, and above all clarify this original redemptive promise until it finds its glorious fulfillment in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup>

8. Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 664.

This first word on salvation frames all the others.<sup>9</sup> It is delivered in the context of warfare and written in the key of triumph. Cosmic conflict has come to the earth, and the consequences will be terrible, but God will never forget his promise—a promise made, ironically, to the devil. The rest of redemptive history will feature the keeping of this promise for the people of God, all of whom will be protected and delivered by the woman's Seed. As later revelation will show, the Suffering Servant will overcome the sinister serpent.

Having laid this groundwork, let us now offer four observations about this promise, the *protoevangelion*.

### **First, God wants the serpent's head to be crushed.**

Here we think about the character of God as displayed in this scene. He has already cursed the serpent. But here he shows that he is not leveling abstract judgment. This passage reveals that God takes the serpent's wicked action personally. God judges it himself. He does not send an angel to pronounce sentence. God personally pronounces the sentence. He wants no confusion about the evil of what has occurred. Nor is he willing to allow anyone to slip away out the garden's back exit. As we said earlier, he sets up a courtroom in a garden, and he calls all to account.

Summarizing the point, we may say it like this: God hates the serpent. God is not an indifferent God. God shows himself here to be a jealous God. God does not let the devil terrorize his creation without reprisal. God himself meets the devil face to face. He does not let him get away with anything. He shows us, in personal as well as principal form, that he loves justice. More than this, justice flows from his very character. He owns justice; in a sense, he *is* justice. As such, he deals judgment to the wicked, and they cannot escape him.

9. A good number of theologians cite this text as the announcement of the *covenant of grace*. I respect this argument and have substantial sympathy with it in terms of the significance and implications of the divine promise declared here. In general, I incline toward John Murray's framing of this matter and related covenantal theology of the Presbyterian tradition; as stated above, while revering Presbyterian covenant theology and learning much from it, I hold to Baptist covenant theology. For references in this discussion, see John Murray, "Covenant Theology," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 4, *Studies in Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1982), 216–40; Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*.

**Second, the Lord will send a human Warrior to accomplish this crushing.**

The “bruising” of the serpent, the crushing of the serpentine head, comes not incidentally but intentionally. Though the predicament before humanity is terrible, the Lord God has his best Man on it. The woman’s Seed who deals this blow cannot but be a mighty foe to the serpent. He must be greater than the devil, far greater in power and forcefulness and agency. Indeed, he will be. The Son of God will not become incarnate in order to make the cosmos a marginally better place. The Son of God will come to earth as a holy human (and fully divine) Warrior in order to destroy the works of the devil and take the enemy of God’s people out (1 John 3:8).<sup>10</sup> His is a mission of death and destruction, wreaking carnage on the foes of heaven.

We are not in trifling territory here. If we downplay the *protoevangelion*, or skim it quickly only to camp elsewhere in our atonement studies, we will miss a great deal about Christ and his work. The Bible’s first word about Christ—without naming him, of course—features him as a death-dealing Warrior.<sup>11</sup> Jesus will not necessarily look like a Warrior, but He will do the work of a Warrior by opposing the devil, undoing satanic works in his ministry, and buying his people back from the dead through his death on the cross. In all this work, he will overcome death and the fear of death, which as we will see later is a power that Satan wields over the unforgiven. The reign of death and terror will meet its end in the cross-work of Christ, who died to defeat Satan and destroy his power over the church.

10. Irenaeus captured the significance of the humanity of the Warrior long ago: “Because of this the Lord also declares himself to be the Son of Man, so renewing in himself that primal man from whom the formation of man by woman began, that as our race went down to death by a man who overcame, and as death won the palm of victory over us by a man, so we might by a man receive the palm of victory over death.” Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.21.1, quoted in *Genesis 1–11*, ed. Andrew Louth, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 90–91. We will return to this theme below, even many times in this volume; it is one of the most crucial dimensions of biblical atonement. Atonement in biblical terms is ultimately *personal*.

11. Christ is indeed not named in this biblical passage. But Robert Peterson has spoken well to the eventual unveiling of the Warrior’s identity: “Already Genesis 3:15 promises a champion who will defeat Satan and benefit humankind. The rest of Genesis—and the rest of Scripture—will identify him clearly enough.” Robert A. Peterson, *Salvation Accomplished by the Son: The Work of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 416. Just as the serpent is not named according to his true identity (Satan the devil), so the righteous Warrior is not named. But his name will emerge in due time—at just the right time, in fact.

The one who comes as a Warrior is sent by the one who is himself a Warrior. Long before we pick up the trail of the Warrior-Christ, we learn that Yahweh is a Warrior-God. We will say more about this truth below, but for now we cannot fail to note that God *wants* a head-crusher to attack the devil. God hates the devil, and God wants war with him. What God wants is always right, perfectly right, and what God wants, furthermore, God will have, and neither man nor angel nor demon has a thing to say about it.

**Third, the crushing is an effectual accomplishment—it is death to the serpent.**

In addition to what we have already observed, the promise of the bruising or crushing of the serpent's head tells us something vital about the atonement: it will be a killing-stroke. By this we mean not that the devil will vanish forever once Christ atones for sin, but rather that Christ's death will secure final victory over the devil by purchasing the elect for God. John Gill nearly lit the page on fire when he described the effect of the fulfilled *protoevangelion*:

The Messiah, the eminent seed of the woman, should bruise the head of the old serpent the devil, that is, destroy him and all his principalities and powers, break and confound all his schemes, and ruin all his works, crush his whole empire, strip him of his authority and sovereignty, and particularly of his power over death, and his tyranny over the bodies and souls of men; all which was done by Christ, when he became incarnate and suffered and died, Heb. 2:14–15; Col. 2:15; 1 John 3:8.<sup>12</sup>

As Gill's eloquent words convey, the death of Christ—the Seed of the woman promised in Genesis 3:15—will function as the deathblow of the serpent. This is because of what the cross accomplishes: it propitiates God on behalf of the people of God and thus clears the account of every sinner predestined to life. The devil will still rage and deceive following

12. John Gill, *An Exposition of the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, Newport Commentary Series (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2010), 63.



Calvary, but he will do so as an enemy whose days are numbered and whose defeat is secured.

Under this two-age framework, the cross represents, as Oscar Cullmann posited, a theological D-Day.<sup>13</sup> World War II was effectively won in June 1944 on the beaches of France on D-Day, even if VE-Day—the true end of the war—did not come for another year. So too the cross functions as the decisive blow in the great battle of the cosmos, for it was there that the destruction of the devil's reign was secured. Still, we await VE-Day, the last day, when the God of peace once and for all crushes Satan under our feet (Rom. 16:20). We may know that this day will surely come, and thus gain great confidence as we wait, when we reflect on just how effectual the cross was in paying for our sin and thus, when regeneration unto conversion took hold of us, in releasing us from Satan's tyranny.

#### **Fourth, the promise of the head-crushing stands as God's own promise.**

God has sworn to this outcome. He will do it; he will bring it to pass. All his personal character backs it. His word is law, and his speech is iron. It is not malleable like the words of men in postmodern thought, always subject to interpretation and reinterpretation. The first part of the *proto-evangelion* has the surety of heaven behind it.

As we considered above, the word of God is altogether distinct from the word of men, and certainly from the word of Satan. Satan not only offers his own antirevelation (counterrevelation, that is), but always works against God's Word. Satan always tries to soften the Word, always massages it, always tries to turn it upside down, so that ultimately what God has said actually means the reverse of the divine pronouncement. But the Word of God is firmly fixed in the heavens. Try as Satan might and Satan does, Satan cannot successfully overturn the Word, undo it, or soften it. God has spoken in Genesis 3:15, and the promise of the head-crusher has God's own seal on it. God, we see, not only has the last word, but always has the definitive word.

God's speech made an appointment, an appointment that the Son would keep. It sounds strange even now, but it is wondrously true: the death of death, and the death of the devil, could come only through the

13. Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), 11, 142.

death of Christ. Grace would come through righteous destruction. John Murray said it well: “It is surely significant in this connection that the first promise of redemptive grace, the first beam of redemptive light that fell upon our fallen first parents, was in terms of the destruction of the tempter.”<sup>14</sup> Only through combat would grace come; only destruction could suffice to yield redemption for the sinful.

In the Reformation period, Martin Luther registered a similar conviction. Luther noted the physical awfulness of the blow, even as he pointed out that God uses the same instrument for salvation that Satan used for destruction:

It is as if He were saying: “Through the woman you, Satan, set upon and seduced the man, so that through sin you might be their head and master. But I, in turn, shall lie in wait for you by means of the same instrument. I shall snatch away the woman, and from her I shall produce a Seed, and that Seed will crush your head. You have corrupted the flesh through sin and have made it subject to death, but from that very flesh I shall bring forth a Man who will crush and prostrate you and all your powers.”<sup>15</sup>

Luther speaks well and powerfully. What Satan used for the greatest evil, namely, the body of the human person, God will use for the greatest good.

### **The Bruising of the Warrior’s Heel**

The victory that God will win is a glorious one, as is apparent from this text. But we must consider a second clause in Genesis 3:15. It is similarly spoken to Satan: “*and you shall bruise his heel.*” If the first part of the verse is wonderful, the second part is terrible. Just as we have examined the first part in some detail, now we must consider the three foreboding truths expressed in the guarantee of the Warrior’s bruising.

14. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (1955; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 46–47.

15. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Genesis 3:15*, quoted in *Genesis 1–11*, ed. John L. Thompson, Reformation Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 1 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 159.

**First, the Lord places Satan in an action role: you shall do this.**

What a startling assignment. The Warrior will not die of natural causes, we learn here. The Warrior will come to do battle with the devil, as observed earlier, but this conflict does not run in only one direction. The two seeds are not evenly matched, as Scripture will reveal. One is the Son of God incarnate, the second Adam; the other is a mere creature, the devil.<sup>16</sup> This doctrinal reality matters tremendously, and must always inform our understanding of spiritual warfare. Whatever shape it takes, spiritual warfare never represents a contest of equals. God is not just bigger than the devil, quantitatively greater in strength. God is a different *being* from the devil. His ontology is divine, while Satan's is creaturely.

But theology is in many cases the commitment to say two truths, not merely one. As we confess the creatureliness of Satan in full, we follow this statement with a second: God invests the serpent with a breathtaking ability to do damage. This enables Satan to work according to his nature and the powerful gifts he possesses. The devil hated Adam, appointed to a role of righteous authority and glad stewardship. The devil wanted Adam to fall from that role as the devil had, for the devil is the one "fallen from heaven" (Isa. 14:12).<sup>17</sup> He once said these terrible words, and his deception led to Adam and Eve's effectually communicating the same by their sinful rebellion against God: "I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north; I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa. 14:13–14).

16. Derek Kidner observes that this word is addressed to the enemy, not Adam directly: "Remarkably, it makes its debut as a sentence passed on the enemy (cf. Col. 2:15), not a direct promise to man, for redemption is about God's rule as much as about man's need (cf. Ezek. 36:22, 'not . . . for your sake . . .')." Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (London: Tyndale, 1967), 70–71. It is nonetheless true that God is making a sure promise, a promise that bears the best possible news for his covenant people, the woman's seed. Yet Kidner's observation holds: it is technically true that this sentence is aimed at Satan directly, not mankind.

17. I hold that Isaiah 14 speaks of the fall of Satan. On this count, see Derek Thomas, who argues that though "Satan is not referred to specifically in 14:12, his shadow lies behind this passage." Derek Thomas, *God Delivers: Isaiah Simply Explained*, Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1991), 126.

The devil will not break his streak following his malevolence in the garden. Behind the scenes, the devil will conspire and scheme and work against the prophets, the priests, and the kings appointed by God over his people. The two seeds will continually clash, and Satan will have his hand in all of it. He will incite David to number the people; he will agitate to attack Job; when Christ comes, he will tempt him personally (1 Chron. 21:1; Job 1:6–9; Matt. 4:1–11). The implication for ministry is as plain as it is sobering: to step into authority in the work of God is to have a target painted on your chest as a man, a target that never comes off.<sup>18</sup> Beyond ministry, all Christians are hunted by the adversary, for he is like a roaming lion, seeking whom he may “devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

All this is ordained and appointed by God. It is crucial to understand this: strange as it may seem to the natural mind, the bruising attack by Satan on the Warrior is not merely allowed by God. It is intended by God. This is not Satan’s proposal; Satan hears from the Lord that he will surely do what he most wants to do. He wants to attack God’s Seed, and he will. His attack will have devastating effect. This foretelling—this foreordination—is from God and no one else. There is not a hint in this passage of waffling or wavering. God has written it all in his Book, and no one can scratch it out.

On these mysterious matters, we do best to repeat our stated truth: the secret things belong to God. Whereas God could have vanquished the devil on the spot, instead he gave him a key role in the ongoing drama of doctrine. As Ambrose of Milan put it, “God judged that evil was to be held in check for a time rather than to be destroyed,” a true statement that points to the goodness of God’s working.<sup>19</sup> If God does all things so as to maximize his own glory, as indeed he does, then we can only conclude

18. Hatred, as John Gill substantiates, characterizes every facet of the war between the two sides: “the posterity of Eve, mankind, and the production of serpents, between whom the antipathy still continues, and mystically the evil angels and also wicked men called serpents; and a generation of vipers on the one hand, and the people of God on the other, the seed of the church; the latter of which are hated and persecuted by the former, and so it has been ever since this affair happened. And especially by the seed of the woman may be meant the Messiah; . . . who as he has been implacably hated by Satan and his angels, and by wicked men, so he has opposed himself to all them that hate and persecute his people.” Gill, *Exposition of the First Book*, 63.

19. Ambrose, *Flight from the World*, 7.43, quoted in *Genesis 1–11*, ed. Andrew Louth, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament 1 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 90.

that the glory of God came to much greater expression by keeping Satan “held in check” for long ages.

Here is a call to think as God thinks, per the teaching of Scripture. In the counsel of God, it was of far greater glory to the Creator and Ruler of the cosmos that sin happen, Satan roam and hunt, and Christ die than for all this to be avoided. In laying out what is called *felix culpa* (“happy fault”) theology, Scott Christensen helps us here:

Christ is no conventional hero, and the cross is no conventional weapon. . . . Surprisingly, in the cross, Jesus defeats evil. Jesus defeats death by dying. He crushes evil by laying it on himself and then shows it to be powerless by rising from the dead. . . . This subversive storyline defies all human expectations. It appears foolish to the natural mind and thus proves that the narrative of biblical redemption hails exclusively from a divine source.<sup>20</sup>

Christensen is right: only God could have conceived of a redemption this ironic, this unexpected, and this majestic. Atonement and salvation do not owe to us and our proposals for renewal. Counter to our expectations, God is maximally glorified, we may conclude, not in an undisturbed creation with no possibility of sin, but in a tragically fallen world that invites and receives the glorious work of redemption.

**Second, the blow that Satan will strike is painful in the extreme.**

The head of the woman’s Seed suffers no violence by the serpent, according to the Lord. But the heel does. The distinction here is subtle but of vast importance. The serpent’s work, as will become clear, will be altogether undone and defeated by the Warrior-Savior. Though the serpent rates as an estimable foe, the serpent will not win. The serpent will lose, and in spectacular fashion. The Lord makes it as brutal as it can possibly be for the serpent: at the very moment that the serpent will think he has triumphed, he will have lost it all, and his ultimate destruction will be secured with granite finality.

20. Christensen calls this “greater-glory theodicy.” Scott Christensen, *What about Evil? A Defense of God’s Sovereign Glory* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020), 8–9.

But the serpent has his own blow to strike, and all this from God's perfect will and plan. Awful as it is to write, the serpent will leave his mark on the Warrior.<sup>21</sup> The serpent will, in fact, target his foe in one of the most vulnerable places of the body: the heel. All the momentum of the woman's Seed will slow. Running hard, ministering with great power and efficacy, he will suffer a terrible slashing attack. We should not press the point too hard, but we cannot help but think of the mythical Achilles, greatest of the fantastical soldiers of the ancient world. Achilles dealt out death to hundreds, but all it took was an arrow in his heel to fell him and, in the narrative, take him out. This is only a myth, whereas the biblical narrative is true. But it speaks to the severity of the heel blow nonetheless.

The woman's Seed will not suffer defeat. But the woman's Seed will indeed suffer death. Though it will seem by all outward appearances that the plan of God fails and that Satan defeats Jesus at the cross, Jesus will defeat Satan at the cross. Then, three days later, Christ will rise to life, ushering in the firstfruits of new covenant humanity and establishing nothing less than a redeemed human race, a Spirit-indwelt people whose own resurrection unto eschatological glorification is secured and inaugurated by Christ.

All this is glorious beyond measure. But it does not obscure the hard truth: while Satan did not defeat Jesus, he did viciously and successfully strike him. Under the providential working of God (Acts 2:23; 4:27–28), Satan as the instrument of God's purposes worked on numerous fronts to agitate for the crucifixion of the Messiah. He penetrated Judas's heart, a soft target if there ever was one, for Judas craved worldly things. Through Judas's agency, Satan led the authorities to arrest, beat, try, and convict Christ. In terms of secondary causation, the execution of Christ took place because of satanic activity. Said more simply, in the end, the devil took Christ off the field.

21. This combat could not be more visceral, as Kenneth Mathews shows in his exegesis: "The language of the passage indicates a life-and-death struggle between combatants. 'Crush' and 'strike' translate the same Hebrew verb *šûp* (AV, 'bruise') and describe the combatants' parallel action, but the location of the blow distinguishes the severity and success of the attack. The impact delivered by the offspring of the woman 'at the head' is mortal, while the serpent will deliver a blow only 'at the heel.'" Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary 1A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 245.

**Third, the *protoevangelion* shows us that the Lord will use the worst possible evil to accomplish the greatest possible good.**

At this place in the scriptural narrative, we know very little about how this promise will take root. In the judicial sentencing of Genesis 3, we gain only a quick glimpse into the plan of God. We see that great pain will come for the woman's Seed. The heel-bruising is genuinely terrible. But it accomplishes nothing less than the securing of our salvation.

The Scripture is creating categories for us at this juncture in the narrative of redemption. Terrible evil has been loosed in the world by Adam's rebellion. But that is not the last word. The last word is this: God is going to accomplish good beyond human imagining through the bruising of the heel of the woman's Seed. The greatest act of injustice in human history, the death of Christ, will be used by God to accomplish the greatest act of deliverance. This deliverance is not neat and clean; it is bloody and visceral, painful and tragic beyond estimation. But it is effectual, and it is the means by which sinners will cross over from death to life, and live forever with God in a world of love.

This is all by the action of a loving and holy God. God has ordained the fall; God has set in motion the bruising of the heel of the woman's Seed.<sup>22</sup> God has foreknown, appointed, and guaranteed that the cross will come to pass. The rest of the biblical story, with a particular focus on Isaiah 53 and the letters of Paul, will reveal that in the wake of the worst possible evil, the greatest good flows.<sup>23</sup> If this is true at the highest levels, it is equally true in the mundane circumstances of our lives. Evil does not triumph in God's economy; God employs evil to effect a salvation that gives him the greatest glory and his people the greatest good.

22. The conflict mapped in Genesis 3:15 signals not only a climactic battle, but an ongoing struggle. Gordon Wenham comments: "The human race, 'her offspring,' and the serpent race, 'your offspring,' will be forever at loggerheads. Those who had been in league against their creator will from now on be fighting against each other, a motif that reappears in the tower of Babel story (11:1-9). It is not simply a case of God versus the snake in perpetuity, but of mankind versus the snake as well (cf. Isa 11:8)." Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 79. To be on the side of God, as Wenham argues, is to be on the side that opposes the serpent—and that the serpent hates.

23. Gentry and Wellum rightly argue that this goodness does not terminate in this age, but flows into all eternity beyond: "This promise creates the expectation that when it is finally realized, all sin and death will be defeated, and the fullness of God's saving reign will come to this world as God's rightful rule is acknowledged and embraced." Gentry and Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant*, 770. This promise is not only soteriological, then, but eschatological.

## After Sentencing, Atonement

Things start to get practical, and very earthy, right after the sentencing covered in the first chapter. The woman's calling of childbearing is now subject to the fall, as is the man's calling of provision by laboring amid the earth. The sexes no longer work together harmoniously by nature, the man playing his role, the woman playing hers. Now human nature becomes sinful; daily labors become difficult. The postfall world plays in the key of tragedy.

But not completely. Massively important as the *protoevangelion* is, it is not the only word of hope in this chapter. In Genesis 3:20–24, we glean a corollary truth: while true and final atonement must wait, pardon for sin in provisional form will not delay. The God who has just sentenced his people shows that he is the God who covers his people: “The man called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living. And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them” (Gen. 3:20–21).

The man's naming of his wife reflects both his God-given authority and his hopefulness. Eve will bear children, and her womb is not stopped. Death will not win; life will be produced. Beyond this, the first couple is not left in the shame of their nakedness. The Lord himself provided skins for Adam and Eve, just as the Lord himself will provide atonement for his people. We find here not only atonement, but a foretaste of justification: the Lord himself “clothed them” in the skins (Gen. 3:21). Adam and Eve were covered by God's provision, fully covered. We spot the kindness and tenderness of a forgiving God in this action, and also in the Lord's placing of the angel at the entrance of the garden to keep humanity from eating more of the forbidden fruit (vv. 22–24). We find God's grace in his covering and in his limiting. Truly God is an abundantly gracious God.

How vital all this is for the godly walk of faith. The biblical God is not cold and dispassionate, abstract and unmoved. The biblical God forgives. The biblical God loves. The biblical God steps in when man rejects him, endures man's rebellion against him, and makes atonement for sin when man cannot do it and would not want it if he could. But the biblical God does want it, for he wants man—made in his image—to draw near to him and enter the world of his love. So we do through atonement, and through the ground of justification that the atonement secures.



## Conclusion

For God's people, victory is sure. But victory will come at staggering cost, as James Boice once observed: "We know how the bruising of the Lord Jesus Christ took place. It happened at the cross as Satan finally succeeded, so it seemed, at striking back at God and silencing his meddling in human affairs forever. It was bruising with a vengeance."<sup>24</sup> It was both a physical and a spiritual bruising; understood in all its horrible depth, it was the strongest possible bruising that humanity could issue.

But this bruising did not defeat God's purposes. Boice notes this well: "It included the hatred of the religious leaders, the mocking of the crowds, the beatings, eventually the crucifixion with its great agony. And yet, it was only a bruising, not a defeat, for on the third day after the crucifixion Jesus rose from the tomb triumphantly."<sup>25</sup> The crucifixion represented a real death, but not a real defeat. Through the fulfillment of the Genesis 3 promise, victory came to earth. This triumph did not come as the world would expect it. It came through the simplest of circumstances and the humblest of accommodations. It came through a virgin's conception, an anonymous childhood, and then a suffering ministry. It came, more than all this, through a tree, through a Roman cross, on wood twisted to fit the ministration of torture and death.

It was a tree that damned us, and it is a tree that saves us.

## Key Terms

atonement

devil

dominion mandate

glorification

gospel

image-bearer

immanent

moral autonomy

*protoevangelion*

regeneration

spiritual warfare

transcendent

24. James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 1:164–65.

25. Boice, 1:165.

### Questions for Discussion

1. Why did Adam and Eve end up disobeying the Lord? What prompted their sin?
2. What can we learn about our temptations and propensity to sin from the fall of humanity in Genesis 3?
3. In an ironic way, how is the judgment of the serpent in Genesis 3:15 greatly encouraging?
4. Why is it significant that the first promise of God's deliverance deals with war, battle, and triumph in suffering?
5. What do we learn about God's character in the promise of the "first gospel"?

### For Further Study

- G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004).
- Scott Christensen, *What about Evil? A Defense of God's Sovereign Glory* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2020).
- Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).
- Owen Strachan, *Reenchanting Humanity: A Theology of Mankind* (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2019).