**Motifs of the Crucifixion – By Thailer Jimerson**

*Christianity is unique. The world’s religions have certain traits in common, but until the gospel of Jesus Christ burst upon the Mediterranean world, no one in the history of human imagination had conceived of such a thing as the worship of a crucified man.*

* **Fleming** **Rutledge**

In 2015, Fleming Rutledge published a mammoth book that has served to greatly illumine a dark spot in my understanding of the cross. It’s called *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ,* and I couldn’t recommend it more. My favorite thing about the book was its lucid presentation of various motifs the New Testament authors play with in their explanations for the meaning of Christ’s death. I wanted to write about this because we are people of the cross, and as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2.1-2, it is the heartbeat of our faith. This means there are somethings we should understand about it.

Now, this article isn’t meant to be comprehensive and, no doubt, as we continue to study and meditate on the cross we will continue to be surprised at the yield. It is the climax of the Bible and in the crucifixion of the Son of God we find a confluence of biblical themes, all meeting and marrying into this kaleidoscopic view of God’s love for sinners. We see in the cross echoes of all the Scriptures – e.g., the Passover lamb, the scapegoat, the ransom, the substitute, the representative goat sent into the wilderness, the atoning sacrifice for our sin, and the victorious messiah who triumphs over the powers to liberate us from bondage.

**Two Main Motifs**

Though it would take a lifetime to exhaust the theological riches of Jesus’s sacrifice, I think it would be fair to say (even if I’m nearing oversimplification) that the motifs can be summarized by two main branches. Here are the motifs:

1. **Atonement.** This is the theme with which we are most familiar. It’s the idea that Christ came primarily as a substitutionary sacrifice for our sins – namely, that we could not bear the penalty of our sins, so he came to subject himself to the penalty in order that God’s wrath against sin might be exhausted on him instead of us. (By the way, for those who bristle at this theory for sounding like some sort of “divine child abuse,” remember that Jesus is one member of the triune God and that he determined from eternity to lay down his life for us. God interposed himself for our sins out of his love – long before we heard and obeyed his message (John 3.16). We have to keep the members of the triune God together or our understanding will begin to deconstruct.) Here we see echoes of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 where the sacrifice of the lamb clears the sins of Israel for the year; however, the crucial difference with Christ is that his one death clears our sins forever.  
     
   *Rutledge states that the atonement motif deals with our guilt requiring remission*.
2. **Christus Victor.** This is the motif with which we are more unfamiliar as our particular tradition seldom mentions it. The name itself is given to describe the motif as being Christ’s victory on the cross. In other words, on the cross there was a divine invasion occurring. Jesus was conquering Sin itself as a power. Now, in order to fully grasp this idea (since, again, we seldom speak of Sin in this way but, instead, more of personal guilt and wrongdoing), you have to see the *other* way the Bible speaks about sin. Where is sin first mentioned in the Bible? Of course, we naturally think of the first sin of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3, but the first time “sin” is actually mentioned in the Bible is in Genesis 4. In verse 7, the Lord warns Cain about his temptation and describes Sin as this animal-like force that seeks to enslave Cain. The other view of the cross is that this is the decisive moment where God deflated and destroyed the power of Sin once for all (Romans 8.3). Here we see echoes, not of the sacrificial lamb from Leviticus 16, but of the Passover lamb from Exodus 12. It’s the lamb that ensured our freedom from the slavery of Egypt.   
     
   *Rutledge states that the Christus Victor motif deals with our captivity requiring deliverance.*

Though this might sound new to you (as it certainly did to me), I assure you it’s right there in your Bible. Consider Paul’s earliest letter. Here’s what the first few verses state:

“Paul, an apostle not from men nor by men but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead, and all the brothers with me, to the churches of Galatia. Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for our sins in order to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (**Galatians 1.1-5, LEB**)

Not just “gave himself for our sins” (i.e., atonement), but “rescue us from the present evil age” (i.e., Christus Victor).

**In Summary**

I love the following summary of Christ’s victory given by the medieval theologian Anselm: “He freed us from our sins, and from his own wrath, and from hell, and from the power of the devil, whom he came to vanquish for us, because we were unable to do it, and he purchased for us the kingdom of heaven; and by doing all these things, he manifested the greatness of his love toward us."

On the cross, you’ll remember the famed inscription over Jesus’s head “INRI” – the Latin for “Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews.” They had no clue how right they were. To the Roman, the cross was a symbol of Caesar’s power, but to the Christian the cross is the emblem of God’s victory over the powers. It was Jesus’s enthronement. On the cross, he submits to the Enemy (Sin), suffers the strength of its Ally (the Law), and pays its Wage (Death). Then he springs forth in glorious life having exhausted and quenched those powers so that all in Him might be forever freed.