

2010

Armedgeddon: Atonement's Ultimate Victory

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Recommended Citation

Oluikpe, Ikechukwu Michael (2010) "Armedgeddon: Atonement's Ultimate Victory," *Perspective Digest*: Vol. 15 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pd/vol15/iss4/4>

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Though seldom connected in today's culture, Armageddon and atonement are two sides of the same coin.

By Ikechukwu Michael Oluikpe

Armageddon! This term has been and still is an epithet for worldwide warfare. It has been used throughout the centuries to depict the horrors of war. The term brings to mind memories of World War I, World War II, the Cold War, the Gulf War, and the present War on Terror.

All eyes are anxiously watching the nations for what will be the next move. All these wars are significant for Christians, especially in the light of Bible prophecy. Many believers await the fulfilment of the great battle of Armageddon involving the nations and the Antichrist as part of the end-time prophecies of the Apocalypse with special focus on the Middle East scenario.

This is the view of dispensationalist eschatology, which has

become popular and has influenced and led to the great spread of dispensationalist eschatology within the Christian faith through the *Scofield Reference Bible*, the Dallas Theological Seminary, and the *Left Behind* novel series and movies. Major proponents of dispensationalist eschatology include J. Dwight Pentecost, Hal Lindsey, Tim LaHaye, John Walvoord, and C. C. Ryrie, among others.

The word *Armageddon* appears only once in the Bible—Revelation 16—and it is described as the place where the kings of the earth will gather for the battle of the great day of God Almighty (vss. 14, 16). A variety of exegetical and theological interpretations of the significance of Armageddon exist, but these are divided generally into two: (1) a literal place for an international military battle in the Middle East or (2) a theologically symbolic place for the spiritual battle between Christ and the antichrist. Either way, the Bible in the Apocalypse reveals the reality and inevitability of this universal end-time battle.

In the light of salvation history, however, one wonders where this great battle fits into the big picture of the plan of redemption and its spiritual significance. Is Armageddon just another prophecy of global nuclear mushroom clouds and nuclear ash, or is there something profoundly more to it? How does Armageddon fit in the concept of atonement?

The atonement is one of the most central themes in the Bible. It revolves around the significance and extent of the varied roles of Jesus Christ and His work for humanity's salvation. It is one of the all-encompassing words that denote the past, present, and future of the plan of redemption.

A variety of theories have been proposed for the atonement, each with its biblical emphasis. Some major theories of atonement include the exemplary model, the moral-influence model, the governmental model, and the satisfaction model, among others. These theories can be divided into two major

views: the objective and subjective views.

The objective theories of atonement hold that the primary reason for the death of Jesus Christ was the need to satisfy the demands of divine justice and mercy inherent in God's nature. On the other hand, the subjective theories hold that the main reason for the death of Christ was to influence humanity's sinful attitude toward God, so that humanity is eventually drawn and reconciled to God as a result of the demonstration of God's love through the Cross. These theories are not in opposition to each other but are complementary aspects of the great work of atonement through Jesus Christ. It is important, however, to note that atonement is primarily objective.

The objective aspect of atonement can be described as a divine conflict and victory in which Christ fights and triumphs over the evil powers of the world that hold humankind in bondage and suffering. It emphasizes that the life and work of Christ, especially on earth, brought victory over the demonic powers and liberation to sinners from the bondage of sin and Satan.

Among the objective theories, the *Christus Victor* model of atonement is noteworthy. Also earlier known as the ransom theory, it dominated the early church's thinking on the atonement until it was superseded by other theories. After years of neglect, it was brought to light by the Swedish historical theologian Gustaf Aulen in his classic work *Christus Victor* in 1931. It is this objective theory that describes Christ's work as a victory over evil. Christ's victory over these powers brings a new relation of reconciliation between God and humanity.

God is the subject reconciling the world to Himself through Christ. He is also the object being reconciled in the sense that Christ's death and merits (the display of God's love) meet the demands of divine wrath and justice. Hence the tension within the will and being of God is resolved by God's own action through Christ. Salvation is a divine activity from first to last. This

reconciliation brings victory and liberation to sinful humanity through Christ. Atonement is victory over sin, evil, death, and the devil.

Christ's Victory: Objective Atonement

How did Christ win the victory over these forces of evil? In His life and ministry during the incarnation, it was evident that Jesus was in conflict with the devil. Through Herod's attempt to destroy Him after His birth (Matt. 2:1-18), the wilderness temptations (Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:1), the struggle at Gethsemane and Judas' betrayal (John 13:27), Satan waged war against Jesus Christ every step of the way.

Christ's life and ministry, however, demonstrated triumph over the enemy as He healed sicknesses, cast out demons, and delivered captives from the bondage of sin (Matt. 4:23; Mark 1:24; Luke 10:17-20). His victory over the devil is summarily illustrated in a parable in which the strong man is the devil but the stronger man is Jesus Christ Himself (Mark 3:23-27; Luke 11:17-22). The stronger man overcomes the strong man, takes away his armour, divides his spoil, and liberates his slaves.

Apart from His victory in ministry, Christ's life evidenced victory over sin in the flesh. The obedience of Christ (in His humanity) to the Father was the means of His triumph. When Christ died on the cross, as a perfect sacrifice without sin, He broke the power of Satan and death. By totally resisting the devil's temptations and being obedient to God the Father even to death, He won victory. Christ's resurrection was thus a public demonstration and proclamation of Christ's victory on the cross.

Death could not hold Him because it had already been defeated, and all evil principalities and powers were made subject to Him (Acts 2:24; Eph. 1:20-23; 1 Peter 3:22). This victory was now to be extended by the life and mission of the church through

the power of the Holy Spirit. "Every Christian conversion involves a power encounter in which the devil is obliged to relax his hold on somebody's life and the superior power of Christ is demonstrated."¹ Therefore Christ's victory can be personally experienced in the life of every Christian through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

The Christian's Victory: Subjective Atonement

The victory of Christ is to be experienced personally in the individual lives of Christians. The victory He won in the flesh can be claimed, recapitulated, and experienced through the power of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, Christian life should be not only a conflict but a victory, just as Christ was victorious.

Christ has overcome the devil and his works (1 John 3:8), which include the curse and condemnation pronounced by the law (Gal. 3:13; Rom. 8:1-4), the sinful flesh (John 8:34, 36; Rom. 6:6; 8:3), the world (John 16:33; Gal. 6:14) and death (Heb. 2:14, 15). It is important to note, however, that though Christ has defeated these powers, they still exist actively. They have not been completely destroyed. They still remain a continuous threat to the Christian.

This is what makes the Christian life a struggle, a "fight of faith" (1 Tim. 6:12, NKJV) which involves striving (Luke 13:24), wrestling (Eph. 6:10), pulling down (2 Cor. 10:3, 4), enduring (Matt. 10:22; 24:13), pressing on (Phil. 3:14), resisting (James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:9) and standing firm in the strength of the Lord (Eph. 6:10, 11, 13, 14; 1 Peter 5:9). Thus, every Christian continues in this warfare of faith against sin, the flesh, and the world by depending on divine power. This daily battle will exist until the promised day of the blessed hope of Christ's second advent brings the beginning of the complete annihilation of sin and all its effects.

Armageddon's Victory: Ultimate Atonement

On the cross, Jesus Christ defeated the evil powers, but they have not yet been destroyed. His complete victory over these powers will begin at the Second Coming. After Christ's victory on the cross and ascension, He began to reign as High Priest-King over all principalities and powers, waiting for them to become His footstool (Ps. 110:1). This will happen when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Lord to the glory of the Father (Rom. 14:10, 11; Phil. 2:9-11). After the devil is thrown into the lake of fire with death and Hades (Rev. 20:10, 14), and all sinners, evil dominions, authorities, and powers are destroyed, Jesus Christ will hand over the kingdom to the Father (1 Cor. 15:24-28).

Of all the New Testament books, none celebrates the consummation of this victory better than the Book of Revelation. It speaks of Christ as the Overcomer who shares His victory and promises rewards of victory to all who overcome in the end (2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21; 21:7). He appears as the risen, ascended, glorified, and reigning Lord, the One who has defeated death and the grave (1:17, 18). He is the Lamb who has triumphed (5:5) and through whose blood His people defeat the devil (12:11). He will ultimately overcome the devil and his agents—the beasts, Babylon, the kings of the earth, death, and Hades (13:17, 18; 15:2, 3; 17:14; 18; 19:11-21; 20), and eternally establish His perfect rule over all.

Armageddon fits into this picture as the beginning of the complete destruction of all the evil powers that have been a continual threat to the saints. It is the actual physical, ultimate victory of the saints over these enemies of God. The Old Testament battles and victories like the Exodus (the Red Sea victory), Deborah and Barak over the Canaanites, and Cyrus's victory over Babylon and deliverance of the Jews, foreshadowed

and symbolized the ultimate victory when God will completely deliver His people from the presence and power of their ultimate enemy: sin with all its effects. These victories are types of the antitype battle of Armageddon.

It will be logical to say, especially in the setting of the Apocalypse, that Armageddon is God's divine intervention to deliver His saints who have personally experienced Christ's victory over sin in their lives and demonstrated it in their faithful obedience to Him in the face of persecution from the evil powers—the beasts, Babylon, and the kings and people of the earth whose names are not in the book of life (Rev. 13:8; 17:2, 8). In this moral and spiritual war, the saints win victory over these evil powers by resisting their temptations and refusing to compromise their faith, even in the face of persecution and death, just as Christ did while on earth (13:17, 18; 15:2, 3; 20:4).

It is biblically consistent to say that God's saints will be within the Tribulation (and not taken out of it) and will be delivered from it by Christ's second coming. The dispensationalist theory of the Tribulation and Rapture is usually explained based on the last seven years (or one prophetic week) of the 70-week prophecy of Daniel 9:24-27. In this theory, the saints are taken out of the antichrist's seven-year tribulation in the Rapture. They return with Jesus Christ to defeat and destroy the antichrist and the nations with him in the battle of Armageddon fought in the Middle East.

Throughout salvation history (as it is recorded in the Bible), however, God's people are never taken out of trouble; they are preserved through it. Examples include: Noah and his family through the Flood (Genesis 6-9); the Israelites in the 10 plagues of Egypt before the Exodus (Exodus 7-12); Elijah and other faithful through the famine and drought of Israel (1 Kings 17, 18); the three Hebrew youth in the fiery furnace (Daniel 3); and

Daniel in the lions' den (Daniel 6). Other Bible texts make it clear that God's people will go through trouble but will be delivered out of it (Dan. 12:1, 2; Matt. 24:13; John 16:33; Acts 14, 22; 2 Tim. 3:12).

The context of the Apocalypse also agrees with the rest of Scripture on this point. It clearly shows the saints who have passed through the tribulation (Rev. 7:14), who have overcome the beast by refusing to worship him or receive his mark (13:15-17; 15:2-4), and who are protected from the troubles of the winds of strife by the seal of God like the Israelites (7:3; Ex.11:7). The second coming of Jesus delivers the saints completely in the end.

Armageddon will be the climactic outworking of Christ's victory that began on the Cross. Indeed, on the Cross, sin was publicly judged by God before the universe. It was at the Cross that "the final eradication of evil was made certain"² and complete victory over sin was made sure. As stated earlier, the Book of Revelation agrees that Christ's death on the Cross is the basis for the final victory of God and the church over all their enemies. "It is in His death that Christ overcomes His enemies, the world—not a bloody eschatological battlefield. . . . For him [John] there is only one victory of Christ; it was won in the past and resulted in the debilitation of all enemy powers, once and for all."³ Truly the Apocalypse resounds with "the objective decisive victory of the Lamb over all the powers of darkness which He won when He shed His blood on the cross."⁴ Indeed, "the message of the Book of Revelation is that Jesus Christ has defeated Satan and will one day destroy him altogether."⁵ This is the good news of Armageddon.

Armageddon in Atonement

Among other models, atonement can be described as

Christ's victory over all evil powers on the Cross. Though these powers are broken and defeated, they are not yet destroyed. Armageddon brings Christ's victory at the Cross to its climax when all these enemies of God are completely and ultimately destroyed. Though this judgment is a D-Day (doomsday) for evil, it is a V-Day (victory day) for the saints, bringing complete liberation, peace, and harmony to the whole universe and perfect reconciliation of God and alienated humanity. This is the end of the atonement, God dwelling with the redeemed with no more sin and its effects (Rev. 21:3). Armageddon will bring atonement to its final objective of reconciling God and humankind.

Though the imagery of nuclear mushroom clouds and smart bombs in the Middle East may seem like the biblical picture of the end-time prophecy of Armageddon, it is truly about one thing: God's final victory over His evil enemies and the deliverance of His saints from them. Armageddon is atonement's ultimate victory!

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