

From the November 4, 2009 Issue

Atonement in the Dirt

We're preparing a piece of our backyard for garden space for next spring. I spent last Saturday out there with my 7-year-old, sitting in the dirt, plucking up bits of landscaping gravel and dropping them into buckets.

We were chatting about anything and everything, as usual. And when the conversation somehow turned to the death of Jesus, my son looked at me a little accusingly: "I *still* don't understand why that was necessary." Apparently I haven't been drilling him hard enough on theories of atonement, and he was ready to start getting snarky about it.

I have avoided telling him the god-with-a-split-personality-disorder theory of atonement. I don't want to give him the idea that Jesus is nice, but our Father is obligated to kill something every time someone breaks a rule. Still, it's been hard to find other theories of atonement that a 2nd grader can understand.

But under the accusing glare of the particular 2nd grader in question, I had to think fast. Stalling for time, I apologized for not having been clearer about it before, and I explained that it's not an easy concept to get. He was un-impressed with these justifications.

Squatting there in the dirt, I ended up settling on a form of *Christus Victor* as my way of reasoning out why it was important for Jesus to die:

DAD: Okay, think of it this way... Do you want to die?

KID: Of course not.

DAD: Me neither. And it gets even worse, because once you die, you're sort of STUCK being dead. You can't just decide to stop being dead once you're bored with it.

KID: [*Stony glare. He's waiting for me to get to the bloody point*]

DAD: What I mean is that being dead is a little like being in jail, because you're in a place you don't want to be, but you can't leave.

KID: Okay...

DAD: And everything ends up in this jail eventually. People die. Plants and animals die. Even our solar system is going to die in 5 billion years or so. That sort of sucks, right?

KID: Yes. A LOT.

DAD: Well, if Jesus wants to be with us wherever we go, is he going to need to go to jail too?

KID: Hmmm. Okay. Yeah.

DAD: So that's ONE reason Jesus had to die. He did it so that he could be with us where we are. If we're going to go to this place called 'Death,' he's going to go there too.

KID: Dad?

DAD: Yes, my beloved firstborn son?

KID: This is getting depressing.

DAD: Yes it is, but there's more... When Jesus went to Death-Jail, did he stay there or did he break out?

KID: Oh I get it – He broke out of jail!

DAD: Exactly. You and I aren't strong enough to break out of Death-Jail, but Jesus is stronger than anything, so he busted out. He ripped the door right off the hinges. Remember the story about Samson where he pulls the city gates out of the ground and carries them away?

KID: Yeah. That was awesome.

DAD: Well that's what Jesus did. Not only did he break out of Death-Jail, but he picked up the prison door and carried it away and dumped it in the recycling bin, so that nobody will ever be stuck in that jail ever again. So all that stuff about being stuck being dead simply IS NOT TRUE anymore. We'll die, but we'll get resurrected, so it's really not a thing we have to worry about anymore.

KID: So he didn't just bust HIMSELF out of jail; he busted out EVERYBODY?

DAD: Exactly.

KID: Okay. Can I go play Lego Star Wars now?

~ John Stonecypher