



The Atonement

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through him all things were made. For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man. **For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate,** he suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

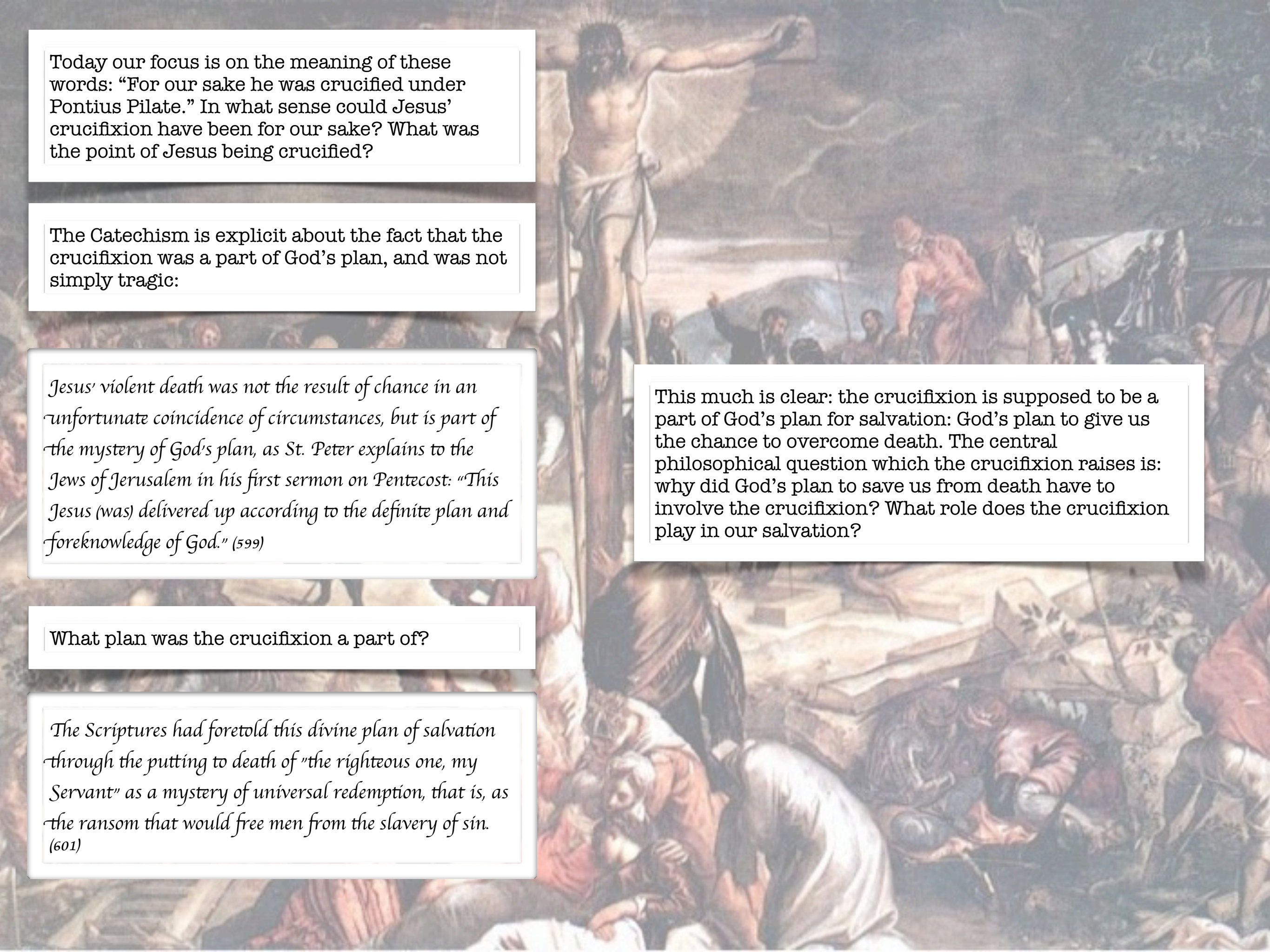
Today our focus is on the meaning of these words: "For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate." In what sense could Jesus' crucifixion have been for our sake? What was the point of Jesus being crucified?

The Catechism is explicit about the fact that the crucifixion was a part of God's plan, and was not simply tragic:

Jesus' violent death was not the result of chance in an unfortunate coincidence of circumstances, but is part of the mystery of God's plan, as St. Peter explains to the Jews of Jerusalem in his first sermon on Pentecost: "This Jesus (was) delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God." (599)

What plan was the crucifixion a part of?

The Scriptures had foretold this divine plan of salvation through the putting to death of "the righteous one, my Servant" as a mystery of universal redemption, that is, as the ransom that would free men from the slavery of sin. (601)



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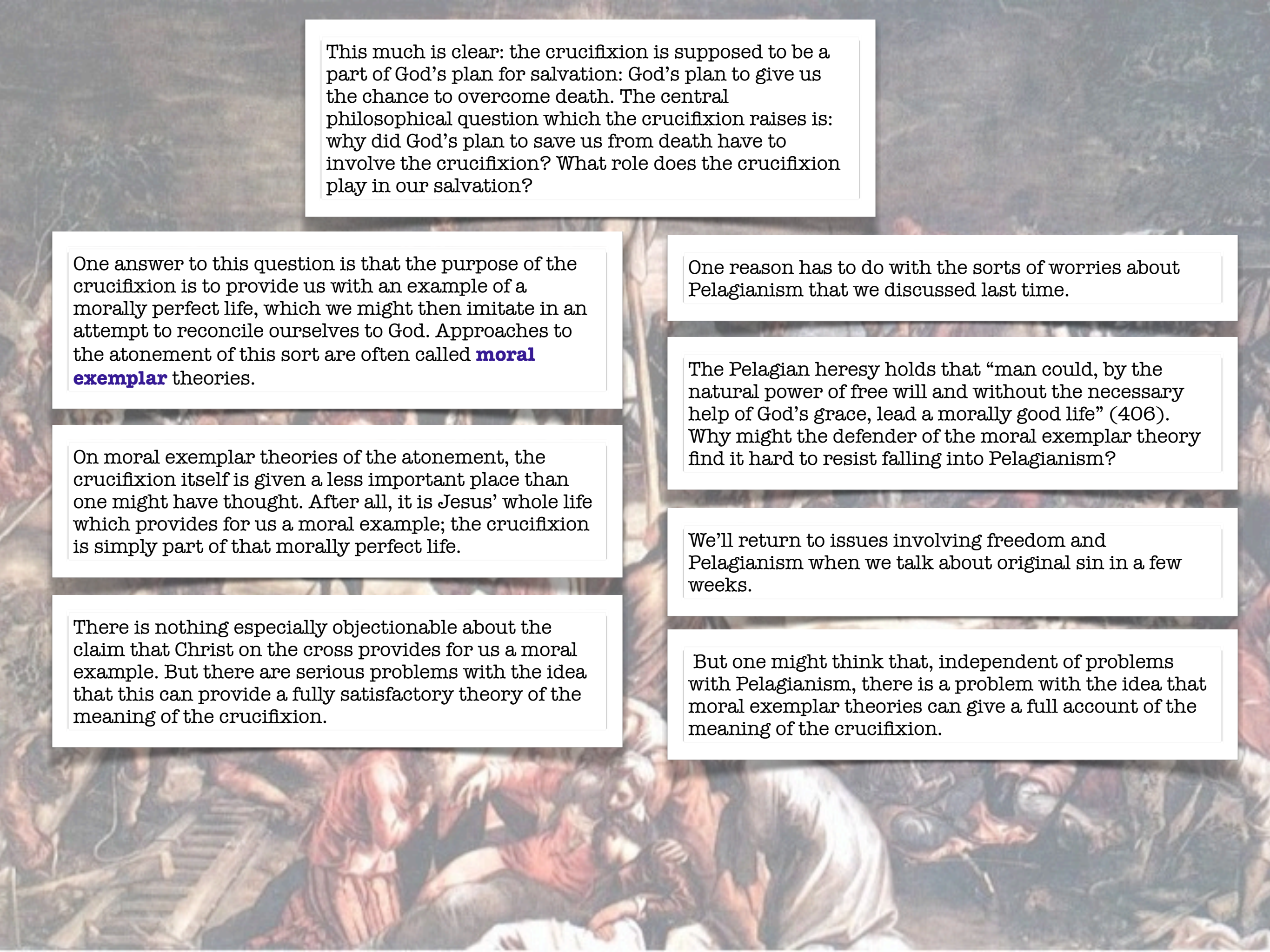
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This much is clear: the crucifixion is supposed to be a part of God’s plan for salvation: God’s plan to give us the chance to overcome death. The central philosophical question which the crucifixion raises is: why did God’s plan to save us from death have to involve the crucifixion? What role does the crucifixion play in our salvation?

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One answer to this question is that the purpose of the crucifixion is to provide us with an example of a morally perfect life, which we might then imitate in an attempt to reconcile ourselves to God. Approaches to the atonement of this sort are often called **moral exemplar** theories.

On moral exemplar theories of the atonement, the crucifixion itself is given a less important place than one might have thought. After all, it is Jesus' whole life which provides for us a moral example; the crucifixion is simply part of that morally perfect life.

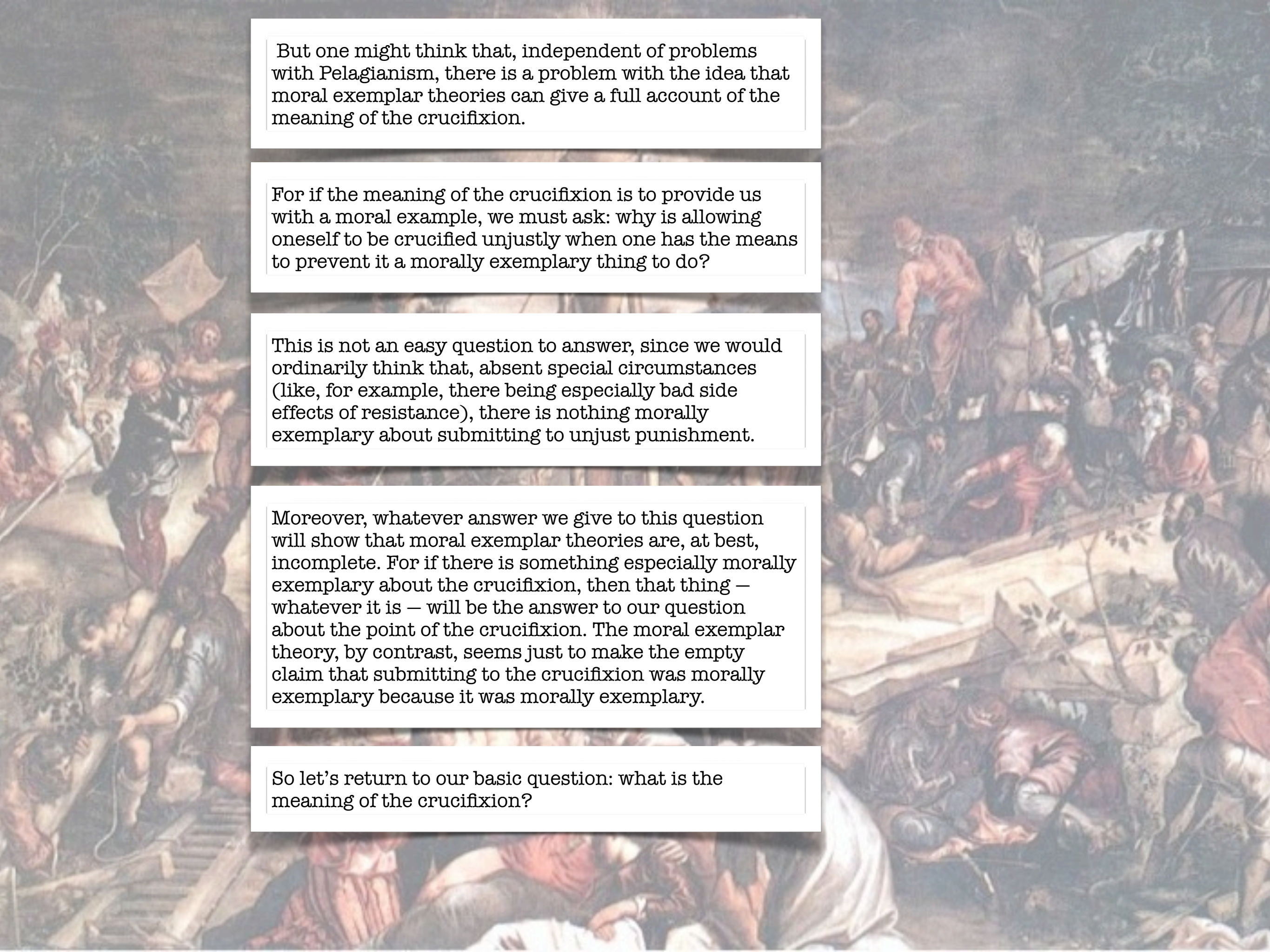
There is nothing especially objectionable about the claim that Christ on the cross provides for us a moral example. But there are serious problems with the idea that this can provide a fully satisfactory theory of the meaning of the crucifixion.

One reason has to do with the sorts of worries about Pelagianism that we discussed last time.

The Pelagian heresy holds that "man could, by the natural power of free will and without the necessary help of God's grace, lead a morally good life" (406). Why might the defender of the moral exemplar theory find it hard to resist falling into Pelagianism?

We'll return to issues involving freedom and Pelagianism when we talk about original sin in a few weeks.

But one might think that, independent of problems with Pelagianism, there is a problem with the idea that moral exemplar theories can give a full account of the meaning of the crucifixion.



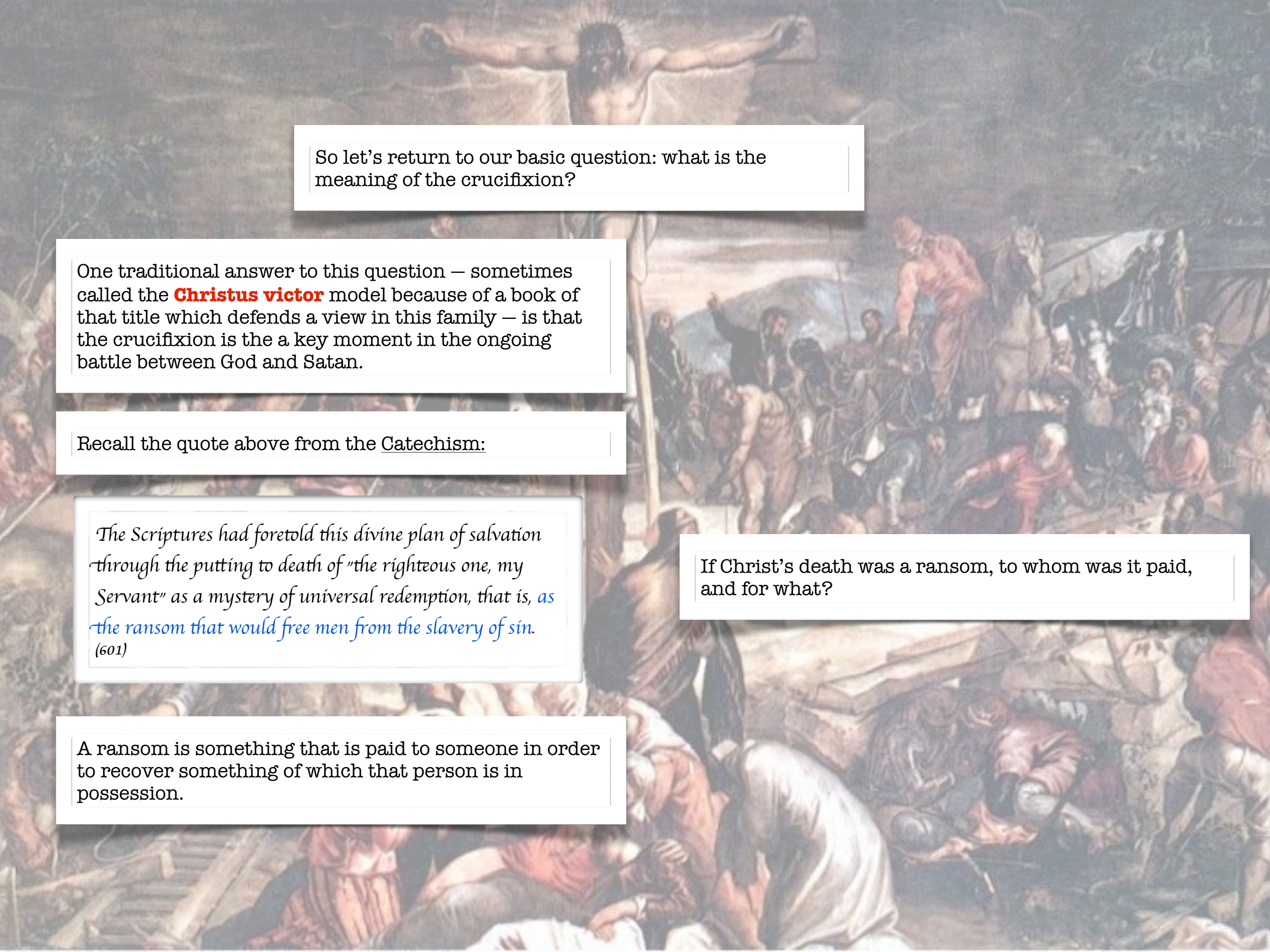
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For if the meaning of the crucifixion is to provide us with a moral example, we must ask: why is allowing oneself to be crucified unjustly when one has the means to prevent it a morally exemplary thing to do?

This is not an easy question to answer, since we would ordinarily think that, absent special circumstances (like, for example, there being especially bad side effects of resistance), there is nothing morally exemplary about submitting to unjust punishment.

Moreover, whatever answer we give to this question will show that moral exemplar theories are, at best, incomplete. For if there is something especially morally exemplary about the crucifixion, then that thing — whatever it is — will be the answer to our question about the point of the crucifixion. The moral exemplar theory, by contrast, seems just to make the empty claim that submitting to the crucifixion was morally exemplary because it was morally exemplary.

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One traditional answer to this question — sometimes called the **Christus victor** model because of a book of that title which defends a view in this family — is that the crucifixion is the a key moment in the ongoing battle between God and Satan.

Recall the quote above from the Catechism:

The Scriptures had foretold this divine plan of salvation through the putting to death of "the righteous one, my Servant" as a mystery of universal redemption, that is, as the ransom that would free men from the slavery of sin.
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If Christ's death was a ransom, to whom was it paid, and for what?

A ransom is something that is paid to someone in order to recover something of which that person is in possession.

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Origen, a 3rd century Egyptian theologian, answered the question like this:



"But to whom did He give His soul as a ransom for many? Surely not to God. Could it, then, be to the Evil One? For he had us in his power, until the ransom for us should be given to him ... he (the Evil One) had been deceived, and led to suppose that he was capable of mastering that soul, and he did not see that to hold Him involved a trial of strength greater than he was equal to. Therefore also death, though he thought he had prevailed against Him, no longer lords over Him, He having become free among the dead and stronger than the power of death, and so much stronger than death that all who will amongst those who are mastered by death may also follow Him, death no longer prevailing against them. For every one who is with Jesus is unassailable by death."

Here's one way to understand the view: by sin, people have freely placed themselves in Satan's power. God wishes to free us from Satan, and hence from death. His way of executing this plan is to offer the Son as ransom for humanity.

Satan is willing to take this bargain because, knowing of Christ's miracles, he thinks that Christ is a more desirable target than the rest of humanity.

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As the 4th century theologian St. Gregory of Nyssa put it,

"When the enemy saw the power, he recognized in Christ a bargain which offered him more than he held. For this reason he chose him as the ransom for those whom he had shut up in death's prison."

Gregory thinks of this as a kind of stratagem on God's part:

...he who first deceived man by the bait of pleasure is himself deceived by the camouflage of human nature. But the purpose of the action changes it into something good. For the one practiced deceit to ruin our nature; but the other, being at once just and good and wise, made use of a deceitful device to save the one who had been ruined.



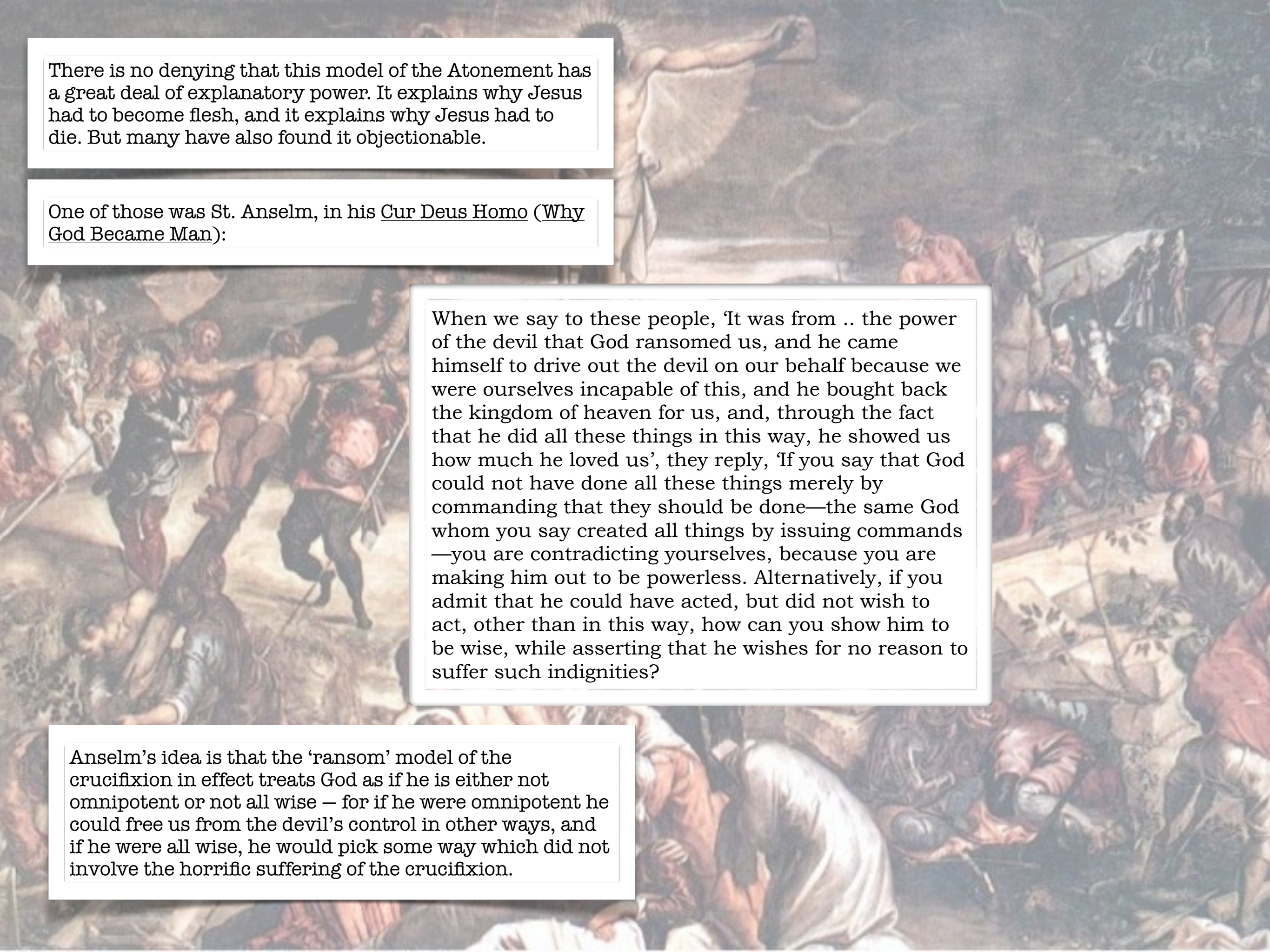
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The idea is that the fact that Christ is a human being fools the devil into thinking that Christ can be bound by death in the way that human beings — until that time — were. Satan can't condemn Jesus to death in the way that he can condemn other human beings to death, by tempting them to sin — since Jesus does not sin. So the only way for Satan to trap Jesus in death is to trade the human beings in his power — all of us — for Jesus. God's triumph over Satan then comes with the resurrection.

There is no denying that this model of the Atonement has a great deal of explanatory power. It explains why Jesus had to become flesh, and it explains why Jesus had to die. But many have also found it objectionable.

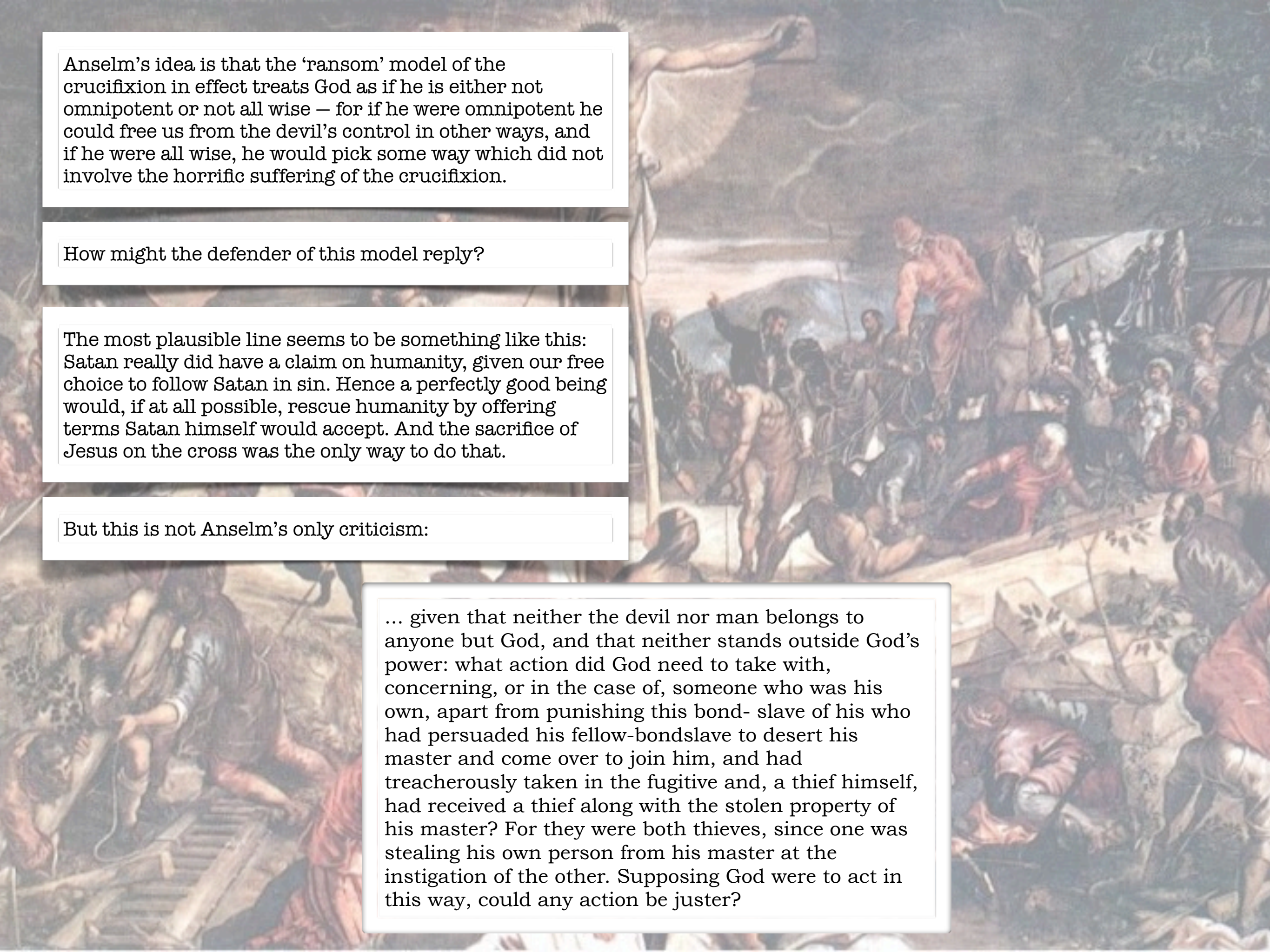


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One of those was St. Anselm, in his Cur Deus Homo (Why God Became Man):

When we say to these people, 'It was from .. the power of the devil that God ransomed us, and he came himself to drive out the devil on our behalf because we were ourselves incapable of this, and he bought back the kingdom of heaven for us, and, through the fact that he did all these things in this way, he showed us how much he loved us', they reply, 'If you say that God could not have done all these things merely by commanding that they should be done—the same God whom you say created all things by issuing commands—you are contradicting yourselves, because you are making him out to be powerless. Alternatively, if you admit that he could have acted, but did not wish to act, other than in this way, how can you show him to be wise, while asserting that he wishes for no reason to suffer such indignities?'

Anselm's idea is that the 'ransom' model of the crucifixion in effect treats God as if he is either not omnipotent or not all wise — for if he were omnipotent he could free us from the devil's control in other ways, and if he were all wise, he would pick some way which did not involve the horrific suffering of the crucifixion.



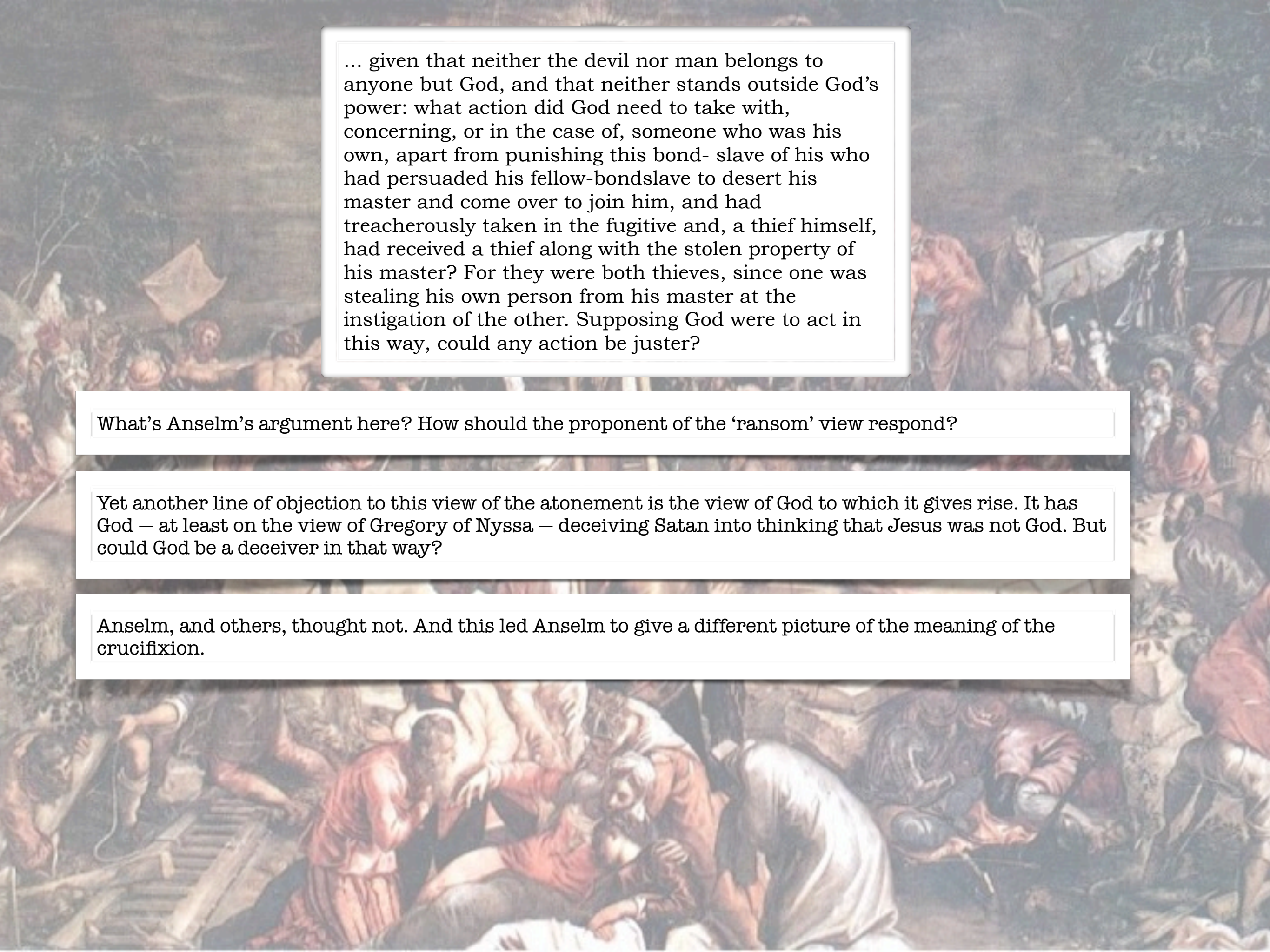
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How might the defender of this model reply?

The most plausible line seems to be something like this: Satan really did have a claim on humanity, given our free choice to follow Satan in sin. Hence a perfectly good being would, if at all possible, rescue humanity by offering terms Satan himself would accept. And the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was the only way to do that.

But this is not Anselm's only criticism:

... given that neither the devil nor man belongs to anyone but God, and that neither stands outside God's power: what action did God need to take with, concerning, or in the case of, someone who was his own, apart from punishing this bond- slave of his who had persuaded his fellow-bondslave to desert his master and come over to join him, and had treacherously taken in the fugitive and, a thief himself, had received a thief along with the stolen property of his master? For they were both thieves, since one was stealing his own person from his master at the instigation of the other. Supposing God were to act in this way, could any action be juster?

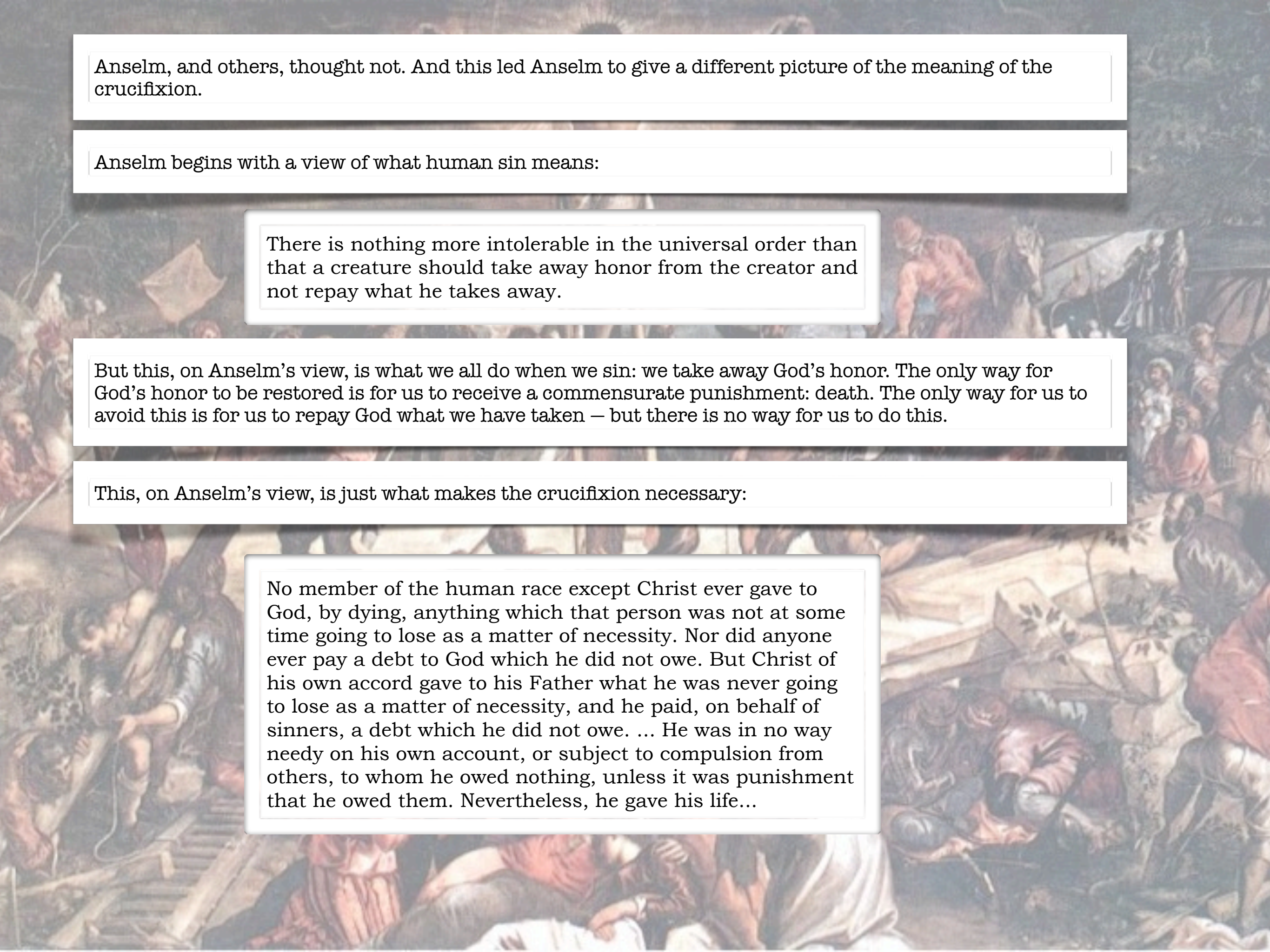


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What's Anselm's argument here? How should the proponent of the 'ransom' view respond?

Yet another line of objection to this view of the atonement is the view of God to which it gives rise. It has God — at least on the view of Gregory of Nyssa — deceiving Satan into thinking that Jesus was not God. But could God be a deceiver in that way?

Anselm, and others, thought not. And this led Anselm to give a different picture of the meaning of the crucifixion.



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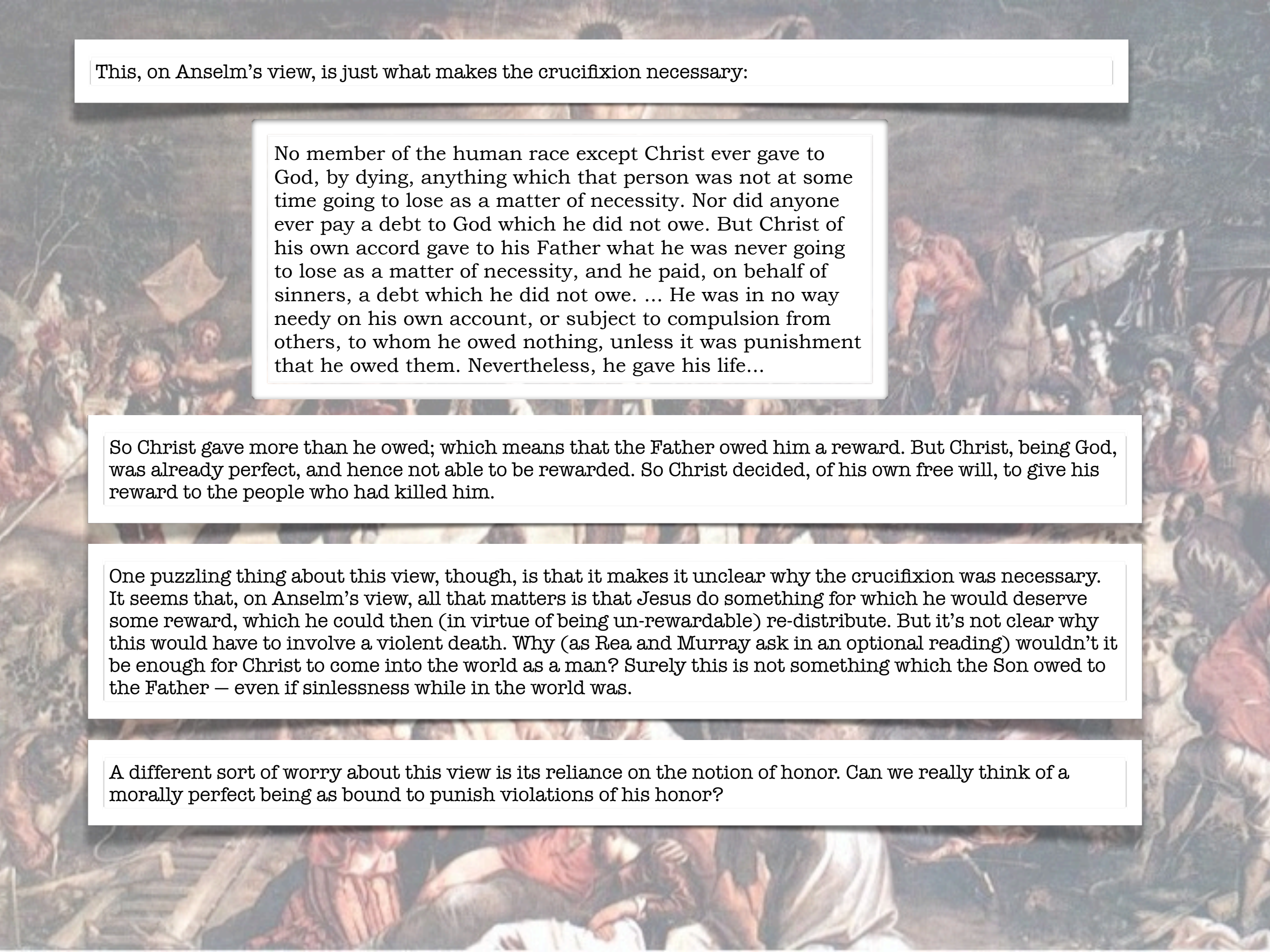
Anselm begins with a view of what human sin means:

There is nothing more intolerable in the universal order than that a creature should take away honor from the creator and not repay what he takes away.

But this, on Anselm's view, is what we all do when we sin: we take away God's honor. The only way for God's honor to be restored is for us to receive a commensurate punishment: death. The only way for us to avoid this is for us to repay God what we have taken – but there is no way for us to do this.

This, on Anselm's view, is just what makes the crucifixion necessary:

No member of the human race except Christ ever gave to God, by dying, anything which that person was not at some time going to lose as a matter of necessity. Nor did anyone ever pay a debt to God which he did not owe. But Christ of his own accord gave to his Father what he was never going to lose as a matter of necessity, and he paid, on behalf of sinners, a debt which he did not owe. ... He was in no way needy on his own account, or subject to compulsion from others, to whom he owed nothing, unless it was punishment that he owed them. Nevertheless, he gave his life...



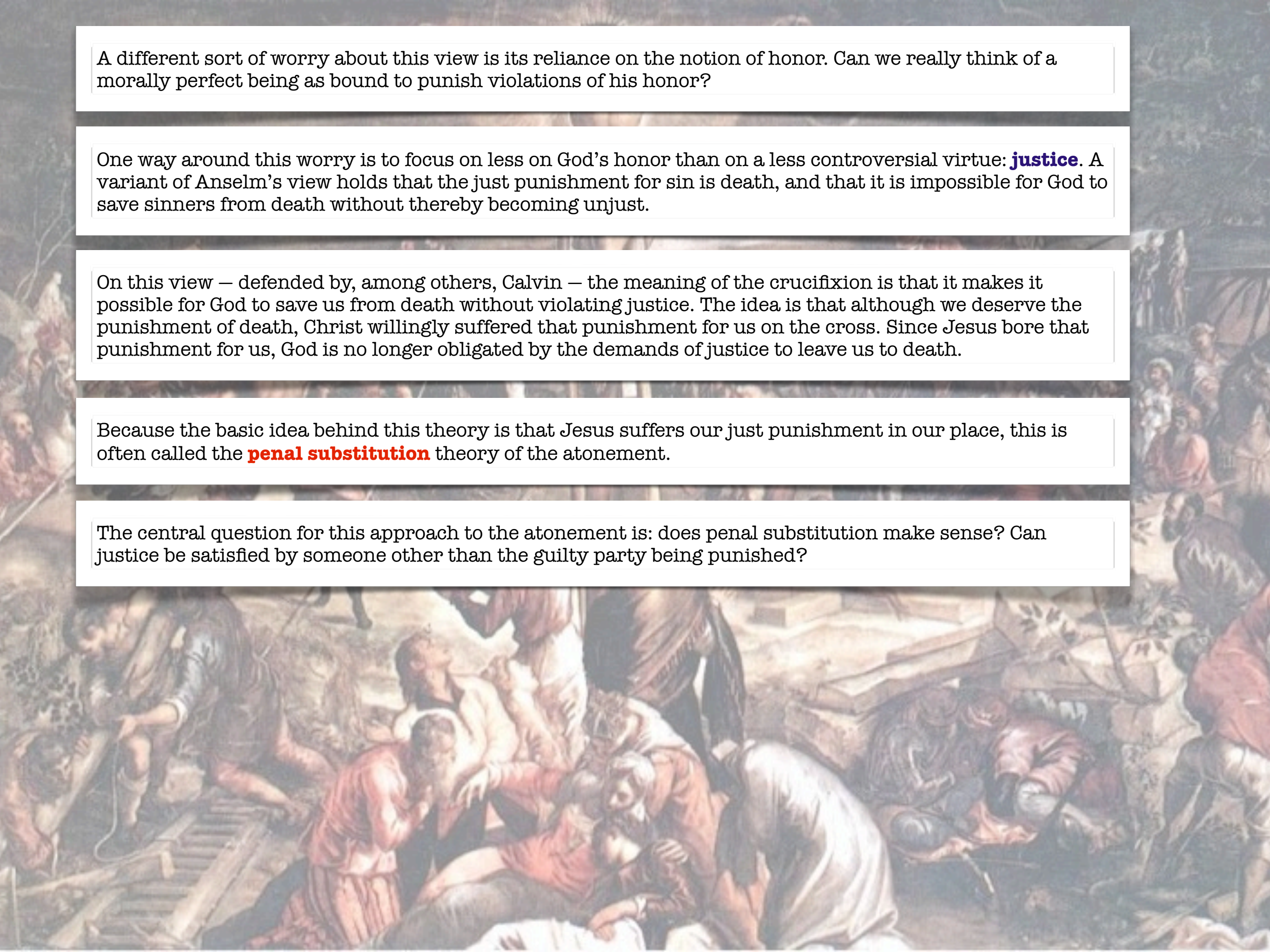
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So Christ gave more than he owed; which means that the Father owed him a reward. But Christ, being God, was already perfect, and hence not able to be rewarded. So Christ decided, of his own free will, to give his reward to the people who had killed him.

One puzzling thing about this view, though, is that it makes it unclear why the crucifixion was necessary. It seems that, on Anselm's view, all that matters is that Jesus do something for which he would deserve some reward, which he could then (in virtue of being un-rewardable) re-distribute. But it's not clear why this would have to involve a violent death. Why (as Rea and Murray ask in an optional reading) wouldn't it be enough for Christ to come into the world as a man? Surely this is not something which the Son owed to the Father — even if sinlessness while in the world was.

A different sort of worry about this view is its reliance on the notion of honor. Can we really think of a morally perfect being as bound to punish violations of his honor?



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One way around this worry is to focus on less on God's honor than on a less controversial virtue: **justice**. A variant of Anselm's view holds that the just punishment for sin is death, and that it is impossible for God to save sinners from death without thereby becoming unjust.

On this view – defended by, among others, Calvin – the meaning of the crucifixion is that it makes it possible for God to save us from death without violating justice. The idea is that although we deserve the punishment of death, Christ willingly suffered that punishment for us on the cross. Since Jesus bore that punishment for us, God is no longer obligated by the demands of justice to leave us to death.

Because the basic idea behind this theory is that Jesus suffers our just punishment in our place, this is often called the **penal substitution** theory of the atonement.

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In the reading for today, David Lewis points out that, in many cases, we are strongly inclined to resist the idea that penal substitution is just.



It is unheard of that a burglar's devoted friend serves the burglar's prison sentence while the burglar himself goes free; or that a murderer's still-more-devoted friend serves the murderer's death sentence. Yet if ever such a thing happened, we surely would hear of it – for what a newsworthy story it would be! Such things do not happen. And not, I think, because a burglar or a murderer never has a sufficiently devoted friend. Rather, because the friend will know full well that, whatever he might wish, it would be futile to offer himself as a substitute for punishment. The offer would strike the authorities as senseless, and they would decline it out of hand.

Even if the friend managed to substitute himself by stealth, and arranged for it to be found out afterward that he had been punished in place of the offender, the scheme would fail. Once the authorities learned that the offender had gone unpunished, they would get on with the job. However much they might regret their mistake in punishing the innocent friend, they could not undo that mistake by failing to punish the guilty offender. That would merely add a second mistake to the first.

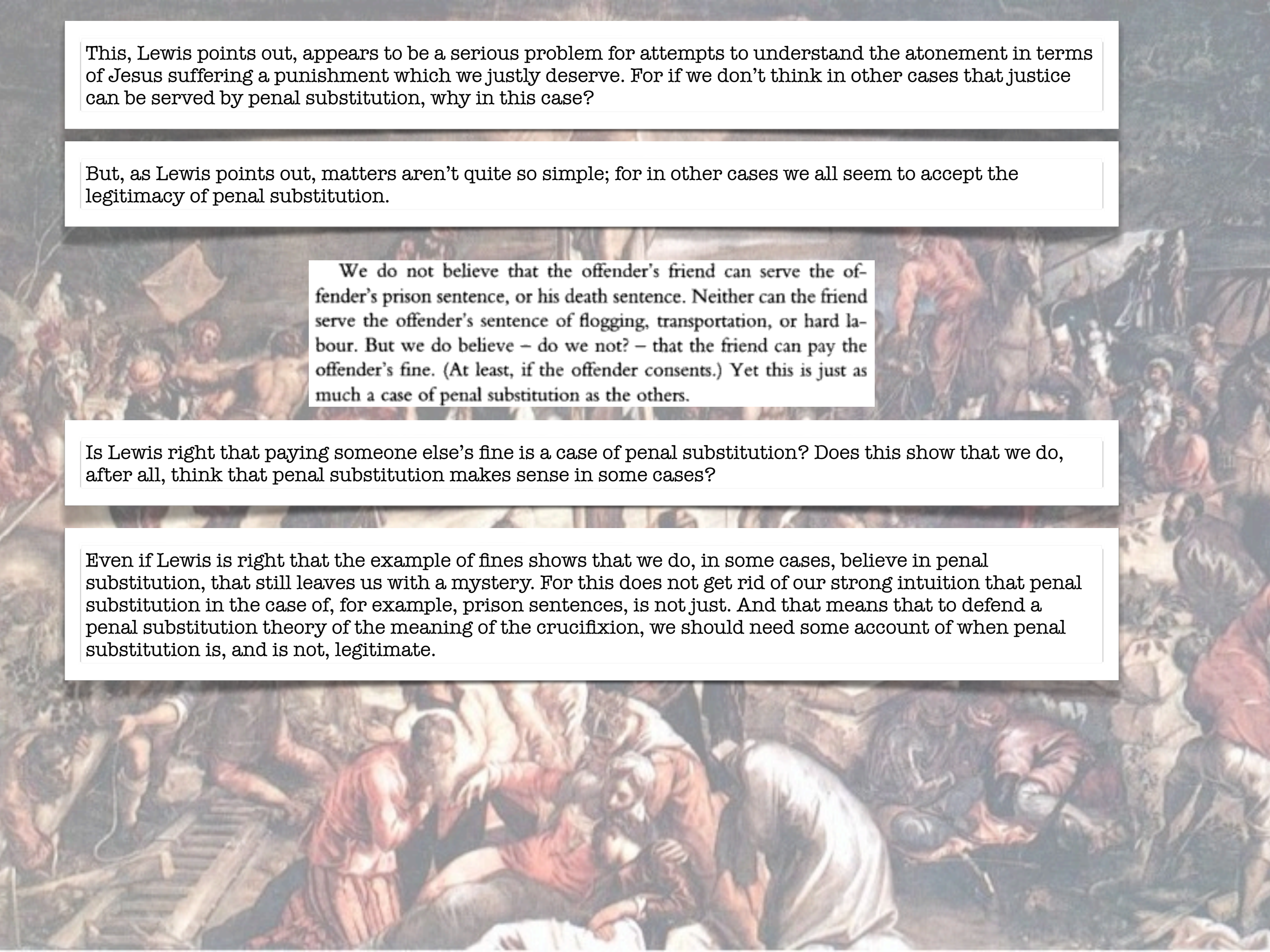
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We can imagine a world in which the punishment of burglars really is designed to serve a compensatory function, and in such a way as to make sense of substitution. But when we do, the differences from actuality are immense. Suppose, for instance, that the burglar was required to serve a sentence of penal servitude as the victim's personal slave. Then a compensatory function would indeed be served; and punishing an innocent substitute could serve that function equally well. Or suppose the burglar was to be hanged before the victim's eyes. If the victim took sufficient pleasure in watching a hanging, that might compensate him for the loss of his gold; and if he enjoyed hangings of the innocent no less than hangings of the guilty, then again punishment of a substitute could serve a compensatory function.

This, Lewis points out, appears to be a serious problem for attempts to understand the atonement in terms of Jesus suffering a punishment which we justly deserve. For if we don't think in other cases that justice can be served by penal substitution, why in this case?



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But, as Lewis points out, matters aren't quite so simple; for in other cases we all seem to accept the legitimacy of penal substitution.

We do not believe that the offender's friend can serve the offender's prison sentence, or his death sentence. Neither can the friend serve the offender's sentence of flogging, transportation, or hard labour. But we do believe – do we not? – that the friend can pay the offender's fine. (At least, if the offender consents.) Yet this is just as much a case of penal substitution as the others.

Is Lewis right that paying someone else's fine is a case of penal substitution? Does this show that we do, after all, think that penal substitution makes sense in some cases?

Even if Lewis is right that the example of fines shows that we do, in some cases, believe in penal substitution, that still leaves us with a mystery. For this does not get rid of our strong intuition that penal substitution in the case of, for example, prison sentences, is not just. And that means that to defend a penal substitution theory of the meaning of the crucifixion, we should need some account of when penal substitution is, and is not, legitimate.