

Chapter 7

The Atonement

Regarding our "Sin Debt"

My father once told me that whatever He gave to me I owe to my children, not to him. We don't owe God anything. Instead, we owe it all to the rest of God's children. I have been forgiven much, and I need to pass that forward. The purpose of God's so-called punishments is to correct us and lead us to repentance. God has always been, and always will be, our loving heavenly Father. Calvary did not change the way God deals with us and our sinfulness. It changed the way we view God, as a loving Father who gives to us sacrificially without wanting anything more from us than our love and gratitude. He wants this for our benefit, not His. What He wants for us is that we learn to love others as He loves us. When we learn to do this our lives will be wonderfully transformed as we identify with the Christ of Calvary and begin to think and act like Him.

The Purpose of Animal Sacrifices

The system of making animal sacrifices to appease an angry God was inherited by the Hebrews from previous and surrounding cultures. It is not the blood of animal sacrifices that cleanses us from sin. Instead, it is the attitude of repentance that accompanies those sacrifices.

See Isaiah 1:11: *"The multitude of your sacrifices-- what are they to me?" says the LORD. "I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats."*

Also see Hosea 6:6: *"For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings."*

The Old Testament sacrifices were a type or symbol of what was to come in the person of Jesus Christ. The "blood" of Christ, I believe, is also a symbol of a deeper truth, that Godly love is sacrificial in nature. "Agape" love is by definition sacrificial. It costs you something. In the case of Calvary, the cost was Jesus' life.

So, when the writer of Hebrews says that *"without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin,"* (Heb. 9:22) he is referring not to the physical act of killing an animal, but to the change of heart that accompanies it. The same is true for Christ's sacrifice on Calvary. It was not the physical shedding of Christ's blood that made atonement for our sins. Instead it was the underlying truths that the blood atonement represented. God in the person of His Son, Jesus, identified Himself with our sin and shame and took upon Himself the burden of our sin. When we look to the cross for mercy and forgiveness, we are forgiven and freed from the bondage that sin holds over us.

The Atonement

The cross of Calvary is God's way of identifying with us through an incredible act of humility and submission. This was God's way of demonstrating His love for us. *"But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* (Rom. 5:8) You don't really understand a person, and cannot fully appreciate that person's pain and suffering, unless you have actually walked in his/her shoes. The real message of Calvary is exactly the opposite of what most evangelicals preach. Instead of a super Holy and separate God requiring the blood of men to appease His anger and satisfy the demands of justice, we instead see God Himself in the person of His Son, Jesus, humbling Himself and literally becoming one with us in our suffering and pain. Not only is God able to look upon sin and abide in the presence of sin, He actually became sin for our benefit, in the person of Jesus Christ. *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."* (2 Cor. 5:21)

On Calvary, God has demonstrated to us that literally nothing can separate us from His love. No matter how sinful and unworthy we might think we are, none of us is so bad that God cannot love us and actually live in us. The feelings that we have of isolation from God and abandonment by God are illusions. Christian Salvation may best be regarded as getting rid of the illusion and experiencing God's presence in our lives. We are not saved from the wrath of God, but from our failure to understand how loving and understanding God really is. Our God is indeed a God of wrath, but the object of His wrath is godlessness and wickedness, because these things are harmful to us, the objects of His love. *"The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness."* (Romans 1:18) God hates sin, not sinners. Rather than separating Himself from us because of our sin, He is present with us through all our sinning, trials and suffering.

The penalty for sin is spiritual death, or estrangement from God. This is not a permanent condition. That which is dead can be made alive again. Christians, who were once dead in their sins, have been made alive in Christ. According to Ephesians 2:4-5, *"because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved."* See also Romans 6:1-11. If the penalty for sin were everlasting torture in a place called Hell, then Jesus could not possibly have paid the price of our sins on Calvary. He rose from the dead less than three days later and is very much alive today in Heaven, not Hell.

Jesus' purpose in coming to Earth was to redeem all mankind from sin and death. *"For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."* (John 3:17) On Calvary, Jesus acted as a surrogate for all mankind, when He endured estrangement from God and died both spiritually and physically. According to 1 John 2:2, *"He himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."*

The difference between those of us who are saved and those who are not saved has to do with our awareness and experience of the connection that we all have with God through Christ. God is omni-present and exists everywhere, including in the hearts of all mankind. When we by faith

enter into relationship with the Christ of Calvary, we are awakened to this connection and experience God's love, mercy and forgiveness in a personal way.

The Participatory Atonement vs. the Substitutionary Atonement

The "suffering servant" of Isaiah 53 originally referred only to the nation of Israel, not the Messiah. To this day, that is the interpretation accepted by most Jews. The nation of Israel was being punished for their iniquities and at the same time they were being healed by it. The purpose of God's judgments on the nation of Israel was not retribution but refinement and purification, and in the end they are healed and restored.

Christians saw in this passage a foreshadowing of the cross of Christ. By substituting Christ for the Nation of Israel, they came up with the idea of a "substitutionary atonement," whereby Christ takes the place of the nation of Israel and suffers in their stead. There is no doubt that most early Christians saw it this way, as most of them do to this day. On the surface, this seems to be what happened at Calvary.

The Apostle Paul, I believe, saw a deeper meaning. We are not cleansed by what Christ did on Calvary on our behalf, but instead by our PARTICIPATION in His death and resurrection. All of us, like the Hebrew nation, suffer for our iniquities, the purpose of which is to refine and purify us. The difference with Jesus is that he did not suffer for his own iniquities, but ours. He identified Himself with our sin, took upon Himself our humanity, and suffered the consequences of our sin right along with us. The atonement that took place on Calvary does not mean that we do not suffer for our iniquities. It means that Christ suffers with us, forgives us, and lifts us up to new life TOGETHER WITH HIM in Heaven. If God had chastised Christ "instead of" or "on behalf of" us, then He would not still be chastising Christians today. God chastises those whom He loves, and He loves all of us, Christians and non-Christians alike.

In Romans 6:1-14, the Apostle Paul elaborates on this:

"What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

Theories of the Atonement

Exactly what it was that Christ accomplished on Calvary has been a matter of fierce debate among Christian scholars over the centuries. My view is this. What was accomplished was the salvation of all mankind. By what mechanism was this accomplished? That is what the debate is all about. There are several predominant theories of the atonement. I would briefly summarize them as follows, in laymen's language:

1. Christ's death was a ransom paid by God to Himself or the Devil in exchange for mankind's redemption,
2. Christ's death was substituted for ours, thereby cancelling our sin debt and making it possible for God to forgive us without our having to be righteous on our own accord,
3. Christ's death was a demonstration of God's sacrificial love, by which God exerts moral influence to woo us into relationship with Himself,
4. Christ's death and resurrection was a demonstration to mankind that there is life after death, that God has always loved and accepted us. God was revealing that to us on Calvary what has always been the case.
5. Christ's death and resurrection is a process that we all go through. Because we are all spiritually united with Christ, we actually experienced it simultaneously with Christ. This is what I have termed the "participatory" view of the atonement. The term "participatory" is one that I have coined.

There are elements of truth in all of the above theories.

The participatory view, I believe, is that which most closely aligns with the writings of the Apostle Paul and the teachings of Jesus. That is why Paul talks so much about being "in Christ" and Christ being "in us." That is what Paul is talking about when he talks about our identification with, and participation with Christ in His death, burial and resurrection. Jesus made the point several times that a seed must die before it can grow and reproduce, that death precedes life. In order to be born again (of the spirit), the body must die. Paul said that this can be experienced before we die, as well, when we repent of our sin and die to our old nature and identify with Christ in His death and resurrection. So it is about this life as well as the next.

When Paul says that Christ died "for" us, he wasn't saying the Christ died "in our place" or "instead of us." He was saying that Christ died "for our benefit." How do we benefit from Christ's death and resurrection? Well, He took us along with Himself and raised us up together with Himself. He carried us on His own back, so to speak. He said that when He would be lifted up, He would draw (literally "drag") ALL men to Himself. When Paul says the righteousness of Christ is "imputed" to us, he wasn't saying that we exchanged our righteousness for that of Christ. He was saying that the righteousness of Christ was "transferred" to us as we participated with Him in His death, burial and resurrection. It was given to us by grace, through no merit of our own. The ransom that Christ paid was not to God or the Devil. It was simply the price He had to pay in order to put Himself in the position of dying and rising up again with us and for us.

This does not mean that we don't experience death, nor does it mean that we don't experience the loving chastisements of God for our sins. What it means is that Christ is the one who carries us through the process. Our salvation results from Christ's initiative, and the good that we do we cannot take credit for, because it is all done under the influence and in the power of Christ's Spirit. In order for Christ to do this work, it was necessary that He die with us. Not only did He die with us, He also was raised from the grave and exalted in the Heavenly places with us.

Christian salvation is something that happened in Christ. What we refer to as "getting saved" is temporal process in this life whereby we "experience" in our conscious awareness something that has already happened to us in Christ.

The other side of the coin of "participatory atonement" is this. Not only did we participate in the death and resurrection of Christ, but He also currently participates in our death and resurrection during our sojourn on here on earth. The term "Christ in us" refers to the idea that God the Father, as the Christ, lives in us. He not only lives in us. He is us. We all share the divine nature. We are all sparks of the divine, God's children, as it were. We are all connected. We are separated from God and one another only in the sense that we are unaware of our connectedness. Yes, we all have separate and distinct personalities or egos, but at the same time we are all part of a single divine godhead.

As an aside, I would like to point out that the term "Christ in us" does not refer uniquely to Christians. It refers the fact that Christians are aware of this connection and have invited the Spirit of Christ to take control. All are indwelt by Christ and all share the divine nature, but not all are aware of it. For all practical purposes, Christ might as well not be there if we are not aware of His presence and if we fail to exploit the power of the His Spirit within us to overcome the weakness of the flesh and live up to our calling.

The Apostle Paul did say, in Romans 8:9, that *"you, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ."* This does not mean that only Christians are indwelt by Christ. Both God the Father and the Christ are omnipresent. There is nowhere that God does not dwell. What Paul is saying is that God is not there in the practical sense if we do not allow Him to take control of our lives. He lives in us in the active sense only to the extent that we allow Him to live His life through us. Christ does not belong to us unless we take possession of Him and lay claim to Him. God always was, still is, and always will be our

loving Heavenly Father. But in the practical sense, He might as well not be if we are not aware of it and go our own way into the foreign country, as in the case of the Prodigal Son. When we are ready to return home and reclaim our birthright, our Heavenly Father will still be there waiting for us.