

THE ATONEMENT

“having obtained eternal redemption”

Key question

What was the spiritual significance of Jesus death?

Key text

Hebrews 9:11-12

“But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.”

Key Definition

Redemption

People are redeemed *from* the marketplace of slavery to sin *by* the payment of a price (the blood of Christ) *to* a state of freedom; which they are called to renounce for voluntary slavery to the Lord who redeemed them.

A Fundamental of the faith

Substitutionary Blood Atonement

Christ suffered in our place to satisfy the radical requirement of the holiness of God so as to remove the obstacle to the pardon and reconciliation of the guilty. What the holiness of God required, the love of God provided in the cross.

Introduction

1. “So central is the theme of the cross that it is no exaggeration to say that the events surrounding the passion of Christ constitute the central interest of the New Testament proclamation.” *Berkouwer*
2. The heart of the meaning of the cross is confessed in the creed: “he died for us.”
 - a. “he died” is a fact of history.
 - b. “for us” is the meaning of that fact.
3. The English word “atone” is derived from the phrase “at one.” The Hebrew word translated “atone” means to “cover.”

The word “atonement” is found often in the OT but seldom if at all in the NT. The concept however is everywhere in the NT.

4. The notion of substitutionary sacrifice is assumed in the Bible going back to Gen.4 but it is nowhere explained.
 - a. It is likely that blood sacrifice was and is seen as an expression of the most profound and serious issues of life and death. (Lev.17:11; 16:9; 20-22; Isa.53:4-10). Heb.9:4 “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness”.
 - b. The formal distinction between a sacrifice and an offering is that the former involves the slaughter or burning of an animal while the latter does not.
 - c. The prophets protested the abuses of the sacrificial system without rejecting the system altogether. They were calling for an integration of atonement and ethics. Sacrifices without faith, expressed in mercy were useless.
5. Much of the history of religions is intensely concerned with expiation. Ancient and modern religions alike amply demonstrate that human beings in cultures from time immemorial have been aware of their guilt. Conscience sees to that, with as much variability as persistence. Most religious systems practice some form of sacrifice as a part of worship. In World Religions, the sacrifice is usually initiated by the sinner. The notion that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” II Cor.5:19 is unique to Christianity.

World religions	Christianity
Humanity approaches God	God approaches humanity
Humans suffer for God	God suffers for humanity
God receives human gifts	God gives God’s own self
Sinners conciliate God	God reconciles sinners
God awaits conciliation	God actively reaches out

A. The death of Christ is a major theme in Scripture.

1. It is mentioned at least 175 times in the N.T.
2. It is the purpose of the incarnation (Matt.20:28, Heb.2:14).
3. It is the heart of the gospel (I Cor.15:1-3).
4. It is the emphasis of each of the gospel records.
5. It is a central theme in the epistles. (Col.1:19-23)
6. It is the focus of the ordinances of Water Baptism and the Lord’s Table. (Rom.6:1-7; I Cor.11:24-26).

B. The meaning of Christ’s death has been subject to many theories. It is understood in the context of:

1. The demands of life in a fallen world.

THE ACCIDENT or NATURAL THEORY - Jesus’ death was an accident of history (Modern secular view). Jesus was but another man with strong principles who was a

victim of political powers that felt threatened by him. While this is true it ignores the gospel story in the Biblical record. The historical critique explains the emphasis on the cross in the gospel record by suggesting that the suffering of early Christians needed to be dignified by an emphasis on Jesus' suffering. The gospel story was created by the early church to affirm early Christian suffering.

Traditional views are seen as objectionable by those who hold this view.

- It is felt that God is unjust to punish his beloved Son for the sins of another. This objection misses the point of the depth of the predicament of sin.
- It is an immoral arrangement by which one receives benefit from another's suffering without moral effort or discipline. This objection misses the point of God's graciousness.
- It is felt that God is cruel to punish sins if sin is inevitable. This objection misses the point of the Biblical story of how God's attributes are to be displayed in the human drama of sin.

Objections – Problems with the more radical expressions of this theory.

- It does not take the Biblical description at face value but rather assumes a historical critical perspective.
- It assumes a radically different worldview than that revealed in the Bible.

2. The demands of behavioral change in man.

THE MARTYR or HEROIC EXAMPLE THEORY - Christ was a martyr who provided an example for us (Socinus). This view assumes that man is capable of doing God's will (Pelagianism), that God is not concerned with retributive justice, so much as subjective repentance and that Christ died as any other man. The more radical forms of this view (Abelard) were condemned at the Council of Sens (1141).

THE MORAL INFLUENCE or LOVE OF GOD THEORY - Christ's death was an act manifesting the love of God for fallen man and this should influence man to repent, love God, and other people. (Abelard, Bushnell, Chrysostom).

- **II Cor.5:14-15** "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again".
- **Eph.5:1-2** "Be imitators of God therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God".
- **Phil.2:5-8** "Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!"

Objections – Problems with the more radical expressions of this theory.

- It views Christ's death as little more than that of a noble martyr.
- It does not say enough about who the teacher was.
- It assumes that no punishment for sin is required.

- It makes the live rather than the death of Christ, the focus of his work. It ignores the vicarious premise of Scripture. Christ does not merely suffer with humanity, but for humanity.
- It fails to show how anyone born before Jesus could receive redemption, since they would have had no access to his moral teaching or influence.
- It locates the effective power of atonement in personal experience, yet lacks any objectivity beyond that experience.
- It sentimentally stresses the love of God at the expense of the justice of God.
- It misses the point that finally it is not humanity only that needs to be reconciled, but primarily the holiness of God.

3. The demands of God's law.

THE GOVERNMENTAL or RESPECT FOR LAW THEORY - The death of Christ was required to show God's respect for His Law & displeasure over sin but it was not vicarious. The set-up of God's government (Law) required Christ's death (Grotius, Miley). This is the Wesleyan -Arminian view of the atonement. Fellowship with God is centered in man's repentant attitude not God's vicarious sacrifice because it is not possible, according to Grotius' understanding of law for one person to pay the penalty for another.

Objections – Problems with the more radical expressions of this theory.

- It has a hard time accounting for those scriptural passages that view the cross as propitiating God himself.
- It suggests that forgiveness rests on repentance as its ground, not objective atonement.
- It suggests that the cross has no direct effect upon God except that it renders God morally safe in forgiving sin.

4. The demands of Satan.

THE RANSOM TO SATAN THEORY - The death of Christ constituted a ransom paid to Satan for sin (Origin and Augustine). According to this view sinners give themselves over to Satan then God tricked Satan into swapping the souls of men for that of Christ. This is regarded by some as the classic historic view or *Christus Victor* and was the dominant view of the Church Fathers. It remains the view of the Eastern Orthodox Church today. It also has enjoyed a revival among some evangelicals who have questioned the consistency of the satisfaction or substitutionary view with the nature of a loving God of peace. While the view is insightful at many points it must not displace the substitutionary theory.

- **I Pet.1:18** "You were redeemed not with corruptible things, with silver or gold, from your vain matter of life handed down from your fathers; but with precious blood, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, even the blood of Christ"
- **Col.2:14-15** "nailing it to the cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross".
- **I Jn.5:19** "the whole world" is assumed to be "under the control of the evil one"
- **I Jn.3:8** "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work"
- **Jn.12:31** "Now the prince of this world will be driven out."

5. The demands of God's character. (these views are closest to the proper emphasis of the N.T.)

COMMERCIAL or SATISFACTION THEORY - Satisfaction made to the honor of God which was offended by man's sin (Anselm). The emphasis here is not on Christ's suffering so much as His moral worth & incarnation.

Objections – Problems with the more radical expressions of this theory.

- It fails to emphasize adequately the active obedience of Christ in his entire life under the law and focuses primarily upon the passive obedience of Christ in his suffering and death.
- It focuses upon medieval commercial analogies to the neglect of other moral, social, and familial analogies.
- It tends toward a disjunction between an overly harsh Father and a compassionate Son.
- Some argue that the New Testament rather views the death of Christ not as a substituted penalty, but a substitute for a penalty.

SUBSTITUTIONARY THEORY - The orthodox view. Christ offered Himself a ransom to the holy demands of God's nature. He died in our place as our substitute. This resulted in our being reconciled to God through our faith-union with Christ.

C. The nature of God reveals the necessity and meaning of Christ's death.

1. God is both holy and just. God's love without God's holiness would be unjust. God's holiness made a penalty for sin necessary. When we neglect God's holiness in our understanding of the cross we make God to be soft on sin.
2. God is loving and merciful. God's holiness without God's love would be unbearable. God's love endured the penalty for the transgressor and made payment of the penalty possible. When we neglect God's love in our understanding of the cross we make God to be an angry tyrant.
3. Of the Cross of Christ: In the love of the Triune God is found its source, in the justice of the Triune God its necessity, and in the wisdom of the Triune God its method.
4. The atonement has an active and passive aspect that come from Christ's life under the Law. **Gal.4:4** "But when the fullness' of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law."

a. **Active** – Christ lived a perfect life fulfilling the demands of God's character as expressed in the Law of Moses. His vicarious obedience produced the righteousness of faith required of all humanity. According to God's reckoning, the faithful are viewed as if Christ's righteousness had become theirs (Gal.4:4-5; Rom.5:8; 8:3; 10:4; Phil.3:9; Matt.5:17)

b. **Passive** – Christ died as a substitutionary sacrifice after the image of the lamb of the old covenant. His vicarious death produced the penalty for sin owed by all humanity. **II Cor.5:21** "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us"

Christ lived a perfectly sinless life but when our sins were imputed to him he became guilty because of us and bore the just wrath of a holy God as the one who was now the sinner.

There are three great imputations in Scripture – the imputation of Adam's sin to all humanity, the imputation of human sin to Christ, and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer.

D. **The Old Testament sets the stage for the proper understanding of the significance of Christ's death.**

1. The **LAW OF GOD** reflects His holy character.
 - a. Falling short of the glory of God = death (Rom.3:23, 6:23).
 - b. Violation of the Law demands punishment (Rom.6:23).
 - c. The wrath of God against sin is clearly revealed in Scripture (Rom.1:18, 2:5,8, 4:15, 5:9, 9:22, 12:19, 13:4-5, Eph.2:3, 5:6, Col.3:6, I Thess.1:10, 2:16, 5:9).
2. Three pictures of sacrifice in the Old Testament.
 - a. **Abel** – Heb.11:4 “by faith” Christ’s sacrifice is also applied to us by faith.
 - b. **Abraham** – Gen.22 Christ’s sacrifice is vicarious as was the ram offered in the place of Isaac.
 - c. **Job** – Job 1:5 Job offered sacrifices for all his children picturing the plenary (all-inclusive) nature of Christ’s sacrifice.
3. The Old Testament **SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM** foreshadows and explains the significance of Christ’s death. **Jn.1:29** “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”
 - a. The Passover - Ex.12 (see Matt.26:17-19; Lk.22:15; I Cor.5:7-8).
 - b. The red heifer - Num.19:1-10
 - c. The Day of Atonement - Lev.16 (see Heb.9-10)
 - d. The Tabernacle (The Jewish sacrificial system)

Name	Portion burnt	Other portions	Animals	Occasion	Text
Burnt	all	none	male without blemish; animal according to wealth	propitiation for general sin demonstrating dedication	Lev.1
Meal or Tribute	token portion	eaten by priest	unleavened cakes or grains, must be salted	general thankfulness for first fruits	Lev.2
Peace (Thank, Vow, Freewill)	fat portions	shared in fellowship meal by priest and offerer	male or female without blemish according to wealth	fellowship a. for an unexpected blessing b. for deliverance when a vow was made c. for general thankfulness	Lev.3; 22:18-30
Sin	fat portions	eaten by priest	priest or congregation - bull; king - hegoat; individual - shegoat	applies basically to situation where purification is needed	Lev.4
Guilt	fat portions	eaten by priest	ram without blemish	applies to situation where there has been desecration or desacrilization or something holy	Lev.5-6:7

3. The Old Testament **PORTRAITS OF MESSIAH** presented an enigma to the Jewish people.
 - a. Messiah is presented as both:
 1. A glorious and triumphant ruler (Ps.110)
 2. A suffering servant (Isa.52:13-53:12). How can this be?
 - b. This led to speculation among the Jews concerning the nature of Messiah. Three views:
 1. **Two Messiahs**--one of suffering (the son of Joseph), the other of glory (the son of David).

2. **A Person and the People** - The texts that speak of glory refer to a coming leader, while those that speak of suffering refer to the nation Israel.
3. **Messiah = “An Age”** - one, a time of suffering, and another, a time of glory.

E. There are a number of concepts that must be included in an orthodox understanding of Christ’s death.

1. It was a **RANSOM SACRIFICE** paid to the holy demands of God for the sinners’ freedom from just condemnation.
 - a. There are a number of colorful Greek words used to make this point.
 1. (AGORAZO) - “to buy in the marketplace” (**I Cor.6:20** “For you have been bought with a price” Look also at I Cor.7:23; II Pet 2:1; Rev. 5:9, 14:3-4).
 2. (EXAGORAZO) - “to buy out of the marketplace” (**Gal.4:5** “in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law,” Look also at Gal.3:13; Eph.5:16; Col.4:5).
 3. (LUTROO) ΛΥΤΡΩΩ - “to let loose; to set free; remove from sale” (**Mk.10:45** “to give His life a ransom for many”).
 4. (LUTROSIS) - noun form of LUTROO (**Heb.9:12** “and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.”).
 5. (APOLUTROSIS) - “to free from enslavement” (**Eph.1:7** “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses”, Look also at Lk.21:28; Rom.3:24, 9:23; I Cor.1:30; Eph.14; 4:30; Col.1:14; Heb.9:15; 11:35).
 - b. This purchase is a once and forever transaction (**Heb.10:14** “For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” Look also at Isa.53:7-12; Jn.1:29; I Cor.5:7; Eph.5:2; Heb.9:22,26).
2. It was a **PROPITIATION** or satisfaction of all God’s righteous demands upon the sinner (**Rom. 3:25** “whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed” Look also at **I Jn.2:2; Heb.2:17**). Note that the RSV uses the word “expiation” emphasizing the effect of Christ’s death on man (taking away his guilt) as opposed to its effect upon God (appeasing His wrath).

NOTE: The concept of “expiation” with its emphasis not on the demands of God’s character but on the guilt of man has often been offered as the preferred emphasis noting that atonement is made more “for sin” as opposed to “to God.” This emphasis is popular among those who are offended by the notion that God is a God of wrath (C.H. Dodd). Expiatory acts sought to remove “guilt feelings” through conciliatory actions offered to God, initiated by penitents is common in the history of religion. Propitiation stands in contrast to this concept.

The world’s religions (expiation)

Preparation for the gospel
 History of religions
 Humanity approaches God
 Humans suffer for God
 God receives human gifts
 Sinners conciliate God

Christianity (propitiation)

The gospel
 The reversal of religions
 God approaches humanity
 God suffers for humanity
 God gives God’s own self
 God reconciles sinners

God awaits conciliation

God actively reaches out

3. It provided the basis by which the world is **RECONCILED** unto God (**Rom.5:10** “For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we will be saved by His life.” Look also at I Cor.7:11; II Cor.5:18-20; Eph.2:16; Col.1:20-21; II Pet.2:1; I Jn.2:1-2).
4. It was a **VICARIOUS** (substitutionary) provision whereby Christ died in the place of the sinner (**I Pet.3:18** “For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God,” Look also at Lev.16:21; Isa.53:6; Matt.20:28; Lk.22:37; Jn.10:11; Rom.5:6-8).
 - a. Αντι (ANTI) is a Greek preposition meaning “in the place of” (**Matt.20:28** “just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”).
 - b. Ηυπερ (HUPER) is a Greek preposition meaning “for the benefit of; in the place of” (**II Cor.5:21** “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”).
 - c. Jesus’ death is not to be understood as the heroic act of a martyr but rather as the just punishment of a guilty sinner for He actually became sin (guilty) for us. It is in this context that Jesus cried from the cross “Why have you forsaken me.” Matt.27:46.
5. **At the root of the atonement is the SUBSTITUTIONARY THEORY although the other theories have merit.**
 - a. Christ’s death was a tragic act of injustice at the hands of wicked men. Acts 2:23
 - b. Christ is a powerful example in His obedience unto death. I Pet.2:21
 - c. Christ’s death does reveal God’s love to us in a dramatic way. Rom.5:8
 - d. Christ’s death is a response to the demands of God’s Law. Gal.4:4-5
 - e. Christ’s death did free us from Satan’s grasp. Col.2:15
 - f. Christ’s death is linked to His holy life, which does bring honor to the Father. II Cor.5:21
6. **Note some of the other purposes in God’s plan related to the atonement.**
 - a. It terminated the rule of condemnation through the Old Covenant (Mosaic law). (Rom.10:4; Col. 2:14; II Cor.3:1-18; Eph.2:15; Gal.3:19-25; 5:1-6)
 - b. It terminated the authority of the believer’s sin nature so that he need not obey its desires (Rom.6:1-10).
 - c. It terminated the authority of Satan and his hosts over God’s people (Col.2:15; Jn.12:31).
 - d. It reveals the nature of God’s character (holy, just, loving, wise, merciful, etc.).
 - e. It reveals the seriousness of man’s dilemma.
 - f. It reveals the nature of the Gospel. It is about the cross not moral rearmament.
 - g. It reveals the basis of Christian ethics. It is about the loving sacrifice of self for others.
 - h. It reveals the extent of God’s empathetic love for all who suffer. This extends even to the suffering and shame that comes from our moral failure. He suffered our shame before we did. There are three great imputations in Christian theology: 1) the imputation of Adam’s sin to the human race, 2) the imputation of human sin to Christ on the cross, 3) the

imputation of Christ's righteousness to all believers. Christ became as much a sinner on the cross as we became righteous in Him through faith.

- i. John of Damascus put it in words.
 - Death has been brought low,
 - the sin of our first parent destroyed,
 - hell plundered,
 - resurrection bestowed,
 - the power given us to despise the things of this world and even death itself,
 - the road back to the former blessedness made smooth,
 - the gates of paradise opened,
 - our nature seated at the right hand of God,
 - and we made children and heirs of God.
 - By the cross all things have been set aright,
 - it is a raising up for those who lie fallen a support for those who stand,
 - a staff for the infirm,
 - a crook for he shepherded,
 - a guide for the wondering,
 - a perfecting of the advanced,
 - salvation for soul and body an averter of all evils,
 - a cause of all good things,
 - a destruction of sin,
 - a plant of resurrection,
 - and a tree of eternal life.

Note: It is more important to know *that* we are saved by the cross than *how* we are saved by it.

It is difficult to imagine any alternative way of salvation that more fully satisfies the rigorous requirements set by the confluence of God's holiness, justice, and love amid the wretched conditions requiring reparation for the history of sin. *Anselm*

7. Who was responsible for the death of Jesus?

- a. Ultimately it was **God** who's plan centered on the cross. **Acts 2:22-23** "Men of Israel, listen to these words; Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know – this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to the cross by the hands of godless men and put him to death."
- b. The Scripture indicates that no one takes the life of **Christ** but rather, he lays it down of his own volition. **Jn.10:18** "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative, I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again."
- c. The **Jewish leaders** were historically responsible with the assistance of the **Roman** system.
- d. In a theological sense, **all sinners** were responsible in that it was for our sins that he offered himself a sacrifice.

8. Four metaphors of atonement in the New Testament.

Diplomatic	Legal	Familial	Sacrificial
The negotiated liberation of slaves	The fair procedures of a just court room	The loss of a family member	The sacrifice offered at the Temple.
Freedom	Justice	Love	Holiness
I Cor.6:20, Mk.10:45	Rom.5:19	I Jn.4:10	Heb.9:12
Christ is liberator	Christ is advocate	Christ is Son	Christ is priest

Pastoral advice

What does a person have to believe about Christ's death to be accepted by the church?

1. Paul seems to link the orthodox gospel to a substitutionary view of the atonement. This would suggest that the orthodox view is fundamental to the faith.
2. It is very possible that a "born-again" believer could have a confused view of the atonement. In this case a correction should be made before a person is recognized by the church as an orthodox believer.

Questions that you should be able to answer.

1. Specific facts you should know.

- a. Identify two Scriptures that explain the meaning of Christ's death.
- b. What are three false views of the atonement?

2. Issues that you should be able to discuss.

- a. How is the death of Christ related to the OT sacrificial system?
- b. What are some of the purposes for the atonement other than the substitutionary sacrifice for sin?
- c. How would you defend (from Scripture and common sense) the idea of God's wrath against sinners?
- d. What is the offense of the cross to our contemporary culture?
- e. How are the Roman Catholic mass and the Jewish day of atonement similar?

3. Questions you should wrestle with.

- a. Why is the orthodox view of the atonement so offensive to the modern mind?
- b. How might the atonement be explained so that this offense is minimized? Is this a wise move?
- c. If a person has a false view of the atonement should they be received as a Christian by the church?

d. Does a believer have to confess sin in order to have the sin forgiven?