

“THE NECESSITY AND NATURE OF CHRIST’S ATONEMENT”

Today, in churches across the globe, Christians gather together to remember the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ. And it is very appropriate that we do this. Were it not for Christ’s death on the cross on that first Good Friday, there would be no Christian religion, no Christian church, no Christian faith. This is why, from very early on in church history, the cross has been the defining symbol of Christianity.

What Christ accomplished on the cross, his substitutionary sacrifice on behalf of his people, has come to be referred to by the term “atonement.” Tonight, I want us to reflect upon the necessity and nature of the atonement. Why did Jesus have to die? What was accomplished by his death on the cross?

Our passage begins with Paul’s famous words, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Paul says that sin is universal. But that is not the only thing that Paul says about sin. He also says that our sinfulness causes us to fall short of God’s glory. Now, what exactly does that mean? What is this glory that we all fall short of? There are two main possibilities. It could be referring to a glory that God bestows by announcing his approval over us. Or, it could be referring to the glory that human beings should reflect as creatures made in the image of God. Both interpretations are possible, and both make the same basic point: there is something that we lack in the sight of God. There is a

standard that God requires, and no person is able to live up to that standard. In the words of the 19th century Anglican bishop Handley Moule, “The harlot, the liar, the murderer, are short of [that glory]; but so are you. Perhaps they stand at the bottom of a mine, and you on the crest of an Alp; but you are as little able to touch the stars as they.” (cited in Stott, *Romans*, 109) Every single one of us falls short of the glory that God requires of us.

This is why the atonement is necessary. Our sin renders us unable to measure up to God’s standard. God requires us to be completely righteous. Anything less than perfection falls short of that standard. Think about that. Let’s say, theoretically, that you were able to make it through life with only having committed one sin. In every other respect, aside from that one sin, you perfectly fulfilled God’s law. Now, if God requires complete perfection, what can you do to make up for your one sin? What can you do to make yourself perfect? There is nothing that you can do. Try as you might, you cannot make up for that one sin. You have fallen short of the standard. God requires perfection, and you failed to meet that requirement. This is why Calvin says, “There is no righteousness where there is sin.” God requires righteousness. And the only way for us to be righteous is for Jesus to pay for our sin and to clothe us with his righteousness. Only in Christ can we find the righteousness that we lack. That is why the atonement is necessary; that is what the atonement is about.

In these verses, Paul talks about three different aspects of the atonement: justification, redemption, and propitiation. Each of these terms sheds light on the atonement from a different angle. They are not competing theories, or alternate explanations, of the atonement, but complementary images of it.

We begin with the image of justification. You may know that justification is a legal term, a term that means “to declare righteous.” Now, the very fact that we stand in need of justification undermines all of our self-righteousness. As we stand before God’s throne of judgment, we all deserve the verdict, “Guilty.” And God’s righteousness requires him to declare a just verdict. He cannot simply overlook sin. He cannot grade on a curve. God is holy, and he must declare sin to be sin. But in Christ, God has provided a way by which we can be declared righteous, a way of justification.

In this passage, Paul tells us three basic truths about justification: the source of justification, the ground of justification, and the means of justification. The source of justification is God’s free grace. We are justified by his grace as a gift. The initiative in salvation comes from God, not from us. It was God’s love, which no one deserves, that caused him to send Jesus into the world. That is the source of justification.

The ground of justification is Christ and his cross. God cannot declare an unrighteous person to be righteous; he cannot declare the guilty to be innocent. If he were to do that,

he would be compromising his own righteousness and justice. This is why the cross is the only ground of our justification. Jesus died on the cross as the substitute for all who will believe in him. He bore the punishment that we deserve. For this reason, and for this reason alone, God is able to justify the unjust. He can look upon guilty, sinful people such as you and I and declare us to be righteous, and he can do so only because we are united to Christ, and because our sins have been reckoned to him and his righteousness has been reckoned to us.

And this brings us to the means of justification. Faith is the means by which we are justified. Christ's saving work is "received by faith." Justification is, as Luther rightly insisted, by faith alone. But it is important for us to understand that there is nothing meritorious about faith. Our faith does not earn anything from God. Faith is only the instrument by which we receive God's free gift. As Richard Hooker wrote, "God justifies the believer – not because of the worthiness of his belief, but because of his worthiness who is believed." (cited in Stott, *Romans*, 118) If you have faith in Christ, then God looks upon you and declares you to be righteous – not because of any righteousness of your own, but because of Christ's righteousness that is reckoned to you by faith. God declares that you are worthy of entering his presence and living in fellowship with him as one of his people. That is justification.

Paul also describes Christ's atonement as a work of redemption. This is a term that was used to refer to the purchase of a slave out of his or her bondage. We are in bondage to sin, in bondage to the guilt that we incur from sin, and in bondage to the power that sin exerts over us. The chains of sin are far too heavy and oppressive for us to ever cast off by our own effort. Try as we might, we cannot break free from captivity to sin. We need a deliverer. We need a Redeemer. And that Redeemer is Jesus Christ. Christ died to set us free from bondage to sin; he died to set us free from sin's guilt and power.

And Paul also describes Christ's atonement as a propitiation. This term is less familiar to us today, but it would have been well known to Jews and Gentiles in the first century. It was a term used in both Israel and in the pagan world in reference to the system of religious sacrifices. A sacrifice propitiates the god to whom it is offered. That is, it appeases, averts and removes divine wrath. Some people have a hard time thinking of the God of the Bible in this category. It is much more popular to conceive of God as a lenient deity, a god who doesn't get too bent out of shape by our failings. We might like to believe in that kind of God, but that is not the God of the Bible. God is a God of wrath. In Rom. 1:18, Paul says that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness of men." Our sin incites God's wrath and anger, and justly so. He is a holy God, and he is right to be wrathful towards those who fail to submit to his perfect will. God cannot compromise his holiness. He cannot affirm the lie that says that moral evil does not matter. Our sin incites God's wrath, and that wrath must be averted if we are to

be saved. That is what propitiation is about. Christ's death on our behalf serves as the propitiation for our sins. In the words of John Stott, "God himself gave himself to save us from himself." (*Romans*, 115)

The atonement was necessary because we stood before God as condemned and imprisoned by sin, and as objects of divine wrath. The atonement accomplished justification, redemption, and propitiation. This is why the cross of Christ is at the very heart of the Christian gospel. This is why we glory in the cross. Listen to these words from John Owen, in which he describes the glorious accomplishment of Christ in his atoning work:

"How glorious the Lord Jesus Christ is in the eyes of believers! When Adam sinned, he stood ashamed, afraid, trembling, as one ready to perish for ever under the severe displeasure of God. Death was what he deserved, and he fully expected the sentence to be immediately carried out. In this state, the Lord Christ in the promise comes to him, and says, 'Poor creature! How terrible is your condition! How deformed you are now! What has become of the beauty, the glory of that image of God in which you were created? See how you have taken upon yourself the monstrous shape and image of Satan? And yet your present sorrow, your physical return to dust and darkness, is in no way to be compared with what is to follow. Eternal distress lies before you. But now, look up and

behold me, and you will have a glimpse of what infinite wisdom, love and grace have purposed for you. Do not continue to hide from me. I will take your place. I will bear your guilt and suffer that punishment which would sink you eternally into the hideous depths of hell. I will pay for what I never took. I will be made a curse for you so that you may be eternally blessed.’ In the same vein the Lord Christ speaks to all convicted sinners when he invites them to come to him.” (*The Glory of Christ*, pp. 60-61)

That is what the Lord Jesus Christ says to you, if you come to him in faith. He tells you that he took your place; he tells you that he bore the punishment you deserved; he tells you that he averted God’s wrath that was directed towards you; he tells you that he set you free from sin’s guilt and power; he tells you that he is your righteousness. What a Savior!

Not what my hands have done can save my guilty soul;
Not what my toiling flesh has borne can make my spirit whole.
Not what I feel or do can give me peace with God;
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears can bear my awful load.

Thy work alone, O Christ, can ease this weight of sin;
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God, can give me peace within.

Thy love to me, O God, not mine, O Lord, to thee,
Can rid me of this dark unrest, and set my spirit free.

Thy grace alone, O God, to me can pardon speak;
Thy pow'r alone, O Son of God, can this sore bondage break.
No other work, save thine, no other blood will do;
No strength, save that which is divine, can bear me safely through.