

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE **(LESSON EIGHTEEN)**

THE ATONEMENT **(PART ONE)**

The doctrine of the Atonement in Christian theology describes how lost, unregenerate human beings can be reconciled to God through the sacrificial suffering, and death of Jesus Christ. We will define the Atonement as **the work accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ in His life, death and resurrection, in order to save lost, unregenerate human beings**. This definition indicates that we will use the word “atonement” in a broader sense than it is generally employed. In most instances, the word is used to refer to the forgiving or pardoning of sin in general, and original sin in particular, through the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ which makes it possible for God and His creation to be reconciled. But as we will discover in our study of this doctrine, the sinless life that our Lord lived, under the Law, also provides saving benefits to us and is therefore, an important element of the work of atonement. The doctrine of the Atonement lies at the very heart of Christianity. It is central to all Christian theology.

In **Philippians 2:5-8**, the apostle Paul outlines the process by which God became a human being: *“You must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had. Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross”* (**New Living Translation**).

Theologians refer to the act of God becoming a human being as Incarnation. The word “incarnation” is derived from the Latin verb **incarno**, which means “to make into flesh” or, in the passive, “to be made flesh.” The two great objectives that Jesus Christ, God incarnate, came to accomplish in His earthly mission were:

1. the removal of the curse which had come upon the entire human race as a result of the disobedience and fall of Adam; and
2. the restoration of human beings to the image of God and fellowship with Him. Both of these were essential to salvation.

Let us recall that when God created Adam, He gave Him specific instructions as to how he should rule over the works of His hands. As a test of obedience, Adam was given permission to eat of every tree of the Garden of Eden except of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which was located in the middle of the Garden. In **Genesis 2:16-17**, we read the following: *“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”* Tragically, Adam deliberately and defiantly disobeyed that command. The disobedience of Adam was especially horrible in light of the fact that God had blessed Him so abundantly, had expressed such tremendous good will toward him, and had warned him of the terrible consequences that he would have to deal with if he disobeyed.

One of the consequences of his disobedience was the corruption of his moral nature. Moreover, by his fall, Adam corrupted not only himself but all of his posterity, since by divine appointment he acted as the federal head and representative of all humanity.

Adam and all his descendants had now to suffer the penalty, not only of physical death, but spiritual death as well, which meant eternal separation from God. The human race was morally polluted and guilty and could not by any means reform themselves. Furthermore, it is very evident that no member of this fallen race was capable of paying the debt owed by themselves or by any other member, since each one had to deal with the consequences of his or her own sinful condition. No member had even the slightest grounds on which to base a request that he or she be excused from the penalty of the law. Hence our condition was truly desperate.

But fortunately for fallen, unregenerate, lost humanity there was One who was both able and willing to deliver us from our hopeless dilemma. It was for this purpose that the Lord Jesus Christ became incarnate and performed for man a double service. On the one hand, He discharged the penalty of sin through His own suffering and death, and on the other hand, He restored holiness and life through His perfect obedience to the moral law.

One of the titles given to our Lord in the New Testament is “*the last Adam*” (**1 Corinthians 15:45**), which indicates that Jesus Christ became a federal head and representative comparable with Adam. As a result of the disobedience and fall of one man, the first Adam, ruin and death came upon humanity. As a result of the obedience of another man, the “last Adam,” Jesus Christ, redemption and eternal life came. Jesus Christ was the successful Adam, who did **on behalf of** His people what the first Adam failed to do. Jesus Christ became our **substitute**.

The idea of substitution is deeply rooted in the biblical concept of atonement. In fact, if we eliminate substitution from the theology of Christianity we would have to discard the Scriptures altogether.⁹

In the Old Testament, we see a graphic concept of the atonement worked out in the nation of Israel through a complex sacrificial system. **Leviticus 16** provides us with God’s instructions to Moses regarding the Day of Atonement. We shall read verses **1-22** from the **New Living Translation**:

1 The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of Aaron’s two sons, who died after they entered the Lord’s presence and burned the wrong kind of fire before him.

2 The Lord said to Moses, “Warn your brother, Aaron, not to enter the Most Holy Place behind the inner curtain whenever he chooses; if he does, he will die. For the Ark’s cover — the place of atonement — is there, and I myself am present in the cloud above the atonement cover.

3 “When Aaron enters the sanctuary area, he must follow these instructions fully. He must bring a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.

4 He must put on his linen tunic and the linen undergarments worn next to his body. He must tie the linen sash around his waist and put the linen turban on his head. These are sacred garments, so he must bathe himself in water before he puts them on.

5 Aaron must take from the community of Israel two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.

6 “Aaron will present his own bull as a sin offering to purify himself and his family, making them right with the Lord.

7 Then he must take the two male goats and present them to the Lord at the entrance of the Tabernacle.

8 He is to cast sacred lots to determine which goat will be reserved as an offering to the Lord and which will carry the sins of the people to the wilderness of Azazel.

9 Aaron will then present as a sin offering the goat chosen by lot for the Lord.

10 *The other goat, the scapegoat chosen by lot to be sent away, will be kept alive, standing before the Lord. When it is sent away to Azazel in the wilderness, the people will be purified and made right with the Lord.*

11 *“Aaron will present his own bull as a sin offering to purify himself and his family, making them right with the Lord. After he has slaughtered the bull as a sin offering,*

12 *he will fill an incense burner with burning coals from the altar that stands before the Lord. Then he will take two handfuls of fragrant powdered incense and will carry the burner and the incense behind the inner curtain.*

13 *There in the Lord’s presence he will put the incense on the burning coals so that a cloud of incense will rise over the Ark’s cover — the place of atonement — that rests on the Ark of the Covenant. If he follows these instructions, he will not die.*

14 *Then he must take some of the blood of the bull, dip his finger in it, and sprinkle it on the east side of the atonement cover. He must sprinkle blood seven times with his finger in front of the atonement cover.*

15 *“Then Aaron must slaughter the first goat as a sin offering for the people and carry its blood behind the inner curtain. There he will sprinkle the goat’s blood over the atonement cover and in front of it, just as he did with the bull’s blood.*

16 *Through this process, he will purify the Most Holy Place, and he will do the same for the entire Tabernacle, because of the defiling sin and rebellion of the Israelites.*

17 *No one else is allowed inside the Tabernacle when Aaron enters it for the purification ceremony in the Most Holy Place. No one may enter until he comes out again after purifying himself, his family, and all the congregation of Israel, making them right with the Lord.*

18 *“Then Aaron will come out to purify the altar that stands before the Lord. He will do this by taking some of the blood from the bull and the goat and putting it on each of the horns of the altar.*

19 *Then he must sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times over the altar. In this way, he will cleanse it from Israel’s defilement and make it holy.*

20 *“When Aaron has finished purifying the Most Holy Place and the Tabernacle and the altar, he must present the live goat.*

21 *He will lay both of his hands on the goat’s head and confess over it all the wickedness, rebellion, and sins of the people of Israel. In this way, he will transfer the people’s sins to the head of the goat. Then a man specially chosen for the task will drive the goat into the wilderness.*

22 *As the goat goes into the wilderness, it will carry all the people’s sins upon itself into a desolate land.*

It is evident that quite a few animals were involved in the rituals on the annual Day of Atonement. After the high priest sacrificed a bull for his own sin, two goats were taken and lots were cast over them. One of the goats was reserved to serve as a sin offering for the people, while the other was to serve as a scapegoat. Verses **21** and **22** inform us as to what role the scapegoat played in the drama: *“He (the high priest) will lay both of his hands on the goat’s head and confess over it all the wickedness, rebellion, and sins of the people of Israel. In this way, he will transfer the people’s sins to the head of the goat. Then a man specially chosen for the task will drive the goat into the wilderness. As the goat goes into the wilderness, it will carry all the people’s sins upon itself into a desolate land.”*

The high priest laid his hands on the head of the scapegoat, symbolizing the transfer or imputation of the sins of the people to the goat. The scapegoat was then driven into the

wilderness, outside of the camp where the presence of God resided. The sins of the people were symbolically carried away with it. The atonement however, involved more than that. The other goat had to be slain and its blood sprinkled upon the atonement cover or the mercy seat, which was the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. It was called the “atonement cover,” because the blood that was sprinkled upon it indicated the means by which the sins of the people were atoned for and the means by which they were reconciled to God.

In **Hebrews 10:1-10**, we are informed that the animals which were used as substitutes on the Day of Atonement, were only shadows of a reality that would be revealed at a later time. The **New Living Translation** renders the passage as follows:

1 The old system under the law of Moses was only a shadow, a dim preview of the good things to come, not the good things themselves. The sacrifices under that system were repeated again and again, year after year, but they were never able to provide perfect cleansing for those who came to worship.

2 If they could have provided perfect cleansing, the sacrifices would have stopped, for the worshipers would have been purified once for all time, and their feelings of guilt would have disappeared.

3 But instead, those sacrifices actually reminded them of their sins year after year.

4 For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

5 That is why, when Christ came into the world, he said to God, “You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings. But you have given me a body to offer.

6 You were not pleased with burnt offerings or other offerings for sin.

7 Then I said, ‘Look, I have come to do your will, O God — as is written about me in the Scriptures.’”

8 First, Christ said, “You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings or burnt offerings or other offerings for sin, nor were you pleased with them” (though they are required by the law of Moses).

9 Then he said, “Look, I have come to do your will.” He cancels the first covenant in order to put the second into effect.

10 For God’s will was for us to be made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ, once for all time.”

The value of the atoning sacrifices in the Old Testament was in the way they represented the authentic atonement which was yet to come. The people living under the Old Covenant were justified by believing in the promise of God. They believed by seeing and contemplating the rituals as types of a future reality. They received real atonement from Jesus Christ only. It is very clear that in the Old Testament ceremonies, the concept of substitution was central.

In order to redeem fallen human beings it was not sufficient for our Lord to merely shed His blood. We are not saved by the blood of Jesus as such. For the children of Israel, the shedding of blood involved the loss of life. *“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23)*. What was required as the payment for sin was the life of the sinner.

In the Old Testament sacrificial system, God was saying in effect to the Israelites, “You have committed capital offences against Me, and the Law demands your death, but I will accept the death of an animal in your stead. The animal will be your substitute.”

The Bible speaks of two distinct aspects of this substitutionary action. One aspect is **expiation** and the other aspect is **propitiation**. Expiation refers to the removal of guilt from someone. This aspect is seen in the drama of the scapegoat. The sin of the Israelites was transferred to the scapegoat by the high priest and the goat was then driven away into the wilderness, carrying away the sins of the people with it. In **Psalm 103:12**, we find a beautiful expression of expiation: *“As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.”*

Of course, we know that our sins were not transferred to a scapegoat. Our sins were transferred to Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, who took our guilt upon Himself. He fulfilled the prophecy in **Isaiah 53:3-6**: *“He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*

Jesus Christ became our scapegoat; He became our sin-bearer; He carried our sins far away, so far away that they are forgotten, never to be remembered anymore!

Propitiation refers to the satisfaction of the justice of God and the appeasement of the wrath of God, by the death of Jesus Christ in our stead. This aspect is seen in the drama of the goat who was slain and whose blood was sprinkled over the atonement cover, or the mercy seat.

The necessity of appeasing God is something many religions have in common. In ancient pagan religions, as well as in many religions today, the idea is taught that man appeases God by offering various gifts or sacrifices. However, the Bible teaches that God Himself has provided the only means through which His wrath can be appeased and sinful man can be reconciled to Him. In the New Testament, the act of propitiation always refers to the work of God and not the sacrifices or gifts offered by man. The reason for this is that man is totally incapable of satisfying God's justice except by spending eternity in hell. There is no service, sacrifice, or gift that man can offer that will appease the holy wrath of God or satisfy His perfect justice. The only satisfaction, or propitiation, that could be acceptable to God and that could reconcile man to Him had to be made by God Himself. For this reason, God, came into the world in human flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ to be the perfect sacrifice for sin and make atonement for our sins. Jesus Christ became our substitute. The moral obligation that we owe to God was paid by Him and therefore, God is not angry with us anymore. The sacrificial death of Jesus Christ as our substitute fully satisfied the justice of God and fully appeased His wrath.

In **Galatians 3:10-14**, we read the following: *“But those who depend on the law to make them right with God are under his curse, for the Scriptures say, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the commands that are written in God’s Book of the Law.’ So it is clear that no one can be made right with God by trying to keep the law. For the Scriptures say, ‘It is through faith that a righteous person has life.’*

This way of faith is very different from the way of law, which says, ‘It is through obeying the law that a person has life.’ But Christ has rescued us from the curse pronounced by the law. When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.’ Through Christ Jesus, God has

blessed the Gentiles with the same blessing he promised to Abraham, so that we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith” (New Living Translation).

Brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us. When the apostle Paul investigated the depths of the atonement, he was confronted with the concept of the curse. The penalty for sin is the experiencing of the curse of God. Our Lord became a curse. It is significant that He was not executed by His own people, the Jews, but by Roman Gentiles. They were considered to be “unclean people” who lived “outside the camp” of Israel. Jesus died outside the city of Jerusalem, for Golgotha was outside the city limits. He was taken outside the camp, He was numbered among the Gentiles and He was considered unclean. God plunged the world into darkness clearly indicating that the light of His countenance was turned away. From the cross our Lord cried out *“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”* He was experiencing the full measure of the curse. He was cut off from the land of the living on our behalf, so that we would not be cut off.

The great mystery in regard to the Atonement lies in the fact that God chose to accept the sufferings of Christ as a just equivalent for the suffering that should have been meted out to sinners. The question may be asked, “How can the suffering of an innocent person be set to the account of a guilty person in such a way that the guilty person is freed from the obligation to suffer?”

In light of the fact that Jesus Christ is God, and is therefore of infinite value and dignity, we may say that the crucifixion of Christ was not only the world’s most heinous crime, but that it was a more terrible crime than that which would have been committed if the entire human race had been crucified. Whatever may be said about the Atonement, it certainly cannot be said that the debt paid by Christ was of lesser value than that which would have been paid if all of those for whom He died had been left to suffer their own penalty. Jesus Christ, who was God incarnate, was not only of greater value than any individual human being but was of greater value than the sum total of all human beings. Therefore, the value of His suffering and death is more than sufficient to redeem as many of the human race as God sees fit to call to Himself. Christ did not, of course, suffer eternally as those who are not saved will eventually do, but because He was of such infinite value and dignity His suffering was what God considered a just recompense for that which was due to all of those who were to be redeemed.

When we who have been redeemed read the account of the crucifixion of our Lord, let us remember that we had a share in it. Let us remember that it was for our sin that He suffered and it was as our Substitute that He died. As Cecil Alexander wrote,

*“For me was that compassion,
For me that tender care;
I need His wide forgiveness
As much as any there.
It was my pride and hardness
That hung Him on the tree;
Those cruel nails, O Savior,
Were driven in by me.”*

Or as Charles “Rusty” Goodman wrote,

*I often wonder who could be so cruel
To hang my Lord upon a rugged tree*

*But then I chanced to pass an old looking glass
And there I saw the man staring back at me*

*I saw the eyes that turned aside
I saw the lips that sadly whispered "Crucify!"
I saw the feet that walked in sin
I saw the hand that drove the nails in Him
I saw the man that crucified the Lord.*

In order for us to understand how it was possible for Christ to have accomplished this work of redemption it is necessary for us to keep in mind the fact that He possessed two natures, one Divine and the other human, and that it was in His human nature that He suffered on the cross. But since the two natures were vitally united what He experienced in either, He experienced as a Person. Hence His suffering on the cross was God's suffering, and His death was in a real sense God's death for His people. In a sense then, it was God who died on Calvary! The words of Paul in **Acts 20:28** support this seemingly incredible statement: "*Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.*" This means that the death of Christ, through which the Atonement was accomplished, was an extraordinarily astonishing event. It was the most important event in the history of the universe. It was the central event in all history.

It is very evident that an atonement of some kind was necessary if human beings were to be pardoned. The justice of God demands that sin be punished and it demands that righteousness be rewarded. God would not be just if He failed to do punish sin and reward righteousness. Consequently, the law which was set forth in the beginning, that the punishment for sin should be both physical and spiritual death, could not simply be brushed aside or negated. The holy character of God was at stake, and when man sinned the penalty had to be paid. The idea of substitutionary suffering was at the foundation of the entire sacrificial system of the Jews and impressed upon them the fact that a righteous God could make no compromise with sin, and that sin must be punished with its just recompense, death.

Although Christ's work of Atonement is completed, He still retains His resurrection body and will retain it forever. His resurrection body, though it is a glorified one, still bears the marks of His suffering and it will do so forever. In this way, God demonstrates how closely He identifies with us and confirms His measureless love for us.

There are persons who object to the doctrine of Atonement on the grounds that it is unjust to punish one person for the sins of another and assert that the idea of substitutionary suffering is disgusting. We argue, however, that there can be no injustice or corruption connected with substitutionary suffering when the person who suffers is the same one who enacted the law that such and such an offense should be followed by such and such a penalty and He Himself steps in and receives the penalty in His own person while at the same time, making provision for the salvation of the offender. In financial matters, we recognize that there is no injustice when a creditor remits a debt, provided that he assumes the loss himself. This is exactly what God has done in the process of redemption.

He has assumed the loss Himself and has set us free. In this case God, who is the offended party, took the initiative and:

1. made allowance for a substitution;
2. provided a substitute; and

3. became the substitute Himself.

If after man fell, God, as the sovereign Ruler of the universe voluntarily chose to pay man's debt, surely there can be no grounds for objecting that such action was not right. God chose to act in this way in order to manifest His attributes of love and mercy before men and angels throughout eternal ages. This is precisely what Paul explains to us in **Ephesians 2:4-9**: *"But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) For he raised us from the dead along with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms because we are united with Christ Jesus. So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus. God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it"* (**New Living Translation**).

Many of those who oppose the doctrine of Atonement do not appreciate the fact that Jesus Christ was both God and man, divine and yet human. They view Jesus as human only. Because they see in Jesus only a man, the Atonement, from their point of view is nothing but a colossal perversion, an insult to their intelligence and an insult to God. And it is true that if Christ was human only, the whole Christian system is reduced to foolishness. Had Christ been only a man, He could no more have saved others than could any other martyr. God cannot make atonement for sin by taking the sins of a criminal and laying them on a good man. He can only make an atonement for sin by taking the sins of a criminal and laying them on Himself. This is exactly what the doctrine of the Atonement teaches us that He has done.

We will continue to explore the great doctrine of the Atonement in our next Lesson.