

THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE **(LESSON TWENTY-ONE)**

THE ATONEMENT **(PART FOUR)**

In **Lesson 18**, we defined 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.**” We stated that this definition indicated that in our study of the doctrine of the Atonement we would use the word “Atonement” in a broader sense than it is generally employed. We made the point that in most instances the word “Atonement” 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 Jesus Christ, which makes it possible for God and His creation to be reconciled. But we also indicated that the sinless life our Lord lived, under the Law, also provides saving benefits to us and is therefore an important element of the work of Atonement. In this Lesson, we will consider this aspect of our Lord’s atoning work.

In **Lesson 18**, we noted that the two great objectives to be accomplished by our Lord in His earthly mission to this world were, firstly, the removal of the curse which had come upon the entire human race as a result of the disobedience and fall of Adam, and secondly, the restoration of human beings to the image and fellowship of God. In order to accomplish these two objectives, the Lord Jesus entered into a vital relationship with humanity by taking our nature upon Himself through incarnation. He acted as our federal head and representative in precisely the same manner that Adam had acted when he plunged the human race into sin. The Lord Jesus Christ took our place before the divine Law. On the one hand, He fulfilled every precept of the Law in His life. This aspect of His work is referred to as His **Active** obedience. On the other hand, He suffered in His own person the penalty due for our transgressions. This aspect of His work is referred to as His **Passive** obedience

Throughout the history of the Church, most theological discussions have emphasized the **passive** obedience of our Lord but have had very little to say about His **active** obedience. The result of this is that many professing Christians who readily acknowledge that Jesus Christ suffered and died for them, seem to be unaware of the fact that the holy, sinless life which He lived under the Law, was also a substitutionary work by Him on their behalf, which guaranteed eternal life for them.

If we think about the matter seriously, we will see that although the suffering and death of Jesus Christ was fully effective in paying the debt which His people owed to divine justice, His suffering and death was, in a sense, a negative service only. Our Lord’s suffering and death was effective in relieving His people of the debt which they owed, but His suffering and death could not provide them with a **positive reward**. The effect of His suffering and death was to bring them back to the position in which Adam stood before the fall. It provided for their rescue from sin and its consequences, but it could not secure eternal life for them. Eternal life is the reward for keeping the Law perfectly as **Matthew 19:16-17** indicates: “*And, behold, one came and said unto him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: **but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments.***”

If the work of Jesus Christ had merely entailed the payment of the debt which was owed by His people, then they, like Adam, would still have been under the obligation to earn their own salvation through a Covenant of works and they, like Adam, would have been subject to eternal death again if they disobeyed. But the Covenant of works had been tried and it had failed. It had failed because the human race was a failure! In **Romans 3:9-20**, Paul emphasizes this truth:

9 *What then? are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin;*

10 *As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one:*

11 *There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God.*

12 *They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.*

13 *Their throat is an open sepulchre; with their tongues they have used deceit; the poison of asps is under their lips:*

14 *Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness:*

15 *Their feet are swift to shed blood:*

16 *Destruction and misery are in their ways:*

17 *And the way of peace have they not known:*

18 *There is no fear of God before their eyes.*

19 *Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law: that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.*

20 *Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.*

John Fullerton MacArthur Jr. in a sermon entitled ***“The Non-Negotiable Gospel”*** made the following remarks: *“The law requires attitudes and behaviours which are opposite the natural desires of the human heart; it demands unnatural affections, it demands hated attitudes and hated behaviours. The law goes against the natural will.*

Secondly, the demands that the law makes are not only against the sinner’s will but they are beyond the sinner’s capability, so the sinner is both unwilling and unable. Thirdly the law exacts absolute perfection accepting nothing less all the time, perfection with no excuses all the time. Fourthly, the law accepts no partial payment for violations. The law offers no restitution and no restoration. No good acts erase bad acts, there is no accumulated human goodness that cancels out one sin. A lifetime of human goodness can’t cancel one sin.

Also, the law refuses to accept good intentions, the law is indifferent toward good intentions or noble motives as if that's any consolation or credit against guilt. Further the law provides no lightening of the burden of responsibility. The law does not shorten the sinner's sentence; it is an unrelenting taskmaster, there is not one millimeter of mercy in the law. Furthermore, the law shatters the soul of the noblest sinner like a hammer shatters glass.

And then the law sentences the violator to the most extreme punishment forever without relief eternally. The law provides no strength to help its victims, the law offers no assistance. The law listens to no excuses, listens to no confessions, is indifferent to repentance. The law offers no grace, the law provides no hope. You want to live under the law?"

It is evident then that if human beings were to be saved, their salvation had to be worked out utilizing a different strategy than the Covenant of works, for what sense would it make for God to rescue a man from a situation which had proved too strong for him, merely to put him back into the same situation again? Having rescued his people once, God was not going to allow them to be lost a second time. In the plan of salvation man was not going to play the decisive role. The decisive role was going to be played by God. The basis of salvation was not going to be works but grace, the free and undeserved love and favour of God exercised toward undeserving sinners. The result of salvation was not going to be failure but complete success. That is exactly why it was a necessity in the nature of the case that Jesus Christ, in His human nature, rendered perfect obedience to the Law by living a sinless life during the thirty-three years of His earthly pilgrimage, and thus, fulfilled the second vitally important part of His work of redemption.

The fact that our Lord did, in fact, live a life of absolute perfection in relation to the Law is confirmed by the passages of Scripture outlined below. We have utilized the rendering of the **New Living Translation** for each passage.

LUKE 23:4

"Pilate turned to the leading priests and to the crowd and said, 'I find nothing wrong with this man!'"

JOHN 8:46-47

"Which of you can truthfully accuse me of sin? And since I am telling you the truth, why don't you believe me? Anyone who belongs to God listens gladly to the words of God. But you don't listen because you don't belong to God."

HEBREWS 4:14-15

"So then, since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin."

HEBREWS 7:23-28

"There were many priests under the old system, for death prevented them from remaining in office. But because Jesus lives forever, his priesthood lasts forever. Therefore he is able, once and forever, to save those who come to God through him. He lives forever to intercede with God on their behalf."

He is the kind of high priest we need because he is holy and blameless, unstained by sin. He has been set apart from sinners and has been given the highest place of honor in heaven. Unlike those other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices every day. They did this for their own sins first and then for the sins of the people. But Jesus did this once for all when he offered himself as the sacrifice for the people's sins."

1 PETER 2:21-23

"For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps. He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone. He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered."

On the Cross our Lord prayed, *"Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do"* (Luke 23:34). But never did He pray, "Father, forgive me." Nowhere in the accounts of His life can we detect even the slightest hint of sin-consciousness. He made no confession of sin, nor did He at any time offer a sacrifice for Himself in the temple. At the time of His death, there was no shadow of a cloud between Him and the Father except as He assumed the consequences of sin on behalf of others.

By His life of absolute perfection, Jesus Christ acquired for His people a positive righteousness which is imputed to them when they are saved and which guarantees for them eternal life. In Him, His people have fulfilled the Law of perfect obedience, as also in Him they have borne the penalty for their sins. By His passive obedience, they have been rescued from hell and by His active obedience they are given entrance into heaven.

We have just said that by His life of absolute perfection, Jesus Christ acquired for His people a positive righteousness which is **imputed** to them when they are saved and which guarantees for them eternal life. But what does this word **imputation** mean? The word "imputation" comes directly from the Latin. It is an accounting term; it means "to apply to one's account." Expenses are debited and income is credited.

There is a double imputation that takes place in justification. Paul makes reference to this double imputation in **2 Corinthians 5:21**: *"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."* Here we are informed that our sin is imputed to Christ. We are the offending party. He is without sin. He kept the Law perfectly. Yet, on the cross, God poured out His wrath on Christ. Why? Because our sin was imputed to Christ. He took upon Himself our sin. Our great debit was put on His account. Christ paid the horrible penalty as the cup of God's wrath was poured out upon Him.

There is also a second imputation. Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. He not only takes our debit, but we also get His credit. Christ paid the penalty we could never satisfy, but He also kept the Law perfectly, which we could not do either. Consequently, God credits to us the righteousness. We stand before God clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. There is a sense, then, in which we are saved by works. We are certainly not saved by our works, but instead by Christ's work of perfect obedience, on our behalf. One theologian said that two of the most beautiful words in the Bible are **"for us."** Jesus lived and died and rose again for us. All of His work was done on our behalf. Jesus Christ took the filthy rags of our sin and clothed us in the robe of His own perfect righteousness.

Brothers and sisters, the doctrine of the person and work of Christ is the gospel. Therefore, the doctrine of imputation - the crediting of our sin to Him and of His perfect obedience to us - is essential to this gospel. It shows us why the gospel is such good news. Jesus Christ really has done it all. He has met our Creator's standard of perfection for us, so we never need to fear God's wrath if we are in Christ by faith alone. This doctrine of imputation can lead us only to praise the glory and grace of God. This doctrine of imputation tells us that salvation truly is of Him and of Him alone.

The teaching of Paul that we are saved, not by our own righteousness, but by the righteousness of Christ which is imputed to us, is very clear. In **Romans 10:1-3**, he wrote, *"Brethren, my heart's desire and prayer to God for Israel is, that they might be saved. For I bear them record that they have a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God."*

In **Philippians 3:8-9** he wrote, *"Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ, And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith."*

Beloved ones, if we had been able to work out our own salvation there would have been no need for Jesus Christ to have become incarnate and to have submitted to such humiliation and suffering. The salvation which the Scriptures offer to mankind is a salvation provided entirely by God Himself. It is not adulterated in any way by human works. We are, in fact, nothing but receivers; we never bring any adequate reward to God, and we are always receiving from Him. Good works are not the means to earn or safeguard our salvation. Good works are rather the fruit and proof of salvation. They are performed as an expression of love and gratitude for the salvation **which has already been conferred upon us**. Good works, done with right motives toward God, are a result of our having been regenerated, not the means of our regeneration. Our responsibility in this system is to praise God, to honour Him by keeping His commandments, and to reflect His glory in all possible ways.

Brothers and sisters, it is important for us to understand that the requirement for salvation at the present time is what it has always been, perfect obedience to the Law of God and perfect conformity to the will and character of God. The perfect obedience of Jesus Christ in relation to the Law, and His perfect conformity to the will and character of God are imputed to His people as the only basis of their salvation, and they will enter heaven clothed only with the garment of His perfect righteousness and utterly destitute of any merit of their own. Thus grace, pure grace, is extended not in lowering the requirements for salvation, but in the substitution of Jesus Christ for His people. He took their place before the Law and did for them what they could not do for themselves.

Brothers and sisters, it is not possible for us to really fathom the depths of our Lord's suffering on our behalf. His physical suffering was certainly most excruciating. And yet that was not the most awful or awesome part, of His suffering. His poignant, agonizing cry, *"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me,"* speaks of a great spiritual suffering which was more intense than the physical.

In previous Lessons we noted that the penalty originally inflicted for sin was not merely the separation of the soul from the body, which is physical death, but the separation of the soul from God, which is spiritual death. It is my conviction that our Lord suffered not only the separation of His soul from His body but the separation of His soul from God as well. I believe that He not only **felt** forsaken but that He, in His humanity, actually **experienced** being forsaken. During those hours that Jesus hung on the cross as the sin-offering for His people that unique spiritual relationship which had existed between His human soul and His Father, and which had so enriched Him during the entire period of His earthly life, was withdrawn. God literally hid His face from Him. His human soul, which in Gethsemane "*began to be sore amazed, and to be very heavy*" (**Mark 14:33**), was now cut off from all divine fellowship and communication. For Jesus to become the curse, he had to be completely forsaken by the Father.

We must bear in mind that in His humanity, our Lord was limited in knowledge as all human beings are. He was distressed by the ordeal through which He was passing, and He was engaged in a final desperate combat with the Devil and all the forces of evil which had consistently sought to cause His downfall and to defeat His purpose. His human soul was unable to understand fully this complete abandonment of Him by His Abba.

Calvary presents a spectacle such as had never been seen before and will never be seen again. For Jesus did not suffer and die passively, as one helplessly submitting to the inevitable, but He suffered and died actively, as one keeping a schedule or as one fulfilling a purpose. If it had been possible for us to have looked within the soul of Jesus Christ as He hung on the cross, we would have witnessed the most colossal struggle that the universe has ever known. He was not the passive sufferer that He appeared to be in the eyes of those who witnessed the crucifixion. He was actively holding up the pillars of the moral universe by rendering full satisfaction to divine justice. As our substitute and in our stead, Jesus stood before the awful tribunal of God. He stood before the Judge who hates sin and burns against it with fierce anger. He was being roasted by the wrath of God in our place. After He became the scapegoat and the Father had imputed to him every sin of every one of His people, the greatest concentration of evil ever experienced on this planet was exhibited against Him. Jesus Christ became the personification of impurity, immorality and filth.

When He had drunk the last dregs of the cup, when the price had been paid in full, when the Atonement had been secured, when all was accomplished, the divine light shone again in His soul and He cried triumphantly "*It is finished.*" Fellowship and communication with Abba was restored and soon there followed the affectionate words, "*Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.*" Every detail of the account of our Lord's suffering clearly indicates that the full price of our redemption was paid for by Him alone, without human assistance of any kind. It was Jesus Christ alone, through the infinite mercy and grace of God, who made a way through which sinners might be saved.