

# **THE DOCTRINES OF GRACE** **(LESSON NINETEEN)**

## **THE ATONEMENT** **(PART TWO)**

In Part One of our study of the doctrine of the Atonement 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.”**

If we are to have an adequate understanding or appreciation of the work that Jesus Christ has done for us, it is necessary for us to know something of the nature of sin and its effects in the human soul. The Bible informs us that sin is open and defiant rebellion against the law of God. There are, of course, many forms in which sin may manifest itself, such as theft, murder, fornication, lying, profanity, idolatry, pride, envy, covetousness, disrespect for parents. But regardless of the different forms which it may assume, sin is basically crime committed against God.

The American theologian **R.C. Sproul** defined sin as “cosmic treason.” In explaining what he meant by that statement, he said that even the slightest sin that a person commits against God is a violation of God’s holiness, glory, and righteousness. Every sin, no matter how insignificant it may seem to be, is an act of rebellion against the sovereign God who reigns and rules over us and as such, is an act of treason against the cosmic King.

In an article titled **“Sin Is Cosmic Treason”** Sproul wrote the following: *“When we look at the ways in which the Scriptures describe sin, we see three that stand out in importance. First, sin is a debt; second, it is an expression of enmity; third, it is depicted as a crime. In the first instance, we who are sinners are described by Scripture as debtors who cannot pay their debts. In this sense, we are talking not about financial indebtedness but a moral indebtedness. God has the sovereign right to impose obligations upon His creatures. When we fail to keep these obligations, we are debtors to our Lord. This debt represents a failure to keep a moral obligation.*

*The second way in which sin is described biblically is as an expression of enmity. In this regard, sin is not restricted merely to an external action that transgresses a divine law. Rather, it represents an internal motive, a motive that is driven by an inherent hostility toward the God of the universe. It is rarely discussed in the church or in the world that the biblical description of human fallenness includes an indictment that we are by nature enemies of God. In our enmity toward Him, we do not want to have Him even in our thinking, and this attitude is one of hostility toward the very fact that God commands us to obey His will. It is because of this concept of enmity that the New Testament so often describes our redemption in terms of reconciliation. One of the necessary conditions for reconciliation is that there must be some previous enmity between at least two parties. This enmity is what is presupposed by the redeeming work of our Mediator, Jesus Christ, who overcomes this dimension of enmity.*

*The third way in which the Bible speaks of sin is in terms of transgression of law. The **Westminster Shorter Catechism** answers the fourteenth question, “What is sin?” by the response, “Sin is any want of conformity to, or transgression of, the law of God.” Here we see sin described both in terms of passive and active disobedience. We speak of sins of commission and sins of omission.*

*When we fail to do what God requires, we see this lack of conformity to His will. But not only are we guilty of failing to do what God requires, we also actively do what God prohibits. Thus, sin is a transgression against the law of God.*

*When people violate the laws of men in a serious way, we speak of their actions not merely as misdemeanours but, in the final analysis, as crimes. In the same regard, our actions of rebellion and transgression of the law of God are not seen by Him as mere misdemeanours; rather, they are felonious. They are criminal in their impact. If we take the reality of sin seriously in our lives, we see that we commit crimes against a holy God and against His kingdom. Our crimes are not virtues; they are vices, and any transgression of a holy God is vicious by definition. It is not until we understand who God is that we gain any real understanding of the seriousness of our sin.”*

Since the nature of sin is so terrible, it is not surprising that the penalty that God has established against it is so severe. Sin attracts the death penalty. The following passages of Scripture clearly indicate this truth:

### **GENESIS 2:16-17**

*“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.”*

### **EZEKIEL 18:4**

*“Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die.”*

### **ROMANS 6:23**

*“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”*

As we noted in **Lesson 18**, the death referred to in these passages, includes much more than physical death, which is the separation of the soul from the body. The death referred to in the passages also involves **spiritual death**, which is the eternal separation of the soul from God. Indeed, the primary reference of the word is to spiritual death. In this broader sense, death means an abandoned spiritual condition such as that of the Devil and the demons. It involves the immediate loss of the divine favour, the sense of guilt, the corruption of the moral nature, and the pains of hell.

All three passages indicate, however, that life is the reward for those who do not sin! This life is not merely physical life as we know it, but eternal life. Adam, by divine appointment, represented all who were to come after him by natural descent and he acted precisely as they would have acted under similar circumstances. As a consequence of this, the reward for his obedience or the penalty for his disobedience was designed to fall not only on him but equally on all of those who were *“in Adam”* (**1 Corinthians 15:22**). The results of Adam’s fall were disastrous, therefore, by that fall he brought himself and his descendants into a state of depravity, guilt, and condemnation, a state in which the intellect is blinded to spiritual truth, the affections are corrupted, and the will is enslaved. From that condition there was no possible way of escape, except by the grace of God.

That the penalty for sin did not relate primarily to the physical aspect of human beings but to their spiritual aspect, may be seen in the fact that Adam did not die physically immediately after he transgressed. Indeed, he lived for over 900 years after the event. But it is apparent that the spiritual effects of the fall were experienced from the very instant he sinned. Immediately after he sinned, he felt himself estranged from God, a clear indication that he had died spiritually. The spiritual death of Adam is also demonstrated by the fact that his fallen, unregenerate descendants have invariably and persistently gone the way of evil, displaying the same hatred of righteousness and the same affection for sin.

The Old Testament Law was not arbitrary, subjective or insignificant. It was, in fact, an expression of God's character. The Law revealed to human beings the nature of God. It was very clear, both in its commands and in its threatened penalties. Sin is the absolute contradiction of the nature of God and therefore, sin cannot be lightly set aside. The Bible reveals to us a God who is holy, just, and righteous. God's holiness causes Him to hate sin and to burn against it with a consuming zeal. His justice causes Him to scrupulously reward righteousness and to punish sin. God cannot give the reward of obedience for disobedience. The same God who is a God of mercy and therefore, desires to save human beings, is also a God of justice, and His justice demands that He must punish sinners. Since He is also a righteous God, He must put into effect the penalty which He has said would be enforced against transgressors. If He did not punish sin, God would be violating His own nature and destroying the moral order of the universe.

Beloved ones, God can never overlook sin, He cannot turn a blind eye to it, He cannot ignore it. The penalty must be paid. No matter how much God in His love and mercy may have desired to save human beings, it was not possible for Him to do so until His own Law was satisfied. What is it that can possibly satisfy God's Law? What is the penalty that must be paid? We find the answer in **Hebrews 9:22**: *"And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission."*

Do we understand what this declaration of Scripture indicates? It indicates that even if human beings possessed the ability to repent and turn to God, their sins could not be forgiven on the basis of mere repentance. Repentance, by itself, cannot expiate sin. You will recall that in our last lesson we explained that expiation refers to the removal of guilt from someone.

Even in the case of human law, repentance is not enough to expiate crime. The fact that the criminal is sorry for his or her crime does not excuse him or her from obligation. Restoration must be made, otherwise, the injury remains. We human beings instinctively feel that wrong-doing must be balanced by a corresponding penalty. This feeling is especially noticeable after a particularly horrible crime has been committed. We all feel that the crime calls for vengeance, and that a system which would allow it to go unpunished would not be right. The truth is that a person who is genuinely repentant never feels that his or her repentance constitutes a ground of acceptance with God. The more sincerely a person repents is the more fully he or she recognizes their need of expiation and their need to make things right.

Fortunately for us, it is God Himself who satisfied the demands of His own holiness, justice and righteousness. He did so by providing Himself as an atonement. We may say that He satisfied Himself by the provision of Himself. This is the way it had to be. He was the only One who could satisfy His own holiness, justice and righteousness. In His own person and by the sacrifice of Himself, He paid the penalty which freed us from our obligation and provided us with the righteousness of Jesus Christ, which alone can admit us into heaven.

Brothers and sisters, it has been observed that the cross is not a compromise, but a substitution. It is not a cancellation, but a satisfaction. It is not a wiping off, but a wiping out in blood and agony and death. By the atonement, Holiness is rewarded, sin is punished, and the moral order of the universe is maintained in its perfection.

*He paid the debt he did not owe  
I owed the debt I could not pay  
I needed someone to wash my sins away;  
And now I sing a brand-new song, "Amazing Grace"  
Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay.*

*He paid that debt at Calvary  
He cleansed my soul and set me free  
I'm glad that Jesus did all my sins erase;  
I now can sing a brand-new song, "Amazing Grace"  
Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay.*

*One day he's coming back for me  
To live with him eternally  
Won't it be glory to see him on that day!  
I then will sing a brand-new song, "Amazing Grace"  
Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay.*

In the atonement, God in Christ paid the debt for His people. That is the meaning of the Cross. God Himself assumed the nature of human beings, and in that nature, He took our place before His own law. He suffered the penalty of His own law, and He saved us through pure grace.

It was at Calvary that the heart of God was revealed and the love of God was expressed more than anywhere else. This love was first exhibited in God's attitude toward man, not in man's attitude toward God; for the human race demonstrated only opposition and hatred toward Him. In **Romans 5:6-8** Paul writes, "*For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*"

In **1 Peter 3:18** the apostle writes, "*For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit.*"

In **1 John 4:10** we read, "*Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*"

The atonement is not the cause of God's love for us, but the effect of God's love for us. It was **because** He loved us that He redeemed us. Calvary was the greatest demonstration of God's great eternal love. Before the foundation of the world He chose us in Christ, and in love He predestined us for adoption through Christ, according to the purpose of his will (**Ephesians 1:4-5**). Jesus, the Son of God, brought the love of God into a world of hate, and by that love, He satisfied the holiness, justice and righteousness of God. By that love, He appeased the fierce anger of God and by that love He made an atonement for sin.