

Part V: The Doctrine of the Application of the Work of Redemption

Chapter XVII: The Atonement Through Christ

There is one part of Christ's priestly work that calls for further consideration, namely, the atonement.

1. The Moving Cause and Necessity of the Atonement

It is sometimes represented as if the moving cause of the atonement lay in Christ's sympathy for sinners. God in His anger, it is said, was bent on the sinner's destruction, but the loving Christ steps in between and saves the sinner. Christ receives all the glory, and the Father is robbed of His honor. The Bible teaches us that the atonement finds its moving cause in the good pleasure of God, Isa. 53:10; Luke 2:14; Eph. 1:6-9; Col. 1:19, 20. It is best to say that the atonement is rooted in the love and justice of God: love offered sinners a way of escape, and justice demanded that the requirements of the law should be met, John 3:16; Rom. 3:24-26. Some deny the necessity of the atonement, and hold that God could have pardoned the sinner without receiving any satisfaction. The Bible teaches however, that a righteous and holy God cannot simply overlook sin, but reacts against it, Ex. 20:5; 23:7; Ps. 5:5, 6; Nah. 1:2; Rom. 1:18, 32. Moreover, He had pronounced the sentence of death upon the sinner, Gen. 3:3; Rom. 6:23.

2. The Nature of the Atonement

The following particulars should be noted here:

a. It served to render satisfaction to God. It is often said that the atonement served primarily, if not exclusively, to influence the sinner, to awaken repentance in his heart, and thus to bring him back to God. But this is clearly wrong, for if a person offends another, amends should be made, not to the offender, but to the offended party. This means that the primary purpose of the atonement was to reconcile God to the sinner. The reconciliation of the sinner to God may be regarded as its secondary purpose.

b. It was a vicarious atonement. God might have demanded a personal atonement of the sinner, but the latter would not have been able to render it. In view of this fact God graciously ordained that Christ should take the place of man as his vicar or substitute. Christ as our vicar atoned for the sin of mankind by bearing the penalty of sin and meeting the demands of the law, and thus wrought an eternal redemption for man. For that reason we speak of the atonement as a vicarious atonement. The offended party Himself made provision for the atonement in this case. The Old Testament sacrifices prefigured the atoning work of Christ, Lev. 1:4; 4:20, 31, 35; 5:10, 16; 6:7; 17:11. We are taught that our sins were laid upon Christ, Isa. 53:6, He bore them, John 1:29, Heb. 9:28, and gave His life for sinners, Mark 10:45; Gal. 1:4; 1 Pet. 3:18.

c. It included Christ's active and passive obedience. It is customary to distinguish a twofold obedience of Christ. His active obedience consists in all that He did to observe the law in behalf of sinners, as a condition for obtaining eternal life; and His passive obedience in all that He suffered in paying the penalty of sin and discharging the debt of His people. But while we distinguish these two, we should never separate them. Christ was active also in His suffering, and passive also in His submission to the law. Scripture teaches us that He paid the penalty of the law, Isa. 53:8; Rom. 4:25; Gal. 3:13; 1 Pet. 2:24, and merited eternal life for the sinner, Rom. 8:4; 10:4; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 4:4-7.

3. The Extent of the Atonement.

Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Arminians of every description regard the atonement of Christ as universal. This does not mean that in their estimation all men will be saved, but merely that Christ suffered and died for the purpose of saving all without any exception. They admit that the intended effect is not achieved. Christ did not actually save, but made salvation possible for all. Their actual redemption is dependent on their own choice. Reformed Churches on the other hand believe in a limited atonement. Christ suffered and died for the purpose of saving only the elect, and that purpose is actually accomplished. Christ not merely made salvation possible but really saves to the uttermost every one of those for whom he laid down His life, Luke 19:10; Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 1:4; Eph. 1:7. The Bible indicates that Christ laid down His life for His people. Matt. 1:21, for His sheep, John 10:11, 15, for the Church, Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25-27, or for the elect, Rom. 8:32-35. If the Bible sometimes says that Christ died for the world,

John 1:29; 1 John 2:2; 4:14, or for all, 1 Tim. 2:6; Titus 2:11; Heb. 2:9, this evidently means that He died for people of all nations of the world, or (in some instances) for all kinds or classes of people.

To memorize. Passages bearing on:

a. The cause of the atonement:

Isa. 53:10. "Yet it pleased Jehovah to bruise Him; He hath put Him to grief: when Thou shalt make His soul an offering for sin, He shall see His seed, He shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of Jehovah shall prosper in His hand."

Col. 1:19, 20. "For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in Him should all the fullness dwell; and through Him to reconcile all things unto Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross."

b. Vicarious atonement:

Isa. 53:6. "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and Jehovah hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all."

Mark 10:45. "For the Son also came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many."

2 Cor. 5:21. "Him who knew no sin He made to be sin on our behalf; that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

1 Pet. 2:24. "Who His own self bare our sins in His body upon the tree, that we, having died unto sins, might live unto righteousness."

c. Active obedience and the gift of eternal life:

Matt. 3:15. "But Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it now: for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

Matt. 5:17. "Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets: I came not to destroy, but to fulfill."

Gal. 4:4, 5. "But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that He might redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons."

John 10:28. "And I give unto them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand." Rom. 6:23. "For the wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." d. Limited atonement.

Matt. 1:21. "And she shall bring forth a son; and thou shalt call His name Jesus; for it is He that shall save His people from their sins."

John 10:26-28. "But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."

Acts 20:28. "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flocks, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the Church of the Lord which He purchased with His own blood."

For Further Study:

- a. What is the difference between atonement and reconciliation?
- b. How do the following passages prove the vicarious nature of Old Testament sacrifices? Lev. 1:4; 3:2; 4:15; 16:21, 22.
- c. Does John 17:9 teach us anything respecting the extent of the atonement?

Questions for Review:

1. What was the moving cause of the atonement?
2. Why was the atonement necessary?
3. What was the primary purpose of the atonement?
4. What is the difference between personal and vicarious atonement?

5. How was Christ's vicarious atonement prefigured in the Old Testament?
6. What Scripture proof is there for it?
7. What is the difference between the active and passive obedience of Christ?
8. What did each one of these effect?
9. What difference of opinion is there respecting the extent of the atonement?
10. What is meant by universal atonement, and who teach it?
11. What is limited atonement, and what Scripture proof is there for it?
12. What objections are raised against this, and how can they be answered?