
Title: What is the Atonement?

Series: Speaking of God

Teacher: Pastor Chad Bresson

Date: October 29, 2006

Introduction

What is the Atonement?

Before we get started, I think it would be good to make one comment about this word “atonement”. The atonement is one of those Bible words that comes loaded with a lot of meaning. When we speak of the atonement there are two ways of talking about it. The first way is its specific definition. We are going to define the atonement as an exchange of life for life that covers over sins. That is its specific definition, a definition that makes the word inseparable from the word “sacrifice”. But that word, over time, has also come to mean all things pertaining to the sacrifice and redemption. It is what theologians would call its biblical theological definition. That’s a fancy way of saying that what the entire Bible says about the sacrifice and our salvation comes to bear on the word atonement. We use the word “redemption” in much the same, overarching, function. For our purposes today, we are going to be speaking more to the specific definition of atonement; however, keep in mind that as we speak of what it is and what it does, that all the other things we could say about sacrifice and salvation are coming into play at various points.

From the very beginning of Christ’s life, the atonement was in the backdrop. If any of you have seen the Ron DiCianni Christmas picture of the glowing manger and at the foot of the manger in its shadow is a lamb. DiCianni is making the point that Christ was born the lamb of God whose goal from the very outset was the cross. The angel impresses this on Mary from the beginning in Matthew 1:21 when he tells her that her son Jesus will “save His people from their sins”. And that is what Jesus did. Jesus saved his people from their sins—both through the life he lived and through the death he died. The work Jesus did in living and dying to earn our salvation is sometimes referred to as the atone-ment.

The Cause of the Atonement

What caused Christ’s death? Why did Christ die the death that he did? The answer to this question begins in Genesis 3. God is not only a loving God, but God is a just God. God gave Adam one commandment in the garden and it came with a threat. The commandment was that Adam was not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And the threat was that he would die if he ate of that tree. We know from Genesis 3 that Adam and Eve disobeyed that command. Would God have been just to allow Adam and Eve to go unpunished for disobeying that command? God promised Adam and Eve death if they disobeyed his command. What is a just sentence? Death, of course. Among the implications of God being a just God is that he will do exactly what he says he will do.

Now, does Genesis 3 tell us that Adam and Eve died? It doesn't; they don't. Is God just for seemingly allowing them off the hook? The better question is this: did God let them off the hook?

Genesis 3 shows us that God did not let Adam and Eve off the hook, and in God's actions, a foundation is laid for everything else the Bible tells us about the atonement. Adam and Eve did not leave the garden without a death. Something died. What died? Genesis 3:21 tells us: "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them." An animal died. A life was exchanged for a life. And this exchange functions as a covering for sin.

Christ asks an ultimate question (a question that we tend to miss) in Matthew 16:26: "...what shall a man give in return for his life?" Adam and Eve were guilty. God is just. A life demanded, a life requires. For all intents and purposes, before verse 15 of Genesis 3, Adam and Eve are dead people. But he is also gracious. God in his graciousness, arranged it so that an eventual "seed of the woman" would remedy man's violation of God's character and reconcile the creature's relationship with the Creator. And in his graciousness he also arranged that a life could be exchanged for a life, thus satisfying his justice. Because this exchange involves God's justice, we speak of the nature of this exchange as "forensic" and "judicial". A real exchange takes place between God and the creature. It is this exchange that provided a covering for sin.

This exchange is inherent to who we are as creatures. Man knows there must be some kind of exchange between himself, the fallen creature, and the Creator. We see all over man's history in all cultures in all times and places. Man is constantly trying to placate a god or being bigger than himself in making exchanges, usually involving sacrifice.

This exchange of a life for a life lies underneath and runs through every blood sacrifice in the text of scripture. The animal dies and the one sacrificing does not. Yet the blood sacrifices of the OT were just a down payment, so to speak, in lieu of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The book of Hebrews tells us that these OT sacrifices were temporary. The animal sacrifices could not take *really* take away sin; only Christ's death could do so. No animal could satisfy the human life for human life exchange. Only a man could do that. Only Christ, the perfect Last Adam could exchange His life for many (Romans 5:12ff). It is Christ's exchange of a life for a life that provided not only a covering for our sin, but a removal of it. That exchange has satisfied God's justice and turned away (or placated, so to speak) his wrath on our behalf.

Scripture tells us that God cannot and will not clear the guilty. The soul that sins will and must die. There are some in our day who have attempted to downplay the implications of the exchange that took place in the garden, and the exchange that takes place in every sacrifice. Much of this downplaying is coming from a theology that downplays the significance of (or denies altogether) God's wrath and justice. Some theologians have tried to say that when God said that they would *die*, he was not saying Adam and Eve would *die*, but that they would be separated from God.... thus, death is redefined as "separation from God", rather than as an absence or end of *life*. Death is not seen as an antithesis of life. The end result is that *death* throughout the whole of scripture is turned on its head, as is *life*. What gives death its definition in the canon isn't so much what is said about death as what is said about life. When God said that Adam and Eve would

die (if they ate of the tree) he was saying that he would exact from them the very breath of God that he had breathed into them in Genesis 2:7... a withdrawal of the very essence of God's image in *life*. Death cannot simply be reduced to being defined as "separation from God". It involves the withdrawal of the very life-breath of God.

Further, the life-for-life exchange is inseparable from the idea of a "substitutionary" atonement. Christ was our *life* substitute. Without the antithetical life-death understanding of death, there is no substitutionary atonement. In the OT sacrifice, the animal was a life substitute for the one making the sacrifice. The animal sacrifice *dies* on behalf of and *in the stead* of the sacrificer. The person making the sacrifice stood at the altar and said "either that animal dies or I die" looking forward to the day when the "seed of the woman" would crush the serpent's head in an ultimate sacrifice. The death itself was substitutionary.

We do not know all of the reasons why God in his grand design set up the life for life exchange this way. What we do know is that God planned the atonement (Acts 2:23). Christ was chosen before the foundation of the world to do the work of the atonement (1 Peter 1:20). And there is a pattern of the atonement that begins with Genesis 3:21, moves through Abel, and the altar-building of the patriarchs to the sacrificial system of Israel's tabernacle and temple. These Old Testament shadows pointed forward to the ultimate atonement made by Christ for God. The Old Testament uses vivid illustrations that continually point forward to Christ's atoning work, and the New Testament is the fulfillment, the final fruition of atonement through the atoning work of Christ. There are 2 vantage points – the Old and the New Testaments -- but they're all about Christ. The Bible is all about Christ's final, perfect, once-for-all atoning work that the blood of bulls and goats could not fully and completely and eternally satisfy throughout all of OT history.

Jesus understood that God the Father had sent Him to carry out His plan, and that it was absolutely necessary that He die on the cross. Christ came to earn our salvation because of God's faithful love and justice (John 3:16; Romans 3:25). On the road to Emmaus, the 2 disciples were downcast as they reflected on Christ's sufferings, and there in that passage in Luke 24:25-26 Jesus says, "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer all these things and enter into His glory?" Here Christ's words tell us that the atonement was a necessary part of a larger plan, planned by God before the foundation of the world and foretold by prophets throughout OT generations. This perfect redemptive plan, of which atonement was a critical component, was the only way salvation could be possible. And it flowed from God's love in a glorious demonstration of that love (Romans 5:8) to satisfy his justice.

There is another fancy term we use to describe the work of the atonement. Only this word is used by Paul in Romans. Romans 3:23-26 says "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.²⁶ It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. The word "propitiation" in verse 25 nuances atonement in a way that brings God's wrath into the picture. A "pro-

propitiation” is a sacrifice that bears God’s wrath so that God looks favorably toward us. This is not a popular way of understanding the life for life exchange. Some have suggested that propitiation is merely Christ bearing God’s jealous wrath for an unfaithful people in defense of God’s honor and name. This eliminates any need to speak of God’s justice as having to be satisfied. The antithesis between justice and mercy is lost. Yet it is precisely in this antithesis that the Old Testament develops the understanding of the atonement. More than God’s honor and name is at stake. God’s wrath is his expression of his forensic justice, a justice that must be satisfied through the judicial punishment of sin.

Christ’s wrath-bearing was God’s punishment on Christ on our behalf. In Christ’s life and death we find full expression of sin being punished and Christ’s bearing of that punishment. The denial that God is a just God who is angry at violations of His holiness and that Christ is a righteous judge who will punish and destroy his enemies comes from a failure to rightly account for justice in God’s nature. This kind of punishment as judgment for sin has led one prominent British pastor to claim that this wrath-bearing understanding of the cross makes God a “cosmic child abuser” (Steve Chalke, in the “Lost Message of Jesus”, p. 185). Another pastor, an American, has called our understanding of the substitutionary atonement “divine child abuse” (Brian McLaren, “The Story We Find Ourselves In”, p. 102). These men deny that a penalty is to be paid for sin through a life for life exchange in a sacrifice that will satisfy God’s wrath. These men make this outrageous claim about our understanding of the scriptures because they have no category for justice in their theology. Yet the Bible says God is a righteous judge who will exact a penalty for sin in his *vengeance*. Isaiah 53:10 says that “the Lord was pleased to crush him” (HCSB). God avenged the violation of his holiness in crushing his Son who “became sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21). And God did this because he loved us. Had the Son not have been crushed in exchanging his life for ours, we would have been crushed.

The Necessity of the Atonement

God’s justice made it necessary for Christ to live the life he lived and die the death he died (Luke 24:26). Sin is dealt with in a judicial manner in God’s universe. It isn’t like a gas that dissipates into thin air. It isn’t simply passed over. The only way sin can be fully dealt with is to “cover”, or “atone” it with perfect holy obedience. It took a life of perfect obedience to God in order to earn righteousness — something that is impossible for us to do. Christ had to obey the law for His whole life on our behalf — and shed His blood — so that the positive merits of His perfect obedience would be counted for us.

There was no other way for God to save us than for Christ to suffer and die in our place for our sins (Hebrews 9:12, 26). Righteousness could not and cannot come from ourselves, but only through the work of Christ on our behalf. Paul says that Christ has been made “our righteousness” in I Cor 1:30, and in Romans 5:19 he says that it was by one man’s obedience that many will be made righteous. God Himself is the ultimate standard of what is just and fair in the universe, and he decreed that the atonement would take place in this way — through Christ — and that it did in fact satisfy the demands of His own righteousness and justice.

The Nature of the Atonement

Having said all of this about Christ's death and the necessity of the life for life exchange, we must say this about Christ's life. Perfect obedience was required. The original commandment to Adam was never rescinded. It had to be obeyed by the creature. The necessity of obedience is critical to our understanding of how Christ's righteousness is given to us as if it were our own.

Christ's obedience is necessary because of this: If Christ had only offered himself as a sacrifice for forgiveness of sins, we would only have access to a partial salvation. Christ had to live a life of perfect obedience to God so that the positive merits of that obedience could be counted for us (Romans 5:19, 1 Corinthians 1:30, Philippians 3:9). Christ, through the sinless life he lived, became "our righteousness" (1 Cor. 1:30). The physical pain of Christ's death was nothing compared to the spiritual pain because Jesus never sinned.

We've talked much about God's justice. But we must also speak of God's love and mercy which accompanied his justice. Yes, His justice demanded an atonement to cover our sin through a life for life exchange. But His plan for atonement also flowed out of His perfect love for us. He SO LOVED THE WORLD THAT HE GAVE...(John 3:16). Without God's justice, the requirement for completing it — which could only be accomplished through Christ — would not have been met. And without His love, He would have never taken the steps to redeem us. Jesus voluntarily took upon himself all the sins of those who had been and would be saved (Hebrews 53:12, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 3:13, 1 Peter 2:24). As Jesus voluntarily and in infinite love bore the guilt of our sins, God unleashed all wrath and punishment for all sins upon his own Son (Hebrews 9:26). His life was exchanged for ours. God's justice has been vindicated. God's love has been lavished on us in the process. And Christ has been exalted for His accomplishment.

The Result of the Atonement

Christ paid the penalty we deserved to pay for our sin and bore the wrath we deserved to bear. When we walked out of the garden, we deserved death. We did not deserve the animal skins. Christ appeared in redemptive history as a covering for our sin for all time. Because of Christ's work on our behalf, God can "deliver us from the domain of darkness" and transfer "us to the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Col. 1:13).