

The Atonement...



CONTEMPLATING
CHRIST'S GREAT
REDEMPITIVE WORK

The Atonement: Its Demand Galatians 4:4-5a; Luke 2:1-20

This morning's sermon is the second in a five-part series on the Atonement. The atonement is Christ's satisfying divine justice by His sufferings and death in the place of sinners. Last Sunday we tried to answer the question, why was such a thing necessary? Indeed, was it necessary; was it unavoidable; was it required that Christ should suffer and die? Historic Christianity argues yes. You see, the Bible teaches that sin is guilt. Death-deserving guilt attaches itself to us with every violation of the law of God rendering us subject to the wrath of God and liable to divine punishment. Somehow the demands of the law must be met and the penalties prescribed in the law must be paid. Since we are unable to do either it follows that our most desperate need is for a righteousness outside ourselves. Indeed, the point last Sunday was that atonement is necessary on account of our need of a righteousness not our own. Paul declares this righteousness to be of divine origin. In **Romans 3:21** he says, *But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law has been made known.* Unless you possess this righteousness that is from God, this righteousness that is outside yourself, you shall never enter heaven.

This week the title of my sermon is “The Atonement: Its Demand.” Today we ask what was required for God to achieve such a righteousness? The big idea is this: Atonement required God to come out of heaven. Think about that for a moment. What dilemma was so desperate that God should come out of heaven to affect a rescue? What crime was so despicable that God should come out of heaven to punish it? What promise was so binding that God should come out of heaven to fulfill it? What love was so intense that God should come out of heaven to demonstrate it?

Let’s unpack this big idea. The first thing this thesis suggests is that *God came out of heaven*. It is not as if heaven was left void of divinity or that God was “out of the office” for 33 years. The essence of Christianity is that the eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity, He who is the same in substance as the Father and the Spirit, He who is equal to the Father and the Spirit in power and glory, left heaven to assume humanity in order to atone for the sins of His people.

This is affirmed by the historical orthodox creeds of the church. The Apostles’ Creed, for example, says, *I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the Virgin Mary*. The Westminster Confession, in Chapter 8 says, *The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, being very and eternal God, of one substance and equal with the Father, did, when the fullness of time was come, take upon him man’s nature, with all the essential properties, and common infirmities thereof, yet without sin; being conceived by the power of the Holy Ghost, in the womb of the virgin Mary, of her substance*. Question #35 of the Heidelberg Catechism says, *God’s eternal Son, who is, and continueth true and eternal God, took upon him the very nature of man, of the flesh and blood of the Virgin Mary, by the operation of the Holy Ghost*. The Nicene Creed says, *we believe ... in one*

*Lord Jesus Christ, the only - begotten Son of God, begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father; by whom all things were made; who for us and for our salvation **came down from heaven**, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man. So who was it that came out of heaven?*

Jesus, the pre-existent Son of God, came out of heaven. Jesus was not created. He did not come into being at conception. **John 1:1** clearly says, *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.* In the Incarnation the second person of the Trinity “remained the infinite and unchangeable Son of God.” The eternal Son took on the form and character of humanity “without in any way changing His original nature” (Berkhof, p. 334).

Jesus, the Creator of all that is, came out of heaven. With the Psalmist we consider all that is around us and confess that it exists by the word of God’s power, according to His design, and unto the glory and praise of His mighty name. **Psalm 33:6-9** (GN), *The Lord created the heavens by his command, the sun, moon, and stars by his spoken word. He gathered all the seas into one place; he shut up the ocean depths in storerooms. Worship the Lord, all the earth! Honor him, all peoples of the world! When he spoke, the world was created; at his command everything appeared.* And this creative act was by and through the Son. **John 1:3**, *all things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.* **Colossians 1:16**, *for by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible ... all things have been created by Him and for Him.* **Hebrews 1:2**, *in these last days [God] has spoken to us in His Son ... through whom He made the world.*

Not only does everything owe its existence to Jesus but it also owes to Him its continuation. Jesus, the Sustainer of all that is, came out of heaven. **Colossians 1:17**, *in Him all things hold together*. **Hebrews 1:3**, *He upholds all things by the word of His power*. Certainly Jesus sustains all of the vast universe which He has been pleased to create. We simply cannot comprehend how the baby held in Mary's arms was Himself the One upholding all the mass in the universe.

Jesus, the Son of Glory, came out of heaven. Jesus Himself, in His prayer in **John 17** spoke of *"the glory which [He] had with [the Father] before the world was"* (**17:5**). This glory consisted of a condition. We begin to understand this through the account of the transfiguration of Christ in **Matthew 17:1-2**. *And six days later Jesus took with Him Peter and James and John his brother, and brought them up to a high mountain by themselves. And He was transfigured before them; and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became as white as light*. In this experience, for a brief moment, Jesus pulled back the veil so to speak and allowed His glory to manifest itself in resplendent brilliance, purity, and majesty. The human body of Jesus was glorified for a moment in time and those with Him saw it. This glory was intrinsic to Christ. The Son of God never surrendered or lost this glory. In the incarnation it was simply veiled; it was *"hidden beneath the form of a servant"* (Rhodes, p. 218). The glory that Christ had also consisted of communion in the Father's presence. The Son dwelt with the Father face to face. The cross is not the only price paid by the Redeemer. He laid aside for a time the condition that He had known for eternity and He gave up the communion with the Father that had been His eternal joy. *Atonement required that **God** come out of heaven*.

The second thing the thesis suggests is that *God came out of heaven*. He left heaven and came to this earth. Eternity broke into history. **Luke 2:1-7** (KJV) *And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. ² (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) ³ And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) ⁵ To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ⁶ And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.*

God came out of heaven. Hymnody gives us just a hint of the staggering implications of that statement. “He looks and ten thousands of angels rejoice and myriads wait for His word. He speaks and eternity filled with His voice re-echoes the praise the praise of the Lord.” He left that place where in His presence antiphonal choruses shout, “*Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts*” (**Is. 6:3**). He left that place where in His presence beautiful and unearthly creatures, day and night, delight in ceaseless praise (**Rev. 4:8**). The Son of Glory left all of that for all of this. He left heaven to assume a human nature from the substance of His mother; *to be made like His brethren in all things* (**Heb. 2:17**). Why? Why?

The third thing the thesis suggests is that *atonement required God to come out of heaven*. Nicea affirms that Christ was incarnate *for us and for our salvation*. **Galatians 4:4-5a** says, *but when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵ in order that He might redeem those who were under the law*. Berkhof says, “The law serves the purpose of bringing man under the conviction of sin, and of making him conscious of his inability to meet the

demands of the law. In that way the law becomes his tutor to lead him unto Christ" (p.614). When *God sent forth His Son He was born of a woman, born under the Law*. Jesus Christ was born under personal obligation to obey and be judged by conformity to God's written Law. Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity voluntarily submitted Himself to the jurisdiction of the Law. Why?

In order that He might redeem those who were under the Law. Here we discover the reason for Jesus being *sent* and for the conditions to which He subjected Himself. He was sent to secure a release by the payment of a price; to *redeem*. But from what do men need to be released? The answer is from our bondage to the Law. Did you know that everyone in this room was also born *under* personal obligation to obey and be judged by conformity to God's written Law? Does such an obligation shake you up in any way? Does that thought unnerve you? It should. Remember the Law says, "Do this and live." But the truth is that none can "do this." No matter how hard you try you cannot be perfect; you cannot keep the Law of God. Ridderbos says that this "knocks the bottom out of every hope of being saved on the basis of the works of the law" (*Galatians*, p.123). Herein lies the tyranny of the Law.

I want to repeat this illustration often enough that you are able to retell it yourselves. During college my roommate, Kent Phillips, and I took a trip to Daytona Beach. One night we decided to go to the greyhound races. The dogs were in little cages, lined up at the starting line. There was also this little fake rabbit on the end of a metal arm which ran along the inside rail of the track. When this little rabbit would reach a certain point, the doors of the cages would open and the dogs would bolt out, chasing after this mechanical rabbit with all

their might. The closer they got, the harder they ran. But they were never able to catch it - in race after race, night after night.

For years, I have considered this a wonderful illustration of man under the tyranny of the law. The rabbit held out a certain hope for the dogs. So does the law to you. It says, "Do this and live." The tyranny lies in the fact that we can never "do this." The stringency and the scope of the law coupled with our own inability produce a deadly combination. Under law ours is an existence of slavish performance - trying to win God's favor by our own efforts. Under law ours is an existence of slavish fear (**Rom. 8:15**) - one failure results in condemnation so we are always afraid that we are not measuring up. According to **Galatians 5:3** every man is *under obligation to keep the whole Law*. Yet, to our agonizing despair, **James 2:10** reminds us, *For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all*. Under law ours is an existence of slavish despair - law makes demands but imparts no ability to meet those demands. So what is the answer?

We need a hero. We need a champion. We need someone who can face the law with its demands and its threats and satisfy them both on our behalf. We need a representative. We need a substitute. So Christ came out of heaven as the designated and worthy representative of the elect of God.

Jesus, the Savior of sinners, came out of heaven. An interesting phrase appears occasionally in God's Word - *from the foundation of the world*. This is a biblical way of saying from all eternity. From **Hebrews 4:3** and **Revelation 13:8** we know that the finished work of Christ on the cross was *from the foundation of the world*. Who is not moved by the King James translation of **Revelation 13:8**, *And all that dwell*

upon the earth shall worship him, whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. The little baby birthed, held, nursed, loved, and wondered at by Mary was born to atone for sinners. This was in the eternal and immutable purpose and plan of God. Peter preached to the crowd in Jerusalem ... this Man, delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross ... and put Him to death (Acts 2:23). This is what we celebrate in this season.

***Atonement required** that God come out of heaven. Christ came under obligation to keep the Law on our behalf. As Christ, our representative, perfectly fulfilled the demands of the law and endured the punishment prescribed in the law, we are set free from both the obligation to keep the law for righteousness and from the curse for having broken the law. This, my friends, is the Gospel.*

⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. ¹⁵ And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. ¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them

concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Angels declare that the gospel is *good news (2:10)*. Angels declare that the gospel is a message that banishes fear. *“Do not be afraid” (2:10)*. Angels declare that the gospel is a message of *great joy (2:10)*. Joy that God Himself has affected a solution to our sin problem. Beloved, all is well. Angels declare that the gospel is *for all the people (2:10)* regardless of fame, nationality, social position, education, age, or financial status. Angels declare that the gospel is *for you (2:11)*. *“There has been born for you.”* For you if you will trust Christ alone. Angels declare that the gospel is a message of salvation (2:11). *“There has been born for you a Savior.”* Angels declare that the gospel is a message that glorifies God (2:14). *“Glory to God in the highest.”* Salvation is God’s doing from start to finish. Angels declare that the gospel is a message of *peace (2:14)*. *“On earth peace among men.”* And then it is the shepherds who declare that the gospel is a message that is revealed to men (2:15). *The Lord has made known to us.* Men didn’t dream this one up. The gospel is the message of that righteousness *from God revealed to man by God.*

Yes, atonement required that God come out of heaven in the person of Jesus Christ. The appeal of the gospel to you this morning is to *believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.*

We take a few moments now to prayerfully consider the gospel as it has been preached. In so doing we prepare for the presentation of the gospel in the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper.