

# The Atonement...



CONTEMPLATING  
CHRIST'S GREAT  
REDEMPITIVE WORK

## The Atonement: Its Essence 2 Corinthians 5:21

As I was reading the paper (Star-Telegram, 12/19/03) at breakfast Friday morning I noticed an article about Mel Gibson's upcoming movie *The Passion of the Christ*. The gist of the article was that the Pope, more or less, has "signed off" on it. The film, about the last twelve hours of Jesus' life, is scheduled to open in theaters on Ash Wednesday, February 25, 2004. There is no telling what kinds of discussions, debates, and criticisms the movie will generate. Two criticisms are already being voiced. One is that the picture will fuel anti-Semitism by suggesting that the Jews killed Jesus. The second is that there has been no restraint exercised in the graphic portrayal of the horrible torture and crucifixion suffered by our Lord. In other words the blood and gore are just too much. In the article Pope John Paul is quoted as saying, "It shows how it was." I think it fairly presumptuous for any of us to suggest that we know "how it was."

It doesn't take a genius to recognize that the question of *why* Christ suffered and died in the first place is already being obscured by all manner of tangential concerns. The theological is already being obscured by the political, by the sentimental, by the sensational, by the commercial, and by the technical. Some have wisely anticipated the stir and are preparing a Biblical and theologically

orthodox response. John Piper, for example, is already working on a short book to be published to coincide with the release of the movie to help explain what the cross of Christ was all about. I want to speak to this as well in a preemptive way. I want to make sure that you are firmly grounded in terms of your own understanding of what actually transpired at Calvary beyond the gruesome execution of a Jewish teacher and prophet at the hands of the Romans. Why did Christ suffer? What is God's interpretation of the Passion of the Christ? The answer is found in our definition of the atonement.

Atonement is Christ's satisfying divine justice by His sufferings and death in the place of sinners. This morning I want to emphasize that last phrase – *in the place of sinners*. The word I pray the Holy Spirit will burn into your souls is "substitution." We are not strangers to this concept. A substitute is a person who takes the place or function of another. We've all had substitute teachers in school. In the 10<sup>th</sup> grade I was a "sub" on our high school basketball team. The point of the sermon is simply this: Christ suffered and died as our Substitute. Beloved, we are of those who affirm a substitutionary or a vicarious atonement. The Bible teaches that the sufferings and death of Christ were vicarious. In other words, He *took the place of sinners* and our guilt was imputed and our punishment transferred to Him. The sufferings of Christ were the substitutionary or vicarious sufferings of the Lamb of God for sinners.

Now there is a difference between personal and vicarious atonement. A personal atonement is when you make reparation; you make amends; you render satisfaction for an injury or offense yourself. Growing up it was an unwritten law in our home that the children did not talk back to the parents for any reason. Whenever I would sass or backtalk my mother I would have to render *personal*

atonement for my transgression. That atonement was always painful and usually involved a belt, small tree limb, or (quite frankly) whatever she could get her hands on at the time. We know that sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God (SC, Q.14). In strict justice God could have required that we atone for our own sins, suffering eternally the penalty affixed to the transgression. But God was moved by love and compassion for the sinner. Being so moved, God appointed a Substitute to take man's place. This divinely appointed and approved representative, Jesus Christ, atoned for sin, receiving in His own body the punishment due to guilty sinners. Personal atonement is provided by the offending party. That's us. Vicarious atonement is provided by the offended party. That's God.

Now you would think that everyone who names the name of Christ would embrace and rejoice in such a glorious and exalted doctrine. Unfortunately that is not the case. There are many circles in which this particular view of the atonement is not popular. And this is not hard to understand. Substitution breaks the pride of man. The sinner is compelled to admit that he *is* a sinner and cannot save himself. He must admit his guilt and that he deserves death. He must recognize not only the love but also the infinite justice of God. He must humble himself and plead for mercy. He must repent and rest upon Christ alone for salvation as He is offered in the gospel. These are certainly odious to the natural man and so he resists them. They are equally objectionable to those professing Christians who contend that man, to one degree or another, contributes to his own salvation.

Objections typically take one of two forms. The **first** is that sin is not death-deserving guilt and, therefore, does not require atonement. It may be answered,

however, that the Bible certainly teaches us to regard sin as guilt; and because it is guilt, it makes man subject to the wrath of God and renders him liable to divine punishment. The **second** objection is that God is essentially a God of love and such an arrangement as a vicarious sacrifice brings reproach upon His character. It casts Him in an unfavorable light as a capricious deity who punishes the innocent for the guilty; who acts as a stern, severe, and relentless being; who requires blood to appease His wrath; and who demands payment before He can or will forgive. But this substitutionary atonement involved no injustice on the part of God. Christ *voluntarily* took the place of sinners. This substitutionary atonement does not impugn the pardoning grace of God. On the contrary, the grace of God is magnified in that God *Himself* provided the sacrifice. By giving His only Son God demonstrated that He is the God of all grace. **Romans 5:8** is clear, *But God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.*

I believe you will more clearly understand and more deeply cherish this idea of substitution as we examine three other views that are out there in the theological marketplace. Let's say that, like Family Feud, you "surveyed one hundred people," asking them to write out a one sentence definition of the atonement. And let's say that you wanted to keep these for future reference. You would probably be able to put each of them into one of two files. One file would be labeled man-ward views. This file would contain all those definitions suggesting that the primary purpose of Christ's death was to change man's attitude toward God; to make an impression upon man; to produce a moral effect upon man. The other file would be labeled God-ward views. It would contain all those definitions suggesting that the primary purpose of the work of Christ was to ward off the wrath of God and divine punishment from sinners; to satisfy the

infinite justice of God. I think this distinction will be clear upon looking at three of these man-ward views.

There are those who think that the primary purpose of the sufferings and death of Jesus is **to soften** man's heart (Moral Influence theory). Christ hung there on the cross suffering in and with His sinful creatures; taking upon Himself our woes and griefs. The sight of this suffering Savior was designed to break our rebellion and our hostility against God and His law. His suffering did not serve to satisfy divine justice, but to reveal the divine love, so as to melt, to temper, to subdue human hearts and to lead them to repentance. Not a few of you may see Gibson's film. You will undoubtedly be moved by what you see. It will make an impression upon you. But don't confuse the emotional effects of Christ's suffering with the objective judicial transaction that took place on the cross.

There are those who think that the primary purpose of the sufferings and death of Christ is to **inspire** men to lead a life like Jesus (Example theory). They argue that God is not so strictly just as to require that sin be absolutely and unflinchingly punished. The death of Christ did not atone for sin. Neither did it move God to pardon sin. Christ saves sinners by revealing to them the way of faith and obedience as the way of eternal life, by giving them an example of true obedience, and by inspiring them to "sacrifice their lives for the welfare of others as He sacrificed Himself" (Machen).

There are those who think that the primary purpose of the sufferings and death of Christ is **to deter** man from transgressing God's law (Governmental theory). Like a flu shot, the atonement is basically preventative. It is intended merely to check future sin. Christ's terrible suffering and death are intended to

demonstrate the dreadful consequences of breaking God's law to the end that sinners, by observing those horrible consequences, might be shocked into not sinning. This "governmental theory" as it is sometimes called denies that the justice of God necessarily demands that all the requirements of the law be met. In the atonement God is simply demonstrating that, when it comes to His law, He means business. He is showing that He is displeased with sin in order that He, the moral Ruler of the universe, might be able to maintain His moral government.

NOW EACH OF THESE THEORIES ARE OF VALUE IN THAT THEY DRAW ATTENTION TO PARTICULAR ASPECTS OF CHRIST'S SAVING WORK. EACH OF THEM DRAWS ATTENTION TO SOMETHING THAT IS TRUE AND VALUABLE. BUT WHEN YOU SUGGEST THAT IN EACH IS FOUND THE WHOLE OR PRIMARY PURPOSE OF THE ATONEMENT THEN WE BUY INTO ERROR. THESE THREE THEORIES SHARE A NUMBER OF FEATURES IN COMMON THAT PULL UP SHORT WHEN VIEWED AGAINST THE PLAIN

TEACHING OF THE BIBLE.  
EACH REPRESENTS THE  
ATONING WORK OF  
CHRIST AS NECESSARY,  
NOT PRIMARILY TO  
SATISFY HIS JUSTICE BUT  
TO REVEAL HIS LOVE.  
EACH IS A DENIAL OF  
HUMAN DEPRAVITY,  
ASSERTING TO NATURAL  
MAN THE ABILITY TO  
SAVE HIMSELF IF AIDED  
PROPERLY BY GOD. EACH,  
MORE OR LESS, IGNORES  
THE FACT THAT THE BIBLE  
PORTRAYS SIN AS GUILT.

BROTHERS AND SISTERS  
ALLOW ME TO SPEAK IN  
THE FIRST PERSON AT THIS  
POINT. THE ATONEMENT  
IS DESIGNED BY GOD  
HIMSELF TO MEET MY  
NEED AS A DEATH-  
DESERVING SINNER. MY  
NEED IS NOT INSPIRATION  
AS IF BY SENTIMENTALITY,  
MOTIVATION, AND  
RESOLUTION I MIGHT SAVE  
MYSELF. MY NEED IS NOT  
THE DETERRENCE OF A

GRUESOME PUBLIC  
EXECUTION AS IF A SLIGHT  
AND TEMPORARY  
REDUCTION IN THE  
TORRENT OF SIN FLOWING  
FROM MY CORRUPT  
HEART COULD SUFFICE TO  
SATISFY DIVINE JUSTICE OR  
MAKE AMENDS FOR THE  
INCALCULABLE SINS OF MY  
PAST. INDEED, YOU  
COULD THREATEN ME  
WITH THE MOST  
GRUESOME TORTURE  
DEVISABLE BY MAN AND  
IN MY SHOCK AND  
DREAD I MIGHT *INTEND*  
TO STOP SINNING BUT TO  
NO AVAIL. THE ABILITY  
TO DO SO IS SIMPLY NOT  
WITHIN MY POWER NO  
MATTER HOW TERRIFIED I  
MIGHT BE. MY NEED IS  
NOT FOR AN EXAMPLE  
TO FOLLOW AS IF BY  
SACRIFICIAL SERVICE TO  
OTHERS I MIGHT RENDER  
MYSELF ACCEPTABLE TO A  
HOLY GOD.

No beloved, my need is for cleansing. My need is for the wrath of God against my unrighteousness to be turned back. My need is for His righteous anger



against this sinner to be appeased. My need is for that which separates me from God to be removed. My need is for a righteousness not my own. All of these desperate spiritual needs were met when Jesus suffered and died in my place as my Substitute; when Jesus presented Himself as a worthy and willing sacrifice on my behalf.

The Bible certainly teaches that the sufferings and death of Christ were vicarious. He took the place of sinners and our guilt was imputed and our punishment transferred to Him. The sufferings of Christ were the substitutionary or vicarious sufferings of the Lamb of God for sinners. **John 1:29**, *The next day he saw Jesus coming to him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!*

The Old Testament teaches us to regard the sacrifices that were brought upon the altar as vicarious. When the Israelite brought a sacrifice to the Lord, he had to lay his hand on the head of the sacrifice and confess his sin. This action symbolized the transfer of sin to the offering, and rendered it fit to atone for the sin of the offerer, **Leviticus 1:4**, *And he shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf.* **Leviticus 16:20-22**, *When he finishes atoning for the holy place, and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall offer the live goat.* <sup>21</sup> *"Then Aaron shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel, and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stands in readiness.* <sup>22</sup> *"And the goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness. After the laying on of hands death was vicariously inflicted on the sacrifice. The significance of this is clearly indicated in the classical passage that is found in*

**Leviticus 17:11**, *“For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you to make atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh atonement by reason of the life.”* The sacrificial animal in its death takes the place of the death due to the offerer. Those sacrifices were but pre-figurations of the one great sacrifice of Jesus Christ. **II Corinthians 5:7** affirms that *Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.*

Scripture speaks of our sins as being *laid upon* Christ, and of His *bearing* sin or iniquity. **Isaiah 53:6**, *the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.* **Isaiah 53:11**, *My Servant will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities.* **I Peter 2:24**, *He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross.* On the basis of Scripture we can say that our sins are imputed to Christ; the guilt of our sin was charged to Jesus. There are several passages in which the prepositions used clearly suggest substitution in connection with the work of Christ for sinners. In such passages as **Romans 5:6-8, 8:32, Galatians 2:20**, and **Hebrews 2:9** the preposition *hyper* probably means “instead of.” In **Galatians 3:13, John 11:50**, and **II Corinthians 5:15** it certainly means “instead of.” **II Corinthians 5:15** says, *And He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf.* A. T. Robertson says that only violence to the text can get rid of the idea of substitution. The preposition *anti* clearly means “instead of” in **Matthew 2:22, 5:38, 20:28** and in **Mark 10:45**. In **Mark 10:45** Jesus says, *“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”* According to Robertson any other meaning of the term is out of the question here.

One final point. The penalty for sin must be paid by One who is holy if the justice of God is to be satisfied. This means that the Law of God had to be

honored. And so Jesus, as our Representative, entered into a two-fold relationship to God's law. **First**, He undertook to obey all of its commands for us. Christ observed every detail, every aspect, and every intention of the law as the condition for obtaining eternal life. This is what Jesus meant when He said, *"Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill"* (**Matt. 5:17**). His obedience in this regard merited eternal life for the sinner. **Second**, He undertook to pay the penalty for violation of the law in our stead. This is what is referred to in verses like **I Peter 3:18**, *For Christ also died for sin once for all the just for the unjust that He might bring us to God*. His obedience in this regard discharged the debt of all His people.

I know some of you are struggling with issues of aging, with issues of loneliness, with tight finances. Some of you are unemployed. Some of you are dealing with difficult kids. Others of you find yourselves in difficult marriages with little hope that things will improve. Many are overwhelmed by the stresses of day-to-day life in this old world. You may ask, "Pastor, why don't you preach more on these practical things like the guys on TV or the pastors of other churches around here? That's a fair question and here's my response.

With all my heart I am convinced that Tozer got it right when he wrote, "The man who comes to a right belief about God is relieved of ten thousand temporal problems." What he's saying is that when the reality of eternal things breaks into your soul the significance of the everyday things can, at last, be properly evaluated. There is a legitimate place for a minister to speak to the physical and temporal needs of his people. At the same time I believe that all of life - every aspect, every dimension, every compartment, every endeavor, every challenge, every difficulty - all of life takes on a different meaning when life is evaluated in

light of the stunning and awesome significance of the fact that Christ suffered and died in **your** place.

Your sin is nailed to the cross and you bear it no more. The wrath of God has been turned back. No charge can be brought against you at the tribunal of God. You are free. There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. In Christ, when it comes time to die all you will have to do is die. As far as it concerns you, the infinite and unflinching justice of God has been satisfied by the sacrifice of your worthy Substitute. And we praise Him.