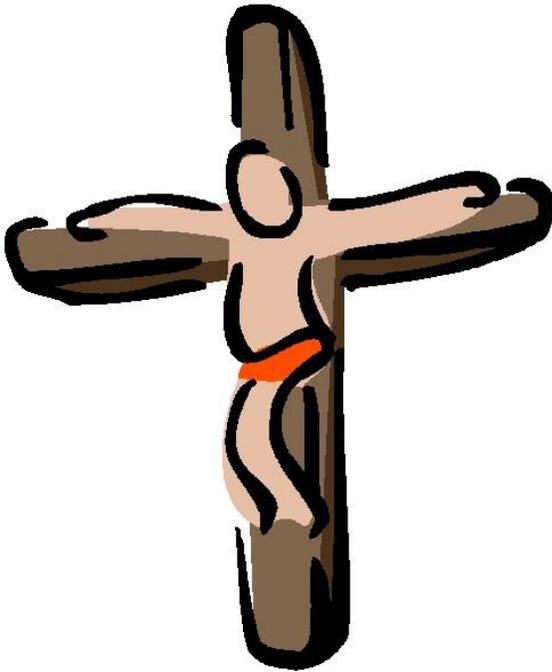


THE ATONING WORK OF CHRIST



The thoroughgoing teaching of the New Testament is that salvation is vitally connected to the death of Jesus on the cross. It is in this sense that Paul could speak of the Christian gospel as the "message of the cross" (1 Co. 1:18) and could say, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Co. 2:2). What was it that happened when Jesus died that made such a difference in the universe? How is it that the death of one man, tried for blasphemy by the Jewish Sanhedrin and sentenced to death for high treason against the Roman State, could bridge the gulf between humans and God? The answer to these questions is at the heart of the Christian message.

While there are a variety of models in the New Testament which explain the death of Jesus, far and away the most important and the most frequently mentioned is the idea of a vicarious, substitutionary atonement. The English word *atonement* comes from Anglo-Saxon and means "a making at one." It points to the process of bringing into unity those who were previously estranged. Theologically speaking, the word

atonement refers to the reconciliation brought about between sinners and God. The terms *vicarious* and *substitution* refer to what Christ did on our behalf to bring us back to God. In the simplest terms, Paul explains, "Christ died for us" (Ro. 5:8).

This theme of substitutionary death, that is, a death in behalf of someone else, runs throughout the entire Bible. One sees it on Mt. Moriah as Abraham is provided with a ram to sacrifice in the place of his son Isaac (Ge. 22). One sees it at the first Passover, when a slaughtered lamb became the necessary protection for the Israelites on the night that death stalked the Egyptian nation (Ex. 12). One sees it in the annual Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) commanded by Moses and perpetually observed by the Israelite nation—a day on which two goats were chosen to represent the nation, one to be driven into the desert while symbolically bearing the nation's sins, and the other to be slaughtered before the Lord (Lv. 16). One sees it in the prophetic word about the future Servant of the Lord, a tragic figure who would suffer unto death for the sins of others (Is. 52:13-53:12).

This theme, which is so prominent in the Old Testament, reaches its climax in the death of Jesus. While he was on his final trip to Jerusalem, Jesus explained to his disciples, "We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be handed over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him, spit on him, flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again" (Lk. 18:31-33). Just before entering the city, he told his followers, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45). At the Last Supper, Jesus explained that his death was the "blood of the covenant which is poured out for many" (Mk. 14:24). Finally, after his resurrection, Jesus talked with two disciples on the Emmaus Road and opened their perception so that they could clearly understand the centrality of his death from the Hebrew Scriptures (Lk. 24:13-32).

The atonement of Christ in his death is explained by several word-pictures in the New Testament. One of these is the metaphor of redemption, which arises from the slave markets of the Roman world. A slave was redeemed when he or she was purchased at the forum and then set free. This idea is very closely related to the words ransom (1 Ti. 2:6; He. 9:15) and freedom (Ro. 6:18; Ga. 5:1). Christians, then, are people who have been bought with a price (1 Co. 6:20; 7:23), and the price was the death of Jesus (Ep. 1:7; Col. 1:13-14; 1 Pe. 1:18-19).

A second word-picture arises from the analogy of a family quarrel. The human family has alienated itself from God, its Father, through rebellion (Col. 1:21). Similar to the Israelites in the Old Testament, who deliberately deserted the heavenly Father like a stubborn child (Ho. 11:1-8), humans have exhibited all sorts of depraved behavior while refusing to recognize God (Ro. 1:28-32). This alienation is so complete that it includes the entire human family (Ro. 3:9-18, 23). Nevertheless, God's love reached out through his Son to an alienated world! Though we were powerless to return to God on our own (Ro. 5:6), Christ's death demonstrated to us that God still loved us (Ro. 5:7-8). In the death of Jesus, we have been reconciled to God (Ro. 5:10-11; 2 Co. 5:18-19; Col. 1:22). His anger toward our sins has been propitiated, that is, satisfied and turned away. Jesus bore the just punishment for our sins (1 Jn. 4:10; Ro. 3:5-6, 25; 5:9; Ep. 2:3-7). We have now been received back again as a member of God's intimate family (Lk. 15:11-32). By a slight adjustment of the metaphor, Paul can also say that we have been adopted into God's family (Ep. 1:5).

Yet another word-picture is derived from the law courts. Like the condemned thieves who were crucified with Jesus (Lk. 23:39-41), we deserved to be executed also (Ro. 1:32; 5:12; 6:23). Yet as we stood before the bench to receive our verdict, the judge pronounced us to be justified and acquitted of our crimes because of the death of Jesus (Ro. 3:23-26; 4:25; 5:1,9). In this acquittal, we were declared to be righteous before God by faith (Ro. 1:17), and the holiness of Jesus Christ was appropriated to us (1 Co. 1:30; Phil. 3:7-9; Ep. 1:3-4). As Martin Luther expressed it, "...by a wonderful exchange our sins are now not ours but Christ's, and Christ's righteousness is not Christ's but ours!"

Finally, the death of Jesus corresponded to the Old Testament animal sacrifices which were performed by a priest, but at a higher level. In one sense, Jesus was himself the great High Priest who performed the one sacrificial death effective for all (He. 8:1-2). In another sense, he is the sacrificial victim whose blood was shed for human sin (He. 9:12-14). As such, he is both the priest and the sacrifice, and at the cross he offered himself once for all (He. 9:24-28). Because the sacrificial work was done "once for all," Christ as the great High Priest sat down at the right hand of God (He. 1:3; 8:1; 12:2). His enthronement at the Father's right side denoted that his redemptive work was finished forever (He. 10:11-12).

In retrospect, Christians can say with confidence that in a most wonderful way, the death of Jesus on the cross involved them personally. With Paul, they can say, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Ga. 2:20). Words such as substitution, redemption, ransom, freedom, reconciliation, propitiation, adoption, justification, holiness and sacrifice are words rich in meaning for believers, for they describe the atonement of Jesus our Lord who died for us. With Paul, Christians can say, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Ga. 6:14).



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