

LESSON 4: THE WORK OF JESUS CHRIST

I. Introduction

As we mentioned in the previous study, who Christ is—His person—is what makes His work so significant. The death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, represent the apex of Christian theology. In this study we will examine what Christ accomplished, and why His work and ministry are so important for all of us.

II. The Atonement

A. Introduction:

Millard Erickson has said, “*The doctrine of the atonement is the point at which the organic character of theology is most apparent. Our views on the other doctrines influence strongly our conclusions in this area.*”¹ Leon Morris has said, “*The atonement is the crucial doctrine of the faith. Unless we are right here it matters little, or so it seems to me, what we are like elsewhere.*”² They are right. The atonement is the heart of the gospel. One’s view of the atonement impacts their view of salvation, the character of God, how to live the Christian life, etc. In light of this, it is very difficult to study the atonement by itself without looking at many other doctrines. Yet in this section, we will attempt to look at the atonement exclusively, as far as that is possible, and save some of the other related topics for future lessons.

B. The Definition of Christ’s Atonement:

Here are three different theologians’ attempts to define the atonement:

*The word ‘atonement’ is one of the few theological terms which derive basically from Anglo-Saxon. It means ‘a making at one’, and points to a process of bringing those who are estranged into a unity. . . Its use in theology is to denote the work of Christ in dealing with the problem posed by the sin of man, and in bringing sinners into right relation with God.*³

The bringing together of two who have been enemies into a relationship of peace and friendship. . . In Christian theology, atonement is the central doctrine of our faith

¹ Millard Erickson, Christian Theology, pg. 802.

² Leon Morris, The Cross in the New Testament, pg. 5.

³ The Illustrated Bible Dictionary, vol. 1, pg. 147.

and can properly include all that our Lord accomplished for us on the cross. It was vicarious (i.e. substitutionary) atonement.⁴

Etymologically the word atonement signifies a harmonious relationship or that which brings about such a relationship, i.e., a reconciliation. It is principally used of the reconciliation between God and man affected by the work of Christ. The necessity for such reconciliation is the breach in the primal relationship between the Creator and the creature occasioned by man's sinful rebellion.⁵

C. Differing Views of the Atonement:

1. **The Ransom Theory:** Developed by Origen, an early church theologian from Alexandria, this view teaches that Christ died to pay a ransom to Satan to release men and women held captive in his kingdom.
 - a. How much power does this perspective attribute to Satan?
 - b. What is the problem with believing that Christ died to satisfy Satan's demands? In reality, who is it that requires payment (Heb. 9:22)?
2. **The Moral Influence Theory:** Formulated by Peter Abelard, a French Theologian (1079-1142), this theory teaches that God does not require a payment for sin, but can freely overlook it. Instead, Christ's death was God's way of showing the depth of His love for human beings by identifying with their sufferings. It is this powerful display of love that moves sinners to repent and live morally transformed lives.
 - a. According to this view, why did Christ die?
 - b. Let's say that you and I are having an argument on the banks of a rushing river. Sensing that you are still upset and that we are not reconciled, I say, "Look how much I love you," and jump into the dangerous rapids while you remain safely on the bank. Would this example move you to reconcile with me? Why or why not?

⁴ Merrill C. Tenney, The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary, pgs. 83-84.

⁵ Merrill C. Tenney, The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia, vol. 1, pg. 408.

- c. Let's say that we are having that same argument on the banks of a rushing river, and you accidentally fall in. To save your life, I risk my own by jumping in to save you. Would you be willing to reconcile with me at this point? Why?
 - d. How does denying that Christ bore the penalty for our sins on the cross change our understanding of God's love, and of Christ's love?
3. **The Example Theory:** Championed by the Italian theologian Faustus Socinus (1539-1604), this view also teaches that God did not require a payment for sin. Instead, Christ's death provides an example of how we should trust and obey God even if it costs us our lives. Whereas the moral influence theory points to the love of God, this theory emphasizes the instructive aspect of Christ's suffering and death as a pattern for our own living.
- a. A fireman who has faithfully served his city and is a great example to all responds to a house fire. The parents make it safely outside, but suddenly the mother screams in horror as she realizes her baby is still inside. The fireman rushes inside and saves the baby, but in the process he suffers mortal burns and dies. Why would this example be inspiring?
 - b. Imagine a different scenario in which the same fireman who is an example to all shows up at the same scene. This time the entire family is out of the house and everyone is accounted for. In spite of this, the fireman rushes into the house and dies. Would this be a worthwhile example to follow? What would be your opinion of the fireman?
 - c. If Christ did not have to die a torturous death to begin with, would we want to emulate His death?
 - d. What does this view suggest about God and His plans for our lives?
4. **The Governmental Theory:** First taught by Dutch theologian Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), this view states that God did not require payment for sins. Since He is

omnipotent, He could simply set aside the requirement that the penalty be paid. Yet, desiring to show mankind that breaking His laws is no light matter, the Father made an example of the Son by sending Him to die on the cross for sin.

- a. What other options would God have at His disposal to make people understand that His law must be kept?
- b. How does this view portray God – especially in light of the fact that Christ did not have to die such a torturous death?

Note: *The glaring problem with the above views (except the ransom theory) is that Christ did not bear our sins, which robs the atonement of its objective nature.*

5. **The Penal Substitution Theory:** Formulated most clearly by John Calvin, this theory teaches that Christ's death was a vicarious (substitutionary) sacrifice for our sins. Jesus' death satisfied the demands of God's justice upon sin, paid the penalty, brought forgiveness, imputed righteousness, and ultimately reconciled repentant sinners to God. This is the biblically correct view, and it will be fleshed out in the following section.

D. Elements of the Penal Substitution Theory of Atonement:

1. Necessity:

- a. Explained: God cannot merely overlook man's sin, nor can He just forgive man without requiring that payment be made or punishment be given for sin. In this sense, the atonement is necessary for man to be made right with his Creator.
- b. Scripture Reference:

Hebrews 9:22 ***Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.***

- c. Objection: Why doesn't God simply forgive us as an act of goodwill instead of requiring a payment?
- d. Response:

- i. Can a judge justly overlook an act of clear murder when he is presiding over a homicide case? Why or why not?
- ii. From the passage below, on what basis should we freely forgive others? Is God obligated to the same standards?

Matthew 6:14-15 ***“For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, ¹⁵ but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”***

Note: Even if it were possible for God to overlook sin as an act of goodwill, He is still bound by His nature as the holy Judge to preserve justice. Humans may freely forgive others, but the basis of such forgiveness is the immense forgiveness the sinner has already received from the Father. God, being perfect, has received no such forgiveness from anyone, and owes none to anyone.

- e. Reflection: What does the necessity of the atonement teach us about God’s character?

2. Substitution:

- a. Explained: Substitution simply means that the atonement is a sacrifice offered in place of the sinner; the sacrifice bears the sinner’s guilt.
- b. Scripture References:

John 1:29 ***The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”***

2 Corinthians 5:21 ***For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.***

Galatians 3:13 ***Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”***

- c. Objection: Isn’t it improper and unjust to punish an innocent party?

d. Response:

- i. What is the difference between a judge finding a murderer guilty but then sentencing the court recorder to death, and Christ's work on the cross?

ii. How do the following passages clarify the issue?

John 10:17-18 ***"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. ¹⁸ No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father."***

John 10:30 ***"I and the Father are one."***

Note: Normally it is improper to punish innocent third parties. An exception could be made if a) the innocent party were to receive the penalty voluntarily, and b) the judge is that innocent party. Jesus suffered voluntarily and is united with the Judge in the Godhead; thus, the Judge essentially punished Himself.

- e. What does the substitution element of the atonement teach us about God's character?

3. Propitiation:

- a. Explained: Propitiation refers to the amount of compensation needed to regain favor, appease, or satisfy God's demands and divert His wrath. Man's sin does not just make God sad; it makes Him angry, and His anger will only be satisfied by the execution of His justice.

- b. Scripture References:

Leviticus 4:35 ***And all its fat he shall remove as the fat of the lamb is removed from the sacrifice of peace offerings, and the priest shall burn it on the altar, on top of the LORD's food offerings. And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven.***

Romans 3:25-26 *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.*

Romans 5:9 *Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.*

- c. Objection: Doesn't the appeasement of the Father by the Son reveal conflict in the Godhead? In other words, does this mean that God the Father wants vengeance, but the Son desires forgiveness?

- d. Response:

- i. Is it possible for a person to be both angry and loving at the same time? In answering this question, consider godly parents.

- ii. Does the atonement change God from an angry God to a loving God? Why or why not? (cf. John 3:16)

*"It is one thing to say the wrathful God is made loving. That would be entirely false. It is another thing to say the wrathful God is loving. That is profoundly true."*⁶

- iii. Does propitiation detract from God's love and mercy? Why or why not?

- e. Reflection: What does Christ's work of propitiation teach us about God?

4. Imputation:

- a. Explained: While substitution and propitiation have to do with the negative aspects of the atonement (what God has taken away from us), imputation has to do with the positive aspect of the atonement (what God has given to us). God

⁶ John Murray, *Redemption*, p. 31.

has taken away the guilt of believers, but he has also imputed to them the righteousness of Christ.

b. Scripture Reference:

Romans 6:3-4 ***Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.***

c. Objection: Isn't it improper or unfair to reward a guilty party?

d. Response:

i. Under what circumstances would it be acceptable to punish a substitute in our stead?

ii. In the same way, when would it be acceptable to reap the benefits of another's work?

iii. According to the following passage, how do we reap the benefits of Christ's work?

Romans 6:5 ***For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.***

e. Reflection: What does Christ's work of imputation teach us about God's character?

III. The Resurrection of Christ

The Resurrection is one of the most foundational and essential events in all of Christianity. Without the Resurrection, Christianity loses its credibility and is reduced to nothing more than moral teachings about a transcendent God. With the Resurrection, the certainty of Christianity takes hold as the teachings, message, and work of Christ are validated. We will now examine the significance of this supernatural event and consider its impact on our theology, faith, and destiny.

A. The Nature of Christ's Resurrection

1. The resurrection body of Christ is identified with the body laid in the tomb:

Matthew 28:9 ***And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him.***

Luke 24:39-43 ***"See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch Me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."***⁴⁰ ***And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. . . .***⁴² ***They gave him a piece of a broiled fish; ⁴³ and he took it and ate before them.***

John 20:17 ***Jesus said to her, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"***

- a. According to the above verses, what properties does Jesus' resurrection body still retain? What does this suggest about God's view of physical creation?
 - b. Why do you suppose God allows Jesus' scars to remain? How does this add credibility to His actual Resurrection?
 - c. Why is it important to understand the Resurrection as a physical reality?
 - d. What would happen to the Christian faith if it were shown that the Resurrection was merely spiritual – not physical – in nature?
 - e. What are some modern attempts to deny the bodily resurrection of Christ?
2. The resurrection body of Christ changed:

Luke 24:30-31 ***When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. ³¹ And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight.***

John 20:14-16 *Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).*

- a. Why wasn't Christ immediately recognizable to Mary?
- b. Would the resurrected Christ need food, rest, water, etc.? Why or why not?

3. The resurrection body of Christ is now glorified:

Acts 9:3-6 *Now as he went on his way, he approached Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven shone around him. ⁴ And falling to the ground, he heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" ⁵ And he said, "Who are You, Lord?" And he said, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. ⁶ But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."*

Revelation 1:12-16 *Then I turned to see the voice that was speaking to me, and on turning I saw seven golden lampstands, ¹³ and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash around his chest. ¹⁴ The hairs of his head were white, like white wool, like snow. His eyes were like a flame of fire, ¹⁵ his feet were like burnished bronze, refined in a furnace, and his voice was like the roar of many waters. ¹⁶ In his right hand he held seven stars, from his mouth came a sharp two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining in full strength.*

- a. How is Christ's glorified body different from the one that walked the earth after the Resurrection?
- b. Why do you suppose the resurrected Christ did not fully unveil His glory until after the Ascension?

B. The Significance of Christ's Resurrection:

1. It demonstrates the validity of the Christian faith (1 Cor. 15:17).
2. It fulfilled the promise made to the Old Testament fathers (Acts 13:32-37).
3. It established His identity as the Son with finality (Rom. 1:4).
4. It validated Christ's atoning work (Rom. 4:25).
5. It guarantees the believer's future resurrection and possession of a glorified body (1 Cor. 15:20-21; Phil. 3:20-21; and 1 Pet. 1:3-5).
6. It guarantees the final judgment of the world (Acts 17:31).

IV. The Ascension of Christ

A. The Reality:

Simply put, the Ascension is the transference of the resurrected body of Jesus from this world to heaven. Of the New Testament writers, only Luke described Jesus' Ascension. Acts 1:9–11 pictures a scene in which Jesus was "taken up" and disappeared into a cloud. Luke 24:50, 51 and Acts 1:12 locate that final event near Bethany, east of Jerusalem, on the Mount of Olives.

Matthew's gospel concluded before Pentecost, but John recorded in his gospel Jesus' own words about His future ascension: Many will believe without ever having seen Him (20:29); Jesus could not be touched, for He still had to ascend to the Father (20:17); and though He departed, He will return (21:22). Thus, the Gospels assume that (1) after the Resurrection Jesus appeared to His disciples; (2) at some point in time those appearances ceased; and (3) although physically absent, Jesus is still spiritually present in His church. Other New Testament writings agree. The apostle Paul wrote that God raised Christ from the dead **"and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places"** (Eph 1:20) or, as the writer of Hebrews put it, **"at the right hand of the Majesty on high"** (Heb 1:3).⁷

B. The Significance of the Ascension:

1. It marks the end of Christ's self-limitation.

Though He is very God, in coming to earth as a man Christ voluntarily emptied Himself, making Himself of no reputation (Philippians 2:6). This self-limitation came to an end at the Ascension.

⁷Elwell, Walter A. ; Beitzel, Barry J.: Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible. Grand Rapids, Mich. : Baker Book House, 1988, S. 209

2. It is the occasion for Christ's exaltation and glorification.

Quite simply, the Ascension is the *designation* and the demonstration of Christ's Lordship; it is the glorious coronation of our King by His Father (cf. John 17:5).

3. It marks the entrance of resurrected humanity into heaven.

Jesus was the first man to enter heaven with a glorified body. He is our forerunner (Hebrews 6:20). His presence there is our guarantee that we, too, will be resurrected and taken to heaven. As Fitzmyer says, "the ascension of Christ is the guarantee of Christian destiny."

4. It marks the beginning of Christ's new ministry of intercession and advocacy.

While on earth Christ accomplished the provision of salvation to all who would believe; after the Ascension He began a new ministry. As our intercessor, Jesus continually mediates for us (Hebrews 7:25), and as our advocate He continually pleads our case before the Father (1 John 2:1). When we sin and need familial forgiveness, He is there for us. When we pray to the Father, Christ forms the bridge.

5. It allowed Christ to send the Holy Spirit to indwell and empower us.

This is the heart of the theological significance of the Ascension. In John 16:7 Jesus says, ***"Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you."***

6. It served as the opportunity for Christ to give us spiritual gifts.

We read in Ephesians 4:8, ***"When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men."*** These spiritual gifts were actually gifted men who were given to lead the church.

7. It allows the preparation of our future heavenly home.

In John 14:2–3 Jesus said, ***"In my father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."*** We are only strangers here on earth, and part of the reason Christ is absent now is that He is away preparing our true home in heaven.

8. It anticipates His return.

In Acts 1:11 we read, ***“This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”*** Walvoord comments, “This is of great significance because when Christ returns to earth to establish His kingdom, His second advent has all of these same characteristics, namely, gradual, visible, bodily and with clouds.” As we wait for his second coming, our reference point is his Ascension.⁸

V. Conclusion

It seems fitting to conclude with the words of Isaac Watts’ immortal Hymn.

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
Save in the death of Christ my God!
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.

See from His head, His hands, His feet,
Sorrow and love flow mingled down!
Did e’er such love and sorrow meet,
Or thorns compose so rich a crown?

Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were a present far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.

⁸Emmaus Bible College: *Emmaus Journal Volume 3*. Emmaus Bible College, 1994; 2002, S. 3:164-167

Appendix:

THE APPLICATION OF THE ATONEMENT (A middle ground between limited and unlimited atonement)

Points of Agreement:

In general, there are three points of agreement between those who hold to limited and unlimited atonement:

1. Not all will be saved.
2. A free offer of the gospel can be made to every person who was ever born.
3. Christ's death in itself, because He is the infinitely perfect and valuable Son of God, has infinite merit and is in itself sufficient to pay the penalty of the sins of as many or as few as the Father and the Son decreed.⁹

Points of Disagreement:

1. Limited atonement holds that God's intention for Jesus' death was *only* to save the elect, and the extent of the atonement is limited by God's intention. Limited atonement holds that believers' salvation was actually accomplished on the cross. It was entirely successful in purchasing and securing the salvation of the elect.
2. Unlimited atonement holds that God's intention for Jesus' death was to provide atonement for the sins of the whole world, and the application of the atonement is limited by people's own failure to believe. Believers' salvation is actually accomplished at the moment of their conversion. Christ's sacrifice was "sufficient for all, effective for the elect."
3. Some of the issues up for debate are: What does the atonement actually accomplish? Who limits the extent of the atonement, man or God? Is there only one purpose for the cross, or are there several? At what point in time are people actually saved? Does God love all people, or only the elect? Can we tell an unbeliever, "God loves you"?

A Middle Position: What happened on the Cross

On the cross Christ gave Himself "for us;" that is, for the people of the church, "to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14). Not only did His death make an adequate *provision* for the elect,

⁹ Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, p. 597.

but it also achieved the desired *certainty* of our salvation. What happened on the cross secures salvation and remains the pivotal point in God's redemptive plan. Though our election was *decreed* by God in eternity past, our redemption was *realized* through Christ's death on the cross.

We receive the benefits of the atonement at the point of conversion, when we are transformed from children of wrath (Eph. 2:3) to sons of God. Thus, Christ's death on the cross made a provision for our sins, but God, through His effectual calling, applies it to our account when we repent. For this reason, it is incumbent upon the church to verbally proclaim the gospel so that the elect around the world can believe (Rom. 10:17; Col. 1:24).

This is the primary purpose of the cross—to redeem the elect. Yet, in view of the infinite value of Christ's sacrifice, its usefulness need not be limited to this singular purpose. Verses such as Isaiah 53:6, 1 Timothy 4:10, 2 Peter 2:1, and 1 John 2:2 all seem to indicate that the death of Christ applies, in some fashion, to the non-elect as well. Jesus died “for” the non-elect in the sense that God presents Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for their sins – the blood of Christ rendered the whole world “savable.” Though their sins are not forgiven apart from faith and repentance, their sins are now forgivable.

This was not done in order to bring everyone to salvation, but rather to increase their responsibility before God. The universal aspect of the atonement changes the unbeliever's dilemma from one of *inability* (i.e., even if they had the will to believe, salvation would be impossible because no provision had been made for their sin) to one of *responsibility* (they reject the provision through an act of their own will). The generosity of God only heightens the responsibility of the unbeliever, and the death of Christ will serve as a star witness when the non-elect are condemned, magnifying His justice. In the words of John 3:18, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” The sinner is condemned not only for being a sinner, but also for rejecting God's gracious provision to cover his sin. Thus, the death of Christ is sufficient for all, but effective to:

1. Secure the salvation of the elect.
2. Make the gospel offer genuine and hold the non-elect more accountable.

Some may object to this view, contending that it allows God's purposes for the cross to be thwarted. In other words, “If Christ had intended to die for everyone, but some remain unsaved, then He failed to accomplish His purpose.” To this I would answer that Christ did intend to die for everyone, but with two different purposes in mind: He died for the elect to secure their salvation, and He died for the non-elect to make the gospel offer genuine.

Application: In view of this understanding of the work of Christ, I have no qualms about telling the unbeliever that God loves you and Christ died for you.