

Lesson 8

THE BIG WORDS OF THE CROSS, 1

Romans 5:11-21

“For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:17).

“Atonement”

Nothing in all of history is more amazing than the invitation of the Scriptures. God invites us to plumb the depths of the cross. When we do, we are stunned into silence and overwhelmed by gratitude. Atonement, that is, being made one with God, is one of the great themes of the Bible—it is what separates Christianity from all the other religions. One day in time—at the cross, in the death of Jesus—sinful man saw the eternal love of God (John 3:16).

Sin violates and eliminates holiness. Through sin man separated himself from a holy God. No sin can enter heaven. No sinner has the right or the reason to stand in the presence of a holy God. Every sin and every sinner will be punished—either at the cross or in hell. Can man in sin be saved? If so, how, when, and by whom? Sin is the greatest of all problems, but Jesus died to solve it. Sinners do not merely need to be saved—they need a Savior for today, tomorrow, and eternity!

John the Baptist was privileged to announce, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, 36). Jesus did not come to seek the saved, but to seek the lost (Luke 19:10). Calvary is the incredible revelation that God is a pardoning God. Atonement is God’s gift of love!

Obviously, atonement is beyond our comprehension and compensation. Faith believes that which can never be understood. Atonement is not a story for our intellect, but a sanctuary for our faith.

It is better to accept a theology we cannot fully understand than to buy clarity at the price of inadequacy. There cannot be true fellowship with God without atonement. Jesus suffered the penalty that sin deserved. Therefore, sinners depend on the crucifixion. If sinners could have been saved another way, then God would have been a fiend to sacrifice His only Son. The accusers unknowingly spoke a profound truth: “He saved others; He cannot save Himself” (Mark 15:31; see Luke 23:35). Jesus has no peers and no rivals. He is the Lion of Judah (Revelation 5:5), but He is also the Lamb of God. We identify more easily with the Lion. However, victory came not by the Lion, but by the Lamb (1 Peter 1:18, 19). The great teaching about the Lamb is in Revelation.¹ The saved are listed in the Lamb’s book of life (Philippians 4:3; Revelation 3:5; 17:8; 20:12, 15; 22:19).

The word “atonement” means “to make amends, make things right, give satisfaction to a wronged person.” Atonement implies that “God is right.” He is right about our problem—sin. He is right about the solution—the cross. Atonement is like a diamond: We cannot see all of it from any one direction. Cardinal errors result from emphasizing one facet of the cross over others. Jesus died on a cross—that is history. Jesus died for me—that is salvation. We must learn to believe and accept that Jesus died for each of us.

Atonement and Justification

It has been said that Romans is the heart of the Scriptures and Romans 3:20–26 is the heart of Romans: In this passage Paul used the phrase “. . . that He would be just and the justifier.” Atonement is built upon justice. The Bible uses “justification” and “righteousness” in basically the same way. Obviously, one cannot teach justification without justice. How can God justify the guilty? Time and forgetfulness do not cancel sin. Sin cannot be fixed. Even God does not fix sin. The sin penalty must be paid, and sin must be punished. Jesus paid it all! Thus God’s answer to sin is the cross.

¹See Revelation 5:6, 12, 13; 6:16; 7:9, 10, 14; 12:11; 13:8; 14:1, 4; 21:9; 22:1, 3.

Our culture stumbles over this truth (1 Corinthians 1:22–25). Man cannot see himself lost in sin. Universalism says, “God is too good to allow you to go to hell. . .”—but “good enough” never is! There is no justice without punishment. A holy God cannot allow sin to remain unpunished. God is *just*. Do not accept the idea that “God is loving and will overlook sin”! Mercy cannot cheat justice. God cannot be less than God. Justice is a higher principle than sentimental love. What justice demanded, grace provided. What man could not do, God did in the Son of Man (Jesus).

Justice is the heart of biblical theology. Study justice! To believe in the cross is to accept justice and to accept hell. Love cannot make sense apart from justice (holiness). Without justice, grace is unnecessary. Without justice, the cross has no purpose. Love and holiness always go together. God is a God of justice. If guilt does not matter, Jesus died in vain. Sin must be cleansed—not overlooked (1 Corinthians 6:11).

The incarnation of Jesus, in and of itself, could not save us. The perfect life of Christ could not save us. The perfect teachings of Jesus, by themselves, could not save us. There had to be blood: “. . . [A]nd without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22). There had to be death: “. . . since a death has taken place” (Hebrews 9:15–17; see 2:9; Romans 5:10; Colossians 1:22).

It was not love that nailed Jesus to the cross—it was justice. God is just. He also is the justifier. God is right. God provided by grace what man could not do by meritorious works. This is why Jesus cried out, “It is finished!” when He died upon the cross. “He paid a debt He did not owe; I owed a debt I could not pay.”² Jesus could either save Himself or save us. He gave Himself to save us. The Judge of man became the Savior of man (John 5:22–27).

Therefore, salvation begins and ends with justification. We have been justified. “Just-as-if-I’d never sinned” sounds better than it actually is. We have sinned, but God has forgiven us. The justice of God is so contrary to us that it even takes Christians by surprise!

Atonement and Substitution

The middle cross at Calvary did not belong to Jesus; it belonged to you and me! His crucifixion was vicarious, representative, and substitutionary! Christ took a death that belongs to us; and when we come to Him and live in Him, we take a life that belongs to Him. Without substitution, the cross is only a story about a brave man who died on a cross. Since we cannot save ourselves, someone else must save us if we are going to be saved.

What did I contribute to my salvation? My sin! Jesus is the perfect substitute in everything we were meant to be. The Son of God became the Son of Man, so that the sons of men might become sons of God. Christ’s blood was first given for us, and then, daily it is given to us.

Can a person benefit from another’s suffering and sacrifice? Yes! Life itself is filled with the concept of substitution.³ It is logical, lawful, and expedient. The sacrificial system of the Old Testament teaches us this profound truth. The “scapegoat” is the vivid example. Beautiful Isaiah 53 reveals the depth of substitution. Throughout its pages, the Bible often affirms substitution. Jesus was made to be sin. He became sin for us. Never was there more injustice and justice than at the cross!

How can the unrighteous be made righteous? Our righteousness is a “declared righteousness” (see Romans 3:25, 26; KJV; Philippians 3:9; James 2:23). No one can declare himself righteous (Romans 3:9, 10, 20). Self-justification is impossible. It is God who justifies (Romans 8:33), and He does this freely (Romans 3:24). This is a gift. A gift must have both a giver and a receiver. A gift is not a gift until it is received. Further, a gift is not a gift until it is used. We have a sin problem. Jesus, as our substitute, is the only One who can provide righteousness for us.

God cannot overlook or dismiss sin. He took our sin upon Himself and sentenced Himself for it. God’s holiness was honored, our sin was punished, and those of us who have obeyed Him have been

²Author unknown, “He Paid a Debt,” *Songs of Faith and Praise*, comp. and ed. Alton H. Howard (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Co., 1994).

³See Romans 5:5–10; Ephesians 1:3–13; Philippians 3:7–10; Hebrews 2:9, 14–17; 7:25; 9:28; 10:10; 12:1, 2; 1 Peter 2:24; 1 John 2:1, 2.

redeemed. God has declared the saved to be righteous. This is a legal (lawful) declaration. It is “justified justification.”

In this process God is not making bad people good or evil people holy. Christians are faithful—not perfect. We are tempted and sinful; we fall short (Romans 3:9–12). Christians still live on the earth, in time, and in the flesh. Paul said that nothing good dwells in the flesh (Romans 7:18). Christians are at war . . . with Satan, sin, and self. However, Christians who are walking in the Light are constantly cleansed through His blood (1 John 1:7). God pronounces Christians legally righteous, free from any liability to the broken law, because He Himself, in His Son, bore the penalty. We were baptized into Christ and put on Christ in this act (Romans 6:3, 4; Galatians 3:26, 27). To be “declared righteous” changes not only our status, but also, gradually, changes our character and our conduct.

There cannot be justification without atonement. Obedient faith receives what grace freely offers. The cross is God’s impenetrable mystery, a love greater than our minds can fathom. God is not, in reality, Someone we can understand, but He is Someone we can trust.

Critics of Christianity abhor substitution because substitution magnifies sacrifice. However, the entire concept of biblical religion is based on sacrifice. From Genesis to Revelation, God ordained that a sacrifice be made for sin. Jesus cannot be reduced to a good teacher, a benefactor, or a mere person—He is our sacrifice. God is both the reconciler and the reconciled. Jesus is humanity’s substitute. He did not offer an animal; He offered Himself. Hebrews reveals Jesus as the unique priest and sacrifice. We read, “Christ saves us as a priest, by offering Himself as a sacrifice for our sins.”⁴ In the Old Testament, God had to see the blood on the doorpost in order to save a family as Israel was preparing to leave Egypt (Exodus 12:13). Everyone rescued by God has thereby been purchased for God. Our bodies belong to God three times over—by creation, by redemption, and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20). The heart of Isaiah 53 is sacrifice. Jesus is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8).

Atonement and Adoption

Nothing in our ministries is as exciting as helping parents adopt a child. As the adoption papers are signed, we all think, “This child does not grasp how blessed he is.” The concept of adoption is a neglected facet of Christianity. We seldom talk about or study the subject.

Let us change that and think about the Holy Spirit and His part in our adoption. To begin with, remember that we are born again of water and the Spirit when we become Christians (John 3:3–7). Being led by the Spirit, we become sons of God. He is the Spirit of adoption. He bears witness with our spirit (Romans 8:14–18). This makes us “fellow heirs with Christ.” God wants sons, not slaves. God, who remained at a distance in the Old Testament, is to the Christian “Abba! Father!” This truth is beyond our understanding! Redemption makes adoption possible. The child of God is promised that the Holy Spirit cries, “Abba! Father!” in his heart (Galatians 4:4–7).

Amazing grace! By grace God predestined us for adoption by Jesus. God has accepted us in the Beloved, that is, in Jesus. Redemption comes through His blood. Upon obeying the gospel of salvation, we were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (Ephesians 1:3–14). This is a “crown jewel” verse in the Scriptures. Here is the basis of our faith. John revealed the grand love of God—that we forgiven sinners could be called the sons of God. “Now we are sons!” John said (1 John 3:1, 2). What a profound thought! What a privilege! In this we see the Roman concept of freedom and sonship. Free! Restored! Adopted! Thank God! To claim Christ is to claim acquittal. We are incapable of winning the battle of life alone. God does what we cannot do, so we can be what we dare not think that we can be.

*The cross . . .
there is no other way!*

⁴Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Co., 1876), 555.