

The Satisfaction of Christ Studies in the Atonement 1. Introduction

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Transcript

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The death of Christ, the incarnate Son of God, is the most remarkable event in all history. Its uniqueness was demonstrated in various ways. Centuries before it occurred it was foretold with an amazing fullness of detail, by those men whom God raised up in the midst of Israel to direct their thoughts and expectations to a fuller and more glorious revelation of Himself. The prophets of Jehovah described the promised Messiah, not only as a person of high dignity and as one who should perform wondrous and blessed miracles, but also as one who should be "despised and rejected of men," and whose labors and sorrows should be terminated by a death of shame and violence. In addition, they affirmed that He should die not only under human sentence of execution, but that "it pleased the Lord to bruise Him; HE hath put Him to grief" (Isa. 53:10), yea, that Jehovah should cry, "Awake, O sword, against My Shepherd, and against the man that is My Fellow, saith the Lord of hosts: smite the Shepherd" (Zech. 13:7). The supernatural phenomena which attended Christ's death clearly distinguishes it from all other deaths. The obscuration of the sun at midday without any natural cause, the earthquake which clove asunder the rocks and laid open the graves, and the rending of the veil of the temple from top to bottom, proclaimed that He who was hanging on the Cross was no ordinary sufferer. So too that which followed the death of Christ is equally noteworthy. Three days after His body had been placed in Joseph's tomb and the sepulcher securely sealed, He, by His own power (John 2:19; 10:18), burst asunder the bonds of death and rose in triumph from the grave, and is now alive forevermore, holding the keys of death and hades in His hands. Forty days later, after having appeared again and again, in tangible form before His friends, He ascended to heaven from the midst of His disciples. Ten days after, He poured out the Holy Spirit, by whom they were enabled to publish to men out of every nation in their respective languages, the wonders of His death and resurrection. As another has said, "The effect was not less surprising than the means employed to accomplish it. The attention of Jews and Gentiles was excited; multitudes were prevailed upon to acknowledge Him as the Son of God, and the Messiah; and a church was formed, which, notwithstanding powerful opposition and cruel persecution, subsists at the present hour. The death of Christ was the great subject on which the apostles were commanded to preach, although it was known beforehand that it would be offensive to all classes of men; and they actually made it the chosen theme of their discourses. 'I determined,' Paul said, 'not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:2). . . In the New Testament, His death is represented as an event of the greatest importance, as a fact on which Christianity rests, as the only ground of hope to the guilty, as the only source of peace and

consolation, as, of all motives, the most powerful to excite us to mortify sin and devote ourselves to the service of God" (Dr. John Dick). Not only was the death and resurrection of Christ the central theme of apostolic preaching and the principal subject of their writings, but it is remembered and celebrated in heaven: the theme of the songs of the redeemed in glory is the person and blood of the Savior: "Saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing" (Rev. 5:12). "The Atonement made by the Son of God, is the beginning of the ransomed sinner's hope, and will be the theme of his exultation, when he shall cast his crown before the throne, singing the song of Moses and of the Lamb" (James Haldane). Now it is evident from all these facts that there is something peculiar in the death of Christ, something which unmistakably separates it from all other deaths, and therefore renders it worthy of our most diligent, prayerful and reverent attention and study. It behooves us by all that is serious, solemn and salutary, to have just and right conceptions of it; by which is meant not merely that we should know when it happened, and with what circumstances it was attended, but that we should most earnestly endeavor to ascertain what was the Savior's design in submitting to die upon the Cross, why it was that Jehovah smote Him, and exactly what has been accomplished thereby. But as we attempt to approach a subject so important, so wonderful, yet so unspeakably solemn, let us remember that it calls for a heart filled with awe, as well as a sense of our utter unworthiness. To touch the very fringe of the holy things of God ought to inspire reverential fear, but to take up the innermost secrets of His covenant, to contemplate the eternal counsels of the blessed Trinity, to endeavor to enter into the meaning of that unique transaction at Calvary, which was veiled with darkness, calls for a special degree of grace, fear and humility, of heavenly teaching and the humble boldness of faith. Our prayerful hope is that He who is pleased to use ciphers (1 Cor. 1:28) to promote His glory, may condescend to grant us now a special measure of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and deign to bless this book to not a few of those whom God has loved with an everlasting love. What has Christ done in order to secure the salvation of sinners? What is the import of that death of His on which salvation hinges? In the outset we may be fairly warned of what must be the consequences of submitting the question to human reason or of bringing the world's wisdom into the inquiry. "The preaching of the Cross is to them that perish foolishness, but unto us which are saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor. 1:18). To which the apostle added, "But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God." In view of these statements, it was an easy matter for bygone generations of the saints to anticipate what would be the inevitable result when the wisdom of the world, which was fully arrayed against the Gospel which Paul preached, should be constituted its interpreter, or should presume to accommodate it to worldly principles. Sixty years ago Mr. James Inglis, writing in "The Waymarks of the Wilderness" on "The Atonement," said, "There is one question which underlies all theological controversy: and as we approach the crisis, it is coming more and more to the surface. The question in it all really is: whether God or man is to be the supreme; whether the glory of God or the supposed interest of man is the center around which all is to revolve; whether the will of God is to be supreme and unquestioned, or whether every expression of it is to be brought to the bar of human reason; and whether everything in theology, as in morals, is to be judged by its reasonableness and its apparent usefulness to man. Those who claim to be the most advanced theologians and moralists, exalt human nature to the place of the sovereign arbitrator of truth and right, and seek to apply their favorite maxim regarding earthly governments to the Divine government also: that it exists only for the sake—as yet they would scarcely have the hardihood to say by the consent — of the governed. "This fundamental question of Divine or human supremacy underlies the views men adopt of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. On one side the question is simply, What is written? On the other side a right is claimed to decide what ought to be

written—the very presumption which Satan taught our first parents regarding what God had said. When this claimed right is exercised, little of revelation is left unmodified. One of the first points on which proud reason comes into conflict with what is written, is the natural condition of man. Nor need we be surprised if it should revolt against the Divine estimate of fallen man, and against the sentence under which he lies as by nature a child of wrath, dead in trespasses and sins, vile, polluted, helpless and hopeless in himself. It is only the Spirit of God that can convince a man of sin in the Scriptural sense; and so long as the appeal is to human reason, the Scriptural view of man's condition must be rejected. Though it cannot be denied that the facts in the case, whether in the history of an individual or of mankind, most painfully corroborate the Scriptural view, and though the most humbling descriptions of human depravity in the Word of God seem to be only history condensed, there is a wonderful facility in offsetting these sad realities by an ideal excellence, and in covering them up by glowing delineations of the possibilities of human progress. The power of self-deception and self-flattery in the human heart is amazing. The admirable sentiments which are elegantly expressed in the writings of men whose lives were very far from exemplifying them, serve to cover up the deep and general depravity of the age in which they lived. Their modern admirers estimate themselves rather by their admiration of these virtuous sentiments, than by what they know themselves to be in life and character. Never is this power of self-deception and self-flattery more signally illustrated than when it comes into the sphere of Christianity, substituting the Sermon on the Mount for the discourses of heathen moralists, and reckoning all the graces of the renewed man, if not the living perfections of the Word made flesh, among the possibilities of human cultivation. That man is fallen, may not be denied; but we are taught that the evil is incidental, not inherent, and may be traced to physical degeneracy, the influence of a disordered world, of bad example, and defective education. While undeveloped and dormant in the soul, there is inherent nobility, the germ of all excellence, which only needs to be aroused and cherished, until it expands into a perfection which renders it meet for inheritance of the saints in light. "Such views of the natural condition of man lead to a corresponding modification of the Scriptural doctrine of regeneration, which, according to our liberal theologians, is but the awakening of the dormant excellence of man, giving a new turn to misdirected affections and powers, and is the first step in the development of his inherent nobility. The testimony of Scripture as to the utter ruin of man, and the necessity of being born again, in the singularly emphatic terms used with reference to the one as well as the other, might seem to present an insuperable objection to the self-exalting scheme; but an evasion of the objection has already been provided for in a theory of inspiration which permits everything in the Scriptures which is irreconcilable with their theology, to be explained away as the exaggeration of enthusiasts or the daring imagery of Eastern poets. "In such a system of doctrine the mission of Christ can have no place, except as it provides for this moral development, or aids it. For, first of all, in the daring exaltation of man, the revealed character of God is tampered with; His perfections are rendered tributary to the supposed interest of His creatures; His righteousness, holiness and truth are resolved into benevolence; so that there are no claims of justice to be satisfied, no holiness and truth to be vindicated, and sin is only to be taken cognizance of in so far as it may interfere with the well-being of the creature. The humiliation, suffering and death of the Son of God furnished but an impressive spectacle, by which the evil effects of an unconditional pardon of sin might be averted, and by which the heart of the sinner might be melted and conciliated. The life and death of Christ, in short, are the moral influences by which the dormant excellence of the soul is aroused, love to God and man engendered, and by which the wanderer is to be won into the path of virtue. The 'influence' of the Holy Spirit, rather than His personal agency, now comes in to give effect to the truth and to aid the moral development, just as in the natural world the influence of the sun's rays change the desolation of winter into the verdure of spring." When we remember that the Atonement is the most important subject which can engage the minds of either men or

angels: that it not only secures the eternal happiness of all God's elect, but also gives to the universe the fullest view of the perfections of the Creator: that in it are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, while by it are revealed the unsearchable riches of Christ: that through the very Church which has been purchased thereby is being made known to principalities and powers in the heavenlies the manifold wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10)—then of what supreme moment must it be to understand it aright! But how is fallen man to apprehend these truths to which his depraved heart is so much opposed? All the force of intellect is less than nothing when it attempts, in its own strength, to comprehend the deep things of God. Since a man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven (John 3:27), much more is a special enlightenment by the Holy Spirit needed if he is to enter at all into this highest mystery. "Great is the mystery of godliness" (1 Tim. 3:16). Amazing beyond all finite conception is that transaction which was consummated at Golgotha. There we behold the Prince of Life dying. There we gaze upon the Lord of Glory made a spectacle of unutterable shame. There we see the Holy One of God made sin for His people. There we witness the Author of all blessing made a curse for worms of the earth. It is the mystery of mysteries that He who is none other than Immanuel, should stoop so low as to join together the infinite majesty of Deity with the lowest degree of abasement that was possible to descend into. He could not have gone lower and be God. Well did the Puritan Sibbes say, "God, to show His love to us, showed Himself God in this: that He could be God and go so low as to die" (Vol. 5, p. 327). To what source then can we appeal for light, for understanding, for an explanation and interpretation of the Cross? Human reasoning is futile, speculation is profane, the opinions of men are worthless. Thus, we are absolutely shut up to what God has been pleased to make known to us in His Word. If it be true that we can know nothing about the origin of the old creation save what the Holy Scriptures reveal — the wild and conflicting guesses of science "falsely so called" (1 Tim. 6:20) only serving to make this the more evident — then much more are we entirely dependent upon the teaching of Holy Writ concerning the foundation on which the new creation rests. In his splendid work on "The Atonement" (1867) Dr. A. A. Hodge rightly affirmed, "I insist that, as the Gospel is wholly a matter of Divine revelation, the answer to the question, What did Christ do on earth in order to reconcile us to God? be sought exclusively in a full and fair induction from all the Scriptures that teach upon the subject. From a survey of all the matter revealed on the subject, what, in the judgment of a mind unprejudiced by theories, did the sacred writers intend us to believe? The result of such an examination, unmodified by philosophy or secular analogies, is alone, we insist, the true redemptive work of Christ." Well did this deeply-taught servant of God say, "unmodified by secular analogies." The truth of God has been grossly perverted, the honor of Christ grievously sullied, and the people of God (who were too lazy to diligently study the Scriptures for themselves) have often been misled by the superficial efforts of irreverent preachers, who sought "Illustrations" from the imaginary analogies in human relations. For example: the case of a criminal is cited, in whose character there is no redeeming trait, who is condemned to death for his aggravated crimes. When he stands upon the scaffold, the Queen of England is supposed to send her son and heir to die in the villain's stead, that he may again be turned loose upon society. Yet this monstrous and revolting supposition was offered last century as an illustration of John 3:16 in the discourse of a popular preacher of wide reputation. "The plan of redemption, the office of our Surety, and the satisfaction which He rendered to the claims of justice against us, have no parallel in the relations of men to one another. We are carried above the sphere of the highest relations of created beings into the august counsels of the eternal and independent God. Shall we bring our own line to measure them? We are in the presence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit; one in perfection, will and purpose, If the righteousness of the Father demands a sacrifice, the love of the Father provides it. But the love of the Son runs parallel with that of the Father; and not only in the general undertaking, but in every act of it, we see the Son's full and free consent. In the whole work we see the love of the Father as clearly

displayed as the love of the Son: and again, we see the Son's love of righteousness and hatred of iniquity as clearly displayed as the Father's, in that work of which it were impossible to tell whether the manifestation of love or righteousness is most amazing. In setting out upon the undertaking we hear the Son say with loving delight, 'Lo, I come to do Thy will'; as He contemplates its conclusion, we hear Him say, 'Therefore doth My Father love Me, because I lay down My life, that I might take it again.' They are one in the glorious manifestation of common perfections, and in the joy of all the blessed results. The Son is glorified by all that is for the glory of the Father. And while, in the consummation of this plan, the wisdom of God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—shall be displayed, as it could not otherwise have been, to the principalities and powers in heavenly places, ruined man will, in Christ, be exalted to heights of glory and bliss otherwise unattainable." But while no parallel to the great transaction of the Atonement, or to the relations of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as to its accomplishment, can be found in any of the relations of mere creatures to one another, God has graciously adopted a series of types, historical and ceremonial, to the illumination of His great plan, and especially to the illustration of the various aspects of the offices and work of Christ. In these, Divine wisdom is signally displayed. By means of the typical system God was educating men for the "good things to come," and preparing human language to be a fitting medium for the revelation of His grace in Christ. By introducing the Levitical system God has shown us the sense in which such words (in the New Testament) as sacrifice, priesthood, propitiation and redemption, are to be understood. We cannot here give an exposition of these types, our purpose in referring to them here simply being to call attention to the fact that they supply the needed key to unlock this New Testament mystery. That which is outstandingly prominent in the typical sacrifices of the Old Testament is, first, that they were offered to God, having Him for their object and end, instead of being pageants for making impressions on men. Second, that they are expiatory, atoning for sin, blotting out iniquities. Third, that just as the sins of the offerer were imputed to the victim, so the excellency of the victim was ascribed to the offerer. Fourth, that something more was effected by these offerings than an atonement being made for sins—a satisfaction was offered to God's holiness and justice. This leads us to call attention to the title for this book, and here we cannot do better than give below a digest from Dr. Hodge's able comments on this point: —During the latter part of the nineteenth century the word "Atonement" became commonly employed to express that which Christ wrought for the salvation of His people. But before then, the term used since the days of Anselm (1274), and habitually employed by all the Reformers, was "Satisfaction." The older term is much to be preferred, first, because the word "Atonement" is ambiguous. In the Old Testament it is used for an Hebrew word which signifies "to cover by making expiation." In the New Testament it occurs but once, Romans 5:11, and there it is given as the rendering for a Greek word meaning "reconciliation." But reconciliation is the effect of the sin-expiating and God-propitiating work of Christ. On the other hand, the word "Satisfaction" is not ambiguous. It always signifies that complete work which Christ did in order to secure the salvation of His people, as that work stands related to the will and nature of God. Again: the word "Atonement" is too limited in its signification for the purpose assigned to it. It does not express all that Scripture declares Christ did in order to meet the complete demands of God's law. It properly signifies the expiation of sin, and nothing more. It points to that which Christ rendered to the justice of God, in vicariously bearing the penalty due the sins of His people; but it does not include that vicarious obedience which Christ rendered to the precepts of the law, which obedience is imputed to all of the elect. On the other hand, the term "Satisfaction" naturally includes both of these. "As the demands of the law upon sinful men are both preceptive and penal—the condition of life being 'do this and live,' while the penalty denounced upon disobedience is, 'the soul that sinneth it shall die' — it follows that any work which shall fully satisfy the demands of the Divine law in behalf of men must include (1) that obedience which the law demands as the condition of life, and (2) that suffering which it demands as the penalty of

sin." May the Lord graciously fit both writer and reader to contemplate and apprehend this wondrous theme in such a way that much fruit may issue to His glory and praise.

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