



Study 8: The Atonement

(TTWFB, chh. 16-17, pp. 97-113)

What does ‘atonement’ mean?

The word *atonement* has both a specific and a wider meaning.

- In its specific sense, it is used to translate words in Greek in the New Testament which all share a common idea of *reconciliation*. The English word atonement is really ‘at-one-ment’ and has the same idea.
- In its more general sense it has come to be an overall word to cover *the event and meaning of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ*. It is in this sense, which also includes the specific meaning above, that we are using the word in this study.¹

What is the purpose of the Atonement?

By the Atonement—the event and significance of the cross and resurrection—God fulfils His plan as Creator, Father, King and Redeemer. And by the Atonement, men and women under bondage to his enemies (more about them later in this study) are released from them, and under God now become new creatures, true sons and daughters, voluntary subjects, and redeemed people.²



As well as redeeming Man from sin, the Atonement is the means by which God effects His plans for the whole creation—it isn’t just about us! Geoff Bingham has often taught that *creation* is the primary doctrine of the Scriptures, and that all other doctrines relate to that. You could also say the *new creation* (the goal given for the first creation) is the primary concern of Scriptures. Atonement ensures that the first creation reaches its destiny in the new creation. Ephesians 1:4-6 spells this out:

For he [the Father] chose us in him [Jesus Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will—to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment—to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ.

IMPORTANT: The work of the Atonement is the work of God, and so it reflects the essential work of each member of the Godhead. The Father is the initiator of the Atonement, the Son is the mediator of the Atonement and the Spirit is the agent of the Atonement. The Triune Godhead is wholly involved in the Atonement, and the work of each is essential in the Atonement accomplishing its goal. All is worked in the holiness of God’s own true being.

¹ We’ll indicate this by using a capital to begin the word.

² Geoffrey Bingham, *The Things We Firmly Believe*, 2nd ed., NCPI:Blackwood, 1986, p. 98

What are the enemies to be overcome in the Atonement?

1. *Sin*—essentially rebellion and assertion of independence from God, resulting in alienation from Him (Isa. 59:2) Refusing obedience to God we have become deprived of His glory, and this has led to us being depraved, innately evil. Sin is bondage – everyone who sins is a slave of sin (John 8:34). Sin causes compulsive transgression out of hatred of (=enmity towards) God (Col. 1:21, Rom. 1:18-32). Sin pollutes a person and incurs penalty (judgment) and through these holds people in its power. At the heart of sin’s power is guilt—no guilt, no bondage. ‘It is its guilt which gives it power. Its guilt alienates us from God, and it is in virtue of this alienation that sin reigns in us.’³

2. *Death*—the outcome of disobedience in Genesis 3, primarily to be understood as alienation from God. However mortality flows also from sin. Man lives in the fear of death, and Rom. 6:9 refers to the *mastery* (=rule) of death. ‘Men fear death not so much because we have to die, but because we deserve to die’.⁴ Death’s power has to do with judgment—see Heb. 9:27, Heb. 2:14-15, 1John 4:18.

3. *God’s wrath*—God’s personal opposition to all that opposes His truth and which seeks to divert creation from the goal and purpose He has for it. Sinful Man lives in the daily experience of God’s wrath (Psa. 7:11, Rom. 1:18-20), which has its impact in the conscience (Psa. 32:3-4).

4. *The Law*—a good gift of God (Rom. 7:12, Pss 1, 19 & 119), essential for our life of love before God (Rom. 13:8-10, Jas. 2:8-12). It becomes a tyrant to us in our guilt and rebellion. The law brings consciousness of sin (Rom. 7:7-11), and reveals our state of being under God’s wrath (Rom. 4:15). *Objectively* through the law we are under God’s condemnation. *Subjectively* this works out in the turmoil of guilt. Especially this bondage gives us up to ceaseless self-justification.

5. *The conscience*—our awareness and judgment of ourselves before God and His law. It is deeply affected by defiling dead works (=sins) (Heb. 9:14), constantly then reminding us, through the Law, of our sin and its judgment. So unbearable is this that some repeatedly sin until finally the conscience becomes seared, desensitised to the holiness of God (1Tim. 4:2).

6. *Satan, the principalities and powers, and the world* —the prime rebel against God, Satan uses accusation (Rev. 12:10, Job 1 & 2) to keep Man in subject to him and his alternative intentions for the world. Man is seen to be in his power, doing his will (Eph. 2:1-3, 1John 5:19, 2Tim. 2:26). He uses the fear of death and the wrath of God, all terrifying because of guilt, to keep Man in bondage (Heb. 2:14-15). The principalities and powers work under and with Satan. Eph. 6:12 speaks of them as ‘the world rulers of this present darkness, the spiritual hosts of wickedness’. Again, the power of these powers over humanity is through our guilt (Col. 2:14-15). Satan and his powers, with a following humanity comprise ‘the world’ (Gal. 1:4, 1John 2:15-17). Our allegiance to the world is established through guilt.

7. *The flesh*—Man in rebellions against God, our humanity as conditioned by sin. The physical body is not evil, but having the mindset of the flesh as our being against God is deadly. The flesh operates through desires and passions that contradict the holiness of God and life in His image.

8. *The idols*—false gods, invented by us to substitute for God, and to fill the void of being deprived of relationship with Him through sin. Behind the idols the demons and Satan are working, holding human beings in obedience to them (1Cor. 10:20).

³ James Denney, *The Death of Christ*, p. 191, qu. In *The Things We Firmly Believe*, p. 99

⁴ Quote attributed to Paul Tillich, source unknown.

What happened in the Atonement?

The enemies as listed above must all be dealt with in the atonement if there is to be the liberation of Man into his true being before God, and so the achievement of God's plan for creation. The common element in the power of the enemies was the guilt of human beings. Our problem is basically a *moral* one; we are not victims of evil, we are perpetrators of it. Until guilt is dealt with there is no liberation for humanity.

'The key to the liberation of Man and the defeat of evil is the bearing of the guilt of the human race, and so the breaking of the power of evil. No guilt, no power.'⁵

Throughout the flow of history the Atonement has been anticipated and promised by God, beginning from the first sin with the pronouncement to the serpent of certain destruction by one of the children of the woman (Gen. 3:15).⁶ So, when we come to the New Testament, and see the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, we must not think of it as an unfortunate mis-hap. It is the prophesied means by which Atonement would be made. Jesus spoke of it as a divinely planned act (Mark 8:31, 9:31, 10:32). Acts 2:22-23 makes this clear:

Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you *by God's set purpose and foreknowledge*; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross.

What actually happened in the Atonement?

The answer is simple: having been judged to be a blasphemer by the Jewish Sanhedrin, and the hand of Pilate manipulated by political pressures, Jesus of Nazareth was hanged upon a cross, dying after many hours, and was taken down prior to sunset and placed in the grave.⁷

These events could be seen, but there was an action of God in the Atonement, for the defeat of the enemies and the liberation of Man, that was not visible to eyes. What did God the Father do, through Christ in the power of the Spirit, that enabled all this to be accomplished? Certainly Jesus knew it to have been accomplished when he cried out on the cross, 'It is finished!', which could also be translated as 'The goal has been achieved!'

The whole of the Scriptures—especially Old Testament prophecy, Jesus' words about the cross in the Gospels, and the letters of the apostles that interpret the cross—is given to us to understand these things (1Pet. 1:10-11, Luke 24:25-27, 1Cor. 2:2).

John the Baptist declared at the start of Jesus' ministry that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). In Mark 10:45—'The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many'—Jesus showed how he understood his ministry and its culmination in his death. He was linking it with the ministry of the Servant in Isaiah 40 and following, especially Isaiah 53. Just before going to the cross, he spoke of the cross as the giving of his body for the forgiveness of sins, to bring life to the world (Matt. 26:28, cf. John 6:51). He knew that unless he died, like a seed going into the ground, there could be no gathering of people to new life in God (John 12:23-24). In the cross he understood that God's judgment on all evil would be worked out and that Satan would be driven out (John 12:31). What happened to him would be for all people, because he would draw all people to himself when he was crucified (John 12:32-33).

As the apostles reflected on this, they came to see that:

He [Jesus] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live to righteousness (1Pet. 2:24).

⁵ *The Things We Firmly Believe*, p. 106

⁶ The tracing of this promise through the Bible is called *salvation history*; we will be doing this in our studies next year.

⁷ *The Things We Firmly Believe*, p. 108

We are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again (2Cor. 5:14-15).

God made him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2Cor. 5:21).

When Christ bore our sins, he did not simply bear the punishment for our sins, but actually became sin for us, taking our sins themselves. He actually became them. 'In practice, this must mean that the entire weight of the guilt of sin descended on him and he bore such until he had expended it, and so defeated it by extinguishing it.'⁸ Paul means all this when he says that Christ was made curse for us (Gal. 3:13). Isaiah 53:5-6 says that the Lord has laid on him (the Suffering Servant) the iniquity for us all, as he was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. He bore the wrath of God on us, for us. 'In my place condemned he stood.' Just how Christ so fully identified with us is a mystery as deep as how the two natures of Christ, divine and human, are one in his person. We do know however that as Christ offered himself obediently to the Father by the eternal Spirit, we were being acted upon and an atonement made that frees from the tyranny of the enemies.

Their tyranny is all gathered around our guilt, like a pack of vultures around a corpse. Where guilt is taken away, where sins are atoned for and where the wrath of God does its work to completion, then there is nothing left for the enemies to have their teeth in. Because wrath has been fully expended, the Law fully met and sins fully judged in Christ's death, then there is no longer a fearful expectation of judgment in those who trust in Christ. Our consciences finally come to peace.⁹ Hence, death is no longer a tyranny and threat. Satan who has used the fear of death as his manipulative tool upon us is dethroned, as well as the powers and principalities, the idols, the world and the flesh. We can affirm with all confidence, 'There is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus!' And in this liberation there is liberation from the dominating power of sin, so that we are those who love and live in the will of God, seeking to obey and worship him in all we do.

⁸ *The Things We Firmly Believe*, p. 111

⁹ 'Nothing can satisfy the conscience of man which does not first satisfy the conscience of God.' P. T. Forsyth. Until we know that God's holiness has been met in us, then we will always be on edge. In the cross we have assurance that this has happened.