

The Life of Faith Chapter 1 The Design of the Atonement

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Transcript

The Life of Faith

Chapter 1

The Design of the Atonement

What was the purpose of the Eternal Three in sending Christ Jesus into this world? What was the incarnation of the Son of God intended to accomplish? What were his sufferings and obedience ordained to effect? Concerning this all-important matter the most erroneous ideas have been entertained, ideas at direct variance with Holy Scripture, ideas most dishonoring to God. Even where these awful errors have not been fully espoused, sufficient of their evil leaven has been received to corrupt the pure truth which many good men have held. In other instances, where this great subject has been largely neglected, only the vaguest and haziest conceptions are entertained. Sad it is to see what small place this vital theme now has in most pulpits, and in the thoughts and studies of the majority of professing Christians. "Known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world" (Acts 15:18). Everything God does is according to design: all is the working out of "the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:11). God had a design in creation (Rev. 4:10). He has a design in providence (Rom. 8:28). And he has a design or purpose in the Satisfaction which was wrought by Christ (1 Pet. 1:20). What, then, was that purpose? This is not a speculative question, but one of the utmost moment. Surely the right answer to it must be the one which upholds the glory of God. Therefore any answer which carries with it the inevitable corollaries of a dishonored Father, a disgraced Saviour and a defeated Holy Spirit, cannot be the right one. Redemption is the glory of all God's works, but it would be an everlasting disgrace of them if it should fail to effect whatsoever it was ordained to accomplish. One conception, now widely held, is that Christ came here to remove certain barriers which stood in the way of God's grace flowing forth to fallen creatures. This theory is that Christ's death took away that hindrance which the Divine justice interposed to mercy being extended to transgressors of the law. Holders of this view suppose the great Atonement was merely the procuring unto God a right for his pardoning of sin. The words of Arminius are: "God had a mind and will to do good to humankind, but could not by reason of sin, his justice being in the way; whereupon he sent Christ to remove that obstacle, so that he might, upon the prescribing of what condition he pleased, and its being by them fulfilled, have mercy on them." Sad it is to find so many today echoing the errors of this misguided man. The error in the above theory is easily exposed. If it were true that the design of Christ's satisfaction was to acquire a right unto his Father, that notwithstanding his

justice he might save sinners, then did he rather die to redeem a liberty unto God, than a liberty from evil unto his people; that a door might be opened for God to come out in mercy to us, rather than that a way should be opened for us to go in unto him. This is certainly a turning of things upside down. And where, we may ask, is there a word in Scripture to support such a grotesque idea? Does Scripture declare that God sent his Son out of love to himself or out of love unto us? Does Scripture affirm that Christ died to procure something for God, or for his people? Does Scripture teach that the obstacles were thrown out by Divine justice or that our sins were what Christ came here to remove? There can be only one answer to these questions. Again: this theory would reduce the whole work of Christ to a costly experiment which might or might not succeed, inasmuch as according to this conception, there is still some condition which the sinner himself must fulfil ere he can be benefited by that mercy which God would bestow upon him. But that is a flat denial of the fatal effects of the Fall, a repudiation of the total depravity of man. Those who are spiritually dead in sins are quite incapable of performing any spiritual conditions. As well offer to a man who is stone blind a thousand dollars on condition that he sees, as offer something spiritual to one who has no capacity to discern it: see John 3:3, 1 Corinthians 2:14. Such a view as this is as far removed from the truth as is light from darkness. Such a view, reduced to plain terms, comes to this: if the sinner believes, then Christ died for him; if the sinner does not believe, then Christ did not die for him; thus the sinner's act is made the cause of its own object, as though his believing would make that to be which otherwise was not. To such insane absurdities are the opposers of grace driven. How different the plain teaching of the Word! Christ came here to fulfil his agreement in the Everlasting Covenant. In that covenant a certain work was prescribed. Upon his performance of it a certain reward was promised. That work was that Christ should make a perfect satisfaction unto God on behalf of each and all of his people. That reward was that all the blessings procured and purchased by him should be infallibly bestowed on each and all of his people. God out of his infinite love to his elect, sent his dear Son in the fullness of time, whom he had promised in the beginning of the world; to pay a ransom of infinite value and dignity, for the purchasing of eternal redemption, and bringing unto himself all and every one of those whom he had before ordained to eternal life, for the praise of his own glory. So that freedom from all the evil from which we are delivered, and an enjoyment of all the good things that are bestowed on us, in our translation from death to life, from hell and wrath to heaven and glory, are the proper issues and effects of the death of Christ, as the meritorious cause of them all (John Owen).

We are now ready to answer our opening question. The design of Christ's Satisfaction was 1. That God Might be Magnified. "The Lord hath made all things for himself" (Prov. 16:4). The great end which God has in all his works is the promotion of his own declarative glory: "For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36). It must be so. There is nothing outside himself which can possibly supply any motive for him to act. To assert the contrary would be to deny his self-sufficiency. The aim of God in creation, in providence, and in redemption, is the magnifying of himself. Everything else is subordinate to this paramount consideration. We press this, because we are living in an age of infidelity and practical atheism. God predestinated his people unto "the glory of his grace" (Eph. 1:6). Christ has "received us to the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7). All the Divine promises for us are in Christ "Amen, to the glory of God" (2 Cor. 1:20). The inheritance which we have obtained in Christ is in order that "we should be to the praise of his glory" (Ephesians 1:12). The Holy Spirit is given us as the earnest of our inheritance "unto the praise of his glory" (Eph. 1:14). The very rejoicing of the believer is "in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). Our thanksgiving is that it may "redound to the glory of God" (2 Cor. 4:15). This is the one design of all the benefits which we obtain from the Satisfaction of Christ, for "we are filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ unto the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1:11). While every tongue shall yet "confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:11). God

had both a subservient and a supreme design in sending Christ into this world: the supreme design was to display his own glory, the subservient design was to save his elect unto his own glory. The former was accomplished by the manifestation of his blessed attributes, which is the chief design in all his works, pre-eminently so in his greatest and grandest work of all. The remainder of the chapter might well be devoted to the extension of this one thought. Through Christ's obedience and death God magnified his law (Isa. 42:21). The law of God was more honored by the Son's subjection to it, than it was dishonored by the disobedience of all of Adam's race. God magnified his love by sending forth the Darling of his bosom to redeem worthless worms of the earth. He magnified his justice, for when sin (by imputation) was found upon his Son, he called for the sword to smite him (Zech. 13:7). He magnified his holiness: his hatred of sin was more clearly shown at the Cross than it will be in the lake of fire. He magnified his power by sustaining the Mediator under such a load as was laid upon him. He magnified his truth by fulfilling his covenant engagements and bringing forth from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep (Heb. 13:20). He magnified his grace by imputing to the ungodly all the merits of Christ. This, then, was the prime purpose of God in the Atonement: to magnify himself.

2. That The God-Man Might be Glorified. Christ is the Center of all the counsels of the Godhead. He is both the Alpha and Omega of their designs. All God's thoughts concerning everything in heaven and in earth begin and end in Christ. "God created all things by Jesus Christ" (Eph. 3:9), and all things were created "for him" (Col. 1:16). As Mediator he is the only medium of union and communion between God and the creature. "That in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; in him" (Eph. 1:10). Christ is the one universal head in which God has summed up all things. Therefore was the stupendous work of redemption given to him that he might reconcile all things in heaven and earth unto himself, and this, that a revenue of glory might come to him. The man Christ Jesus was taken up into union with the essential and eternal Word, God the Son, so that he might be Jehovah's "Fellow" (Zech. 13:7). The man Christ Jesus was predestinated unto the ineffable honour of union with the second person in the Trinity. As such he is the head of the whole election of grace, called by the Father, "Mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth" (Isa. 42:1). As the God-man, the Father covenanted with him, appointed him as Surety, and assigned him his work. As God-man, he had a covenant subsistence before he became incarnate. This is clear from John 6:62: "What and if ye shall see the Son of man ascend up where he was before?" It was as the God-man the Father "sent" forth Christ on his errand of mercy, and that for his personal glory. As Judas went out to betray him, Christ said, "Now is the Son of man glorified" (John 13:31). Within a few hours his stupendous undertaking would be accomplished. The Mediator was honored, supremely honored, by God's having committed to his care the mightiest work of all, a work which none other was capable of performing. To him was entrusted the task of glorifying God here on earth; of vanquishing his arch-enemy, the Devil; of redeeming his elect. To this he makes reference in John 17:4, "I have glorified thee on the earth; I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do." He had completed God's vast design, executed his decrees, fulfilled all his will. Having so gloriously glorified the Father, the Father has proportionately glorified the Mediator. He has been exalted high above "all principality and power, and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come" (Eph. 1:21). He has been elevated to "the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Heb. 1:3). He has been given all authority in heaven and in earth (Matthew 28:18). He has been given "power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as the Father hath given him" (John 17:2). He has been given a name which is above every name, before which name every knee shall yet bow (Phil. 2:11). Speaking of Christ's finished work and the Father's rewarding thereof, the Psalmist said, "His glory is great in thy salvation: honour and majesty hast thou laid upon him. For thou hast made him most blessed forever: thou hast made him exceeding glad with thy countenance" (Ps. 21:5, 6). This was the

grand design of the Trinity: that the God-man should thus be glorified. 3. That God's Elect Might be Saved. "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). How different is this plain, positive and unqualified statement from the tale which nearly all preachers tell today! The story of the vast majority is that Christ came here to make salvation possible for sinners: he has done his part, now they must do theirs. To reduce the wondrous, finished, and glorious work of Christ to a merely making salvation possible is most dishonoring and insulting to him. Christ came here to carry into effect God's sovereign purpose of election, to save a people already "his" (Matthew 1:2 1) by covenant settlement. There are a people whom God hath "from the beginning chosen unto salvation" (2 Thess. 2:13), and redemption was in order to the accomplishing of that decree. And if we believe what Scripture declares concerning the person of Christ, then we have indubitable proof that there can be no possible failure in connection with his mission. The Son of man, the Child born, was none other than "the mighty God" (Isa. 9:6). Therefore is he omniscient, and knows where to look for each of his lost ones; he is also omnipotent, and so cannot fail to deliver when they are found. Observe that Luke 19:10 does not say that Christ came here to seek and to save all the lost. Of course it does not. Two thirds of human history had already run its course before Jesus was born. Half the human race was already in hell when he entered Bethlehem's manger. It was "the lost" (see Greek) for which he became incarnate. That is the awful condition in which God's elect are by nature. Lost! They have lost all knowledge of the true God, all liking for him, all desires after him. They have lost his image in which they were originally created, and have contracted the image of Satan. They have lost all knowledge of their own actual condition, for their understanding is darkened (Eph. 4:18), they are spiritually dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). Totally unconscious of their terrible state they neither seek Christ nor realize their need of him. Christ did not come here to see if there were any who would seek after him. Of course not. Romans 3:11 emphatically declares "there is none that seeketh after God". Christ is the seeker. Beautifully is that brought out by him in his parable of the lost sheep. A strayed dog or a lost horse will usually find its way back home. Not so a sheep: the longer it is free, the farther it strays from the fold. Hence, if that sheep is ever to be recovered, one must go after it. This is what Christ did, and which by his Spirit he is still doing. As Luke 15:4 declares, he goes "after that which is lost until he find it". But more: Christ came here not only to seek and find, but also to save. His words are, "For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost." Note it is not merely that he offers to, nor helps to, but that he actually saves. Such was the emphatic and unqualified declaration of the angel to Joseph, "Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins"—not try to, not half do so, but actually save them. Christ came here with a definitely defined object in view, and being who he is there is no possible room for any failure in his mission. Hence, before he came here, God declared that he should "see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied" (Isa. 53:10). As the Mediator he solemnly covenanted with the Father to save his people from their sins. He actually purchased them with his blood (Acts 20:28). He has wrought out for them a perfect salvation, therefore is he "mighty to save" (Isa. 63:1). Blessedly is this illustrated in the immediate context of Luke 19:10. To Zacchaeus he said, "Make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house... This day is salvation come to this house, forasmuch as he also is a son of Abraham" (vv. 5,9). Yes, "a son of Abraham", one of the elect seed. Therefore we boldly say to the reader, If you belong to the sheep of Christ, you must be saved, even though now you may be quite unconscious of your lost condition. Though, like Saul of Tarsus, you may yet "kick against the pricks", invincible grace shall conquer you, for it is written, "Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power" (Ps. 110:3). "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly. I am the good Shepherd: the good Shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" (John 10:10,11). Here again we have clearly defined the design of Christ's mission and satisfaction. His sheep once possessed "life", possessed it in their natural head, Adam. But when he fell, they fell; when he died, they

died. As it is written, "In Adam all die" (1 Cor. 15:22). But by Christ, through his work, and in him their spiritual head, they obtain not only "life", but "more abundant" life; that is, a "life" which as far excels what they lost in their first father, as the last Adam excels in his Person, the first Adam. Therefore it is written, "The first Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam a quickening spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). "As the Father hath life in himself, so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself (John 6:26), which speaks of Christ as the God-man, the Mediator, as is clear from the words "given to". But that "life" had to be "laid down" (John 10:17) and received again in resurrection before it could be, efficaciously, bestowed on his people (John 12:24). It was as the Risen One that Christ was made "a quickening spirit". The first Adam was "made a living soul" that he might communicate natural life to his posterity; the last Adam was "made a quickening spirit" that he might impart spiritual life to all his seed. As the soul dwelling in Adam's body animated it and so made him to be a "living soul", so the man Christ Jesus being united to the second Person of the Trinity, has constituted him a "quickenning spirit", i.e. quickening his mystical body, both now and hereafter. The life of the head is the life of his members. The Christian first has a federal life in Christ before he has a vital life from Christ. Being legally one with Christ, this must be so. When Christ died his people died, when Christ was quickened his people were quickened "together with" him (Eph. 2:5). It is to this union with the life of Christ that Romans 5:17 refers: "For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ." Yes, there is a "much more": the abundance of grace is greater than the demerits of sin, and the gift of righteousness exceeds that which was lost in Adam. The righteousness of God's elect far surpasses that which they possessed in innocence by the first Adam, for it is the righteousness of Christ, who is God. To this, neither the righteousness of Adam nor of angels can be compared. Those redeemed by Christ are not only recovered from the fall, but they are made to "reign in life" to which they had no title in their first parent. Since Christ is King, his people are made "kings" too (Rev. 1:6). The same aspect of truth is brought before us again in 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15: "For the love of Christ constraineth us: because we thus judge that if one for all died, then all died. And for all he died, that they who live no longer to themselves should live, but to him who for them died and was raised again" (Bagster's Interlinear). Many have supposed that the last clause of verse 14 refers to those who are "dead in sins", but that was true apart from the death of Christ! Nor does the spiritual death of Adam's fallen descendants render them capable of "living unto" Christ, but the very reverse. No, it is, "If one for all died" (i.e. for all his people), then they all died in him. Then in verse 15 we have stated the consequence and fruit of this: as the result of his rising from the dead, they "live". His act was, representatively, their act. The atoning death of Christ, on the ground of federal union and substitution, was also our death; see Galatians 2:20. So too his resurrection was, representatively, our resurrection: see Colossians 3:1. Thus, in Christ, God's elect have a "more abundant" life than they ever had in unfallen Adam. The same truth is set before us in 1 Peter 2:24, "Who his own self bare our sins in his body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness." The second half of it expresses the Divine design in appointing Christ to be federally and vicariously the Bearer of his peoples' sins. Christ's death was their death: they are "dead to sins", not to "sinning"! Let the reader compare Romans 6:2 and the apostle's exposition in the next nine verses. Further, Christ's resurrection was their resurrection: they "live", legally and representatively, "unto righteousness" in Christ their risen head, of whom it is written "he liveth unto God" (Rom. 6:10). We quote below from John Brown's lucid exposition of 1 Peter 2:24. To be "dead to sins" is to be delivered from the condemning power of sin; or, in other words, from the condemning sentence of the law, under which, if a man lies, he cannot be holy; and from which, if a man is delivered, his holiness is absolutely secured. To "live unto righteousness" is plainly just the positive view of that, of which "to be dead unto sins" is the negative view. "Righteousness", when opposed to "sin", in the sense of guilt or liability to punishment, as it

very often is in the writings of the apostle Paul, is descriptive of a state of justification. A state of guilt is a state of condemnation by God; a state of righteousness is a state of acceptance with God. To live unto righteousness is in this case to live under the influence of a justified state, a state of acceptance with God; and the apostle's statement is: Christ Jesus, by his sufferings unto death, completely answered the demands of the law on us by bearing away our sins, that we, believing in him, and thereby being united to him, might be as completely freed from our liabilities to punishment, as if we, in our own person, not he himself in his own body, had undergone them; and that we might as really be brought into a state of righteousness, justification, acceptance with God, as if we, not he, in his obedience to death, had magnified the law and made it honorable.

"God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us" (Rom. 8:3,4). Here again the design of Christ's mission is clearly stated. God sent his Son here in order that (1) the punishment of his peoples' guilt should be inflicted upon their head, (2) that the righteous requirements of the law—perfect obedience—might be met by him for us. This righteousness is said to be "fulfilled in us" because representatively, we were "in Christ" our Surety: he obeyed the law not only "for" our good, but so that his obedience should become actually ours by imputation; and thus Christ purchased for us a title to heaven. A parallel passage to Romans 8:3,4 is found in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For he hath made him sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." The purpose of Christ's vicarious life and death was that a perfect righteousness should be wrought out for his people and imputed to them by God, so that they might exclaim, "In the Lord have I righteousness" (Isa. 45:24). The righteousness of the believer is wholly objective; that is to say, it is something altogether outside of himself. This is clear from the antithesis of 2 Corinthians 5:21. Christ was "made sin" not inherently, but imputatively, by the guilt of his people being legally transferred to him. In like manner, they are "made the righteousness of God in him", not "in themselves", by Christ's righteousness being legally reckoned to their account. In the repute of God, Christ and his people constitute one mystical person, hence it is that their sins were imputed to him, and that his righteousness is imputed to them, and therefore we read: "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth" (Rom. 10:4). "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God" (1 Pet. 3:18). This wondrous declaration gives us a remarkably clear view of the substitutionary punishment which Christ endured, with the design thereof, namely, to restore his people to priestly nearness and service to God. Four things in it are worthy of our most close attention. First, Christ "suffered". Sin was the cause of his suffering. Had there been no sin, Christ had never suffered. To "suffer" means "to bear punishment", as in ordinary speech we say, a child suffers for the sins of its parents. Christ suffered for "us", the whole election of grace: it was for their sin he was penalized. Second, he suffered "once". This must not be understood to signify that his suffering was confined to the three hours of darkness, but means "once for all" as in Hebrews 9:27,28. The "suffering" which pervaded the whole of Christ's earthly life culminated at the Cross. That suffering was final. His all-sufficient Atonement possesses eternal validity. Third, Christ himself was personally sinless: it was the "Just" or "Righteous" One who suffered. To affirm that he was "righteous" means that he was approved of God as tested by the standard of the law. He was not only sinless, but one whose life was adjusted to the Divine requirements. As such, he suffered, the pure for the impure, the innocent for the guilty. His sufferings were not on his own account, nor were they from the inevitable course of events or laws of evil in a sinful world; but they were the direct and necessary consequence of his vicariously taking the place of his guilty people. Christ received the punishment they ought to have suffered. He was paid sin's wages which were due them. Fourth, the end in view of Christ's substitutionary sufferings was to bring his people to God. This was only possible by the removal of their sins, which separated them from the thrice Holy

One (Isa. 59:2). By his sufferings, Christ has procured for us access to God. "But in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off, are made nigh by the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13). "That he might bring us to God" is the most comprehensive expression used in Scripture for stating the design of Christ's Satisfaction. It includes the bringing of his people out of darkness into marvelous light: out of a state of alienation, misery and wrath into one of grace, peace and eternal communion with God. By nature they were in a state of enmity, but Christ has reconciled them by his death (Rom. 5:10). By nature they were "children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3), obnoxious to God's judicial displeasure; but by grace they have been accepted into his favour (Rom. 5:2). By nature they were spiritual lepers, but by one offering Christ hath "perfected forever them that are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14). Here then, in brief, is the Divine design in the Satisfaction of Christ; that God himself might be honored; that Christ might be glorified; that the elect might be saved by their sins being put away, an abundant life being given them, a perfect righteousness imputed to them, and their being brought into God's favour, presence and fellowship.

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