

The Satisfaction of Christ Studies in the Atonement 3. Its Necessity

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Transcript

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In employing this term, the necessity of the Atonement, we are making use of an expression which calls for careful definition and explanation. Unfortunately, many writers have failed to perform this duty, with the consequence that loose and, oftentimes, most God-dishonoring views are entertained upon this aspect of our subject. To say that God must or must not do certain things is the language of fearful impiety, unless expressly warranted by the very words of Holy Writ. We are living in a day which is strongly marked by irreverence, and the most degrading views of the Almighty are now entertained by some who imagine their views of the Almighty are quite orthodox. It would be a simple matter for us to give illustrations and proofs of this, but we refrain from defiling our readers (1 Cor. 15:33). Suffice it now to point out, once more, that never was there a time when Gods people more earnestly needed to heed that word, "Prove all things" (1 Thess. 5:21). "The Lord of hosts is excellent in counsel and excellent in working" (Isa. 28:29). Infinite wisdom never acts aimlessly. God, who is perfect in knowledge, does nothing without good reason. All His works are proportioned according to His unerring designs. This is true alike in His acts of creation, providence and grace. At the close of the six days' work we read, "And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). Concerning His government over us, "We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). And as for the operation of His grace, faith unhesitatingly affirms "He hath done all things well" (Mark 7:37). Now the most wondrous of all God's works is that which was performed by His Son here upon earth. When we attempt to contemplate what that Work involved, we are lost in amazement. When we seriously endeavor to gauge the depths of unutterable shame and humiliation into which the Beloved of the Father entered, we are awed and staggered. That the eternal Son of God should lay aside the robes of His ineffable glory and take upon Him the form of a servant, that the Ruler of heaven and earth should be "made under the law" (Gal. 4:4), that the Creator of the universe should tabernacle in this world and "have not where to lay His head" (Matthew 8:20), is something which no finite mind can comprehend; but where carnal reason fails us, a God-given faith believes and worships. As we trace the path which was trod by Him who was rich yet for our sake became poor, we cannot but feel that we are entering the realm of mystery; the more so when we learn that every step in His path had been ordered in the eternal counsels of the Godhead. Yet, when we find that path entailing for the One in whom the Father was well pleased, immeasurable sorrow, unutterable anguish, ceaseless ignominy, bitterest hatred, relentless persecution, both from men and Satan, we are made to marvel. And, when we find that path leading to

Calvary, and there behold the Holy One nailed to the Cross, our wonderment deepens. But, when Scripture itself declares that God not only delivered up Christ into the hands of earth's vilest wretches to be reviled and blasphemed, that God Himself was not merely a spectator of that awful scene, that He not only beheld the sufferings of Heaven's Darling, but that HE also smote Him, scourged Him with the rod of His indignation, and called upon the sword to smite His "Fellow" (Zech. 13:7), we are moved to reverently inquire into the needs-be for such an unparalleled event. That the incarnation, humiliation and crucifixion of the Son of God were necessary, no one who (by grace) bows implicitly before the Word of Truth can doubt for a moment. The language of Christ Himself on this point is too plain to be misunderstood. To Nicodemus He said, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:14, 15). To His disciples He declared, "how that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day" (Matthew 16:21). So too on the day of His resurrection, He asked, "Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory?" (Luke 24:26). Nevertheless, plain and positive as is the language of these verses, we need to be much upon our guard lest we draw from them a conclusion which will clash with other scriptures and lead us to a most dishonoring conception of God. From the passages just quoted, and others of a similar character, not a few good men have drawn the inference that the sufferings of Christ were an absolute necessity, that the very nature of God rendered them so indispensable that apart from them the salvation of sinners was impossible; yea, that no other possible alternative presented itself to the omniscience of God. To such assertions we cannot assent, for they go beyond the express language of Holy Writ. However plausible the reasoning may be, however logical the deduction, we must, where Scripture is silent, resist a conclusion so momentous. To say that the all-wise God Himself could find no other way of saving sinners, consistently with His holiness and justice, than the one He has, is highly presumptuous. To declare that Omniscience was helpless, that God was obliged to adopt the means which He did, is perilously nigh unto blasphemy. To affirm that God has selected the best possible way to magnify all His perfections in the redemption of His people, is to affirm that which is honoring to Deity, but to assert that this was the only way, is going beyond what Scripture declares. That supremest wisdom and supremest love would seek the noblest means to achieve the most glorious ends, we firmly believe; but to conclude that God was unable to contrive any other method is mere fatalism, and, we might add, semi-atheism. According to the theorizing of some theologians we ought to change Ephesians 1:11 so that it reads, "He worketh all things after the necessities of His own nature." Not so did Christ reason in Gethsemane: He did not accept the bitter cup because of the inexorableness of God's nature, but out of Submission to His will. From the words of our Savior in the Garden, "If it be possible let this cup pass from me," it has been inferred that it was impossible it should do so. In one sense that is true: God had ordained that Christ should die, the terms of the everlasting covenant required it, the will of God demanded it; so die He must. But this is a very different thing from saying that when the Godhead held Their councils no other alternative could be devised, that the death of Christ was an absolute and unavoidable necessity. It is indeed most striking to note, and worthy of our most reverent attention, that at the very time our agonizing Savior presented His petition, He said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible unto thee; take away this cup from me: nevertheless not what I will, but what thou wilt" (Mark 14:36). In summing up this point, let us never forget that the Atonement originated in the mere good pleasure of God. He was not obliged to save any sinners; He was under no obligations to provide a Redeemer at all. That He did so, was purely a matter of grace, and, in the very nature of things, the bestower of "grace" is free, absolutely free, to bestow or withhold it, otherwise it would cease to be "grace," and become a debt owed to its recipient. As to the method by which God chose to manifest His grace, we can only say that the appointed Mediator has answered to

every perfection of God and superlatively magnified all His attributes; and that this Savior is both the gift of His love, and the appointment of His will. Once again we would remind ourselves that we are within the realm of mystery, mystery deep and insolvable to finite intelligence. The entrance of sin into the world, God's infinite abhorrence of it, the moral requirements of His government concerning its punishment, the saving of His own people from it, the magnifying of His own name by it, are some of the principal elements entering into this mystery; and the relation which the whole mediatorial scheme of Divine grace has there unto, is what is now to engage our attention. Conscious of our utter incapacity to even grapple with, much less solve, a problem so profound; conscious that reasoning thereon is worse than futile, we would prayerfully turn, in humble dependence upon the Spirit of Truth, to the Holy Scriptures, to ascertain what light God has been pleased to throw upon this mystery of mysteries.

1. THE ATONEMENT WAS NECESSITATED BY THE WILL OF GOD Unless this be our starting point we are certain to err. God's Word implicitly declares that He "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will" (Ephesians 1:11). The whole extent of this passage contains a revelation of God's eternal counsels concerning His own people. It takes us back before the foundation of the world to the time when He chose them in Christ. While it makes known that it was in love He predestinated them unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ unto Himself, it at once adds, that this purpose was "according to the good pleasure of his will" (v. 5). It is in Christ that we have "redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (v. 7), yet right after we are told, "Having made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself" (v. 9). The above passage ought to make it abundantly plain to every impartial mind that the Atonement or Redemption which God has so graciously provided for His elect, sprang from no obligation either in His own nature or from any claims which His creatures had upon Him. There have been not a few writers and preachers who have blasphemously asserted that the fall of man obliged God to provide a Redeemer. They have had the effrontery to affirm that since the Creator permitted Adam to bring ruin upon himself and his descendants, the least He could do was to raise up a Restorer. They say the exigencies of the situation which sin introduced into the world, required that some remedy be given that would neutralize its baneful effects. In short, these traducers of the Most High have argued that the Atonement was imperative, if God was to justify His creation of man and vindicate Himself for allowing him to lose his original uprightness. It is to such arrogant rebels that Jude 1:10 refers: "But these speak evil of those things which they know not." Others, who gave vent to the enmity of the carnal mind against God in a more moderated form, have insisted that the benevolence of God required Him to provide a Savior for sinners. While allowing that man himself is to shoulder the full blame for the condition in which he now finds himself, while granting that God has justly punished the disobedience of our first parents in ordaining that all their descendants shall taste the bitterness of sin's wages, yet they imagine that God's pity for Adam's fallen children obliged Him to provide a Savior for sinners. A sufficient refutation of this widely-held error is found in the Creator's treatment of the angels that fell: no Savior was provided for them! "God spared not the angels which sinned" (2 Pet. 2:4). There is plain proof that the benevolence of God did not render the Atonement imperative. Whatever claims an unfallen creature may have upon God, certainly a rebel against Him is entitled to nothing but summary judgment. Nor can offenders against His moral government by anything they perform, lay Him under obligation to furnish them with a legal ground of deliverance from sin. To say that they can, would be investing guilty sinners with the power to control the Divine Lawgiver, and would completely divest God's grace of its character of sovereign, free, and unmerited favor. No, there was nothing either in the perfections of God's character nor in the claims of His creatures, which rendered the Atonement an absolute necessity. God's purpose to save a remnant according to the election of grace arose solely out of His own free and sovereign will: the provision of a Savior to save His people from their sins sprang from naught but God's

own determination. 2. THE ATONEMENT WAS NECESSITATED BY THE LAW OF GOD In saying that the Atonement was necessitated by the Law, we are not contradicting what has been said above, as will plainly appear if close attention be given to the sentences immediately following. The sovereign will of God was exercised in at least two things with respect to the Atonement: first, in His original purpose to save sinners, for that was solely His mere good pleasure; second, in the process decreed whereby they should be saved, namely, through the vicarious work of a Redeemer. Having purposed to save His people from the wrath to come, it pleased God to resolve that their sins should be remitted in a way whereby His Law should be honored and magnified. But let it be carefully remembered that in this too God acted quite freely, and not from any constraint. The Law itself is of His own appointment, and not something superior to Himself. Having purposed to save, the Everlasting Covenant was drawn up, and the Mediator having freely accepted its terms and having voluntarily placed Himself under the Law, thenceforward all was done in obedience to the Law. Thus, the Eternal Three having elected that redemption should be effected under the Law, all was wrought out in perfect accordance with the Law. It is in the light of these facts that the passages quoted in an earlier paragraph, respecting the relative necessity of the Atonement, are to be interpreted. "As Moses lifted up the serpent... so must the Son of man be lifted up." There was no absolute necessity in either case. It was sovereign grace, pure and simple, which provided a way of life for the guilty Israelites who were dying in the wilderness. It was by Divine appointment that both the brazen serpent and the Antitype were "lifted up." So of Matthew 16:21: Christ "must" go up to Jerusalem and be killed. Why? Because God had so ordained, because the terms of the Everlasting Covenant so required. So it was not possible for the "cup" to pass from the agonizing Savior. Why? Because God had willed that salvation should come to His people via His drinking it; thus it had been unalterably determined. "Without shedding of blood there could have been no remission" is what Scripture nowhere affirms. But under the regime God has instituted, "without shedding of blood is no remission" (Heb. 9:22). It has been well said that "The work of redemption as well as the course of Nature proceeds in accordance with a predetermined plan, and under absolute and invariable law, law quite as exact as that which governs the material universe. Every end contemplated by the divine mind in the realm of the spiritual, and all means for its attainment under the reign of absolute law, were determined, with infinite exactness, from the beginning" (Dr. J. Armour). The analogies between the reign of law in the natural and in the moral spheres are both close and numerous, the former serving to adumbrate the latter. For example, first, every law in the natural world, such as that of the recurring seasons or of gravitation, has been ordained and imposed by the Creator according to His own sovereign will. So too has every law in the moral realm, as that of sowing and reaping, sin and its punishment, been appointed by God. Second, the reign of law, as such, is invariable and inexorable: it knows of no exceptions. If the dearest child on earth drinks poison by mistake, it produces precisely the same effects as though the vilest wretch had deliberately taken it to end his earthly existence. Third, yet, though law and its demands cannot be defied with impunity, a higher law may be set in motion reversing the action of an inferior. Poisons have their antidotes. The law of gravity may be overcome by lifting an object from the ground. Law is never suspended, but higher power may intervene and deliver from the effects of a lower by magnifying a superior law. This was the case with the Atonement. Law requires conformity to its precepts. The more perfect a law, the greater the obligations to respect it. Given a law which is "holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:12), and obedience to it becomes imperative. For God to repeal or even suspend it would be tantamount to acknowledging there was some defect in it. This could never be. Therefore, creatures made under that law must, of necessity, render obedience to it. In case of their failure, then, before it were possible to justify them, that is, pronounce them righteous, up to the required standard, another must fulfill that law on their behalf, and his righteousness or obedience be imputed to their account. This has actually been done. Christ was "made

under the law" (Gal. 4:4), "fulfilled" it (Matthew 5:17), and His obedience has been placed to the legal credit of all His people (Rom. 5:19), so that they are now made "the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:21). The law not only requires obedience to its precepts, but demands the punishment of its transgressors. Its invariable sentence is "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4). Inasmuch as God Himself declared this, and He "cannot lie," it inevitably ensues that wherever sin is found, death with all that it includes, must certainly follow. The Lord has expressly affirmed that He "will by no means clear the guilty" (Exodus 34:7). The only way of escape for law's transgressors is for Another to suffer the penalty in their stead. Under the regime which God has instituted, were He to pardon without satisfaction made to His broken law by a Substitute being paid sin's wages, then, God would not only trample upon His own law, but disregard His solemn threatening, and Scripture says "He cannot deny himself" (2 Tim. 2:13). Therefore did God Himself provide that wondrous sacrifice upon which the righteous penalty of the law fell. To understand aright the work of Redemption, it is all-important that we should hold correct views of the law of God under which man has transgressed, and the state into which he, by rebellion, has fallen. The law of God points out the duty of man, requiring from him that which is right and just. It cannot be altered in the least degree to exact more or less. It is therefore an unalterable rule of righteousness. This law necessarily implies, as essential to it, a sanction and a penalty — a penalty exactly fitted to the magnitude of the crime in transgressing it. Every creature who is under this law is bound by infinite obligations to obey it, without the slightest deviation from it throughout the whole of his existence. But by transgressing it, man has righteously incurred its penalty and fallen under its curse: "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Gal. 3:10). Now the curse under which sinners have fallen, cannot be removed nor the transgressor released until full satisfaction has been made to it. Such satisfaction the sinner himself is utterly unable to render: "By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight" (Rom. 3:20). Because the law of God is an unalterable expression of His will and moral character, neither its demands nor threatenings can be abated. The authority of the law must be maintained. To pardon without a satisfaction would be acting contrary to law. This insuperable barrier in the way of the sinner's deliverance is what underlies the relative necessity for the Mediator and Deliverer. In order for the curse of the law to be removed from him who had incurred its anathema, it must fall upon another who is made a curse in his stead. It is at this point the amazing riches of Divine grace have been displayed. Not only was the Christ of God "made under the law," not only did He render perfect obedience to its precepts, but in addition — O wonder of wonders — He was "made a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). Him did God Himself foreordain to be "a propitiation through faith in His blood to declare His righteousness... that He might be [not merely "merciful," but] just, and the Justifier of him which believeth in Jesus" (Rom. 3:25,26).

3. THE ATONEMENT WAS NECESSITATED BY SIN

In asserting that the Atonement was necessitated by sin, let it not be supposed for a moment that the entrance of sin into this world was a calamity unanticipated by the Creator, and that the Atonement is His means of remedying a defect in His handiwork. Far, far from it. So far from man's fall being unforeseen by God, the Lamb was "foreordained before the foundation of the world" (1 Peter 1:19, 20). The tragedy of Eden was no unlooked — for catastrophe, but foreknown and permitted by God for His own wise reasons. No, we employ the term used in this third heading in the sense of a conditional necessity. As we sought to show in the previous chapter, the ultimate reason and motive of all God's acts are found within Himself, and that reason and motive is ever His own glory. But "glory" is manifested excellency, therefore God magnifies His manifestative glory by the exercise and exhibition of His manifold perfections. Wondrously has God used sin as an occasion for displaying His own attributes. He has employed it as a dark background from which has shone forth the more resplendently the beauties of His wisdom, His holiness, His faithfulness, His grace. Thus He has made the very wrath of man to "praise him"

(Ps. 76:10). God is ineffably holy. As such, He is absolutely free from every vestige of moral pollution. He delights in whatever is pure, and therefore He hates whatever is impure: "Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity" (Hab. 1:13). Now sin is directly opposed to the holiness of God, for it is essentially impure, filthy, abominable; therefore is it the object of His unceasing detestation. How then shall God's abhorrence of sin be manifested but by His punishment of it? The Atonement relatively necessitated by sin is obvious from other considerations. Had the creature never fallen, he had never merited sin's wages. Had he never transgressed against God's law, no satisfaction had been required for its outraged honor. Sin being obnoxious to both the nature and the law of God renders those who have committed it subject to His displeasure. Again; sin is a grievous dishonor to the manifested glory of God (Rom. 3:22), a direct insult offered to the high Majesty of Heaven, and were sin pardoned without an adequate satisfaction, it would be tantamount to saying that God may be insulted with impunity. But if the holiness of God requires that sin shall be punished, if the law of God requires a satisfaction should be rendered its honor, how can its transgressors possibly escape? Sin has imposed a gulf between the thrice holy One and those who have rebelled against Him (Isaiah 59:2). Man is utterly incapable of filling up that gulf or of passing over it. Well might Job exclaim, "For He is not a man, as I am, that I should answer Him, and we should come together in judgment. Neither is there any Daysman betwixt us, that might lay his hand upon us both" (9:32,33). Ah, a "Daysman," a Mediator, one able to come "betwixt," is what was so urgently required. And what the terrible condition of fallen sinners needed, the matchless grace of God freely provided. Christ is the Divine answer to the Devil's overthrow of our first parents. And in Christ, and by Christ, every attribute of God has been glorified and every requirement of His law satisfied. Through the incarnation, life and death, of His blessed Son, God has shown to all created intelligences what a terrible thing sin is, what a dreadful breach it had made between Himself and His creatures, how impartial is His justice, what an ocean of love is in His heart to promote the happiness of His people, and above all, He has secured and advanced His own manifestative glory by the honoring of all His attributes. Through the Atonement God has been vindicated. But let the final thought of our chapter be this: it was sin which required the Atonement. Let each truly Christian reader make it individual: it was my sins that brought down the eternal Son of God to this world of darkness and death. Had there been no other sinner on earth but me, Christ had certainly come here. Yes, it was my dreadful and excuseless sins which caused the Lord of glory to become "the Man of Sorrows." It was my sins which required the Beloved of the Father to descend into such unfathomable depth of shame and suffering. It was for me the ineffably Holy One was "made a curse." It was for me He endured the Cross, suffered separation from God, and tasted the bitterness of death. O may the realization of this make me hate sin, and cry daily to God for complete deliverance from it. May the realization of grace so amazing constrain me to live only for Him "who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Gal. 2:20).

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