

The Satisfaction of Christ Studies in the Atonement 7. Its Nature-Continued

by A.W. Pink

Transcript

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Rightly has it been said that, "The doctrine of the Atonement is put in its proper light only when it is regarded as the central truth of Christianity, the great theme of Scripture. The principal object of Revelation was to unfold this unique method of reconciliation by which men, once alienated from God, might be restored to a right relation, and even to a better than their previous standing. But the doctrine is simply revealed, or in other words, is taught us by Divine authority alone" (George Smeaton). If it be a fact that the great Atonement is the central luminary in the firmament of God's truth, it is equally true that the nature of the Atonement is the very heart of this vital subject. Therefore it behooves us to give it our most prayerful and careful consideration. In seeking to set forth the nature of the Satisfaction which the Mediator rendered to God on behalf of His people, we have seen, first, that His work was a federal one: that Christ entered this world not as a private individual, but in an official character, as the covenant-Head of God's elect, as their legal Representative. Remarkably does this appear in His first ministerial utterance. In Luke 2:49 we have the first personal word which Scripture records as proceeding from those lips into which grace had been "poured" (Ps. 45:2), viz., "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" There He expressed His relation to God, to the One who had sent Him: He had come here to do that business or work the Father had assigned Him. Those words were uttered by Him as a Boy of twelve. An interval of eighteen years pass before we hear another utterance from Him who spake as never man did, viz., "Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15). Here He expresses His relation to His people, to those on whose behalf He was sent. The Savior had now come forth from the seclusion of Nazareth and presented Himself for baptism at the hands of His forerunner. John is to be regarded as the living expression and culminating point of the law and the Prophets (Luke 16:16). who had for long centuries witnessed to the coming of Messiah, and which now, by their great representative (Matthew 11:11), was to induct Christ into His office (John 1:31). As Christ recognized them (by coming to John), so they (in Him, their representative) were to authenticate Him as the truth of the Prophets and the substance of the law's types. At first John demurred, and Christ said "suffer it to be so now." In the Greek the "now" is emphatic: suffer it in My present state of humiliation, as an act suited to My office as Substitute. The reason given was: "for thus it becometh US" not "Me" personally, but "us" — Christ one with those whom He had come to save! There is the federal relationship seen from the beginning! "Thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness." Those words are not to be limited to the act of baptism' the language is more general in its scope, though particular in its terms. The

words "becometh" signified, It is not unworthy of the Son of God to stoop so low, for "righteousness" requires it. His language intimated, It is suitable that I should appear in the "likeness of sin's flesh," identifying Myself with them in "confessing their sins" (Mark 1:5). It was becoming that He should be immersed in that river which spoke of death (Jer. 12:5) at the very outset of His public ministry, for it symbolized that "baptism" of suffering which He would undergo (Luke 12:50). and showed His willingness to endure it. Passing beneath the waters of Jordan was a fitting emblem of all those "waves and billows" (Ps. 42:7) of God's wrath which would shortly break over Him. It was meet that He should "fulfill all righteousness," submit to all that the law had foreshadowed and the prophets predicted, and thus meet all the demands of God upon His people. Second, we have seen that the Satisfaction which Christ rendered unto God was a vicarious one. Now as the Substitute of His people the law exacted two things from Christ: first, that He should render that obedience which was required from them as creatures; second, that He should endure that penalty which they merited as sinners. Thus, the mediatorial work Which was given to Christ to perform involved two things, which though inseparably connected, yet are clearly separable in thought, namely a work of obedience distinguished from the sufferings He bore. In all His obedience He suffered; in all His sufferings He obeyed. Hence, it is of first importance to recognize that throughout His earthly course Christ sustained a twofold relation to the law: personally sinless, officially under its curse. The very fact of His putting on "the likeness of sin's flesh" (Rom. 8:3) evidences that sin had been transferred to Him from the moment He was conceived in the Virgin's womb. Nevertheless, He who "bore sin" all through the days of His flesh, was also the sinless Doer of a Divine work. The very sinlessness of Christ was the necessary basis of His work of sin-bearing (2 Cor. 5:21). He must be innocent to stand for the guilty; He must be holy to take the place of the unholy, otherwise He too had needed a Savior. It was the Just who suffered for the unjust (1 Peter 3:18). Thus the wondrous life of Christ is far more than a spectacle to be gazed at in admiration, and more than an example for His people to follow (1 Pet. 2:21); it must be regarded as the work of one for the many. Unique, glorious, perfect, was His lovely life. "I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me" (John 5:30), sets forth the guiding principle which ever regulated Him- cf. John 4:34. "I do always those things that please Him" (John 8:29). His was a life of constant service to God: uninterrupted in duration, perfect in degree, flawless in its balance. One grace neither excluded nor marred another: all was there, all was perfectly blended. Such a life, such obedience, such service, merited reward, and is actually bestowed on all He represented, on all whose substitute He was. We are now ready to contemplate: 3. IT WAS A PENAL WORK Scripture plainly teaches that God is both holy and righteous, and that "justice and judgment" (not "love and pity") are the establishment of God's "throne" (Ps. 89:14). Thus there is that in the Divine Essence which abhors sin for its intrinsic sinfulness, both in its respect of pollution and in its aspect of guilt. The perfections of God are therefore displayed both by forbidding and punishing the same. He has pledged Himself that "the soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezek. 18:4). Therefore, in order for a full Satisfaction to be rendered unto God, sin must be punished, the penalty of the law must be enforced. Consequently, as Savior of His Church, Christ had to vicariously suffer the infliction of the law's curse. What we shall now seek to show is that the sufferings and death of Christ were a satisfaction to Divine justice on behalf of the sins of His people. In case any should object against our use of the term "satisfaction," let us point out that this very word is found in our English Bibles, being given by the translators as the equivalent for the Hebrew word which is ordinarily rendered "Atonement": "Moreover ye shall take no satisfaction for the life of a murderer, which is guilty of death: but he shall surely be put to death. And ye shall take no satisfaction for him that is fled to the city of his refuge, that he should come again to dwell in the land, until the death of the priest" (Num. 35:31, 32). The deep humiliation to which the Son of God was subjected in taking upon Him the form of a servant, and being made "in the likeness of sin's flesh," was a judicial infliction imposed upon Him by the

Father, yet voluntarily submitted to by Himself. The very purpose of His humiliation, His obedience, His sufferings, makes them penal, for they were unto the satisfying of the claims of God's law upon His people. In being "made under the law" (Gal. 4:4) Christ became subject to all that the law enjoins: "Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it saith to them who are under the law" (Rom. 3:19), which means the law calls for the fulfillment of its terms. "Christ in our room and stead, did both by doing and suffering, satisfy Divine justice, both the legislative, the retributive, and the vindictive, in the most perfect manner, fulfilling all the righteousness of the law, which the law otherwise required of us, in order to impunity, and to our having a right to eternal life" (H. Witsius, 1693). "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the Just for the unjust" (1 Pet. 3:18). The reference here must not be restricted to what Christ endured at the hands of God while He hung upon the Cross, nor to all He passed through during that day and preceding night. Beware of limiting the Word of God! No; the entirety of His humiliation is here included. The whole life of Christ was one of sufferings, therefore was He designated "the Man of sorrows," not simply, "sorrow". From His birth to His death, suffering and sorrow marked Him as their legitimate Victim. While yet an infant He was driven into exile, to escape the fury of those who sought His life. That was but the prophetic fore runner of His whole earthly course. The cup of woe, put to His lips at Bethlehem, was never removed till He drained its bitter dregs at Calvary. Every variety of suffering was experienced by Him. He tasted poverty in its severest rigor. Born in a stable, owning no property on earth, dependent upon the charity of others (Luke 8:3), oftentimes being worse situated than the inferior orders of creation: (Matthew 8:20). He suffered reproach in all its bitterness. The most malignant accusations, the vilest aspersions, the most cutting sarcasm, were directed against His person and character. He was taunted with being a glutton, a winebibber, a deceiver, a blasphemer, a devil. Therefore do we hear Him crying, "Reproach hath broken my heart" (Ps. 69:20). He experienced temptation in all its malignity. The Prince of darkness assailed Him with all his ingenuity and power, causing his infernal legions to attack Him, coming against Him like "strong bulls of Bashan," gaping on Him with their mouths like ravening and roaring lions (Ps. 22:12, 13). Above all, He suffered the wrath of God, so that He was "exceeding sorrowful, even unto death" (Matthew 26:38), in "an agony" (Luke 22:44), and ultimately, "forsaken of God." What then is the explanation of these unparalleled "sufferings"? Why was the most perfect obedience followed by the most terrible punishment? Why was unsullied holiness visited with unutterable anguish? David declared, "Yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken" (Ps. 37:25); why, then was the Righteous One abandoned by God? Only one answer is possible; only one answer fully meets all the facts of the case; only one answer clears the government of God. In taking the place of offending sinners, Christ became obligated to discharge all their liabilities, and this involved bearing their sins, being charged with their guilt, suffering their punishment. Accordingly, God dealt with Him as the Representative of His criminal people, inflicting upon Him all that their sins merited. As the sin-bearing Substitute of His people, Christ was justly exposed to all the dreadful consequences of God's manifested displeasure. Of old the question was asked, "Who ever perished being innocent?" (Job 4:7), to which we may, without the slightest hesitation, answer, None. God never has and never will smite the innocent. Therefore before His punitive wrath could fall upon Christ, the sins of His people must first be transferred to Him, and this is precisely what Scripture affirms. Remarkably was this foreshadowed of old in the great type of Israel's annual Day of Atonement, "And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions with all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat" (Lev. 16:21). So too was it plainly prophesied, "The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all. . . He bare the sin of many" (Isa. 53:6, 12). So also is it expressly affirmed in the New Testament, "So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many" (Heb. 9:28). Once again we would point out there is not a hint in these passages that Christ bore the sins of His people only while He was hanging

upon the Cross. We are aware that many have so affirmed, but in doing so they have not only been guilty of adding to the Word of God, but also of flatly contradicting it. We have already pointed out that the expression of Romans 8:3, "made in the likeness of sin's flesh," clearly presupposes the transfer of His people's sins to Christ, and that what happened immediately after His birth was in full keeping with this fact, and cannot be understood apart from it. That He was "circumcised" (Luke 2:21) not only proved that He had been "made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7), but also evidenced that He had been made "in the likeness of sin's flesh." So too the ceremonial "purification" of His mother (Luke 2:22) and her presentation of a "sin-offering" (Leviticus 12:2, 6), was in perfect keeping with the fact that, though His humanity was immaculate, yet He had entered this world officially guilty. As little children we sinned — "the wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies" (Ps. 58:3) — and therefore as a child Christ suffered, suffered not only as our Substitute, but because our sins had been transferred to Him. In our youth we sinned, and as a youth Christ suffered, and suffered at the hands of God, as His own words clearly testify: "I am afflicted and ready to die from youth up: I suffer Thy terrors, I am distracted" (Ps. 88:15). In the prime of our manhood, we sinned, and in the prime of His manhood Christ suffered. Let us refer once more to His being assailed by Satan. Hebrews 2:18 tells us that He "suffered being tempted," and that very suffering was penal. That Christ's "suffering" under Satan was designed and appointed as an infliction from God, is proved by the statement that "Jesus was led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the Devil" (Matthew 4:1). Man having allowed himself to be overcome by Satan, God has, by a just sentence, delivered him up as a slave to his tyranny; therefore was it necessary that Christ, as His sinful people's Substitute, should be exposed to the harrassings of the Devil, that in this respect also He might satisfy Divine justice. Most assuredly Satan and his agents could never have assailed Christ had He not been so (legally) charged with the guilt of our crimes, that God righteously exposed Him to injuries from them (Acts 2:23). The elect themselves, as sinners, were subject to Satan's power (Col. 1:13), and that by the righteous sentence of the Judge of all the earth; therefore were they not only the "prey of the mighty," but also were "lawful captives" (Isa. 49:24). Therefore, as Christ came here as Surety in their room, He, by virtue of God's sentence, also became subject to the buffetings of Satan. "Christ's passive, or suffering obedience, is not to be confined to what He experienced in the garden and on the cross. This suffering was the culmination of His peculiar sorrow, but not the whole of it. Everything in His human and earthly career that was distressing belongs to His passive obedience. It is a true remark of Jonathan Edwards, that the blood of Christ's circumcision was as really a part of His vicarious atonement, as the blood that flowed from His pierced side. And not only His suffering proper, but His humiliation, also, was expiatory" (W. Shedd). "The satisfaction or propitiation of Christ consists either in His suffering evil, or His being subject to abasement. . . Whatever Christ was subject to which was the judicial fruit of sin, had the nature of satisfaction for sin. But not only proper suffering, but all abasement and depression of the state and circumstances of mankind (human nature) below its primitive honor and dignity, such as His body remaining under death, and body and soul remaining separate, are the judicial fruits of sin" (Jon. Edwards, 1743). When the Scriptures speak of the Satisfaction of Christ, they ascribe it to His sufferings in general, as Isaiah 53:4, "Surely He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows," that is, He suffered all the pains and sorrows due to us from sin. It is to be most carefully noted that the inspired declaration "the Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6) comes before "He was oppressed" and before "He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter"; as it was at the commencement of His public ministry, and not while He hung upon the Cross that God moved one of His servants to cry, "Behold the Lamb of God" which taketh away the sin of the world. Christ was brought "to the slaughter" before the three hours of darkness, yet even then "affliction" lay upon Him, and our iniquity was exacted of Him. So too this very chapter (Isaiah 53) ascribes our "healing" to the stripes which He received from men

as plainly as other passages attribute our being delivered from the curse of the law through God's visiting Him with its curse. "For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example" (1 Pet. 2:21). "To suffer here denotes to be in affliction: for all those sufferings are here intended, in which Christ has left us an example of patience. These sufferings he affirms to be for us, that is, undergone as well in our stead, as for our good. For this is ordinarily the signification of the word *huper*, and that this is the true meaning of Peter. We conclude hence, that in 3:18 he says, 'Christ suffered for sins', namely, that He might be the propitiation for our sins" (H. Witsius). When the sovereign rights of God are emphasized there is generally raised the objection that we are hereby "reducing man to a mere machine." Many are they who are prepared to hold a brief for human responsibility. But rare indeed is it that we ever hear anything about transferred responsibility. Yet it is at this point lies one of the chief wonders and glories of the Gospel. The responsibility of God's people was transferred to Christ: He assumed their liabilities, made Himself chargeable with their debts, answerable to every demand of the law against them. Had this not been the case, how could God have righteously laid the iniquities of His people upon the head of His Holy Son? Still less could He have called for the sword of Justice to smite Him. It was because Christ was "made sin" for us, that He was also "made a curse" for us: the latter could not be without the former. As this is a point of such vital importance we must amplify a little further. Hebrews 7:22 declares that Christ is "Surety of a better covenant": He was the Sponsor of His people, as Judah undertook to be for Benjamin. "I will be surety for him; of my hand shalt thou require him; if I bring him not unto thee, and set him before thee, then let me bear the blame for ever" (Gen. 43:9). Or, as Paul was for Onesimus, "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it" (Philemon 1:18, 19). Just so did Christ engage Himself unto His Father for us: reckon to Me whatever they owe Thee, and I will satisfy for it. "A surety, whose name is put into a bond, is not only bound to pay the debt, but he makes it his own debt also, even as well as it is the principal's, so that he may be sued and charged for the debt. So Christ, when He once made Himself a Surety, He so put Himself in the room of sinners, that what the law could lay to their charge, it might lay to His" (T. Goodwin, 1680). Christ must take on Him the guilt of our transgressions before He could take our punishment upon Him, and so satisfy Divine justice on our behalf. That He did so, is demonstrated by His own words. It is indeed remarkable to find how that Christ actually owned our sins as being His. First, in the 40th Psalm. That this Psalm is a Messianic one we know from its quotation in Hebrews 10. That it contains the very words of Christ, is plainly evident from verses 7-11. He is still the Speaker in verse 12, where He declared "For innumerable evils have compassed me about: Mine iniquities have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to look up; they are more than the hairs of mine head: therefore my heart faileth me." What a proof that the sins of His people had been transferred to Him! Second, in the 69th, another great Messianic Psalm. There too we find Him saying, "O God, Thou knowest my foolishness; and my sins are not hid from Thee" (v. 5). How unmistakably do those words show our sins had been reckoned to Him! Those sins were His not by perpetration, but by imputation. "Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on [to] the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24). "'Our sins' here are our liabilities to punishment on account of our violations of the Divine law, and the necessary consequences of those liabilities; in other words, guilt in the sense of binding over to punishment, and punishment itself" (J. Brown). Those sins Christ "bare," endured as a heavy load. The prime meaning of the Greek verb is "to carry up," the allusion being to the typical animal which was carried up to the altar, which was always erected on an elevated place. The margin gives the preferable rendering — "to the tree": the preposition is the same as in the next verse, "ye are returned to the Shepherd." The reason why the Cross is here termed "the tree" we will state a little later. There was a needs be for Christ taking on Him the guilt of our transgressions in order for Divine justice to punish Him, for "we are sure that the judgment of God is according to truth" (Rom. 2:2). Whomsoever God

punishes for sin must be guilty of sin. Therefore we read, "For He hath made Him sin for us, who knew no sin" (2 Cor. 5:21). Each word here calls for a separate paragraph. The opening "for" assigns the ground on which the message of reconciliation (vv. 19, 20) rests: verse 19 states that God does not impute trespasses unto His people; verse 21 tells us why: because they were imputed to Christ. Here the Atonement is traced back to its source. "God was in Christ reconciling": He made Christ to be sin — when? In the everlasting covenant, by the mutual agreement of the Father and the Son. Then we beheld the fitness of Christ to make atonement: He was personally sinless, it was God who so adjudged Him! "Who knew no sin" is the negative way of saying that His obedience was perfect. The law had no fault against Him, either of omission or commission. Nevertheless, "He [God] made him [legally constituted Christ] to be sin for us," not in mere semblance, but in awful reality, and this, from the moment of His incarnation. In entering the law place of His people, Christ became answerable to the righteousness of God on their behalf: whatever they owed, must be exacted from their Sponsor: He must pay their debts, suffer the full penalty of their iniquities, receive sin's wages in their room. Christ now became exposed to all that the holiness of God must inflict upon sin. Therefore we read, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree" (Gal. 3:13). "The cross was accursed, not only in the opinion of men, but by the decree of the Divine law. Therefore when Christ was lifted up upon it, He rendered Himself obnoxious to the curse" (Calvin). The very mode of death which God appointed for His Son reveals to us the penal nature of it. The Cross was no mere "accident," as though it made no difference what form His death took. Fundamental reasons rendered it expedient and necessary that the Surety should die a death which was accursed of God; hence the frequent reference in the New Testament to the "cross" and the "tree"-cf. John 12:32, 33. At Calvary God's terrible curse on sin was publicly displayed, of which the cross was not the cause but the symbol: cf. John 3:14. Under the Mosaic law (to which the apostle refers in Gal. 3:13), hanging on a tree was a death reserved for great criminals. Hence the force of the word "tree" in 1 Peter 2:24. Christ hanging upon the tree was the public testimony to God's curse on Him. "The cause of the curse was not the hanging on the tree, but the sin with which He was charged; and that mode of punishment exhibited that He was the object of God's holy displeasure; not indeed because He was suspended on the tree, but because He was the sin bearer, and the punishment of the offenses for which that ignominious penalty was allotted was then inflicted. Divine wisdom appointed that He who bore the sin of the world should be exposed as a curse, for the Divine displeasure was there most awfully displayed" (G. Smeaton). As to why this means and method of death was selected by God out of all others possible — poisoning, stoning, beheading, etc.-Genesis 3 supplies the answer: "As the fatal sin which diffused the curse over the human race was connected with the forbidden 'tree,' God wisely ordered that the last Adam should expiate sin by being suspended on a tree: and He appointed in the law (Deut. 21:22, 23) such a symbol of the curse as reminded all men of the origin of the Divine curse on the world. He would not have the curse removed in any other way" (G. Smeaton). Among the Romans, death by crucifixion was the deepest possible humiliation. It was the most degrading of punishments, inflicted only on slaves and the lowest of the people, and if freemen were at any time subjected to crucifixion for great crimes, such as robbery, high treason, or sedition, the sentence could not be executed till they were put into the catalogue of slaves, and that, by the utmost humiliation. Their liberty was taken from them by servile stripes and scourging, as was done to Christ. Thus the curse of God's law was executed upon the Head and Substitute of His people. To "preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor. 1:23) is to proclaim and expound His being "made a curse for us." Because Christ was "made sin" and "made a curse" for His people, the wrath of God's holiness flamed against Him and the sword of His justice pierced Him. "Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man that is my fellow, saith the Lord of hosts: smite the shepherd" (Zech. 13:7), and cf. Matthew 26:31.

God inflicted punishment on Christ as if He had been the personal offender. "It pleased the Lord to bruise him; He hath put him to grief: when Thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin" (Isa. 53:10). As all the sufferings of men, whether inflicted immediately by God or mediately by Satan or men (Jer. 2:15-17), arise from the demerits of sin; so all the sufferings of Christ, from man, Satan, God, arose from the demerits of His peoples' sins imputed to their Substitute. The punishment which God meted out to Christ was the very punishment which was due His people. That He was accursed of God is seen from His hanging on the tree. That He received sin's wages was evidenced by God's forsaking Him. That He was numbered with transgressors was exhibited by His dying between two thieves. True, He did not suffer eternally, for the eternity of our punishment was only a circumstance arising from our incapacity to suffer the whole weight of God's wrath in a brief season, and therefore the brevity of duration of Christ's sufferings is no valid objection against the identity of penalty which He received. Moreover, the infinite dignity of His person more than compensated the law. "To the enlightened eye, there is found on the cross another inscription besides that which Pilate ordered to be written there: The Victim of guilt. The Wages of sin" (J. Brown).

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