

# The Atonement of Jesus Christ

## Chapter 1: The Necessity of the Atonement

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The most important and significant event in history was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Most people know that Jesus was crucified almost 2,000 years ago in Palestine. Many people even have a vague idea regarding the meaning of Christ's death. They know it has something to do with salvation. But, when people are questioned regarding the biblical, theological significance of Jesus' person and work most display a woeful ignorance of God's Word. The purpose of this booklet is to provide people with a small primer on the atonement.

The word atonement is a theological term that is used to describe the substitutionary work of Christ. The word occurs in the KJV in Romans 5:11 and has the basic meaning of reconciliation. The word often is used in the Old Testament to translate the Hebrew words *kipper* and *kippurim*, which mean "propitiation" or "expiation". The word atonement encompasses Christ's work of redemption on behalf of His people. The center of Christ's work, the main event to which the whole Old Testament pointed and to which the whole New Testament expounded was Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. Christ's death is the very heart of the Christian faith. It is the central theme of Scripture. "[T]he New Testament writers ascribe the saving efficacy of Christ's work specifically to His death, or His blood, or His cross (Rom. iii. 25; v. 9; I Cor. x. 16; Eph. i.7; ii.13; Col. i. 20; Heb. ix.12, 14; I Pet. i. 2, 19; I John i. 7; v. 6-8; Rev. i. 5)."<sup>1</sup>

Many people today regard the idea of the atonement as barbaric and outmoded. They often say: "Why would God require or even allow His Son to be tortured and killed in such a bloody humiliating manner? Isn't God a God of love? Couldn't He just forgive people's sins without the awful shedding of blood?" A Protestant liberal theologian has even argued that the classic Christian concept of the atonement is nothing short of child abuse. Such comments reveal an ignorance and/or rejection of divine revelation. They also show us that in order to understand the meaning of Christ's death we also must learn some things regarding God's nature, sin, man's estate and so forth. Thus, while on the one hand the subject of the atonement is simple, it also is very rich and multifaceted.

When discussing the necessity of the atonement some different aspects of the atonement need to be considered for the sake of clarification. First, a distinction needs to be made between necessity, as it relates to God's *motive* or *moving cause* to save sinners, and necessity, as it relates to God's *method* or *means* used to achieve salvation. These topics need to be treated separately because they deal with different questions, each of which the Bible answers differently.

Did God because of something within His own nature or something intrinsic to man have to save sinners? Did God's attributes of love, mercy and compassion force Him to act? Could God have left the whole human race to perish in their sins if He so desired? The biblical answer is that God's decision to save a people for Himself was a free choice that was not determined by

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<sup>1</sup> B. B. Warfield, *The Person and Work of Christ* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980 [1950]), p. 352.

any internal or external necessity. Paul says that God's predestination of the elect to salvation in Christ was "*according to the good pleasure of His will*" (Eph. 1:5). To the Galatians Paul wrote, "Jesus Christ...gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, *according to the will of our God and Father*" (1:4). In Colossians, we read that "it pleased the Father...to reconcile all things to Himself by Him" (1:19). All these passages clearly indicate that God's decision to save sinners was a free sovereign choice.

Note also that the Bible repeatedly speaks of salvation as a "*free gift*" given by God. This does not mean that achieving redemption was without cost for the Bible says that Christians were "bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:20; 7:23); that Christ redeemed the church with His own precious blood (1 Pet. 1:19). The free gift passages refer to the fact that God bestows salvation upon the elect freely or voluntarily. God was not obligated to save anyone but out of His own good pleasure He gave "freely". Paul says that believers are "justified freely by His grace" (Rom. 3:24); that God will "freely give us all things" (Rom. 8:32); that the Holy Spirit enables us to "know the things that have been freely given to us by God" (1 Cor. 2:12). God's freeness in giving salvation to the elect is intimately connected with the biblical concept of grace. Grace means that God gives His favor and salvation to those who deserve wrath and hell-fire to those who hate God and are His enemies. Salvation is never presented in the Scriptures as bestowed because of obligation or debt. Neither a foreseen faith, nor good works, or bloodline, or nationality has anything to do with God's free choice. "Therefore He has mercy on whom He wills, and whom He wills He hardens" (Rom. 9:18; cf. 4:1-5).

Although the Bible teaches that the moving cause of the atonement was God's sovereign good pleasure, this fact does not mean that God's decision was purely arbitrary. Yes, it was a free act but it was an act rooted in God's nature. The Bible speaks of the atonement as the provision of God's love. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (Jn. 3:16). "In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (1 Jn. 4:9-11). The love of God is the spring from which the atonement flows. Jesus' death was the supreme demonstration of God's love. "But God demonstrated His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Paul informs us in Romans 8:29 that God's love preceded election. "For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son". (The word foreknew in this passage is used in the Hebraistic sense of "to love beforehand"). The fact that God the Father sent His only begotten Son to die for sinners because He loved them beforehand should spur every Christian not only to wonder and amazement but also to profound adoration, love and praise toward God. The Father didn't have to send the Son and the Son didn't have to humble Himself, but because of their love and mercy toward the elect Jesus came and died. "Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name. For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations" (Ps. 100:4-5).

A second distinction that needs to be made is between a hypothetical necessity and an absolute necessity. Some of the early reformers (e.g. Calvin, Luther and Zwingli) held that the atonement was necessary only in the sense that God sovereignly decreed to save sinners by Christ's death. In other words, the sacrifice of Christ had to take place because God predestined it, not because it was the only method that did not contradict God's moral perfection. If God had wanted to, He could have decreed other methods of securing the salvation of the elect. It is

important to understand the difference between a hypothetical and absolute necessity because many passages which point to an absolute necessity could also be used to support a hypothetical or relative necessity viewpoint. For example: “O My Father, *if it be possible*, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (Mt. 26:39). “And He began to teach them that the Son of Man *must* suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again” (Mk. 8:31; cf. Lk. 9:22; 24:7). “But first, He *must* suffer many things and be rejected by this generation” (Lk. 17:25). “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so *must* the Son of Man be lifted up” (Jn. 3:14; cf. Jn. 12:34; 20:9). “[D]emonstrating that the Christ *had to* suffer and rise from the dead” (Ac. 17:3). If God has decreed that something take place in history, then it *must* take place.

Having considered the moving cause of the atonement and the hypothetical necessity viewpoint, let us turn our attention to the biblical evidence for the absolute necessity understanding of the atonement. Once God decided out of His own sovereign good pleasure to save a people for Himself, could He have saved them in an infinite variety of ways or was He limited by an absolute necessity to only one way: the sinless life and sacrificial death of the God-Man, Jesus Christ? The biblical evidence clearly supports the contention that Christ’s work of redemption was the *only possible way* that God could save sinners.

For those who think a discussion of the absolute necessity of the atonement is the esoteric speculation of theologians and thus not worthy of study; a brief preview of its vital importance is in order. This doctrine is vital for a number of reasons. First, it refutes the popular modern day notion that there are many different paths that lead to God and eternal life. This doctrine proves that only the sinless blood of Christ can remove the guilt of sin and consequently God’s wrath against the sinner. Second, it tells us a lot about the God who is—the God with whom we all have to deal. The God of the Bible is not promiscuous or sloppy regarding ethics. Jehovah is infinitely holy and righteous and thus cannot dwell or have fellowship with any person who has the guilt of sin. Third, it teaches us that sin is exceedingly wicked and evil. Sin (the transgression of God’s holy law) is not a light thing. It is a deadly, soul-damning, God-hating, death-loving act. The thought of committing sin against a God of infinite holiness should make us tremble with fear. Sin is the reason that the spotless, harmless, undefiled Son of God had to die to accomplish redemption. Because of sin, the *only* sinless, good man who ever lived was humiliated, abandoned, tortured and publicly executed as a criminal. Fourth, as noted above, it teaches us that God’s love of the elect is totally amazing. Although God was not obligated to save anyone, He out of His love, mercy and kindness decided to save a people from every nation even though this redemption could only be achieved at the ultimate cost—the suffering, sacrifice and blood of the Lord of Glory. “Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever” (Rev. 6:13)!

There are five major biblical reasons why the atonement was necessary, most of which are intimately connected with God’s nature or character.

Although the God of the Bible is totally sovereign, all-powerful, all-knowing and infinite in perfections, there are certain things that God cannot do. For example, God cannot lie (Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:18) or tempt man to sin (Jas. 1:13). Jehovah can do anything *except* violate His own nature. In other words “He cannot deny Himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). Therefore, when God determined to save a people from the guilt of sin, He could only choose a course of action consistent with His own character (in particular His moral character). The apostle Paul put it this way, God’s method of salvation had to demonstrate “His righteousness, that He might be just

and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). The attributes of God that directly lead to the necessity of the atonement are God’s righteousness, justness and holiness.

## 1. God’s Righteousness and Justice

Many people who object to the biblical doctrine of the atonement do so because they do not understand who God is. They reason within themselves: “Why doesn’t God simply forgive and forget? Wouldn’t God forgive people as long as they say they are sorry and endeavor to be a better person? Isn’t the idea that *only* the death and shed blood of Christ can remove sin extreme and fanatical?” The reason God cannot simply let sin slide or sweep it under the rug and pretend it doesn’t exist is because He is righteous and just. “The LORD is righteous, He is in her midst, He will do no unrighteousness” (Zeph. 3:5). “Righteousness and justice are the foundation of Your throne” (Ps. 89:14). “He is the Rock, His work is perfect; for all His ways are justice, a God of truth and without injustice; righteous and upright is He” (Dt. 32:4). When the Bible speaks of God’s ethical perfection and justice, it does *not* refer to a standard or realm of ideals outside of God but to God’s very being itself. “God is light and in Him is no darkness at all” (1 Jn. 1:5). Therefore, Abraham, who knew God’s character, could ask Jehovah: “Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen. 18:25). Likewise, the apostle Paul could say, “Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not!” (Rom. 9:14). God can only do what is right. Because of His nature, He can only do what is just.

God’s nature demands that sin be punished. If God refused to give sin its full measure of punishment then He could not claim to be perfectly just. God’s infinite holiness, justice and righteousness of *necessity* demand the infliction of punishment on the sinner himself or on an appropriate substitute. The Bible contains many passages that declare that God has to punish sin. Jehovah said, “I will not *justify* [i.e. declare righteous] the wicked” (Ex. 23:7). “We are told repeatedly that He will by no means clear the guilty, Ex. 34:7; Num. 14:18; Nah. 1:3. He hates sin with a divine hatred; His whole being reacts against it, Ps. 5:4-6; Nah. 1:2; Rom. 1:18. Paul argues in Romans 3:25-26, that it was necessary that Christ should be offered as an atoning sacrifice for sin, in order that God might be just while justifying the sinner. The important thing was that the justice of God should be maintained.”<sup>2</sup>

A common objection against the biblical teaching that God must punish sin is that it makes God less charitable than many people who are willing to forgive offenses without any sort of satisfaction. While it is true that many people can and do forgive personal offenses against them, the comparison between God and a private individual is totally illegitimate. God is the Creator, Sovereign Lord over all, Supreme Lawgiver and Judge of all men; therefore, He must maintain His veracity, law and justice. A private individual does *not* have to contradict his *own* nature, law and justice to forgive an offense. The Bible repeatedly affirms that as the Supreme Judge over the whole earth, God will only render just judgment. “But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of *the righteous judgment of God*, who will render to each one according to his deeds” (Rom. 2:5-6; cf. Rev. 20:12).

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<sup>2</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939, 41), p. 370.

## 2. God is Holy

Another aspect of God's character that necessitates the atonement is His holiness. "The nature of God is perfect and complete holiness. This is not an optional or arbitrary matter; it is the way God is by nature. He has always been absolutely holy. Nothing more need or can be said. It is useless to ask, Why is God this way? He simply is. Being contrary to God's nature, sin is repulsive to Him. He is allergic to sin, so to speak. He cannot look upon it. He is compelled to turn away from it."<sup>3</sup> God's infinite holiness causes Him to hate sin with a perfect hatred. God is so holy that before sinful men can come into His presence and have fellowship with Him the guilt of their sin must be removed and they must be clothed with perfect righteousness.

The attribute of God that is emphasized by Scripture above all other attributes (including love) is His holiness. God's holiness refers to His absolute distinctness from all His creatures and to His glorious exalted existence above His creation in infinite majesty as well as His infinite moral purity. The God of the Bible is not like the pagan deities who fornicate, get drunk and commit lewd acts because He really exists (they do not) and *He is holy*. "Who is like You, O LORD among the gods? Who is like You, glorious in holiness" (Ex. 15:11). Jehovah is so holy that the mighty seraphim continually cry out before Him, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isa. 6:3; cf. Rev. 4:8).

God demands a perfect holiness in people not arbitrarily but because His own perfect holiness requires it. To the Israelite He said: "you shall be holy; for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44). Because God is holy, He hates sin and cannot dwell with sinners. "You are of purer eyes than to behold evil and cannot look on wickedness" (Hab. 1:13). "You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness, nor shall evil dwell with You. The boastful shall not stand in Your sight; You hate all workers of iniquity" (Ps. 5:4-5).

When God created Adam and Eve, He made them in His own image (Gen. 1:27). Before they ate the forbidden fruit and fell into sin, they were holy and righteous. They were without any ethical spot or blemish. What happened to Adam and Eve when they disobeyed God's command and sinned against Him? They were cast out of God's presence. Why? Because a thrice holy God cannot have fellowship with people who are not holy! God is so infinitely holy that every sin that an individual commits merits death: physical, spiritual and eternal. God had warned Adam that the day that he disobeyed Him, he would certainly die (Gen. 2:17). God's holiness of intrinsic necessity set up a separation between Jehovah and all sinners. "Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy, that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear" (Isa. 59:1-2).

Once we understand the holiness of God then we can understand the severe penalty that sin deserves. When God demands that "the soul who sins must die" (Ezek. 18:4), He is not setting forth an arbitrary penalty but is penalizing sinners exactly as His holy and righteous nature requires. Thus Paul writes, "knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are *worthy* of death" (Rom. 1:32). Sin is wicked. It is a moral evil that is the very opposite of holiness. God hates all workers of iniquity (Ps. 5:5) and is angry with the wicked every day (Ps. 7:11). Sin in thought, word or deed is an abomination to the Lord. God is determined because of the immutable holiness of His nature to punish all sin with death. "For the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). "Then when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and

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<sup>3</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), p. 802.

sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death” (Jas. 1:15). “The soul who sins *must* die” (Ezek. 18:4). John Murray writes, “Sin is the contradiction of God and He must react against it with holy wrath. Wherever sin is, the wrath of God rests upon it (cf. Rom. 1:18). Otherwise, God would be denying Himself, particularly His holiness, justice, and truth. But wrath must be removed if we are to enjoy the favor of God which salvation implies. And the only provision for the removal of wrath is propitiation. This is surely the import of Romans 3:25, 26, that God set forth Christ a propitiation to declare His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the ungodly.”<sup>4</sup> Because of who God is (He is holy, righteous and just), and because of what sinners are (they are unholy, unrighteous and guilty), people have only two choices. They can remain in their sin and unholiness and thus be forever cast away from God’s presence into hell or they can trust in Christ who as a substitute paid the penalty in full by His death and provided a perfect holiness or righteousness by His life.

### 3. The Sanction of God’s Law

God has given unto mankind a moral law, which is summarized in the Ten Commandments. God’s moral law helps us understand God’s righteousness and holiness for His moral law reflects His character. For example, Jehovah commands us to be holy (Lev. 11:44). Why? Because He is holy (1 Pet. 1:16). God also commands us not to lie (Dt. 5:20). Why? Because Jehovah is truth itself (Jn. 14:6) and cannot lie (Heb. 6:18). Ethical absolutes are not philosophical abstractions existing in some supposed realm of ideals. They are rooted in God’s very being and thus they are as immutable and eternal as God Himself. The only reason that people have a sense of what is right and wrong is because man was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26) and thus has the work of the law written upon the heart (Rom. 2:15).

Why does the law of God necessitate the work of Christ? Because the law carries with it penal sanctions that also reflect God’s nature and character. Thus, these sanctions also are immutable and eternal. Remember, it is God’s holiness that causes Him to hate sin with a perfect hatred and God’s justice requires that sin receive its full penalty. And what is the penalty that God’s law threatens? It is death (Gen. 2:17; Dt. 27:36; Ezek. 18:20; Rom. 1:18,32; 6:23; Jas. 1:15; Rev. 20:14-15). “Since God is true and cannot lie, these threatenings must necessarily be executed either upon the sinner himself or upon a surety.”<sup>5</sup>

The moment that you sinned against God you incurred *real guilt* before Him.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps you think that you are a good person. That God will accept you on the basis of your good works. The Bible, however, says that: “There is none righteous, no, not one...for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:9, 23). “For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin” (Eccl. 7:20). “Sin is a real criminal offense against God. We should not confuse guilt feelings with real guilt. All men are guilty before God (Rom. 3:19). Yet, most men do not know it or feel it. Modern psychology and psychiatry attempt to remove guilt feelings. But no one can remove our real guilt but God Himself.”<sup>7</sup> Since you have broken many of God’s laws, you are guilty and now have God’s curse (the eternal death penalty) upon you. “For it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them’” (Gal. 3:10). “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). “And anyone not

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<sup>4</sup> John Murray, *The Atonement* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.), p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elencitic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1994), 2: 423.

<sup>6</sup> There also is the imputed guilt of Adam’s sin, the federal head of mankind (cf. Rom. 5:12-19).

<sup>7</sup> Robert A. Morey, *Studies in the Atonement* (Southbridge, MA: Crown, 1989), p. 21.

found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire” (Rev. 20:15). If you have *not* believed in Jesus Christ as He is revealed in the Scriptures, than you are an enemy of God and His wrath abides upon you this very moment. “He who believes on the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on Him” (Jn. 3:36). Your only hope is the substitute (the Lord Jesus Christ) that God has provided.

Because God’s law and its cause are a reflection of His perfect character, He could not set aside the law and its penalty without denying Himself. Thus, to redeem the elect a substitute had to endure the curse or penalty of the law in full. The law pronounces a curse upon the sinner and only Christ can eliminate that curse. How? Not by setting aside the curse but by enduring the curse in the believer’s place. “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’)” (Gal. 3:13). “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). “He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Heb. 9:26). “Christ was offered to bear the sin of many” (Heb. 9:28). Hodge writes, “If the penalty is an essential part of the law; if the whole law is immutable; if Christ actually came to fulfill the law and not to relax its demands; then it follows, without doubt, that he suffered the penalty of the law as our Substitute.”<sup>8</sup>

Since, unbelievers in their natural depravity as well as non-Christian theists (e.g. followers of Islam and Judaism) reject the biblical doctrine of the necessity of a substitutionary sacrifice (in order to eliminate the guilt of sin, remit the penalty and thus eliminate God’s wrath against the sinner) a common heretical objection against the atonement should be considered. It is often said that all that is needed to get right with God is repentance. That is, one must tell God that he is sorry and one must stop the evil behavior that offends God and turn over a new leaf, so to speak. Then God will forgive all of that person’s sins. People who believe this will often appeal to passages which speak of God relenting on a promised punishment on the basis of repentance (e.g. Ahab, 1 Kings. 21:27-29; Nineveh, Jonah 3:10; Hezekiah, Isa. 38:1-5; etc.). the problem with this view is that it confounds God’s *temporal* punishments and blessings with His *eternal* sanctions. Obedience to God’s law can and does bring temporal blessings (Dt. 28:1-14) while disobedience brings severe curses *in this life* (Dt. 28:15-68). However, the Bible *never, ever* teaches that people can be saved or have their sins removed on the basis of obedience to God’s law. The central focus of the Old Testament ceremonial law was upon the shed blood of animals to *cover over* or *expiate* sin. The New Testament teaching on the matter could not be more explicit: “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified” (Gal. 2:16).

#### 4. The Requirement of a Perfect Righteousness

Thus far we have seen that because God is holy, righteous and just, His nature requires that sin be punished with death (spiritual, physical and eternal). Therefore, to be saved we need a substitute who can pay the penalty in our place. (In a moment we will see that only the sinless God-Man Jesus Christ could fulfill the necessary requirements to be that perfect substitute). However, the Bible also teaches that having the guilt of our sins removed is not enough to gain eternal life with God. Jehovah also requires a positive righteousness. God requires a life lived in

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<sup>8</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Guardian Press, n. d. [1867]), p. 67.

perpetual righteousness; a life lived in perfect obedience to His law before eternal life is bestowed. Morey writes, “In order to gain the blessing of God your obedience must be: (1) *personal* : ‘If you listen to the commandment’ (Dt. 11:26); (2) *perfect* : ‘what does the LORD your God require from you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in *all* His ways and love Him, and to serve the LORD your God with *all* your heart and with *all* your soul’ (Dt. 10:12); (3) *perpetual*: ‘Oh, that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep *all* my commandments *always*’ (Dt. 5:29). The only obedience acceptable before God is one in which 100% of you keeps 100% of the Law 100% of the time. ‘For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all’ (Jas. 2:10)”<sup>9</sup>

The biblical teaching that God requires a perfect, personal and perpetual obedience to His law before eternal life is attained is also taught by the covenant of works made with Adam. After God created Adam, He told him not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). If Adam obeyed, he would live. That is, he would gain access to the tree of life. In Revelation 22:14, the right to the tree of life and entrance into the heavenly city are linked. If Adam had met God’s condition of a perfect obedience, his reward would have been life everlasting in God’s presence. Adam, however, failed. His one act of disobedience caused him to be ejected from the garden of Eden. Then the tree of life was guarded by cherubim and a flaming sword to prevent Adam’s access to the tree. “One may therefore conclude that the covenant of works contained both a penalty and a reward... Had there been no sin, access to the tree would not have been cut off. One single act brought the penalty.”<sup>10</sup>

Our problem is not just that we have the guilt of sin but also that we lack a perfect righteousness. Paul said, “the doers of the law will be justified” (Rom. 2:13). Therefore, we need the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ if we are to obtain eternal life, for we continually fall short of God’s standard (Rom. 3:23). The Bible teaches that Christ lived a perfect sinless life. Jesus challenged His opponents saying, “Which of you convicts Me of sin?” (Jn. 8:46). The author of Hebrews says that Jesus was “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” (Heb. 7:26); that He “was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). Paul says, “He made Him who knew *no sin* to be sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21). The apostle John writes, “in Him there is no sin” (1 Jn 3:5). Peter says that Jesus “committed no sin” (1 Pet. 2:22); that Christ was “as a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:19). There are only 33 1/2 years of behavior that God will accept—the sinless, obedient, perfect life of Christ. It was absolutely necessary for Jesus to come and “fulfill all righteousness” (Mt. 3:15) so His people could have eternal life. Christ not only eliminated the penalty for sin by His sacrificial death but He also earned the heavenly reward. Murray writes, “Salvation requires not only the forgiveness of sin but also justification. And justification, adequate to the situation in which lost mankind is, demands a righteousness such as belongs to no other than the incarnate Son of God, a righteousness with divine property and quality (cf. Rom. 1:17; 3:21, 22; 10:3; II Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9). It is the righteousness of the obedience of Christ (Rom. 5:19). But only the Son of God incarnate, fulfilling to the full extent the commitments of the Father’s will, could have provided such a righteousness.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Robert A. Morey, *Studies in the Atonement*, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *The Atonement* (Hubbs, NM: The Trinity Foundation, 1987, 96), p. 56.

<sup>11</sup> John Murray, *The Atonement*, pp. 10-11.

## 5. The Teaching of the Gospel

When the New Testament epistles explain the death of Christ, they do so in terms of necessity. For example, the author of Hebrews says that “without the shedding of blood there is no remission” (Heb. 9:22). If the method of salvation depended solely upon God’s arbitrary decision then the shedding of blood would not be necessary. The author of Hebrews speaking under divine inspiration not only says that blood is necessary but only one type of blood will do—the blood of Christ. “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). “And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever sat down at the right hand of God... For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.” (Heb. 10:11-12, 14). If God could simply by divine fiat pardon sin then the central message of Hebrews 9 and 10 would be totally untrue. Furthermore, the Bible says that Christ appeased the wrath of God (Rom. 3:25). If God could have appeased His own wrath by a mere act of volition (without first demanding any satisfaction) then all the passages which speak of Christ propitiating God’s wrath would be not only unnecessary but would be purely for dramatic effect as in a stage play and nothing more. The very idea that God would send His only begotten Son to the cross for any other reason than necessity not only is a denial of God’s wisdom but also borders on blasphemy. Paul did not for a moment entertain such thinking. “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sin” (Eph. 1:7). Christ has “made peace through the blood of the cross” (Col. 1:20).

## Conclusion

When we examine the biblical teaching regarding God’s moral attributes, His law with its eternal penal sanctions, the nature of sin and man’s predicament as guilty before God, the need of a perfect righteousness for eternal life and so on, everything points to only one conclusion: Christ’s sinless life and sacrificial death was the only way that sinners could be saved. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” (Jn. 14:6). “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved” (Jn. 10:9). Peter “filled with the Holy Spirit” said regarding “Jesus Christ of Nazareth”: “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Ac. 4:12).

The issue of the necessity of the atonement is a life and death, heaven or hell issue. Now that you have an understanding of who God really is, why He hates sin, why sin must be punished, how God’s love and mercy sent His only begotten Son to the cross, and, why there is no other way to be saved other than Christ’s life and blood, are you going to trust in Christ alone for your salvation? Or, will you continue on the path of iniquity and destruction? Woe unto you if you turn away from such a glorious salvation. “When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His power” (2 Th. 1:8-9).

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