

## SESSION 11: The Atonement

### Readings

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 34-44

WCF	WLC	WSC
8	36-57, 68	21-28

### Introduction

In the last session, we studied the person, offices, and estates of our Lord Jesus Christ. In this session, we turn to study the *atonement*. Atonement “means making amends, blotting out the offense, and giving satisfaction for wrong done; thus reconciling to oneself the alienated other and restoring the disrupted relationship.”<sup>123</sup> This is what our Lord did to accomplish our salvation.

How important is it for us to understand properly the doctrine of the atonement? “The centrality of the atonement to Christianity has influenced our language, giving us the word ‘crucial’ which means literally ‘pertaining to a cross’. When we say that anything is crucial we are saying that it is as central to that to which we apply it as the cross is to Christianity. What Christ did on the cross is the heart of the Christian faith. The atonement is critical; it is the central doctrine of Christianity.”<sup>124</sup>

### Terminology

Our standards use several terms to describe Christ’s work. WCF 8.5 speaks of his “obedience and sacrifice,” which “hath fully satisfied” (*propitiated*) God’s justice, purchasing ‘reconciliation’. WCF 8.6 speaks of the “work of redemption.” We can briefly define each of these terms as follows:

Term	Example	Defined
Obedience	Romans 5.19	An umbrella term ( <i>see next section</i> )
Sacrifice	Ephesians 5.2, Hebrews 10.11-12	That which is given up to/for another
Propitiation	Romans 3.25, Hebrews 2.17	That which averts wrath by <i>expiating</i> guilt ( <i>see below</i> )
Reconciliation	Romans 5.10-11, 2 Corinthians 5.20-21	Removal of the alienation between God and man
Redemption	Galatians 4.4-5, Ephesians 1.7	“To ransom by the payment of a price” <sup>125</sup>

The term ‘propitiation’ includes another concept known ‘expiation.’ The former refers to God, the latter to believers. Hodge explains: “Expiation has respect to the bearing which satisfaction has upon sin or the sinner. Propitiation has respect to the effect of satisfaction in thus removing the judicial displeasure of God.”<sup>126</sup> Propitiation turns away *God’s* wrath by taking away *our* guilt.

All of the above terms converge at the cross of Jesus Christ. “As a perfect *sacrifice* for sin... Christ’s death was our *redemption*... Christ’s death was God’s act of *reconciling* us to himself, overcoming his own hostility that our sins provoked... The cross *propitiated* God (i.e., quenched his wrath against us by *expiating* our sins and so removing them from his sight.”<sup>127</sup>

<sup>123</sup> Packer, *Concise Theology*, 134.

<sup>124</sup> Leon Morris, “Atonement,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J.I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 54.

<sup>125</sup> John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 115.

<sup>126</sup> A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 402.

<sup>127</sup> Packer, *Concise Theology*, 135 (emphasis added).

## The Obedience of Christ

The umbrella term ‘obedience’ is used of Christ in two distinct senses. Theologians refer to these senses as Christ’s *active* and *passive* obedience. What is the difference? Christ’s active obedience means he obeyed all the positive requirements of God’s law. His passive obedience means that he suffered the full penalty for our violations of God’s law.

Why must we both distinguish and insist on both aspects of Christ’s obedience? John Murray explains:

The law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands. It demands not only the full discharge of its precepts but also the infliction of penalty for all infractions and shortcomings. It is this twofold demand of the law of God which is taken into account when we speak of the active and passive obedience of Christ. Christ as the vicar of his people came under the curse and condemnation due to sin and he also fulfilled the law of God in all its positive requirements. In other words, he took care of the guilt of sin and perfectly fulfilled the demands of righteousness. He perfectly met both the penal and the preceptive requirements of God’s law.<sup>128</sup>

The two aspects of Christ’s correspond exactly to our twofold need as covenant-breakers. “As the Second Adam he satisfied all the conditions of the broken covenant of works, as left by the first Adam... He suffered the penalty of transgression... He rendered the obedience which was the condition of ‘life.’”<sup>129</sup>

Before leaving consideration of the obedience of Christ, there is a final area on which we ought to touch. This area is the *progressive* obedience of Christ, alluded to in Luke 2.52: “And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.” It is alluded to again in Hebrews 5.8: “Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.”

What does it mean to say that Jesus *increased* in favor with God and *learned* obedience? Smith explains: “To say that the obedience was progressive is not to suggest that there was any disobedience at any point. His obedience at every stage of life was perfect, but as he grew the demands of God became more and more extensive, until finally he was confronted with the demand of death.”<sup>130</sup>

## The Nature, Extent, & Necessity of the Atonement

The view of the atonement taught by the Bible and our standards is that of *penal substitution*. The key phrases on this point are “the justice of his Father” (WCF 8.5) and “divine justice,” (WSC 25). As we have noted already with respect to his obedience, the Lord Jesus died to satisfy the justice of his Father – to bear the *penalty* incurred by breaking the law of God.

But for whom did Christ live and die? WCF 8.5 says he offered himself “for all those whom the Father has given unto Him.” Although his obedience is of *infinite worth*, it is of *limited application*. Jesus lived and died as a substitute only on behalf of the elect. Note how in John 17.2 he speaks of giving eternal life “to all whom you [God the Father] have given him,” and again in 17.9 how he explicitly states, “I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are yours.”

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<sup>128</sup> John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1955), 21-22.

<sup>129</sup> A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 401.

<sup>130</sup> Smith, *Systematic Theology*, I.378.

This view of a *limited atonement*, so far from making God unjust, actually guards and upholds the justice of God. The Bible is clear that Jesus' work was *substitutionary* (2 Cor 5.21). But if Jesus was the substitute for all men, how could God consign any to hell? In such a case the lost in hell would be repaying a debt that Christ has already satisfied! The only logical conclusion to draw that is consonant with the justice of God is that Jesus did *not* act as a substitute for all.

There are, of course, alternative (erroneous) theories of the atonement. The "moral influence theory" states "that the death of Christ was to exert a moral influence upon man. Christ, by his death, was setting a great example for me in being willing to give up his life for the truth. Or, Christ shows us real love by his death, and calls us to follow his example. No idea of expiation or satisfaction is involved in this theory."<sup>131</sup> Another alternative theory of the atonement is the "governmental theory." Smith explains:

This theory was set forth by Grotius during the Arminian controversies in the Netherlands. He asserted that the moral government of God must be maintained by God. God must demonstrate his right to punish the sinner. It is not the satisfaction of God's justice, but rather the exhibition of God's displeasure with sin. God's mercy and grace permit him to forgive sin and cancel the debt without any satisfaction, but lest he encourage man in his sin, he demonstrates his wrath against sin in the death of Christ.<sup>132</sup>

The trouble with both of these theories is not that they contain *no* element of truth. Jesus does call us to follow his example (Mk 8.34-37), and the cross does manifest God's wrath on sin (Rom 3.25-26). Yet by eliminating the key elements of penal satisfaction and personal substitution, both theories leave man's guilt intact. Moreover, if there is no satisfaction and substitution – if our sins were not personally imputed to Jesus at the cross – then why did he have to die? How is his death a just death? How is justice vindicated, if the public example bore no guilt? In such a scenario, the cross would be "not a show of righteousness and justice, but of the grossest injustice."<sup>133</sup>

The cross was not just an example, whether moral or judicial. It was a *consequent absolute necessity*. "God's decree to save was a free and sovereign decree. Once he had so decreed, then there was an inherent necessity that required the salvation be wrought by the satisfaction of God's justice through the shedding of blood, which could only be accomplished by one who was both God and man."<sup>134</sup> Our Lord's prayers in Gethsemane indicate this truth: there simply was no other way. Once God had determined to save, the cross was inevitable.

### **The Perfection of the Atonement**

When our confession says that Christ "has fully satisfied" God's justice, it speaks of the perfection of the atonement. Theologian John Murray describes this perfection under four headings. His explanation is worth our reflection.

First, the atonement is perfect in its *historical objectivity*. "In the atonement something was accomplished once for all, without any participation or contribution on our part... The atonement is objective to us, performed independently of us.... the atonement was made in human nature and at a particular season in the past and finished calendar of events... History with its fixed appointments and well-defined periods has significance in the drama of divine accomplishment."<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Smith, *Systematic Theology*, I.369.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 374.

<sup>135</sup> Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 52-53.

Second, the atonement is perfect in its *finality*. “The atonement is a completed work, never repeated and unrepeatable.”<sup>136</sup> Third, the atonement is perfect in its *uniqueness*. Here Murray quotes Hugh Martin: “It is one solitary, matchless, Divine *transaction* – never to be repeated, never to be equaled, never to be approached.”<sup>137</sup> Finally, the atonement is perfect in its *intrinsic efficacy*. “Christ discharged the debt of sin. He bore our sins and purged them. He did not make a token payment which God accepts in place of the whole. Our debts are not cancelled; they are liquidated.”<sup>138</sup>

### The Effects of the Atonement

The last thing we want to consider are the effects brought to bear upon the life of believers by the atonement. Here again, Murray’s discussion is helpful.<sup>139</sup>

How does redemption change our relationship to the law? Redemption does *not* free us from the obligation to love God and our neighbor. However, it *does* free us from the *curse* of the law, the *ceremonies* of the law, and the *conditions* of the law “*as the condition of our justification and acceptance with God.*”<sup>140</sup>

How does it change our relationship to sin? Redemption frees us from the *guilt* of sin, the *power* of sin, and the *fear* of death. Most believers would confess that all three of these are (much) easier said than done. Nevertheless, our confession affirms that “To all those for whom Christ hath purchased redemption, He doth certainly and effectually apply and communicate the same... overcoming all their enemies by his almighty power and wisdom, in such manner, and ways, as are most consonant to his wonderful and unsearchable dispensation,” (WCF 8.8).

### Important Questions

1. Which view of the atonement is most common among mainline churches in our age?
2. Many Christians affirm that the atonement was both substitutionary in nature and universal in extent. While we may and should appreciate their intentions, is their position consistent?
3. In his 2007 novel *The Shack*, William Young has ‘God’ say to the main character, “I don’t need to punish people for sin. Sin is its own punishment, devouring you from the inside,” (120).<sup>141</sup> Is any portion of this statement biblical? What portion is unbiblical?

### Additional Resources

Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*

### For Next Session

Smith, *Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, 47-49, which covers:

WCF	WLC	WSC
10	57-60, 67-68	29-32

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 53. See John 19.30 and Hebrews 10.5-14.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>139</sup> The paragraphs in this section summarize Murray’s discussion in *ibid.*, 43-50.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 45 (emphasis in the original)

<sup>141</sup> William P. Young, *The Shack* (Newbury Park, CA: Windblown Media, 2007), 120