

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Atonement: Real or Potential?

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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As we come this morning to the Lord's table, I want us to think about the meaning of the death of Christ. For years now we have been working our way through the accounts of the gospels, Luke and now Mark. And maybe this morning to divert ourselves from that a little bit and think perhaps more theologically about the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, we'll enrich us and enrich our experience at the Lord's table today.

I want to begin by inviting you to turn to Revelation chapter 5...Revelation chapter 5. We've engaged in worship this morning, the worship of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have sung of His love and our love to Him. We will do this forever, by the way. This is only a preview of what will be our experience every moment, every sleepless moment of eternity we will be praising Him.

The book of Revelation gives us a glimpse into the praise of heaven. In verse 9 of Revelation 5 we hear the very expression of praise that is lifted up. It is a new song, the heavenly song, the new song being the song of salvation. That's a phrase borrowed from the Psalms. And the words go like this. "Worthy are You," and this is sung to the Lamb that is slain mentioned in verse 6. "Worthy are You to take the book and break its seals for You were slain and purchased for God with Your blood, men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, You have made them to be a Kingdom and priests to our God and they will reign upon the earth."

And then it goes on in verse 12, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." Again in verse 13, "To Him who sits on the throne, namely God, and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever." And the elders in verse 14 who represent the church fell down and worshiped. Worshiping is the occupation of heaven. And the worship will be directed at God out of gratitude for His saving plan effected through the sacrifice of Christ.

You go back to verse 9 with me for a moment and keep in your mind this statement, "You were slain and purchased for God with Your blood, men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation." What this tells us is that the core and the heart of heavenly praise is gratitude for Christ's purchase of sinners for God. When we come to the communion table, the Lord's table, we are looking at the cross and we are looking at the great event, the great historical reality of Christ paying the price to purchase for God His people.

Now when we talk about the death of Jesus Christ then we are talking about an actual purchase. We're not talking about a potential purchase, we're not talking about a general sort of act on Jesus' part that may in the future become a purchase. We are talking about a real purchase. It is the act of Christ dying on the cross that pays the price to God, purchasing the people who will be redeemed from every tribe and tongue and nation. Now what I want you to put in your mind is that the death of Jesus Christ is an act by which He purchases His people. It is not a potential act, it is an actual act. It is not a general act, it is a particular act.

Now all of that is very, very important because if you ask the average person for whom did Christ die? I think if you asked the average Christian, for whom did Christ die? If you asked most pastors, for whom did Christ die? The answer would be, "For everybody, for everyone." That's the typical belief. You hear people say, "Christ died for the whole world," that means He died for every human being. And He wants you to receive that gift of His death personally on your own behalf. Jesus paid the debt on the cross for everyone's sins, He paid the debt in full, He loves everyone equally. He wants everyone to be saved. And He waits for the sinner to turn a potential atonement into an actual atonement, or to turn a general atonement into a particular atonement, and the sinner can do that by an act of the sinner's will. So much of evangelism is driven at the sinner's will, crafted, manipulated to bring the sinner to a certain place emotionally, psychologically that he will activate his own will and accept what Christ has done and therefore turn a potential and general atonement into an actual and particular atonement.

So that view is that Jesus' death on the cross was a death for everyone in general...listen...but a death for no one in particular. Okay? That's the view. That is the standard view. We would call it an Arminian view but it's the standard view, He died for everyone in general and no one in particular. In fact, you have the most popular Christian book in the last ten years, the author says, "I can lead anyone to Christ if I find the key to that person's heart." So it all depends on our technique and how good we are at identifying what moves people psychologically and emotionally.

Now let's think about that a little bit. We need to work on sinners to get them to receive the salvation already purchased for them. That's the idea. That's the popular idea. The fallout of that idea is pretty serious. That means that hell is full of people whose salvation was purchased, right? That if in fact Christ paid for the sins of everyone who has ever lived, their sins were paid for. He died for their sins. He was a substitute for their sins, therefore hell is full of people whose salvation was purchased, whose sins were paid for by Christ. The Lake of Fire then will be filled with eternally damned people who suffer forever for their sins, even though those sins were already paid for. Christ then atoned and bore the punishment for the sins of the people in hell in the same way He did for the sins of the people in heaven. So the only difference between the people in heaven and the people in hell is that the people in hell are suffering double jeopardy on a legal level, their sins already being paid for in full and yet they're there suffering for sins that have already been paid for, and they're there because

they didn't have the sense or somebody didn't make the right approach to activate them emotionally and mentally to turn the potential atonement of Jesus into an actual one. Therefore, the people in heaven can spend eternal life congratulating themselves, or congratulating whoever it was that moved them emotionally or psychologically to make the right call.

Does that sound like biblical theology? Did Jesus Christ do the exact same thing for all the people in hell that He did for all the people in heaven? And is the only difference that the people in heaven are in heaven because they of their own will activated a general atonement and turned it into a specific one, or a particular one? That is strange theology, that Jesus died for the sins of the redeemed and He died for the sins of the damned. That He paid the penalty for everyone in full and the sinner is in hell because of the sinner's failure to make the right call on his own condition.

The bottom line in that is you have just not only created chaos at every level of soteriology but particularly for our discussion, you have redefined the atonement. And if there's anything we want to understand when we come to the Lord's table, we better understand the atonement. We could talk about the foundational doctrine to understand with regard to salvation and that is total depravity, right? The sinner is unable and unwilling, that he's a block and a stone, he's a rock, he's dead, he's blind, he's in the darkness, he's alienated from the life of God, he doesn't desire God, he doesn't seek God, he doesn't want God. There's no way to get to the right decision to activate the atonement on his behalf if it depends on him.

So, we have a major problem if we think that the sinner has the wherewithal within himself to crawl up out of his own casket, spiritually speaking, to open his own blind eyes, to throw off the blindness that Satan has imposed upon him, to literally overturn the normal dominating lust of his own heart and somehow make the right move toward Christ. This is a failure to understand the essence of depravity. What it really means is, the sinner is both unable and here's the most important one, unwilling. He can't will it and he couldn't do it if he could will it.

You can't make the final atonement up to the sinner or you have Jesus dying for everybody in general and nobody in particular. And therefore you've redefined what it means that He purchased us. The notion that God loves everybody so much that He gave His Son for everybody but only in some kind of limited way, some kind of marginal way, some kind of half way is contrary to what the Bible teaches. And the idea that God has done in full for the people in hell, the very same thing He's done for the people in heaven, is just not possible...just not possible.

The Bible says that all people are dead in trespasses and sin, alienated from the life of God, doing only evil continually, unwilling and unable to understand, repent and believe. They have darkened minds, blinded by sin and Satan, hearts full of evil, wicked and desiring only the will of their father who is none other than Satan, unable to seek God. Now how do you get from there to finding in yourself the power to activate a sort of potential atonement that Jesus has offered? We have

therefore the power of salvation in the hands of the sinner.

That's just not consistent with Scripture. John 1 doesn't take long looking in the gospel of John to find this out, chapter 1 verse 12, "As many as received Him, as many as received Him" ..listen..."to them He gave the exousia, the power to become children of God even to those who believe in His name." Look, if anybody believes in His name, if anybody receives Him, it is because He gave them the power. They were born, verse 13 says, not of blood, that is not because of some inheritance humanly speaking, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man but of God. If anyone receives, if anyone believes, it is because it is the will of God by which God Himself has given the power to the sinner to become His child. Ephesians 2:8 and 9, "For by grace are you saved, through faith that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God." It is, 1 Corinthians 1:30, by God's power that you are Christ's, by His power so that if you glory, you glory in Him.

If you have life, it is from God. If you have light, it is from God. If you have sight, it is from God. If you have understanding, it is from God. If you have repentance, it is from God. If you have faith to embrace Christ, it is from God. It is the work of God. God alone can give life. God alone can regenerate. And it is the power of God alone that brings salvation to the sinner.

Now to whom does God do this? For whom does He do this? It is for those whose names are written in the Lamb's Book of Life from before the foundation of the world. By His eternal choice bound up in the glorious truth of sovereign election, God has determined to save certain people and it is for those certain people that Jesus paid an actual price, that Jesus rendered an actual atonement, that He was an actual propitiation or covering, or satisfaction for the wrath of God, that He provided a specific and particular redemption for His people...for His people. A potential atonement, the result of that would be...who would be saved? No one, really, if it was left to the sinner because the sinner is unable.

Just to seal this a little deeper perhaps in your mind. I want you to look at John chapter 10, John chapter 10, the importance of this particular passage cannot be overstated. John 10 verse 11, "I am the Good Shepherd, the Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." Verse 14, I am the Good Shepherd, I know My own and My own know Me. Even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father and I lay down My life for the sheep. I have other sheep which are not of this fold, not Jewish but Gentile, I must bring them also. I must bring them." Why? "Because they are My sheep." How did they become My sheep? They are a love gift from a sovereign Father to Me. "All that the Father gives to Me shall come to Me," John 6. "And they will hear My voice and they will become one flock with one shepherd."

I mean, this is just a monumental statement. "I know My sheep. My sheep will know Me. My sheep have been called and identified by My Father. I receive them, they are My own, it is for them that I lay down My life."

Later in this same chapter, over in verse 25, Jesus answered His enemies and critics by saying, “I told you and you do not believe the works that I do in My Father’s name. These testify of Me, but you do not believe because you are not of My sheep.” Wow! “My sheep hear My voice and I know them and they follow Me and I give eternal life to them and they will never perish and no one will snatch them out of My hand.” That cannot be more specific, can it? Therein you have the words of the Lord Jesus Christ testifying to a specific atonement, a particular redemption an actual substitutionary sacrifice for His sheep. He knows them. The Father has identified them. They belong to Him by virtue of the Father. They are drawn to Him. They come to Him. It is for them He died.

Now maybe this is some new thinking for you as you’ve heard, “For whom did Christ die?” and maybe thought you could just give the standard answer, “He died for the whole world.” It has to be this, that He died for those who would believe because they would repent and embrace Him since the Father would give them life because the Father had chosen them. Those who believe are those whom God calls. Those who believe are those whom God calls and grants repentance and faith. Those who believe are those whom God calls and grants repentance and faith because they are those whom God chose before the foundation of the world.

So someone would say, and I’ve been accused of this, and I accept it, “You believe in a limited atonement.” That’s like a swear word to some people, limited atonement, or swear phrase. I do believe in a limited atonement and I am passionate about a limited atonement. But then so do you. And when anybody says, “I don’t believe in a limited atonement,” I say this to them, “Then you believe that everyone who has ever lived will be in heaven, right?” Well no. Okay, so you do believe in a limited atonement. Right? The only question for you is, who limits it? Who limits it?

Now if you want to believe that Jesus died and paid the penalty for all the sins of all the people who ever lived, then I’ll promise you this, all the people who ever lived would have to show up in heaven to confirm your belief because if Christ indeed pay the sacrifice in full for their sins, they will be in heaven unless Christ paying for your sins is something that is in itself impotent. You don’t really want to land with an unlimited atonement or you’re going to end up as a universalist and you’re going to deny the reality of hell. But that’s a little hard to deny, isn’t it? Since Jesus talked more about hell than He did about heaven, and talked about a Lake of Fire and weeping and wailing and grinding of teeth and outer darkness, people gnashing in pain and suffering. In so many places in the Bible it talks about everlasting destruction. Read 2 Thessalonians chapter 1 verse 7, it talks about the Lord Jesus being revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire dealing out retribution on those who don’t know God and those who don’t obey the gospel and they will pay the penalty of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His power. That’s a devastating statement.

And it was our Lord Jesus who said in John 8:24, "You're going to die in your sins because you believe not in Me, you're going to die in your sins." And again in the gospel of John, "You're going to die in your sins and where I go you'll never come." Where are you going to go? You're going to go into that horrible place called hell. "If you believe not," John 3 says, "you're going to be judged." "But if you believe, you will not be judged." Why? "Because your sins have already been judged." So if you believe, that's evidence that your sins have been paid for by Christ. Your sins have been judged. If you do not believe, then you will be judged for your sins.

Look, the atonement is limited. It is limited in its efficacy. It is limited in its efficiency. It is limited in its application. It is limited obviously. The only question is, who limits it? And the only right answer is that God limits it and that He limited it in this sense, that it was an actual payment in full of all the sins of all the people who would ever believe. And the people who would ever believe would believe because of His mighty work on their hearts based upon His sovereign eternal purpose.

Sinners have to believe, but they can't. They have to repent, but they can't on their own until they are enabled by God. When people ask me about my favorite Bible verse, a couple of them come to mind but very often this one, 2 Corinthians 5:21, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." He became sin for us, Paul says, for us. He's writing to the church.

Now with that thought in mind, from 2 Corinthians, that same passage, back up in that same chapter to verses 14 and 15 and this will help. Paul writes, "The love of Christ controls us, having concluded this," and here comes the point I want you to see, "that one died for all." Now stop there. "There it is," you say. "There it is, He died for all." Okay, that's what it says, I admit. But who is the all? The New Testament also says that all thought that John the Baptist was a prophet, does that mean everybody on the planet? No. Anytime "all" is used, there is a point of reference. All of a certain people that fit into a certain category then is defined for us. "One died for all, therefore all died." Hum....so He died for all who died. And then verse 15, and again, "He died for all." Who? "So that they...this is the all...who live might no longer live for themselves but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf." Oh...so He died for all and who are the all that He died for? All who died in Him. And He died for all, and who are the all that He died for? All who live in Him and it was for them that He died and rose again on their behalf. There is the specificity of the atonement. There is the actuality of the atonement. There is the particularity of the redemption of Christ. He died for all, the all being for all who died in Him. He died for all, all being those who live in Him, remember Romans 6 that we are buried in His death and we rise in His resurrection? For all who died for Him, He died. For all who rise in Him, He died. It is for them He died and rose again.

I want you to understand, folks, there is reason that every moment of a sleepless eternity you are going to be praising God for your salvation because it is all a work of God, from beginning to end. And the work that Jesus did on the cross was not a potential atonement that you activate, it was not a

general atonement that you particularized by an act of your will, it was a specific atonement. We all understand that it was limited, the only question is was it limited by the sinner which not only gives the sinner way more power than the sinner has, but diminishes the essence of the atonement and turns it in to some partial thing that has to be completed by human faith. Or is it better to say, "God limited it with consistency with His own elective sovereign purpose so that it was limited to be applied only to those who throughout history would believe because they were given life by God Himself and for them He provided an actual atonement. I do not believe that Jesus Christ on the cross did the same thing for the people in hell that He did for the people in heaven. He died on our behalf.

Dear friend, you understand what it conveys to your mind and your heart to think about that? Those who say the atonement is unlimited don't mean it. They really mean it's limited to those who believe but then that's not unlimited. Of course it's limited. But those who believe in an atonement that is unlimited really believe in an atonement that's limited, but they also not only get their terms limited and unlimited confused, they get the word atonement confused. In a sense, they would turn the sacrifice of Christ on the cross into something like an Old Testament animal sacrifice. Did an Old Testament animal sacrifice save anybody? No...no. The Old Testament animal sacrifice didn't save anybody.

Was anybody in the Old Testament saved? Yes, they believed, repentant in faith. There had to be a heart issue that gave personal meaning to that sacrifice. So is that the same with Jesus? Did He die like an animal? And in His death was there no particular atonement? But if people get their hearts right, then somehow it can be applied to them?

That is such a convoluted view of the atonement that it begs discussion. Christ did not pay for the sins of all the people who have ever lived in some impotent way, only to be given power by the sinner, but father He gave an actual atonement, a total atonement, a complete atonement bearing in His own body our sins, Peter says, in full for all who would believe and all who would believe believed because of the power of God, not by the will of man but by the power of God.

Hell is not full of millions of people whose sins were paid for in full, they just weren't clever enough, wise enough, emotionally moved enough, psychologically stimulated enough to actualize that atonement. Hell is the place where unbelievers go and an atonement was not provided for them. That doesn't lessen their culpability. In the mysteries of God's mind, beyond our ability to understand, the sinner is still fully responsible for his rejection.

So, you can't limit the atonement's power. You can't limit the atonement's effectiveness. You can't make it potential rather than actual. It is a real true, full and complete provision for sin for all who will believe and all who will believe will believe by the power of God.

Look at Isaiah 53, just a good place to see this laid out so magnificently in the Old Testament. Isaiah 53:4, this is talking about the language of real actual substitution. "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, our sorrows He carried, yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted, but He was pierced through not for His own transgressions but for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The chastening for our well being fell upon Him and by His scourging we are healed."

It is an effective atonement that Messiah will accomplish. It is an effective atonement. At the end of verse 6, "The Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him." Verse 11, end of the verse, "My servant will justify the many as He will bear their iniquities." For many... At the end of verse 12, "He bore the sins of many and interceded for the transgressors."

It is a real atonement, a real sin bearing. He is a genuine substitute sacrifice, feels the full fury of the wrath of God. The angel said to Joseph, Matthew 1:21, "Call Him Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

Now somebody is going to say, "What about...what about all the references in Scripture to the world? God so loved the world, gave His only begotten Son." And there are many. John 1:29, John the Baptist says, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." What about that?

Well, first of all, you don't believe that He takes away the sins of the entire human race through all time, right? That's universalism and we know that can't happen because there is a hell and there is judgment and the majority of people go there and the minority go to heaven. So world has to mean something other than every human being that's ever lived. And the simple answer is, it means humanity. He is the Savior of the world in the sense that the world only has one Savior, right? Whoever in the world who will be saved will be saved by the one Savior who is the Savior of the world. The world meaning beyond the narrow borders of Jewish life, even the Gentiles, humanity in general. He is the only Savior the world will ever know.

You say, "But wait a minute, there's another verse." First John 2 says, "He's the propitiation for our sins and not for ours only but the sins of the whole world." Well if He's propitiation for our sins, and also the whole world, then in what sense is that true? That's not...that's not difficult to interpret because you have an almost identical grammatical construction in the eleventh chapter of John out of the most unlikely mouth of the high priest, John 11. Caiaphas is speaking and he says, "You know nothing at all," verse 50, John 11, "do you take into account that it's expedient for you that one man die for the people and the whole nation not perish?" He was really talking politically there. Verse 51, "Nor did He...Now He did not say this on His own initiative, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus was going to die for the nation...listen to this...and not for the nation only, but in order that He might also gather together into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." That's the same basic construction. He died not only for the nation Israel, but for those nations

scattered abroad. And that's exactly the same construction that John picks up, He died for our sins as Jews and not for ours only but for the nation, the ethna, the Gentiles, the world. So we can sort of let Caiaphas be our interpreter and let John be our interpreter of Caiaphas.

Well somebody is going to inevitably say to me, "What about 2 Peter 2:1? False prophets that arose among the people?" What people? The church, the redeemed. "False teachers will come among you." They're in the church. "Who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves."

Okay, can we conclude one thing? Whatever it means, the Master who bought them, it doesn't mean they were saved or they wouldn't be destroyed, right? They weren't real believers or they wouldn't have been destroyed. So some people say, "See, here you have then people for whom Christ has paid the purchase price who are obviously not believers, they're going to be destroyed. Doesn't this contradict the argument?" The Master who bought them? What could that possibly mean, in what sense did He buy them?

Let me show you the best answer to that. Deuteronomy 32, does that seem like a long trip to interpret that verse? Listen to this. Here is a parallel illustration and it may well have been in Peter's mind because it is such a familiar, familiar passage, the song of Moses. Deuteronomy 32, this is an indictment. Moses poetically refers to God redeeming Israel as a people collectively but affirms the apostasy of many Israelites. Verse 5, "They have acted corruptly toward Him. They are not His children because of their defect. They're a perverse crooked generation. Do you thus repay the Lord, O foolish and unwise people, is not He your Father who has bought you?"

Do you understand that? What do you mean He bought you? He redeemed you out of Egypt, right? He redeemed you out of Egypt. He brought you to the promised land. He's brought you all the way here and many of you, most of you are corrupt and apostate, but you are in the congregation of those who were redeemed from Egypt, the same is going on in Second Peter. You're in the church, you're a part of the redeemed community. You're a part of the church and almost in a sarcastic way, you deny the very Master who redeemed you, only in that superficial sense. You know that Paul said, "Not Israel is Israel," and certainly not all the church is the church.

Well, I know that's a lot to digest. But when you come to the celebration of the Lord's table, I want you to understand that what you're celebrating is a mighty work of God that started in eternity past on your behalf. And you need now and forever you will praise the Lord for this astounding sovereign gift of grace. Let's bow in prayer.

Father, we come to You now with grateful hearts beyond words to express. We have been caught away, again, in the raptures of the realities of salvation. We thank You that because we were chosen, because an actual price was paid, we are therefore secured forever for we could never perish

because you have taken the full judgment in our place. We thank You, Lord Jesus Christ, that You suffered on the cross in just a few hours of darkness, an eternity of punishment on millions of souls. You took the full weight of divine wrath for those who would believe. We thank You, Lord, for this real gift, this true atoning work. We will praise You forever that You were slain in order to purchase us., pay the price for the ones that the Father had determined in eternity past to give to You. We want to be Your people in every sense, true and faithful, to that grace and that love, amen.

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