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## **THE LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF CHRIST**

In Christ's life of perfect obedience to God's will, His suffering, death, and resurrection, God provided the only means of atonement for human sin, so that those who by faith accept this atonement may have eternal life, and the whole creation may better understand the infinite and holy love of the Creator. This perfect atonement vindicates the righteousness of God's law and the graciousness of His character; for it both condemns our sin and provides for our forgiveness. The death of Christ is substitutionary and expiatory, reconciling and transforming. The resurrection of Christ proclaims God's triumph over the forces of evil, and for those who accept the atonement assures their final victory over sin and death. It declares the Lordship of Jesus Christ, before whom every knee in heaven and on earth will bow.

## **THE LIFE, DEATH, AND RESURRECTION OF CHRIST**

An open door leads into the center of the universe, heaven. A voice calls "Come in and see what goes on here!" In the Spirit, the apostle John looks into the throne room of God.

A dazzling emerald rainbow encircles the central throne, and lightning, thunder, and voices issue from it. Dignitaries—arrayed in white garments and wearing golden crowns—are seated on lesser thrones. As a doxology fills the air, the elders prostrate themselves in adoration, casting their golden crowns before the throne.

An angel, bearing a scroll sealed with seven seals, cries: "Who is worthy to open the scroll and to loose its seals?" (Rev. 5:2). With dismay John sees that no one in heaven or earth is worthy to open the scroll. His dismay turns to weeping until one of the elders consoles: "Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals" (Rev. 5:5).

Looking again to the majestic throne, John sees a Lamb that had been slain but now is alive and empowered with the Spirit. As this lowly Lamb takes the scroll the living creatures and elders strike up a new anthem: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to break open its seals. For you were killed, and by your sacrificial death you bought for God people from every tribe, language, nation, and race. You have made them a kingdom of priests to serve our God, and they shall rule on the earth" (Rev. 5:9,10, TEV). Every created being in heaven and on earth joins their song:

"Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever!" (Rev. 5:13).

What is so important about this scroll? It records the rescue of the human race from its enslavement to Satan and portrays the ultimate victory of God over sin. It reveals a salvation so perfect that those captive to sin can be released from their prison house of

doom simply through their choice. Long before His birth in Bethlehem the Lamb cried out: "Behold, I come; in the scroll of the Book it is written of me. I delight to do Your will, O my God, and Your law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:7,8; cf. Heb. 10:7). It was the coming of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world that effected the redemption of humanity (Rev. 13:8).

### God's Saving Grace

The Scriptures reveal a God who has an overwhelming concern for the salvation of humanity. The members of the Godhead are allied in the work of bringing people back into a union with their Creator. Jesus highlighted God's saving love, saying, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). The Scriptures declare that "God is love" (1 John 4:8). He reaches out to humanity "with an everlasting love" (Jer. 31:3). The God who extends the invitation to salvation is all-powerful, but His love necessitates His permitting each person to have freedom of choice in responding (Rev. 3:20,21). Coercion, a method contrary to His character, can have no part in His strategy.

### The Divine Initiative

When Adam and Eve sinned, God took the initiative in searching for them. The guilty pair, hearing the sound of their Creator, did not run joyfully to meet Him as they had done before. Instead, they hid. But God did not abandon them. Ever so persistently He called, "Where are you?"

With deep sorrow, God outlined the consequences of their disobedience—the pain, the difficulties that they would encounter. Yet in their absolutely hopeless situation He revealed a wonderful plan promising ultimate victory over sin and death (Gen. 3:15).

### Grace or Justice?

Later, following Israel's apostasy at Sinai, the Lord revealed His benevolent-but-just character to Moses, proclaiming, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children to the third and the fourth generation" (Ex. 34:6,7).

God's character reveals a unique blending of grace and justice, of a willingness to forgive and an unwillingness to clear the guilty. Only in the person of Christ can we understand how these qualities of character can be reconciled to each other.

### To Forgive or to Punish?

During the times of Israel's apostasy, God often pleaded longingly for His people to acknowledge their iniquity and return to Him (Jer. 3:12-14). But they spurned His gracious invitations (Jer. 5:3). An unrepentant attitude that mocks forgiveness makes punishment inevitable (Ps. 7:12).

Though God is merciful, He cannot forgive those who cling to sin (Jer. 5:7). Pardon has a purpose. God wants to change sinners into saints: "Let the wicked forsake his way,

and the unrighteous man his thoughts; Let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy on him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon" (Isa. 55:7). His message of salvation clearly sounds throughout the world: "Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (Isa. 45:22).

### **God's Wrath Against Sin**

The original transgression created in the human mind a disposition of enmity against God (Col. 1:21). Consequently we deserve the displeasure of God, who is "a consuming fire" against sin (Heb. 12:29; cf. Hab. 1:13). The solemn truth is that "all have sinned" (Rom. 3:23), all are "by nature children of wrath" (Eph. 2:3; cf. 5:6) and subject to death "for the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

Divine wrath is what Scripture calls God's reaction to sin and unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18). Deliberate rejection of God's revealed will—His law—provokes His righteous anger or wrath (2 Kings 17:16-18; 2 Chron. 36:16). G.E. Ladd wrote, "Men are ethically sinful; and when God counts their trespasses against them, he must view them as sinners, as enemies, as the objects of the divine wrath; for it is an ethical and religious necessity that the holiness of God manifests itself in wrath against sin." Yet at the same time, God yearns to save the rebellious world. While He hates every sin, He has a loving concern for every sinner.

### **The Human Response**

God's dealings with Israel culminated in the ministry of Jesus Christ, who gave the clearest insight into "the exceeding riches" of divine grace (Eph. 2:7). Said John, "We beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). "Christ Jesus," Paul wrote, has become "for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—that, as it is written, 'He who glories, let him glory in the Lord'" (1 Cor. 1:30,31). Who therefore can despise "the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering?" No wonder Paul points out that it is "the goodness of God" that leads to repentance (Rom. 2:4).

Even the human response to God's offer of salvation does not originate with human beings, but with God. Our faith is but a gift of God (Rom. 12:3); as is our repentance (Acts 5:31). Our love arises in response to God's love (1 John 4:19). We cannot save ourselves from Satan, sin, suffering, and death. Our own righteousness is like filthy rags (Isa. 64:6). "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ....For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph. 2:4,5,8,9).

### **Christ's Ministry of Reconciliation**

The good news is that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). His reconciliation restores the relationship between God and the human race. The text points out that this process reconciles sinners to God, not God to sinners. The key in leading sinners back to God is Jesus Christ. God's plan of reconciliation is a marvel of divine condescension. He had every right to let humanity perish.

As we have already noted, it was God who took the initiative in restoring the broken relationship between humanity and Himself. "When we were enemies," Paul said, "we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Rom. 5:10). Consequently "we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation" (Rom. 5:11).

The process of reconciliation has been associated with the term atonement. "The English word 'atonement' originally meant 'at-one-ment,' that is, a state of being 'at one,' or in agreement. Accordingly 'atonement' denoted harmony of a relationship, and when there had been estrangement this harmony would be the result of a process of reconciliation. Understood in terms of its original meaning, 'atonement' properly denotes a state of reconciliation that terminated a state of estrangement."

Many Christians limit the term atonement exclusively to the redeeming effects of Christ's incarnation, suffering, and death. In the sanctuary services, however, atonement not only involved the killing of the sacrificial lamb but also included the priestly ministering of its shed blood in the sanctuary itself (cf. Lev. 4:20,26,35; 16:15-18,32,33). According to this Biblical usage, then, atonement can refer to both Christ's death and His intercessory ministry in the heavenly sanctuary. There, as High Priest, He applies the benefits of His complete and perfect atoning sacrifice to achieve the reconciliation of humans to God.

Vincent Taylor also observed that the doctrine of atonement has two aspects "**(a)** the saving deed of Christ, and **(b)** the appropriation of His work by faith, both individual and communal. These two together constitute the Atonement." From this insight he concluded that "atonement is both accomplished for us and wrought in us."

This chapter focuses on the atonement as it relates to the death of Christ. The atonement associated with His High Priestly ministry will be discussed later.

### **Christ's Atoning Sacrifice**

Christ's atoning sacrifice at Calvary marked the turning point in the relationship between God and humanity. Though there is a record of people's sins, as a result of the reconciliation God does not count their sins against them (2 Cor. 5:19). This does not mean that God dismisses punishment, or that sin no longer arouses His wrath. Rather, it means that God has found a way to grant pardon to repentant sinners while still upholding the justice of His eternal law.

### **Christ's Death a Necessity**

For a loving God to maintain His justice and righteousness, the atoning death of Jesus Christ became "a moral and legal necessity." God's "justice requires that sin be carried to judgment. God must therefore execute judgment on sin and thus on the sinner. In this execution the Son of God took our place, the sinner's place, according to God's will. The atonement was necessary because man stood under the righteous wrath of God. Herein lies the heart of the gospel of forgiveness of sin and the mystery of the cross of Christ: Christ's perfect righteousness adequately satisfied divine justice, and God is willing to accept Christ's self-sacrifice in place of man's death."

Persons unwilling to accept the atoning blood of Christ receive no forgiveness of sin, and are still subject to God's wrath. Said John, "He who believes in 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" (John 3:36).

Therefore, the cross is a demonstration of both God's mercy and His justice. "God presented him [Christ] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies the man who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:25,26, NIV).

### **What Does the Atoning Sacrifice Accomplish?**

It was the Father Himself who presented His Son as "a sacrifice of atonement" (Rom. 3:25, NIV; Greek, hilasterion), "a propitiation" (KJV, NKJV), "an expiation" (RSV). The New Testament use of hilasterion has nothing to do with the pagan notion of "placating an angry God" or "appeasing a vindictive, arbitrary, and capricious God." The text reveals that "God in His merciful will presented Christ as the propitiation to His holy wrath on human guilt because He accepted Christ as man's representative and the divine Substitute to receive His judgment on sin."

From this perspective one can understand Paul's description of Christ's death as "an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling aroma" (Eph. 5:2; cf. Gen. 8:21; Ex. 29:18; Lev. 1:9). "Christ's self-sacrifice is pleasing to God because this sacrifice offering took away the barrier between God and sinful man in that Christ fully bore God's wrath on man's sin. Through Christ, God's wrath is not turned into love but is turned away from man and borne by Himself."

Romans 3:25 also reveals that through Christ's sacrifice sin is expiated or purged. Expiation focuses on what the atoning blood does to the repentant sinner. He experiences forgiveness, removal of personal guilt, and cleansing from sin.

### **Christ the Vicarious Sin-bearer**

The Scriptures present Christ as the "sin-bearer" of the human race. In profound prophetic language Isaiah stated that "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities;...and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all....It pleased the Lord to bruise Him; He has put Him to grief,...[He was] an offering for sin,...and He bore the sin of many" (Isa. 53:5,6,10,12; cf. Gal. 1:4). Paul had this prophecy in mind when he said, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:3).

These texts point to an important concept in the plan of salvation: The sins and guilt that have defiled us can be transferred to our Sin-bearer, making us clean (Ps. 51:10). The sacrificial ceremonies of the Old Testament sanctuary revealed this role of Christ. There, the transfer of sin from the repentant sinner to the innocent lamb symbolized its transfer to Christ, the Sin-bearer.

### **What is the Role of the Blood?**

The blood played a central role in the atoning sacrifices of the sanctuary service. God made provision for the atonement when He said, "The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you...to make atonement for your souls," (Lev. 17:11). After the killing of the animal the priest had to apply its blood before forgiveness was granted.

The New Testament reveals that the Old Testament ceremonies for obtaining forgiveness, purification, and reconciliation through substitutionary blood were fulfilled in the atoning blood of Christ's Calvary sacrifice. In contrast to the old ways, the New Testament says, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the Living God!" (Heb. 9:14, NIV). The shedding of His blood accomplished the expiation for sin (Rom. 3:25 RSV). John said that because of His love, God "sent His Son to be the propitiation [hilasmos] for our sins" (1 John 4:10; "expiation" RSV; "an atoning sacrifice" NIV).

In summary, "God's objective act of reconciliation has been accomplished through the propitiating and expiating blood (self-sacrifice) of Christ Jesus, His Son. Thus God 'is both the provider and the recipient of the reconciliation.'"

### **Christ the Ransom**

When human beings came under the dominion of sin they became subject to the condemnation and curse of God's law (Rom. 6:4; Gal. 3:10-13). Slaves of sin (Rom. 6:17), subject to death, they were unable to escape. "No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him (Ps. 49:7, NIV). Only God is invested with power to redeem. "I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death" (Hosea 13:14). How did God redeem them?

Through Jesus, who testified that He "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28, see 1 Tim. 2:6), God "purchased" the church with "His own blood" (Acts 20:28). In Christ "we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Eph. 1:7; cf. Rom. 3:24). His death was to "redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works" (Titus 2:14).

### **What Did The Ransom Accomplish?**

Christ's death ratified God's ownership of humanity. Said Paul, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price" (1 Cor. 6:19,20, NIV; see also 1 Cor. 7:23).

Through His death, Christ broke the dominion of sin, terminated the spiritual captivity, removed the condemnation and curse of the law, and made eternal life available to all repentant sinners. Peter said believers were redeemed from "aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers" (1 Peter 1:18). Paul wrote that those delivered from the slavery of sin and its deadly fruit are now in the service of God with its "fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life" (Rom. 6:22).

To ignore or deny the ransom principle would be "to lose the very heart of the gospel of grace and to deny the deepest motive of our gratitude to the Lamb of God." This principle is central to the doxologies sung in the heavenly throne room: "You were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation. You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God, and they will reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:9,10, NIV).

## **Christ the Representative of Humanity**

Both Adam and Christ—"the last Adam," or "the second Man" (1 Cor. 15:45,47)--represent all humanity. While the natural birth saddles each person with the results of Adam's transgression, everyone who experiences the spiritual birth receives the benefits of Christ's perfect life and sacrifice. "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22).

Adam's rebellion brought sin, condemnation, and death to all. Christ reversed the downward trend. In His great love, He subjected Himself to the divine judgment on sin and became humanity's representative. His substitutionary death provided the deliverance from the penalty of sin and the gift of eternal life for repentant sinners (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 6:23; 1 Peter 3:18).

Scripture clearly teaches the universal nature of Christ's substitutionary death. By "the grace of God," He experienced death for everyone (Heb. 2:9). Like Adam, all have sinned (Rom. 5:12), therefore, everyone experiences death—the first death. The death that Christ tasted for everyone was the second death—the full curse of death (Rev. 20:6).

## **Christ's Life and Salvation**

"For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Rom. 5:10). It took Christ's life, as well as His death, to bridge the chasm gouged by sin. Both are necessary and contribute to our salvation.

## **What Can Christ's Perfect Life Do for Us?**

Jesus lived a pure, holy, and loving life, relying completely on God. This precious life He shares with repentant sinners as a gift. His perfect character is portrayed as a wedding garment (Matt. 22:11) or a robe of righteousness (Isa. 61:10) that He gives to replace the filthy rags of human attempts to achieve righteousness (Isa. 64:6).

In spite of our human corruption, when we submit ourselves to Christ, our heart is united with His heart, our will is merged in His will, our mind becomes one with His mind, our thoughts are brought into captivity to Him; we live His life. We are covered with His garment of righteousness. When God looks at the believing, penitent sinner He sees, not the nakedness or deformity of sin, but the robe of righteousness formed by Christ's perfect obedience to the law. None can be truly righteous unless covered by this robe.

In the parable of the wedding garment the guest who arrived in his own clothes was not cast out because of unbelief. He had accepted the invitation to the banquet (Matt. 22:10). But his coming was not enough. He needed the wedding garment. Similarly, belief in the cross is not enough. To be presentable before the King, we also need Christ's perfect life, His righteous character.

As sinners we not only need the debt to be canceled, we need our bank account restored. We need more than release from prison, we need to be adopted into the family of the King. The mediatorial ministry of the resurrected Christ has the twofold objective of forgiving and clothing—the application of His death and life to our life and our standing

before God. Calvary's "It is finished" marked the completion of a perfect life and a perfect sacrifice. Sinners need both.

### **The Inspiration of Christ's Life**

Christ's life on earth also gave humanity a model of how to live. Peter, for instance, recommends as an example to us the way He responded to personal abuse (1 Peter 2:21-23). He who was made like us, and was tempted in all points as we are, demonstrated that those who depend on God's power have no need to continue in sin. Christ's life provides the assurance that we can live victoriously. Paul testified, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" (Phil. 4:13).

### **Christ's Resurrection and Salvation**

"If Christ is not risen," Paul said, "then our preaching is in vain and your faith is also vain" and "you are still in your sins!" (1 Cor. 15:14,17). Jesus Christ was physically resurrected (Luke 24:36-43), ascended as the God-man to heaven, and began His crucial intercessory work as Mediator at the right hand of God the Father (Heb. 8:1,2).

Christ's resurrection gave a meaning to the cross that the shattered disciples could not see on crucifixion Friday. His resurrection transformed these men into a mighty force that changed history. The resurrection—never detached from the crucifixion—became central to their mission. They proclaimed the living, crucified Christ, who had triumphed over the forces of evil. Herein lay the power of the apostolic message.

"The resurrection of Christ," Philip Schaff wrote, "is emphatically a test question upon which depends the truth or falsehood of the Christian religion. It is either the greatest miracle or the greatest delusion which history records." Wilbur M. Smith commented, "The resurrection of Christ is the very citadel of the Christian faith. This is the doctrine that turned the world upside down in the first century, that lifted Christianity preeminently above Judaism, and the pagan religions of the Mediterranean world. If this goes, so must almost everything else that is vital and unique in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ: 'If Christ be not risen, then is your faith vain' (1 Cor. 15:17)."

Christ's current ministry is rooted in His death and resurrection. While the atoning sacrifice at Calvary was sufficient and complete, without the resurrection we would have no assurance that Christ had successfully finished His divine mission on earth. That Christ has risen confirms the reality of life beyond the grave and demonstrates the truthfulness of God's promise of eternal life in Him.

### **The Results of Christ's Saving Ministry**

Christ's atoning ministry affects not only the human race but the entire universe.

### **Reconciliation Throughout the Universe**

Paul reveals the magnitude of Christ's salvation in and through the church: "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms" (Eph. 3:10, NIV). He further asserts that it pleased God through Christ "to reconcile all things to Himself...whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross" (Col.

1:20). Paul revealed the astounding results of this reconciliation: "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil. 2:10,11).

### **The Vindication of God's Law**

Christ's perfect atoning sacrifice upheld the justice and goodness or righteousness of God's holy law as well as His gracious character. Christ's death and ransom satisfied the demands of the law (that sin needed to be punished), while justifying repentant sinners through His grace and mercy. Paul said, "He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3,4).

### **Justification**

Reconciliation becomes effective only when forgiveness is accepted. The prodigal son was reconciled with his father when he accepted his father's love and forgiveness.

"Those who accept by faith that God has reconciled the world to Himself in Christ and who submit to Him will receive from God the invaluable gift of justification with its immediate fruit of peace with God. (Romans 5:1). No longer the object of God's wrath, justified believers have become the objects of God's favor. With full access to the throne of God through Christ, they receive the power of the Holy Spirit to break down all the barriers or dividing walls of hostility between men, symbolized by the hostility which exists between Jew and Gentile. (See Ephesians 2:14-16.)"

### **The Futility of Salvation by Works**

God's ministry of reconciliation reveals the futility of human endeavors to obtain salvation through works of the law. Insight into divine grace leads to the acceptance of the justifying righteousness available through faith in Christ. The gratitude of those who have experienced forgiveness makes obedience a joy; works, then, are not the ground of salvation, but its fruitage.

### **A New Relationship With God**

Experiencing God's grace, which offers Christ's perfect life of obedience, His righteousness, and His atoning death as a free gift, leads to a deeper relationship with God. Gratitude, praise, and joy arise, obedience becomes a delight, the study of His Word a joy, and the mind a ready dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. A new relationship between God and the repentant sinner takes place. It is a fellowship based on love and admiration, rather than one of fear and obligation (cf. John 15:1-10).

The more we understand God's grace in the light of the cross, the less self-righteousness we will feel and the more we will realize how blessed we are. The power of the same Holy Spirit that was operative in Christ when He rose from the dead will transform our lives. Instead of failure, we will experience daily victory over sin.

## **The Motivation for Mission**

The amazing love revealed in God's ministry of reconciliation through Jesus Christ motivates our sharing the gospel with others. When we have experienced it ourselves, we cannot keep secret the fact that God will not count sin against those who accept Christ's sacrifice for sins. We will pass on to others the moving gospel invitation "Be reconciled to God. 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. 5:20,21).