

THE DEBT CHRIST PAID

By

Curtis Dickinson

The heart of Christian faith and worship is the death of Christ, called “atonement” in both Old and New Testaments. While His death in all its shameful details are well known, the meaning of it remains a mystery to most.

Few theologians seem to recognize that the debt Christ paid on the cross must be harmonized with the fate of the unredeemed at Judgment Day. “He was wounded for our transgressions; He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him; and by His stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:4–5).

This being the case, it should be an easy matter to decide what the penalty for sin is. If we know what the Lord endured as punishment for our sins, then we know what the ultimate fate of the unredeemed will be.

But the grip of traditional belief is strong and many prefer to treat the subject of the final destiny of the unredeemed as a matter of indifference rather than face the wrath of their peers for leaving traditional dogma. The range of the tradition is wide, from Dante’s *Inferno* where the lost are continuously boiled and burned, yet never consumed, to the C. S. Lewis imagery of an ongoing spiritual existence of misery ever drifting farther from God, but never having it end. Proponents of these theories allow the Biblical terms such as perish, death, destroy, burned up and consumed, so long as they are divested of any certain meaning and applied “spiritually” according to every man’s preference.

Often someone will say that it matters not what the final punishment of sinners may be, for it will be bad enough, and our concern is for their salvation. This attitude has contributed to a silence regarding the warning of God’s wrath.

But even worse, it has encouraged a careless treatment of the cross and accounts for the fact that the cross of Christ has lost its centrality in modern churches. If we must be indifferent to the final wages of sin, then we must also be indifferent to what Jesus sustained in meeting the penalty. To be ignorant of the penalty for sin is also to be ignorant of the meaning of the death of Christ. While it is still a big subject at Easter time, its meaning remains a deep mystery to multitudes who profess faith in it.

What did the Lord do to effect the cancellation of our sins? What did He give when He paid the ransom — price? What did He pay when He bought us with His own precious blood? What was the judgment He endured? Certainly it was not perpetual torture or eternal life in a state of misery!

The Old Covenant sacrifices were “types” and “shadows” of the ultimate and final sacrifice in which the guilt and sin of the offender was transferred to the animal by the laying on of hands, then the animal was put to death. As Hoeksema says, “All this proves very plainly that the sacrifices of the old Testament were designed as typical of the one sacrifice of Christ as a substitution for the sins of the people of God” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, Reformed Free Pub. Assoc). The animal was not tortured, but slain, as a type of the death of Jesus. It was subjected to fire only after it was dead. Its remains were burned, not as a token of torture, but as a means of total consummation; not for

preservation but for elimination. This corresponds to the cleansing of the threshing floor which John said would take place at judgment when the Lord will “cleanse His threshing floors; and he will gather his wheat into the garner, but the chaff He will burn up with unquenchable fire” (Matt. 3:12).

Neither torture nor imprisonment had any place in the Old Covenant. One may often hear of the unredeemed “going to that place.” One wrote of “that horrid prison” and another preaches about the “penitentiary of the universe.” But in all God’s economy there was never any provision for imprisonment! Either the offender made restitution and was restored to society or he was put to death. Neither the old nor New Testament suggests that the unredeemed are to be kept forever shut up on prison. Atonement was made by death, for that was the penalty Jesus was to pay for His people’s sin.

In the New Testament atonement is summed up in the words, “Christ died for our sins.” In His death it is said that he satisfied the justice of God, made propitiation for our sins, gave Himself a ransom for many and bought the church with His blood (Rom. 3:24–25, Mt. 20:28, I Tim. 2:6, Acts 20:28, Rev. 5:9). The one thing that stands out clearly in the New Testament is that Christ met the penalty for our sins by taking our sin upon Himself and then undergoing the sentence of death in our place.

In satisfying the justice of God and making such atonement for sin, certain things were required: (1) A person who was acceptable to God, who had no sin of His own for which to die; (2) One who was mortal and could die a human death; (3) One who was willing to die so that his life would not be taken from him unjustly and (4) One who would bear all the consequences of sin. This must include everything which is included in the sentence upon the sinner, so that there was no more penalty left for him to pay.

Jesus met all these requirements.

1. He was perfectly acceptable to God as a sacrifice, having been tempted in all points as we are, and yet never having sinned (Heb. 4:15).

2. He came into the world as a mortal man, born of a woman (Gal. 4:4) and took upon Himself the same flesh and blood of those whom He came to save (Heb. 2:14). He was “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom. 8:3) that He might undergo the very punishment for sin that man must suffer.

3. He was willing to give himself. “No man takes (my life) away from me, I lay it down of myself.” “Then said I, Lo, I am come to do thy will O’ God” (John 10:18, Heb. 10:7). Jesus plainly declared that He came into the world to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

4. Jesus took the full penalty for sin by His death. Just before He breathed His last he cried, “It is finished.” The apostles went out preaching that Christ had fulfilled the “Things fore-shadowed by the mouth of all the prophets.” Stephen explained to the Ethiopian that Jesus was the fulfillment of Isaiah 53, in which Isaiah proclaimed that Jesus was slain as a substitute for the people “to whom the stroke was due,” and that He “poured out his life unto death” (Isa. 53:8, 12). Peter quoted Moses, in saying that every soul that will not listen to Jesus “shall be utterly destroyed from among the people” (Acts 3:23).

Paul's letters are filled with expressions to explain that Jesus, on the cross, paid the price of redemption by suffering death for sin. "He who knew no sin was made to be sin on our behalf" (II Cor. 5:21). He "gave himself a ransom for all" (I Tim. 2:6).

Is there some further penalty to be met for our sins? Is not death enough? Death is exactly what God has decreed for sin from His first warning to Adam – "the day you eat thereof you shall surely die" (literally, "in dying you shall die") to the thundering warning of the prophets, "The soul that sins it shall die," to the final warning of Revelation: "But for the fearful, and unbelieving, and abominable, and murderers, and fornicators, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, their part shall be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone; which is the second death" (Gen. 2:17, Ezek. 18:20, Rev. 21:8).

If the judgment upon the sinner is not death but a prison sentence of unending and everlasting life in misery, then in what sense could Jesus possibly have met that penalty and satisfied the Justice of God by a few hours of terrible agony on the cross which ended in His pouring out His "soul unto death?" In the effort to uphold the traditional view, many answer that Christ's death was a mystery, or that His suffering was intense enough to equal eternity(?) or that a few hours of suffering of the Divine Son of God would equal an eternity of suffering for a sinner. It doesn't take too much logic to see that all these arguments are without any substance, and that they have no support from even so much as one scripture!

Christ's death demonstrated the judgment that is to come upon the unredeemed. He said Himself that "Now is the judgment of this world" (John 12:31) and John explained that He said this with regard to his death! In that brief time on the cross (the usual crucifixion might take 2 or 3 days) and the nearly three days in the tomb, Jesus fully met the penalty for sin, so that by His death the sins of every true believer are fully remitted. As Professor R. L. Whitelaw put it, "in that great cry from the cross, 'Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani' (Mt. 27:46), and especially by the Greek word EGKATALEIPO (abandoned) which God inspired Matthew to use (and its equivalent in Psalm 16:10), we may rightly conclude that, in His human nature, our Lord entered into death on the cross with the same pangs of total abandonment by the Father, totally 'made sin' for us, and therefore for that moment without conscious hope of reprieve, exactly as will be the case of the unredeemed at Judgment Day." (From an unpublished manuscript.)

The center of all history is Christ, and the focal point of Christ's work is in His death, burial and resurrection, which Paul declares to be the good news by which we are saved (I Cor. 15:1–4). The good news of Christ's death for sin must be consistent with what the penalty for sin is. If we are to proclaim the good news that Christ died for us, then let us be consistent and also proclaim that the unredeemed will suffer death for sin, not merely an earthly cessation of physical life with a continuous life in some other realm, but the total loss of life, as seen in the Passover lamb, and as suffered by Christ when He laid down His life and was buried.

If the penalty for sin is eternal torment, not death, then who has paid that penalty? The Word says that "Christ died for our sins" (I Cor. 15:3), and "that he by the grace of God would taste death (not eternal torture) for every man" (Heb. 2:9).

Why destroy the simplicity of the gospel by imposing other meanings upon it which are contradictory to the types clearly portrayed for the purpose of clarity? The issue is not life in one place or eternity in another place, but life or death.

“For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

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