

# THE CROSS AND ATONEMENT

By

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In speaking of the death of Jesus there is a tendency to emphasize the human suffering, the inhumane method of death — crucifixion, and the indescribable agony that Jesus must have endured for those few hours on the cross. The impression often given is that the power of Christ's death is in the depth of pain which He suffered, as if the atonement for our sins was accomplished by such intense pain.

This is in stark contrast to the way the apostles spoke and wrote of Christ's death. Certainly they were well aware of the horrors of crucifixion and knew better than any modern evangelist the depth of the suffering of our Savior. But, they made no effort to describe the amount of pain and anguish that He endured on the cross. Instead, they continually emphasized that the significance of His sacrifice was in His actual dying.

With a view to atonement for sin Moses wrote, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your lives: for it is the blood that makes atonement for life" (Lev. 17:11). The slaying of the animal in the Old Covenant was to prefigure the slaying of Jesus whom John the Baptist labeled as "the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). The significance in the killing of the animal was never in its suffering but in its dying. In fact, every effort was made to keep the animal from suffering any more than absolutely necessary as its life was taken.

When Jesus spoke of His coming death He said, "The Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

In the first gospel sermon delivered on the day of Pentecost, when the events of the crucifixion of Christ were still fresh in the minds of all, Peter had nothing to say about the suffering that Jesus endured on the cross, but simply said, "You denied the holy and righteous one and asked for a murderer to be granted unto you, and killed the prince of life; whom God raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses" (Acts 3:14–15).

In his many letters Paul often spoke of the death of Christ. Never did he imply that it was through great suffering that he met the penalty of sin, but rather that it was through His death. "For while we were yet weak, in due season Christ died for the ungodly...For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his son, much more, being reconciled, shall we be saved by His life" (Rom. 5:6, 10).

When Paul wrote of the preaching of the cross (I Col. 1:18, 23, 2:1–2), he was not referring to a detailed description of the events that took place on the day Jesus died, but rather to the fact that Christ met the penalty of sin by His own death.

In the Colossian letter Paul explained that God reconciled all things to himself through the blood of the cross and that this was done, "in the body of His flesh through death" (Col. 1:19–22).

The most important thing that anyone can consider in this life is his accountability to God, and the his declared judgment upon sin is death. The only way anyone could escape the judgment of God would be for his sins to be atoned for and for him to be

justified in God's eyes. It was exactly for this purpose that God sent Jesus to die, "that he might himself be just, and justifier of him that has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26).

In Old Covenant animal sacrifices the animal was identified with the sin of the person offering the sacrifice, then killed. The blood offered on the altar simply signified that a death had taken place, just as in the original Passover sacrifice in Egypt, where the blood on the doorpost indicated that a death had already taken place in that household and therefore the firstborn was spared. This was the point of every animal sacrifice, that death had taken place to atone for sin. Of course, no animal sacrifice could completely atone for sin, but each was a type or figure of the ultimate atonement which Jesus made. He entered the world as flesh and blood in order to die a human death as one under the penalty of sin, "who his own self bare our sins in his body upon the tree" under the wrath of God in our place (Heb. 2:14, I Peter 2:24).

The essential feature of every animal killed in Old Covenant ceremonies was the death of that animal. Not until the animal was dead was the sin atoned for. The phrase "shedding of blood" did not refer merely to suffering or bleeding, but in every case it meant nothing less than the total death of the animal.

The same is true of Jesus. It was not until He had given up life, and His body hung lifeless on the cross, that the penalty for sin was met and believers could be justified from the wrath of God by His death.

The justice of God was not satisfied by the terrible pain Christ suffered but by His final death. Thus it is death that is symbolized in baptism and death that is remembered in the Lord's supper.

What then does the death of Christ teach us? First, that all have sinned and deserve death as the penalty for sin. Second, that God has such concern for our lives (agape love) that He gave His own Son to pay the penalty for our sins that we might not perish but have eternal life. Third, in the day of judgment God's wrath will not be satisfied by the anguish or suffering of those who die in their sins but by their final death. Fourth, all who have aligned themselves with the death of Christ, through faith and obedience, are free from sin and its penalty and have the promise of life.

The Gospel consists of the two great events for which Christ entered the stream of human life: His death and resurrection. It is through His death that He abolished death and by His resurrection he revealed the meaning of immortality (II Tim. 1:10).

"The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 6:23).

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