

## Chapter Two The Means of Mercy

### The Substitutionary Theory of Atonement

Is "the atonement" the supreme sacrifice offered to appease an angry God, a means of covering our sin so that God who is holy and cannot tolerate sin does not see our sins but Christ's righteousness? Was Christ a substitute for us who took upon Himself the punishment which we deserve, so that we won't have to go to hell? Is the atonement the means by which we can get to heaven in spite of our sinful human natures, in spite of our tendency to go on sinning throughout this brief span of life lived in a fallen world? Is this the plan and purpose of God — to justify taking a few to heaven by the "atoning work" of His Son and sending perhaps over 99% of people to eternal retribution? Are these ideas consistent with the divine attributes of the Creator of the Universe? How can His love and His justice be reconciled to this concept of the atonement when He is the epitome of fairness? God does not show partiality (Acts 10:34, Romans 2:11, Galatians 2:6)

The notion of the death of Christ being a means of appeasing a just God ("just" in the legal sense of inflicting penalties) has led to the concept of Christ offered to God as our substitute, so that we would not have to take the punishment we deserve, eternal hell, but Jesus, and infinite deity was able to take that infinite punishment on Himself in a finite period of time. There is a question we might ask the proponents of this theory. Does the atonement cover us all automatically, or is there something we must do to appropriate it? Most who espouse the substitutionary theory of atonement hold that there is indeed something we must do, although there is no "work" which we can do that will help us at all. Subscribers to this theory define "works" to be "good deeds which we have done in hopes that they will in some way make up for our wrongdoing, and balance the scale of justice in our favour". Eph 2:8 is usually quoted at this point:

*For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast. KJV*

The verse immediately following is seldom quoted. That verse reads,

*For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them. KJV*

There is some variation in opinion as to what we actually must do to appropriate the "covering" so that we can get to heaven in spite of our sin, but a common thread seems to run through the teaching as to what we must do. Usually it is taught that we must first recognize a number of facts:

What follows are the supposed facts:

1. We are indeed sinners.
2. Christ has died in our place.
3. We need to be saved (This is understood as the necessity of being saved from hell).
4. We are helpless to save ourselves.
5. We can be saved only by grace (This is understood to be the unmerited favour of God).

Now having recognized these facts, what we must do is :

1. Call upon Jesus to save us by His grace or in virtue of His shed blood.  
and/or
2. Believe (or trust) in the finished work of Christ to save us.

If we have done one or both of these two things, we are considered to be "justified" ( a word understood to mean "just as if I'd never sinned", and saved from hell, for "God said it; I believe it; that settles it."

In teaching this way to be saved, usually repentance is not mentioned at all, but if it is, it is thought to mean "feeling sorry for our sin" and then being ready to "accept Christ" as our "personal Saviour". "Accepting Christ" seems to mean recognizing Christ's "atoning work" and calling upon Him for salvation from hell.

Imagine two men, Jack, and Chris, both of whom have lived selfish, useless lives. Each has lived as a drunkard, as a thief, and as an adulterer. Each has continued in that way of life until death. Both appear before God to be assigned to their destinies. God says, "Jack, I see by the records that on October 12, 1978, you accepted my son Jesus as your personal Saviour. Okay, you're covered. I'm not mad at you anymore. You can go to heaven forever. Chris, I cannot find any record of your having accepted Jesus as your Saviour. I am utterly enraged at you. To hell with you forever!"

Most people would see in this scenario the action of an unfair and unloving God. But one who subscribes to the substitutionary theory of atonement would have no difficulty whatever! He would say that God's words to Jack demonstrates His love and mercy, and His words to Chris demonstrates His "justice". How astonishing — that God is considered to exhibit two contradictory characteristics, love towards the less than 1% of mankind who "accept Christ as their personal Saviour" to whom He extends His mercy, but hate toward over 99% of humanity on whom he wreaks his vengeance through His judgment of everlasting torment! Useless torment — that has no purpose other than causing pain and suffering forever!

In this booklet, it is my purpose to show what is found in the Bible concerning Christ's sacrifice and its purpose.

At this point I want to emphasize that the substitutionary theory of atonement is just that --- a **theory** of atonement. Any reputable theology text book will present several other theories on the subject. But the substitutionary theory has so permeated every aspect of Christian teaching today that it is difficult for many of us to conceive of the sacrifice of Christ in any other way. Was Christ's sacrifice a way of appeasing a God who was angry about sin? Does Christ's death meet some "legal demand" which requires the death of a sinless person? Is God "satisfied" with the excruciating death of His sinless Son? How does the death of an innocent victim "satisfy" God's justice? Is God bound by the spiritual legalities which He Himself has established?

In considering the various elements of the substitutionary theory let's first look at the "sacrifice" aspect. Does the living God require sacrifices to appease His wrath? Someone will say, "Oh no. Not any more. Christ was the supreme sacrifice to God. But under the old covenant He required them." Do we know that to be the case? Did He require them to satisfy His own needs? What good do they do Him? I suggest that after the Israelites insisted on sacrificing to their God, just as other nations did to theirs, by way of concession, He allowed it, and then gave instructions as to how it was to be done, specifying that their sacrifices were to be offered to Him alone, and to no other gods. But in a primary sense, God didn't require sacrifices at all.

Is it not the heathen religions of the world that try to appease their gods with sacrifice, try to keep them from getting angry, try to avoid their wrath? Does the Creator of the Universe require this kind of appeasement? How did He feel about the Israelites trying to appease Him in this way? Through Isaiah, Yahweh spoke, calling the people "rulers of Sodom" and "people of Gomorrah"

*Isaiah 1:10-20 Hear the word of Yahweh, you rulers of Sodom! Give ear to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah! "What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says Yahweh; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats. When you come to appear before me, who requires of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow."*

*"Come now, let us reason together," says Yahweh: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.*

*If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; But if you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of Yahweh has spoken.*

As always, Yahweh, the great Creator, wanted righteousness. He wanted the Israelites to clean themselves from their evil ways. He wanted them to learn to do good, and He gave specific examples of what that meant. He

wanted obedience from them. This is also made clear in the following passage from Jeremiah 7:22,23

*For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, 'Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk in all the way that I command you, that it may be well with you.'*  
Jeremiah 7:22,23

### **What does the word "atonement" mean?**

In the King James Version of the New Testament, the word "atonement" occurs only once.

*Rom 5:11 And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.*

Oddly enough, it ought not to be so translated! The Greek word καταλλαγή [katallagā] from which it is translated means not "atonement" but "reconciliation". The previous verse reads:

*Rom 5:10 For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.*

Oddly enough, the King James translators rendered the verbal form of καταλλαγή as "reconciled" in verse 10! Why not the nominal form as "reconciliation" in verse 11?

The Revised Standard Version and other modern versions are consistent in their translation of these verses:

*Romans 5:10,11*

*For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. Not only so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received our reconciliation.*

It is wonderful to be reconciled to God! We can indeed rejoice that this has been made possible through our Lord Jesus Christ, through His precious blood, through His death on our behalf!

### **The Greek Words ἵλασμος (hilasmos) and ἱλαστήριον (hilastērion)**

The words used in the Greek New Testament and rendered as "atonement" or "atoning sacrifice" in some modern translations are ἵλασμος (1 John 2:2, 1 John 4:10) and ἱλαστήριον (Rom 3:25, Heb 9:5). Both are derived from the verbal form ἵλασκειν. The Hebrew word translated as "atonement" is "kippur" and is usually rendered as ἔξιλαστήριον in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, translated about 250 B.C. in the reign of Ptolemy. Note that it differs from the New Testament word only by the addition of the prefix ἐξ (out of). The verbal form of the Hebrew word "kippur" is "kaphar".

In the King James Version, ἵλασμος is translated as "propitiation", that is, an appeasement or conciliation of an offended power. It is so rendered also by Darby, by the Douay translators, and by the translators of the King James Version, and of Young's Literal Translation.

The translators of the Revised Standard Version render ἵλασμος as "expiation", that is, the act of making amends of reparation for wrongdoing. This is also the meaning of the English word "atonement." In current English, "atone" is used in precisely the same way as "expiate." If I accidentally run into the neighbor's fence post and break it off, the neighbour may tell me, "You're going to have to atone for that!" In other words, I'm going to have to "make up for it" in some way, perhaps by repairing the fence myself. In the NIV and the NRSV ἵλασμος is translated as "atoning sacrifice."

The translators of the KJV and the Douay also render ἱλαστήριον as "propitiation" in Rom 3:25, and in the RSV it is translated as "expiation." However in Heb 9:5, the translators of the KJV render the same word as "mercy seat"! It is so rendered also by Darby, and by the translators of the RSV, the NRSV, and Young's Literal Translation. Mercy seat! That meaning is quite different from either "propitiation" or "expiation."

Perhaps a look at the verbal form of the words would be helpful in deciding the true meaning of the words

ἰλασμος and ἰλαστηριον

ἰλασκομαι [Strong's 2433]

*Lu 18:13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' RSV*

In this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, every translation of which I am aware translates ἰλασκομαι as "be merciful". ἰλασκομαι is derived from the adjectival form ἰλιως, the meaning of which is "merciful", and is so translated in Hebrews 8:12:

*For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more. RSV*

Curiously, the RSV translators render the word differently in Heb 2:17:

*Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. RSV*

Does consistency demand that the final phrase be translated as "to be merciful concerning the sins of the people"? If the verbal form means "be merciful" and the adjectival form means "merciful", could the nominal forms be rendered as "means of mercy"? Let's see how the verses would read if that were done:

ἰλασμος [Strong's 2434]

*1Jo 2:2 and he is the means of mercy concerning our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.*

*1Jo 4:10 In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means of mercy concerning our sins.*

ἰλαστηριον [Strong's 2435]

*Ro 3:25 whom God put forward as a means of mercy by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins;*

*Heb 9:5 above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat. Of these things we cannot now speak in detail.*

We can leave the translation in Heb 9:5 as "mercy seat," though under Mosaic law it was indeed considered a "means of mercy."

So it certainly appears that the translations which render ἰλαστηριον and ἰλασμος as "propitiation", a word which carries the idea of appeasement and averting of wrath are incorrect. Our examination of the passages quoted above would cast doubt even upon the translation of these words as "expiation" or "atonement". I suggest "means of mercy" as an appropriate translation of these words, a translation that is correct etymologically as well as contextually.

What a mercy the grace of Christ, that divine enablement! This enablement is described in Titus 2:11, 12:

*For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all people, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and to live sensible, upright, and pious lives in this world.*

*O gracious Yahweh! Through your son Jesus, and the words with which you have inspired your apostles, help us to understand more fully the means of mercy through the Anointed One, by which you have made available to us the process of salvation from sin. May this understanding help us to more fully appreciate your love and grace, to be better prepared, through your enabling grace, to show others the way to enter the door of salvation, to become your children, and thus to press on toward completion, to be conformed to the image of your son, and to*