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The Majesty of the Atonement of Jesus Christ Or, Christ's Humanity Provided an Atoning Sacrifice for the Sins of Mankind

"And not only so, but we also joy in God through our LORD Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement"
(Romans 5:11).

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Preface

At this moment, only a short time before the "glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13), it is a retrospective of awe and wonder that we would consider again the central, fundamental, and timeless theme of the atoning self-sacrifice of the Creator for the well-being of rebellious and sinful man. "And without controversy great is the mystery of Godliness: God was manifest in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached unto the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up into glory" (1Timothy 3:16). Nothing can compare to "His Unspeakable Gift" (2Corinthians 9:15), that the Son of God "gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works" (Titus 2:14). May His Name be forever blessed "for His Great Love wherewith He loved us" (Ephesians 2:4) by His voluntary sacrifice, that we "might have Life through His Name" (John 20:31)!

What Does the Term Atonement Mean?

Charles G. Finney best summarized the meaning of the term atonement.

"The English word atonement is synonymous with the Hebrew word cofer. This is a noun from the verb caufar, to *cover*. ["Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt **pitch** <Hebrew, kaphar or caufar, meaning 'to cover'> it within and without with pitch" (Genesis 6:14).] The cofer or *cover*, was the name of the lid or cover of the ark of the covenant, and constituted what was called the mercy-seat. ["And thou shalt put it before the vail that is by the ark of the testimony, before the **mercy seat** <Hebrew, kapporeth, meaning 'mercy seat or cover of the ark of the covenant'> that is over the testimony, where I will meet with thee" (Exodus 30:6).] The Greek word rendered *atonement* is katallage. ["And not only so, but we also joy in God through our LORD Jesus Christ, by Whom we have now received the atonement <Greek, katallage, meaning 'atonement or reconciliation'>" (Romans 5:11).] This means reconciliation to favour, or more strictly, the means or conditions of *reconciliation* to favour; from katallasso, to 'change, or exchange.' ["To wit, that God was in Christ, **reconciling** <Greek, katallasso, meaning 'to change or exchange, especially of money'> the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the Word of **Reconciliation** <Greek, katallage>" (2Corinthians 5:19).] The term properly means

substitution. An examination of these original words, in the connection in which they stand, will show that **the atonement is the governmental substitution [or, exchanging] of the sufferings of Christ for the punishment of sinners.** ["For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit" (1Peter 3:18).] It is a covering of their sins by his sufferings" (from Finney's "[Lectures on Systematic Theology](#)" -- <http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.html> --, [Lecture 34 on "Atonement"](#) -- <http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.4.html#LECTURE 34> --).

"But we see Jesus, Who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that He by the grace of God should taste death for every man" (Hebrews 2:9).

What Is the Purpose of Christ's Suffering in the Atonement?

The One-Time-Only Sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the sins of mankind required the suffering of our LORD, while in human flesh. "By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). More than mental anguish, *Christ suffered in the flesh that all men might be saved.* "For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the Just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit" (1Peter 3:18). But, why did God deem it wise, i.e., the most fit means to the end of man's salvation, to suffer and die while in human flesh to accomplish the salvation and reclamation of man from sin? Could He not have accomplished it another way? Since the "Only Wise God Our Saviour" (Jude 25), chose that path, then it must be the most wise way. "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out!" (Romans 11:33). But, more importantly, *the Almighty's choice of manifesting Himself in human flesh through His Only Begotten Son, and dying for our sins, has the most powerful persuasive effect of subduing our tendency to sin.* "He will turn again, He will have compassion upon us; He will subdue our iniquities; and Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19). *Confirming all holy beings in their holiness so that there could never be another outbreak of sin, such as when Lucifer rebelled in Heaven, is a prime purpose of the Atonement of the LORD Jesus Christ.* "Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto His glorious body, according to the working whereby He is able even to subdue all things unto Himself" (Philippians 3:21).

Why Is an Atonement Necessary?

Man has been so constituted by God with a moral nature that recognizes the reality of God's existence and the necessity of gratefully acknowledging and glorifying Him. "20 For the invisible things of Him from the Creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His Eternal Power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: 21 Because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Romans 1:20-21). Gratitude to God would naturally manifest itself in love to God and to man, i.e., "Thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself" (Luke 10:27), but this love of God and man did not happen. "14 For when the Gentiles, which have not the Law, do

by nature the things contained in the Law, these, having not the Law, are a law unto themselves: 15 Which shew the work of the Law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another" (Romans 2:14-15).

Throughout history, man has known that he has offended God, and that he needs some kind of expiation, reconciliation, or atonement for his sins or offenses against God. "For as I passed by, and beheld your devotions, I found an altar with this inscription, TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Whom therefore ye ignorantly worship, Him declare I unto you" (Acts 17:23). The Old Testament is complete with a dispensation of offerings and sacrifices to Jehovah. "These are the feasts of the LORD, which ye shall proclaim to be holy convocations, to offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD, a burnt offering, and a meat offering, a sacrifice, and drink offerings, every thing upon his [its] day" (Leviticus 23:37). Even the New Testament understands the need for atonement to be made for the forgiveness of sin. "And almost all things are by the Law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission" (Hebrews 9:22).

If man is so certain that he must be forgiven for his sins, then it is even more certain that God knew of this necessity long beforehand. "Your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask Him" (Matthew 6:8). But, why must such extreme measures be taken to manifest the Son of God in human flesh and cause Him to suffer so? The atonement was necessary because sin violated the Law of the Kingdom of God and threatened to bring it down for all the angelic and holy beings, as well as to secure the salvation, sanctification, happiness, and future of mortal man. "Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth also the Law: for sin is the transgression of the Law" (1John 3:4). When children knowingly and willfully break family rules, human parents know that they must uphold the integrity of the rules, as much as they would desire to seek the reconciliation of their offending children; thus, in the counsel of God, it was deemed wise for the Son, the Lamb, to be "slain from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8). Accordingly, the atonement by the LORD Jesus Christ provided God, the Head of the Moral Government of the Universe, with the justification for His pardoning of our sins, while still upholding the worth of His most holy Law, which benefits all holy beings-- God Himself, man, and angels. "24 Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: 25 Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; 26 To declare, I say, at this time His righteousness: **that He might be just**, and the justifier of Him which believeth in Jesus" (Romans 3:24-26).

Miscellaneous Comments

If the Almighty desired only the letter of the Law to be executed, then the Retributive Justice called down upon sinning angels would have sufficed to stop the spread of rebellion in the universe. "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). Retributive Justice is the concept of an exact payment for sin, that the sinner must and will be punished without probation or mercy, as demonstrated in God's swift judgment of the rebellious angels. "2 For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; 3 How shall we escape, if we neglect So Great Salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the LORD, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard Him" (Hebrews 2:2-3). But, in the wisdom and love of

God, if the spirit of the Law would be enacted, then His Public Justice could enable the sinner to be reclaimed, while still upholding the integrity of the Moral Law. "29 And Jesus answered him, The first of all the Commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one LORD: 30 And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first Commandment... 33 And to love Him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mark 12:29-30, 33).

Public Justice is the administration of the Law that secures the highest good and well-being of the universe, while upholding the Law; hence, it secures the welfare of the general public. The concept of the spirit of the Law contrasted to the letter of the Law was illustrated by the LORD Jesus, while in human flesh. "1 At that time Jesus went on the sabbath day through the corn; and His disciples were an hungred, and began to pluck the ears of corn, and to eat. 2 But when the Pharisees saw it, they said unto Him, Behold, Thy disciples do that which is not lawful to do upon the sabbath day. 3 But He said unto them, Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; 4 How he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests? 5 Or have ye not read in the Law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless? 6 But I say unto you, That in this place is One greater than the temple. 7 But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless. 8 For the Son of Man is Lord even of the sabbath day" (Matthew 12:1-8). Therefore, exception may be made to the execution of the letter of the Law, but never to the spirit of the Law.

The spirit of the Law is the same as the Public Justice that Charles G. Finney placed in contrast to Retributive Justice, i.e., "the soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezekiel 18:4, 20). Notice how Finney points out that Retributive Justice makes no exception to the execution of the penalty for the infraction of the rules, as when the angels sinned, there was quick and immediate punishment without opportunity for salvation. "For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment" (2Peter 2:4).

"There is an important distinction between retributive and public justice. Retributive justice consists in treating every subject of government according to his character. It respects the intrinsic merit or demerit of each individual, and deals with him accordingly. Public justice, in its exercise, consists in the promotion and protection of the public interests, by such legislation and such an administration of law, as is demanded by the highest good of the public. It implies the execution of the penalties of law where the precept is violated, unless something else is done that will as effectually secure the public interests. When this is done, public justice demands, that the execution of the penalty shall be dispensed with by extending pardon to the criminal. Retributive justice makes no exceptions, but punishes without mercy in every instance of crime. Public justice makes exceptions, as often as this is permitted or required by the public good. Public justice is identical with the spirit of the moral law, and in its exercise, regards only the spirit of the law. Retributive justice cleaves to the letter, and makes no exceptions to the rule, 'the soul that sinneth, it shall die'" (from Finney's "[Lectures on Systematic Theology](#)" -- <http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.html> --, [Lecture 34 on "Atonement"](#) -- <http://WhatSaithTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.4.html#LECTURE 34> --).

The atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ was for all men. "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that He by the grace of God should taste death for every man" (Hebrews 2:9). The willingness of the LORD Jesus to humble Himself to become a man, made possible His appeasement for our sins; yea, for the sins of the whole world. "And He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1John 2:2).

"14. The spirit of the moral law can no more be dispensed with by the lawgiver than it can be repealed. The spirit of the law requires that, when the precept is violated, the penalty shall be executed, or that something shall be done that will as effectually and impressively negative the inference or assumption, that sin can escape with impunity under the government of God, beyond the limits of the race for whom the atonement was especially made, as the execution of the law would do. The following things must be true under a perfect government, as has been said above.

"(1.) That sin cannot be forgiven merely upon condition of repentance; for this condition is within the power of the subject, so that he might then be sure of impunity.

"(2.) Nor can it be forgiven upon a condition that shall be repeated, for this would encourage the hope of impunity.

"(3.) Nor can it be forgiven upon a condition that will extend to all worlds, and throughout all eternity, for this would be equivalent to forgiving sin merely upon condition of repentance, without any reference to the authority of law or to public justice.

"(4.) Hence it is evident that it must originate in sovereign clemency, subject to the previous conditions." (from Finney's "[Lectures on Systematic Theology](#)" --

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A grand mistake of modern theology is to confound Retributive and Public Justice.

"12. If mercy or pardon is to be extended to any who have violated law, it ought to be done in a manner and upon some conditions that will settle the question, and establish the truth, that the execution of penalties is not to be dispensed with merely upon condition of the repentance of the offender. In other words, if pardon is to be extended, it should be known to be upon a condition not within the power of the offender. Else he may know, that he can violate the law, and yet be sure to escape with impunity, by fulfilling the conditions of forgiveness, which are, upon the supposition, all within his own power.

"13. So, if mercy is to be exercised, it should be upon a condition that is not to be repeated. The thing required by public justice is, that nothing shall be done to undermine or disturb the influence of law. Hence it cannot consent to have the execution of penalties dispensed with, upon any condition that shall encourage the hope of impunity [exemption from punishment]. Therefore, public justice cannot consent to the pardon of sin but upon condition of an

atonement, and also upon the assumption that atonement is not to be repeated, nor to extend its benefits beyond the limits of the race for whom it was made, and that only for a limited time. If an atonement were to extend its benefits to all worlds and to all eternity, it would nullify its own influence, and encourage the universal hope of impunity, in case the precepts of the law were violated. This would be indefinitely worse than no atonement; and public justice might as well consent to have mercy exercised, without any regard to securing the authority and influence of law" (from Finney's "[Lectures on Systematic Theology](#)" -- <http://WhatSaidTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.html> --, [Lecture 34 on "Atonement"](#) -- <http://WhatSaidTheScripture.com/Voice/Systematic.Theology.4.html#LECTURE 34> --).

Conclusion

The most majestic act of God towards us was the Atonement of Jesus Christ on the Cross for all mankind. So marvelous was this act of atonement, that the angels were quite eager to see how the LORD would handle it. "Unto whom it was revealed, that not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister the things, which are now reported unto you by them that have preached the Gospel unto you with the Holy Ghost sent down from Heaven; which things the angels desire to look into" (1Peter 1:12). Eternity cannot exhaust our study of the love of God that was manifested in His atonement for us. "14 For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our LORD Jesus Christ, 15 Of whom the whole family in Heaven and Earth is named, 16 That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might by His Spirit in the inner man; 17 That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 May be able to comprehend with all Saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; 19 And to know the Love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. 20 Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the Power that worketh in us, 21 Unto Him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen" (Ephesians 3:14-21).