

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE ATONEMENT

Have you ever thought of this question, God got rid of our sins by showing us his love. Is that true, or is it God showed us his love by getting rid of our sins? Now, at first sight you might think there is little difference. There's a world of difference! There is an abyss of difference; there's a universe of difference between those two statements. Let me repeat them. Which is true? One is Biblical, the other is heretical. God got rid of our sins by showing us his love--sounds good; God showed us his love by getting rid of our sins, sounds Biblical. The fact is, the first one is a half truth, not the whole truth and a half truth is very usually a whole heresy but very popular. In one denomination alone, for example, that runs several universities, the first one is taught at Loma Linda and has been for decades, God got rid of our sins by showing us his love. Andrews University, run by the same denomination, teaches the opposite, God showed us his love by getting rid of our sins.

What do I mean? Of course, if you have read Roy's excellent series on the atonement in the magazine, you know what I mean. And all the human interest in the Peter Abelard story, Roy, I'll bet people read that a half dozen times--full of human interest; I dare not even tell you about it. Peter Abelard stressed the first view that there was really no such thing as an eternal righteousness that had to be considered, the only real problem was that men did not know God. Now, it's true that men don't know God, that's true but the Bible says that the wages of sin is death because sin is not just ignorance, sin is rebellion.

I want you to think for a moment on what gives the clue to the right answer. The death of Christ is given a proportionate treatment

that is nowhere else found in the whole Bible. The death of Paul is not even mentioned. The death of James, the brother of the Lord, is told in one sentence. We are not told about the death of Moses, not in any detail. Have you ever wondered why it was that when God sent his Son he didn't make the most of it while he was here. Why did he not cross over to Rome, go to Athens; Babylon was still in existence in that day, the capital city was. Why didn't he go down to Egypt? Why not use his divine powers to visit the Aborigines in Australia and the red Indians in America? Why should he be confined to a little place smaller than Tasmania? And, furthermore, if he was to be our example, why don't we see him in mature age? In old age? Why did he not live at least as long as Methuselah? Surely there is more reason for Jesus to live as long as Methuselah than for Methuselah to live the years of Methuselah...surely, much more reason. Think of all he could have taught us! Why should he suddenly be removed from the earth, like crown jewels taken away, like the first fruits reaped, like the dew taken off the grass, like the sun extinguished at noon? Why should he suddenly be taken...if he is gone, if our Joseph is gone, what are we doing here? Why is it that the Gospels give from a third to a quarter the week about his death? I'll tell you why, for the same reason that his death was a bloody death. There are many ways to die, you can fall down stairs and kill yourself, you can take poison and look quite normal and die--many ways to die. But he dies with blood from the brow, from the hands, the feet, the side; it's oozing from his back where he has been flogged. Why a bloody death? Because the wages of sin is death and without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins for the blood is the life. You have heard probably of Martin Lloyd Jones, he was one of the greatest preachers of the 20th century. He was a medical doctor,

became a Christian, gave up medicine, went into the ministry, had no training and was doing very well. He took over the Westminster tabernacle in London, a very great church. He worked tremendously. Not having the success he wanted but nevertheless, doing a great job. One day a man took him aside and said, "Dr. Jones, you preach much about people being good, hating sin, being born again," he said, "You do not say much about the cross of Christ," and he lent him two books, one book called THE ATONEMENT by R.W. Dale, the great classic on the meaning of the cross and the other book THE DEATH OF CHRIST by James Denny, another great classic. Martin Lloyd Jones took the books home, went into the library, began to read. It was not yet lunch time. His wife called him for lunch. He said, "Not now, dear, you go ahead." He kept on reading. She called him for supper, "Not now dear." Toward midnight his wife was very worried. He still had not come out. She called his friends, "Come and get Martin; I don't know what's gone wrong with him." What had gone wrong with him? He found the Gospel. He had been a preacher for years and now he found the Gospel. It had suddenly dawned upon him that from that event on Calvary the whole world was acquitted, redeemed, justified, freed, liberated, because God himself took their guilt upon him and honored the broken law by all the agony pain and anguish that sin inevitably brings in order that he might be just and the justifier.

You know, in that great high priestly prayer, John 17, Christ addresses the Father, "Oh Father, grant me the glory I had with thee before the world was," and a little bit further down he says, "Oh, Holy Father, the world has not known me but I have known thee,"

and then further down: still he says, "Oh, righteous Father," God is a father and we know what that means, love, mercy, compassion and sympathy, "Like as a father pities his children, so the Lord pities them that fear him." But a righteous father, a holy father, what does that mean? Well, can I remind you there is a very strange, double picture of Christ in the Gospels. I hope you have your Bible open and let us notice a few verses, Matthew 5:44, 45. We looked at these this morning, "I say to you, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you so you may be the sons of your father who is in heaven for he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust." In Luke's version it adds, "He is kind to the ungrateful and to the selfish." That's a great picture. Now, look at chapter 7:11, "If you then, who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your father who is in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?" So the picture is clear; God is a loving father. He loves his enemies, the selfish, he loves the ungrateful. It is quite clear what sort of a being God is but now, look, back to chapter five again (Matthew), we are just taking the first testimony of the New Testament, chapter 5:22, "I say to you everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, whoever says, 'You fool' shall be liable to the fire." Now look at verse 29, "If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; better you lose one of your members than your whole body be thrown into hell." Look at verses 25 and 26, "Make friends quickly with your accuser while you go into court with him, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard and you be put in prison; truly I say to you, you will never get out until you have

paid the very last penny." Seems contrary, seems different, same sermon, same speaker, same time! What's it mean? Chapter 7:13,14, "Enter by the narrow gate, the gate is wide, the way is easy that leads to destruction; those who enter by it are many. The gate is narrow, the way is hard that leads to life and those who find it are few." Verse 19: "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down the thrown into the fire," and then 21-23, "Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven; for that day many will say to me, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in your name. cast out demons in your name? Do many mighty works in your name? And then I will say to them, 'I never knew you, depart from me you evil doers.'" Now, chapter 9:12,13, and we turn a flip side again, "When he heard it he said those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick, go and learn what this means. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. I came not to call the righteous but to call sinners." Look at chapter 10, verses 14 and 15, we have turned the coin again, "If anyone will not receive you or listen to your word, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town. Truly I say to you it will be more tolerable in the day of judgment for Sodom and Gomorrha." And so our Lord seems to blow hot and cold; hot with fervent fatherly sympathy and affection and compassion and then cold with rigorous, righteous, discipline, demanding the very essence of the law in perfect obedience.

How do we reconcile the two? The fact is the Bible revolves around law and love for God is light as well as truth. He is light as well as love, he's truth as well as mercy, he's Father but a righteous father, he's father but the Holy Father. The Bible reveals a God who

is determined by grace, by love, by his own self sacrifice to establish holiness. If God threatened rebellion in the beginning and did not fulfill the threat, he imperils the whole universe. What sort of a God has the universe got if he says the wages of sin is death and does not carry it through? This is why the Bible says he is both just and the justifier. That's why it says he is just and having salvation. The Bible pictures a God who is both intent on saving us and saving holiness.

You remember the story of Absalom, beautiful boy, rebels against his father and David is slow to take action; he loves the boy, loves him. He does not want to lose Absalom. So he is too easy going on Absalom and lets him get away with evil. Does that change Absalom? No, it hardens him. Soon there is a great conflict, 10,000 people die and we see Absalom strung up on a tree, feet dangling in the air. What slew Absalom? What slew the 10,000 people who died? I'll tell you--mercy, unwise mercy, foolish mercy. When David tried to exercise compassion without safeguarding righteousness, he killed thousands in his kingdom and his own son. God is too good a father to pamper us. True love does not indulge the whims and the peccadillos and the follies of the children that are loved. True love is more anxious about everlasting happiness than temporary places. When David did not preserve the right and use mercy in an unjust way, he brought havoc and destruction. Now come to the son of David and here's a woman taken in adultery and they say, "You, who claim to be the friend of publicans and sinners, you who claim to uphold the law, get around this one if you can! Rescue this woman and save the law; we caught her in adultery. What do you say should happen?" He says, " Let's uphold the law; the law says that the first witnesses

must be those without rebuke, without blemishes, so that he that is without sin among you cast the first stone." He upholds the law! He saves the law breaker because he is going to take the place, he is going to pay the penalty for her sin, he will endure what she should endure. See the difference compared with David. God is in the business of saving sinners lawfully. God is in the business of forgiving our law breaking in a legal way. Legal does not mean legalistist. Your marriage is legal; I hope it is not legalistic.

Let's look at a few verses where our Lord spoke about the cross because what we are really saying is why was the cross necessary. Look at Mark 8:31, "And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer and be rejected and be killed." Look now please at 9:31, same book, "He was teaching his disciples saying the Son of Man will be delivered unto the hands of men; they will kill him. When he is killed, after three days he will rise." They did not understand the saying. Now come to chapter 10, same book, verse 32, "They are on the road going to Jerusalem and Jesus was walking ahead of them and they were amazed; those who followed were afraid." What was there about the son of God, about to die when he walks ahead of the 12 and there is something in his demeanor that fills them with fear? Look at 14, same book, verse 33, "And he took with him James, Peter and John and began to be gravely distressed and troubled." In the Greek the words mean that his soul was traumatically shaken as though by a great earthquake. This is when he begins to weep, at every fall he weeps blood. That was not physical fear, dear friends, this is a lot braver than Socrates. Socrates went to his death calmly, sedately and serenely. Our Lord Jesus had more courage

than Socrates but Jesus saw the terrible nature of sin. God is not only in the business of saving sinners, he wants to save those who have never sinned. He has a whole universe. Dear friends we are only the one lost sheep that has strayed. The Bible says that under the principalities and powers in heavenly places it might be made known by the church the manifold wisdom of God. The Bible says we are a theater to the universe, to angels, to men; God has made all beings free. Angelic hosts, beings of other worlds, they can all choose to disobey. God has to show that disobedience, rebellion, transgression, sin, is suicide. All the education of life is meant to make us renounce sin. We are slow to learn. We are all by nature in love with sin, in love with different sins. We don't all love the same sins. That's where our self righteousness comes in. I could look down on the drunkard; I am not tempted by alcohol. He can look down on me, this guy spending all this time on books; what a waste of time! We all have our different predilections. The whole purpose of life's education is to make us renounce evil and one of the meanings of the cross is sin brings death. Sin is the worse evil in the universe. You see, we don't know that. We are born fools. There is a great little cartoon that shows two babies in diapers with boxing gloves on and here are these two babies facing each other with their boxing gloves and you see a little dog who has his tail between his legs nearby and he is wincing. What is wrong with that little dog? And then you see what's happening. One of the little babies has his eye on a little butterfly and he does not see that the other baby is about to whack him in the solar plexus so the little dog is cringing. The little dog knows what's going to happen; the little dog knows that this baby is looking at the butterfly and does not know what is going to happen. Friends, that's you and me.

Let me illustrate it by a statement by C.S. Lewis. "My own experience." says Lewis, "is like this, I am progressing along the path of life in my ordinary contented fallen and Godless condition, absorbed in the merry meeting with my friends for the morrow, for a bit of work that tickles my fancy today, a holiday or a new book when suddenly a stab of abdominal pain, threatened serious disease, or a headline in the newspapers which threatens us all with destruction sends this whole pack of cards tumbling down. At first, I am overwhelmed and all my happiness looks like broken toys. Then smalley and reluctantly, bit by bit, I try to bring myself into the frame of mind that I should be in at all times. I remind myself that all these toys were never intended to possess my heart, that my true good is in another world; my only real treasure is Christ. Perhaps, by God's grace, I succeed for a day or two to become a creature consciously dependent on God, drawing strength from the right sources. But the moment the threat is withdrawn, my whole nature leaps back to the toys. I'm even anxious for God to forgive me, but banish from my mind the only thing that supported me under the threat because it is now associated with the thought of misery. Thus, the terrible necessity of tribulation is only too clear. God has had me for but 48 hours and then only by means^{of} taking away everything else. Let him but sheave that sword for a moment and I behave like a puppy after the hated bath is over. I shake myself as dry as I can, race off to reacquire my comfortableness dirtiness, at least, if not in the nearest manure, the flower bed. And that's why tribulation cannot cease until God either sees us remade or sees that our remaking is now hopeless."

You see, friends, the cross is a mini-life. Christ on that cross,

restricted, jeered, hated, limited, in pain. That's a mini-life.

Every sickness is a mini-death. Every threat is a mini-last judgment. What God does when he permits troubles to come to us, pain to come to us, agony to come to us, is that he punctures our illusions that everything is okay, that what I've got is my own and that what I've got is enough and I am looking at the butterflies and forget the solar plexus blow: death, judgment, guilt. We are like those little puppy dogs, like the baby looking at the butterfly--born sinners, in love with sin, our different sins (we are all made differently), some sins congenial to us, others are not, but we are all by nature in love with sin and God sees they will destroy us unless they are crucified so he tries to break our heart by the revelation that he loved us enough to pay the penalty of all our sins, that he took our guilt, he took our sins. He honored the law by showing that it could not be sniffed back; he upheld righteousness, he's the Holy One, he is the just one; he has upheld to safeguard the universe. He has forgiven sins in a legal, just and righteous way, in such a way to break our hearts, to divorce us from our infatuation with evil. It's a life-long education. We don't learn easily. Here is part of the reason for pain that we might learn what the cross teaches us that all sin brings death and our illusions must be shattered, our chasing of butterflies must cease. We must not be like the puppy dog that forgets it's been washed and goes to manure and heaps right away again. We have to so look at the cross that we become anesthetized against sin, vaccinated against it. From the cross we have learned that righteousness is eternal. The law is not something separate from God as the Loma Linda theologians have said, it's not something over God. God is law incarnate because the law is the way love

operates. Love brings constancy. Without law everything is changeable. You can't rest in a world that is one thing one moment and one thing in another but love created law. All law is love, love to the Creator or love to the creature. Sin is selfishness, sin is hate to the Creator, hate to the creature. This is part of the reason why our world is so filled with sorrow. The world is not a lunatic asylum, it only seems to be so. The world is our Father's still. He is trying to point out to us first and chiefly by the cross that all evil brings loss, pain and terrible tragedy and because we are so slow to learn it from the cross he gives us mini-crosses day by day and week by week and month by month and we feel crucified by our problems. You have all been through it and you will go through it again. There is no discharge from that war in this life except by faith, no other way.

George Mathisen got a hint of this. I read it one day to our local fellowship but let me read it again. He was the blind preacher. When he became blind he almost lost his faith in God but God spoke to him and he became a preacher and this is what he said when he grew up--he was already mature when he became blind--but when he grew up spiritually this is what he said, "My God, I have never thanked ^{thee} me for my thorn. I thanked you a thousand times for my roses but never once for my thorn. I have been looking for the world where I will get compensation for my cross, yet, in itself it is a glory. Teach me the glory of the cross. Teach me ^{the} true value of my thorn. Show me that I have climbed to thee by the path of pain. Show me that my tears have made my rainbow."

Now friends, our Lord gave 7 statements from the cross and the

middle one shows him in terrible agony, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me." That's the middle saying on the cross. That is the central saying; that's the heart of the atonement--God, in terrible agony because he feels he is separated from God! God, the Son, separated from the Father because of sin and the Lord is trying to tell us that all sin, all selfishness, all pride, all impurity, all greed, all hate, all lasciviousness brings death, brings agony, brings loss. That's why the Gospel is the only thing that can separate a person from sin, you see? It's no good telling people to be good. Paul learned that secret when he said, "I through the law died to the law that I might live unto God," when he said, "Sin will not have dominion over you because you are not under law but under grace." Only when a person's heart is broken are they willing to surrender sin. There is no other way to get rid of sin! But because we are so slow to learn that best way, God permits the pinpricks of this world's crosses to pierce through our consciousness, hits us in the solar plexus, to take our eye off the butterflies. Dear friends, we are dying, living in a dying world; our loved ones are dying, our friends are dying. The world is in a horrible mess. We have no time for butterflies. We have no time for things that froth and bubble that indulge our pride, vanity and follies. I am not saying we have no time for recreation because God invented rest and God meant us to behave as true humans who must go and stop, and go and stop but we need to know what we are doing and why we are doing what we are doing because everything counts; every action has continuous results. Life is solemn and yet we must learn to laugh. Lincoln said if I didn't laugh, gentlemen, I would die. He saw the solemnity of life.

What are we saying? We are saying that the cross proves to us that

sin is no chimera, no fancy, no butterfly. Sin is the cause of all pain. That does not mean that all your pain comes from your sins, no no! "Who hath sinned more that this man should be born blind? Neither this man or his parents but that the glory of God might be made manifest in him." Sin is the cause of all pain. It is not necessarily the cause of all your pain, that is, not your sin. Looking to the cross we see that our God took upon him our guilt that we might not have to carry the burden and he did it in such a way that the chains of sin might be snapped. And, friends, when we see that glory, then, and then only, can we walk the narrow plank of life without falling off on either side--only when we see that God permits pain to prepare for glory, permits darkness to prepare for life, winter for spring, night for morning, only when we get the vision of a Christ who is forsaken and then suddenly glorified on the third day, only then are we equipped to handle life.

You see, we are not studying theology minutely every day but we are in trouble every day. We are not dealing with big words like propitiation, justification, sanctification and atonement every day but we are threatened every day, threatened with loss, pain, frustration, disappointment, inadequacy. We are worried about our children, we are worried about our parents, we are worried about our spouses, our business, our future, our past. To be human is to be in turmoil. The cross says, I've entered your pain, I've entered your world; I know that only the wounded can minister to the wounded. I have been wounded for you; by my cross I will remove all pain; I'll remove all evil; I'll remove all death. Without the cross, none of that could happen and the universe would be in jeopardy. He had to die. He did reveal his love by dying! But he had to die

just to show his love; he showed his love in dying. He had to die to show us he could forgive us righteously because he took all the pain of it. In so doing he gave us an image of what life is. Life is recurringly being on the cross with its limitation, its shame, its frustration, its blackness, its absence of God. If it's not that way with you this week, it may be next week but my point is that God is there. There are treasures in the darkness. You can have songs in the night.

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for the cross on which our Lord, Jesus, needs must to have suffered. Thank you he took away our guilt and in so doing he diffused all the time bombs that seem to threaten us, little or great. Help us to understand the philosophy of the cross that the seeming absence of God does not mean the real absence. That that plane that seems so perpetual is really only temporary, that all darkness must give way to morning. That there could be no darkness at all were it not for the brilliant light of the holiness and love of God. Teach us these things that we may rejoice in Christ and his cross and in that alone we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.