

BLOOD ATONEMENT AND OUR SALVATION

By Allon Maxwell

INTRODUCTION

The first purpose of the Atonement is to reconcile us with God, leading us to fulfil the first commandment. *"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength". (Mark 12:29-30)*

The second purpose is like the first. Our united participation in the salvation which comes to us through the death of Jesus, is also designed to reconcile us with each other. *"You shall love your neighbour as yourself". (Mark 12:31)*

In the community of the redeemed there is a visible love. There is meant to be, in ALL of us, nothing less than that same quality of love which took Jesus to the cross for sinners. As Jesus has loved us, so also are we to love one another.

We must learn both to live for each other, and to die for each other. *(John 13:34)*

The existence of that love between us is **the test** of whether we are disciples or not.

It is therefore also **the test** of whether we have properly understood the Atonement, whether it has achieved its purpose in us, and whether we are truly redeemed.

If we do not have that love, it matters little whether we have the theory correct or not. We walk in darkness still and we are blind to **the truth!** *(1 John 2:11)* If I cannot love you who I can see, then neither is it possible for me to love God who I cannot see. *(1 John 4:20)*

There may be some amongst my readers who will want to argue the technical correctness of the theory presented here. I have not written to open the door for academic discussion about whether I have the **theory** correct or not!

My belief in the things which I share with you in this paper, has reconciled me to God. My faith in the cross has saved me from the penalty of my sins and changed my heart towards God. What Jesus has done for me, has given me a new vision of who God is and what God is. It has changed my attitudes and my response to the laws of God.

It has given me Eternal life!

That I do know beyond all question!

It is not open for any negotiation between us that I might not be reconciled with God, just because that you think you have a better or more detailed theory about how it all works.

But I will concede that, even if there are some differences in your own understanding of how it worked in your case, you may also have arrived where I am.

If you and I **are** both truly reconciled with God, then we are brothers.

I dare not fail to confess that before men, just because we differ in our understanding of the detail of how it came to pass for each of us.

If we are both disciples, we will recognise the love of Christ in each other and simply be glad for each other that we have both arrived.

That is not to say that I open the door to all theories, regardless of what they are. Some theories of the Atonement do not seem to engender the Divine love at all. Nor do they lead to obedience.

These we must reject, not in unholy conflict, but in love.

WHERE IT STARTS

Bible teaching about salvation begins with the premise that God decrees a penalty of death for the breaking of His laws, and that those who have sinned are in need of salvation from the penalty which they have incurred.

For those who are under condemnation for their sin, there are only two possible destinies:

- * For those who truly repent of their sins, there is pardon and remission of the penalty. ([Ezekiel 33:14 & Acts 3:19](#))
- * For those who wilfully persist in their sins, the death penalty will be carried out without mercy. ([Hebrews 10:26-31](#))

THE LAW OF SIN AND DEATH

The penalty for sin is based on what Paul calls the "Law of Sin and Death". ([Romans 8:2](#))

In simple terms this "Law of Sin and Death" is God's decree that those who break His commandments have placed themselves under sentence of death.

The Bible says:

- * That all have sinned and come short of the perfect standard for which God created them. ([Romans 3:23](#)) thereby incurring the penalty of death. ([Romans 2:8 & Romans 6:23](#)).
- * That this death is a **judicial** death, to be inflicted as a punishment for sin, on the Day of Judgement ([2 Peter 2:9](#))
- * That this judicial death is therefore **not** the "ordinary" death which terminates this present life for all of us, but a "second death", specifically for sinners, following the resurrection of the dead. ([Revelation 20:11-15](#)).
- * That this judicial death will be preceded by the infliction of other punishment in varying degrees of severity, appropriate to the crime. ([Luke 12:48](#)).
- * That the "second death" is a total annihilation from which there is no return. It is described as "everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord", ([2 Thessalonians 1:9](#)).

REPENTANCE AND EXPIATION

However, the penalty imposed by the "law of sin and death" is not completely irrevocable.

God does offer forgiveness and salvation from the penalty of sin to those who accept His conditions.

The **two** conditions for God's offer of salvation from the death penalty are **repentance** and **expiation**. Faith about salvation is built on the foundation that Jesus died to **expiate** the death penalty ([Romans 3:25](#)) on behalf of **repentant** sinners. ([1 Corinthians 15:3 & Luke 24:47](#))

In theological language this is called the doctrine of "**Substitutionary Atonement**". (We should note that of course, the English Bible does not use the word "substitute".

Nevertheless we shall see that it is a valid conclusion to be drawn from those passages which tell us that Jesus died for us.)

DEFINING THE TERMS

"**Atone**" means "make amends", "expiate", "reconcile". (The Hebrew word used in the Old Testament means "to make a covering for sin").

"**Expiate**" means "pay the penalty of (sin)", or "make amends for, (sin)".

"**Substitute**" means "a person or thing performing a function instead of another", "replace a person or thing with another", "put in exchange for".

Biblical "**Repentance**" means "a godly sorrow for sin that leads to both a change of heart about sin, and a decision to forsake sinful behaviour".

EXPIATION ONLY THROUGH DEATH

We must never forget that the Gospel about forgiveness of sins is conditional, first and foremost, on repentance. (Luke 24:47) And forgiveness requires **not only** repentance, but **also** sacrifice.

So, the Bible does say that without the shedding of blood (i.e. a blood sacrifice) there is no forgiveness of sins. (Hebrews 9:22 & Leviticus 17:11).

The literal meaning of this is that a **real death** is required to expiate the penalty incurred for sin.

Of course, if there was no escape from death, and we all had to pay the penalty ourselves for our sins, that would be the end for us.

How is it possible for God to forgive us, not carry out the penalty, and yet still remain true to Himself and His law?

The answer to that question is the Good News about Jesus and his death on the cross.

THE OLD TESTAMENT SACRIFICE

The Old Testament provision for forgiveness of sin introduces us to the principle of substitution as the means by which the sinner could expiate the penalty without actually dying himself.

The penalty was expiated and remitted through the blood sacrifice of an unblemished innocent male animal, which was **substituted** for the guilty but repentant sinner. (Leviticus 1:2-4)

This was **not** simply a "legal" transaction, (although, no doubt, many saw it as such). It was meant to be the response of a repentant heart, broken and contrite for its disobedience. (Psalm 51:17).

The death of the animal by the man's own hand emphasised that the guilt and the penalty were incurred by his own action. It brought home the lesson of the seriousness of sin and its awful consequences for God and for men.

Each individual was responsible for initiating his own sacrifice. By this he confessed his guilt and indicated both his need and his desire for forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

Each individual was required to identify himself personally with the animal as his substitute, by laying his hand on its head before slaying it.

By this identification he confessed his personal responsibility for his sin and acknowledged that he was the one who justly deserved to die.

However, we are told that, in this ritual, it was not possible that the animal itself could achieve the purpose. (Hebrews 10:4). After all, no animal is really a satisfactory substitute for a man, is it?

The sacrifice of the animal merely recognised, prophesied, and portrayed the future death of Jesus, who was to be the **real** blood sacrifice by which sins were to be remitted. (Hebrews 10:10)

For all of those who did see beyond the animals to the promised human saviour, the sacrifice was also a grateful acceptance of the love of God, who in anticipation of the future reality of the cross, was granting immediate forgiveness to the repentant heart instead of death.

THE NEW TESTAMENT SACRIFICE

The New Testament tells us that that Jesus fulfils the prophecy contained in the Old Testament ritual of sacrifice, in which innocent animals died in place of guilty sinners.

Forgiveness is not automatic. The benefit is conditional on a number of inseparable and interdependent factors which are foreshadowed in those Old Testament sacrifices.

Just as in the Old Testament each individual chose his own animal from the flock to bring before God, so too in the New Testament, each of us must come before God, personally choosing to accept for ourselves the sacrifice already made by Jesus.

Just as in the Old Testament the guilty sinner personally identified himself with the innocent substitute animal by laying his hand on its head, so too the New Testament requires a similar choice to accept Jesus as **the man** who is **our** sacrifice for **our** sins. Each of us must individually and personally identify ourself with Jesus as the substitute slain instead of us.

We make this identification by submitting to a "ritual death" in baptism, in which we confess ourselves as the real guilty party deserving of the death which the innocent Jesus suffered **in our place**.

In this "ritual death" we humble ourselves before God, confessing our total inability to deliver ourselves from the penalty which we justly deserve, and gratefully accepting the unmerited love shown to us, when Jesus took upon himself the penalty which should have been ours.

In this "ritual death" we covenant with God to turn away from our sin. We appeal to Him for the grace and forgiveness which will cleanse our guilty hearts and release us from fear of judgement.

By this "ritual death", the person we once were, who committed those sins, is regarded as dead. The past is obliterated, **just as it would be, if we were actually dead**.

Through the "**ritual resurrection**" which follows this "ritual death", we are granted freedom to begin life again, just as though we had really died and then been raised from the dead.

In place of the sinner, we once were, a "new" person now exists. We are "born again", spiritually, to a new life, in which we must learn to remain "dead to sin" and follow the way of faith and obedience.

For those who thus truly turn away from their sins, Christ has paid the penalty for sins. (Isaiah 53:6-11 & 1 Peter 2:24 & 1 Peter 3:18) Our sins are forgiven. They will never be mentioned again. (Ezekiel 33:16)

However, unrepentant sinners who do not accept the love of God in giving His Son to die for them, will have to pay the penalty for themselves. ([Revelation 21:8](#)).

A LEGAL TRANSACTION?

It is dangerous to concentrate merely on the "legal" aspects of the Atonement. The subject cannot be reduced to a mere legal transaction.

There are no "legal rights" to salvation. Left to law alone, without God's love, we are lost.

The Atonement is about the love of God. Salvation is by grace an unmerited gift.

Nevertheless, in order to convey the message of love, the Bible does use "legal" concepts.

As we briefly study these legal concepts however, we must learn to see beyond them, to the love that can change our hearts towards God. They are a tool to achieve that goal nothing more!

CONCEPT 1 - THE JUSTICE OF GOD

The message is clear that God must never be accused of ignoring His law that sin incurs the penalty of death.

The penalty must be carried out, or a legal justification found for pardon.

So, the Bible says in [Romans 3:22-26](#), that God is righteous (i.e. a keeper of His own law) even when exercising forbearance towards sinners (not inflicting an immediate death penalty).

God's **justice** not only imposes a penalty for the guilty, but also provides a means of expiation for those who will repent and accept it.

It is the repentant sinner's confession of his guilt, his humble and contrite heart, his covenant to turn away from sin, and **then** his acceptance, in faith, of the expiatory death of Jesus, which **all** combine to provide the "legal" justification for the forbearance exercised by God.

However, although we may reverently say that the sacrificial death of Jesus is God's **legal** provision, we must not dwell on that aspect. If we do not progress beyond the legal concept, then all we have is useless words.

The real issue is God's **love** for His creation. And it is the sinner's own repentant heart's response to that **love**, which is all important. It is that new love for God, flowing from a **New Heart**, which allows God to regard the penalty as expiated so that it does not have to be borne personally by the sinner himself.

CONCEPT 2 - RANSOM AND REDEMPTION

"Ransom" is the price paid for release of a captive.

"Redeem" has a similar meaning. It means to buy back what is pledged or mortgaged.

The Scripture uses both words to describe what has happened to us.

Sinners have "pledged" or "mortgaged" themselves to sin. They are "slaves" or "captives", under penalty of death.

They are lost and destitute, beyond all hope of paying for themselves, the price of their release.

The price paid for our release from that captive state, is the awful suffering and death of Jesus on the cross, where He gave His life in exchange for ours. (Mark 10:45 & Ephesians 1:7).

I do not believe that we are meant to go beyond the Scriptures to theorise and speculate about all the fine detail of the "legal theory", such as who the price was paid to, or how the life of one man could pay for the life of so many, etc.

What we must really see here is the value of the "Ransom" paid ***the enormous value that Jesus placed on each of us personally***, to "Redeem" us from the penalty of our sins.

In supreme love, he valued us, sinners though we were, as ***equal to Himself***. He considered us worth the awful suffering of the cross, and He freely gave himself for our need.

If we properly appreciate what we have been saved from, and the magnitude of the love that paid such an awful ransom price to save us from our penalty, then we will begin to love in return.

However, redemption is not merely from a penalty, but also from the sinful ways that incurred the penalty. (Titus 2:14 & 1 Peter 1:18)

We are not redeemed from anything until we covenant with God to turn away from all sin.

If we love Jesus enough, for what He has paid to redeem us, then we will want to do that. (John 14:15).

CONCEPT 3 - THE SIN BEARER

In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament, the phrase "to bear sin" means "To bear the penalty of sin".

The Lord has laid on Jesus the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:6) Peter quotes from this chapter in Isaiah to say that Jesus has borne (the penalty of) our sins in His own body. (1 Peter 2:24), providing a way for us to die to (the practice of) sin, and live for righteousness.

Again, the love of God is the motivating force, and our love for God is the desired response.

CONCEPT 4 - THE GRAIN OF CORN

If a grain of corn is never planted, that is all there is..... one grain. If, however it is planted in the ground, it dies and multiplies. The Scriptures use this symbol about Jesus. (John 2:24)

In surrendering His own life, he has given birth to a ***harvest*** of redeemed people who are ***born again*** to freedom from the penalty and the power of sin.

CONCEPT 5 - THE SUBSTITUTE

For me, personally, this is the most compelling of all the pictures which the Bible uses to demonstrate the love of God for us.

In His death, Jesus has given Himself, the righteous for (in place of) the unrighteous. (1 Peter 3:18). He was wounded for ***our*** transgressions, and He was bruised for ***our*** iniquities. (Isaiah 53:5)

Because He has suffered a penalty which He did not deserve for Himself, I will not have to suffer the penalty which I did deserve for myself.

The love for God that does reconcile us to God, comes from our own personal vision of the cross. There we see Jesus reaching out to us in Divine love, taking **our** guilt, and **our** judgement, and **our** suffering upon Himself, and revealing the intense longing of God's heart to save us from **both** the penalty **and** continuing practice of sin.

The love of Jesus for me which underlies this concept, has broken my spirit and made my heart contrite for my sin.

It leaves me with no other choice than to love in return. That has turned my life around. That has reconciled me to God.

BEYOND LEGALITY - LOVE IN ACTION

The death of Jesus is described in brief, but awful and repulsive detail. We are forced to face the sickening truth about the cost of our sin.

Just as in the Old Testament, it was the sinner who slew the animal (and **not** God), so too was Jesus slain at the hands of sinners who represent all of us.

Certainly, it was by God's design and foreknowledge, but it was **our** sin that caused His death.

Just as surely as if we had driven the nails ourselves, it was our wicked hands that slew Him. We made it necessary.

At this point, we are confronted with love.

Nothing at all can quench this love..... not rejection..... not reviling or mocking or false accusation..... not spitting in His face..... not plucking the beard from His face..... not the buffeting and bruising which marred his visage beyond recognition..... not placing that fearsome crown of thorns on His head..... not flogging the skin from His back..... not even nailing Him unjustly to a cross.

We see Jesus accepting all that was done to Him, loving us unconditionally, without retaliation or complaint. Nothing this side of death, nothing in all creation, or all eternity, can ever make this man, or the God who is His Father, cease from loving me.

(Romans 8:38-39)

When I face the terrible cost of my sin, and my responsibility for that terrible suffering, I recoil in horror and my heart cries out to God in contrition. And the words of Jesus echo down the centuries still, as I hear Him intercede for ME..... "Father forgive them".

Such love compels my allegiance. Jesus will not be denied.

The cross opened my eyes to understand the meaning of God's love. Then I began to experience its life changing power. Now I long to be able to love like Jesus.

Love like that lives for ever! (1 Corinthians 13:8)

THE CREATORS GIFT

God so loved the world that he **gave** us Jesus, whose love for us is no less than God's. Both on God's behalf, and in our place, Jesus did the one thing that the immortal God could not do Himself, to redeem us..... **die!**

God gave Jesus, first to show me how to live, and then to die for me in the terrible suffering of the cross.

Now I will not perish for my sins but live for all eternity in the presence of God.

I do not question why it all has to be that way. I do not attempt to explain away some of the concepts used, as "unpalatable" to human feelings and human reason.

I am just so thankful that God did love me and that because of that love, God did give Jesus to die for my need.

I accept that gift of love with feelings of both sadness and joy. First, it broke my heart. Then it healed me! ([Isaiah 61:1](#))

THINGS WHICH WE ARE NOT SAYING

It is unfortunate that it should be necessary to spend time repudiating some of the many false concepts of "Substitution" which have been developed by **carnal** men in their pursuit of a "Cheap Grace".

Let us be quite clear on one very important matter. We are **not** saying that the sacrifice of Christ is a **substitute** for our need to strive for holiness.

Grace does not come without great cost on our part. In a very real way, it will cost us ourselves **and** our lives. ([Matthew 16:24-25](#))

The Scriptures certainly do say that Salvation is a free gift. However, it is given only to those who qualify for the conditions under which the gift is offered!

For those who have been truly convicted of their sins, there is no conflict between the requirement for faith alone and works as well!

Of course, salvation is by faith alone.

However, it is equally clear that the Gospel calls us to repent, and turn to God, and to prove our repentance by our deeds. ([Acts 26:20 NEB](#))

Faith which does not lead to repentance, and which is not accompanied by good works, is not faith at all! ([James 2:14-26](#)) False theories of the Atonement usually attempt to negate this essential combination of faith and works, in some way. Somehow, they usually manage to erect a barrier to real saving faith. Some of these false theories are briefly mentioned below:

(a) Once Saved, Always Saved?

In its worst and most destructive extreme, this teaching actually says that those "believers" who backslide to commit even the worst sins, cannot ever lose their salvation, even if they never repent of those things.

The Bible says however, that those who do such things **cannot inherit the Kingdom of God**. ([1 Corinthians 6:9-19](#) & [1 John 3:15](#))

The Bible also says that it is possible to taste of the goodness of the word of God, and even of the powers of the Age to Come, and then fall from grace beyond the possibility of repentance and salvation. ([Hebrews 6:4-8](#))

(b) Jesus has done it all?

There are those who say that the death of Jesus on the cross is a legal purchase which has somehow paid for our debts without imposing any obligation on us at all for works.

It is supposed to have created a situation whereby our sins are debited to Jesus and the righteousness of Jesus is credited to us, thereby setting aside our own need to purify our hearts.

Any insistence for good works on our part is labelled in a derogatory way as "Legalism", or "Salvation by Works". Some even call it heresy!

Contrary to this, the Scripture does say clearly that **judgement** is on the basis of works. We will be called to give account for what we have **done**. (2 Corinthians 5:10)

Eternal life is reserved only for those who seek for glory and honour and immortality, by patient continuance in well doing. (Romans 2:6-7)

(c) Turning away the wrath of God?

There are those who teach that God's anger against sin was so great, that he demanded satisfaction for His offended holiness. In its worst form, God is said to have satisfied His anger and changed His feelings towards us, only after pouring out His wrath on Jesus.

However, the Atonement is **not** about providing a way to change God's feeling towards us. Nor is it about undeserved wrath poured out on a beloved Son. Nor is it about God demanding satisfaction.

It is about the love of God **poured out on us**. It is about God who cannot die, and Jesus who could and did die, working together in love, to undo the penalty of our failure.

The real objective is to change our feelings towards God and towards sin, in a way that will cause us to change our behaviour!

MUCH MORE THAN A LEGAL TRANSACTION

All of the concepts just rejected, fall down because they concentrate on legal transactions, at the expense of love. They reduce salvation to a mere legal action on God's part. They offer the false hope that our sins can be set aside without a **real** change of heart about obedience.

If we concentrate only on these "legal" aspects of the Atonement, we shall miss the mark by a long way. The Atonement is much, much more than a legal transaction.

Above all else, it is God's unconditional and individual love for each of us, seeking to save us, not only from eternal destruction, but also from lives scarred by the practice of sin.

CONCLUSION

The Atonement is not simply a theory to be studied. It has power to change our lives.

It all comes down to our personal answer to the following vital questions:

- * Has what we believe about the life and death of Jesus, whatever it is, changed our hearts so that we really do love Him enough to obey His teaching? (John 14:15)
- * Are we truly reconciled? Do we now **know** God and His Son? (John 17:3)
- * This does **not** ask whether we merely know **about** God. It asks whether we know Him experientially as a friend, as Abraham did. (Isaiah 41:8 & James 2:23)
- * Has Jesus honoured His promise that He and His Father will come to us and make their home with us? (John 14:23) and that He will reveal Himself to us? (John 14:21)
- * Do we know what it **really** means to become a temple for the Spirit of the living God? (1 Corinthians 3:16 & 1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

- * Do we **really** love one another as Jesus loves us all? (John 13:34)
- * If we don't have those things right, we have **nothing**..... and worse..... **we have lost all!**

But if we do have those things right, then we know THE TRUTH..... and that truth will set us FREE from slavery to sin. (John 8:34-36)

We will be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and **free** to put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God, in true righteousness and holiness. (Ephesians 4:23-24); **free** to grow to the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:13)

*"Now to Him who by the power at work within us is able to do **far more abundantly** than we ask or think, be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus, to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen"*
(Ephesians 3:20-21)