

NECESSITY OF THE ATONEMENT

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The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth from all sin. I John 1:7

My hearers, what is the most wonderful event that ever occurred on earth, that ever happened in the universe? The history of our race is so full of wonderful events-you might well pause for your answer. My answer would be this: by far the most wonderful thing that has ever happened in the universe, is the atoning death of Jesus Christ the Lord. If without philosophizing, if in simplicity you will take what God's Word declares concerning it, you will not only see this to be so, perhaps you will feel it to be so. If you *will* remember who he was-the thought would startle us if we were not so used to it-if you will remember how he died, how the Lord of life and glory, the sinless one, how he died in suffering and shame, and above all if you will remember what he died for, what his death is declared in the Scriptures to mean for the universe and for us, then you will believe that this is the great wonder of all wonders. And yet, God be thanked, it may be the simplest matter of each individual human heart's everyday experience to rest upon that wonderful thought. There are many things we can never comprehend as to their nature, which are yet unquestionable as facts and essential to our existence. To declare before heaven and earth that all our hopes are turned upon the atoning death of Jesus Christ, a man may do that, may live on that atoning death, although it be a mystery he cannot solve.

I wish to speak today of the atonement of Jesus Christ. But that is a large theme. I wish to speak of one particular aspect of it, of the *necessity* of an atonement by the propitiatory death of Jesus Christ. Though the theme looks abstract at the outset, and may be uninviting, I pray your diligent heed, for we are dealing with the substance of the gospel.

The thought of our age turns itself against this necessity of the atonement to a great extent. Many of the tendencies of our time incline men to question whether there is any virtue in sacrificial atonement for sin, and there is nothing more common than to hear superficial people, even good people, saying that they do not see how God the Heavenly Father of men should not forgive us, just as we earthly fathers forgive our children, without requiring some great provision as the basis of this forgiveness. After all, we can learn on such a subject as this only from the Bible. Men in all ages have for the most part recognized the necessity of an atonement. They have shown their recognition of it in very distorted forms, often they have had grossly erroneous conceptions of deity and of their relations to deity. Their ideas of sacrifice and propitiation have been sadly erroneous, grotesque sometimes, often horrible, always degrading. But these are but distortions of a true and right sentiment, of which the human soul is conscious. And then God's Word comes to confirm this instinctive persuasion that there is need of an atonement. The idea of propitiation and of sacrifice which all nations have had finds its counterpart in the divine Word. In the Jewish purifications and the Jewish sacrifices there was not really made an atonement for sin, but they signified an atonement for sin which did not then exist, they pointed forward to an atonement for sin in the future which God Was to accomplish. And now for us that something future has come and the true atonement which all these things prefigured has been fully explained in the complete Word of God. In the light of the New Testament facts and under the guidance of New Testament ideas the necessity of an atonement may be practically clear to our minds. Two chief points are to be distinguished, the *priest* and the *sacrifice*.

1. First, the priest. According to the Old Testament conception of propitiation, certain men were

separated from their fellow men and made mediators between men and God. Now the New Testament counterpart of that idea of propitiation gives us two senses in which the word "priest" may be considered. In one sense there is but one priest, Jesus Christ; in another sense all Christian people are priests, and all equally. In one sense, I say, the New Testament counterpart is that the only priest is Jesus Christ. So we have for the New Testament economy the atoning and interceding word of Jesus Christ. "Seeing then that we have a great High Priest, that is passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession." As the Jewish high priest went through the veil into the most holy place and offered sacrifice, so our High Priest has passed through the heavens into the true sanctuary of that eternal world. His sacrifice is not the blood of bulls and of goats which could never take away sin, which could only symbolize and represent the idea of atonement, his sacrifice is his own blood; himself the High Priest and himself the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world. Not only has he begun this work for the atoning of men, but he lives ever the same High Priest, not dying like the Jewish priest and turning over his work to others but by his continual intercession "he is able to save to the utmost them that come to God through him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." In that sense the whole conception of a propitiation centers upon the propitiation of the Lord Jesus Christ, there is no other priest. No one must come between that priest and our souls.

Will you pardon me an incident that at this moment comes back to my mind. Some years ago, as I was starting to come to New York, a gentleman came up and said, "I want to introduce you to two young ladies. I want to put them under your charge." He explained that some very kind persons in Baltimore were providing for the education of the girls whose families were refined but were now without means. So I brought them along in my care. I knew where they were going-they were going to a convent school. Before parting from them I thought it right to say this much at least-one was an Episcopalian and the other a Presbyterian-I said, "Now whatever ideas you may get in going away, try to cling to the thought that nobody shall come between you and Jesus Christ; you do not need anybody between you and him, try to cling to the idea that you will not have anyone between you and him." One of them said, "Of course not, because that would be a Roman Catholic notion, wouldn't it?" Alas! one of them is a Roman Catholic today and the other was carried home, I understood, to prevent it. I have no word of bitterness for the persons who believe and honestly teach those things, but it seems to me that their teachings strike at the heart of the gospel, and that I must say without reserve there is but one priest, Jesus Christ himself, and nobody has any business to come between my soul and him.

In another sense you are all priests, all alike. Alas! for the fact that so many of those whom we call Protestants have revived the Old Testament idea of human priests, set apart from their fellow men, and even call the New Testament minister a priest. The idea to which the human heart is so inclined is that the propitiation of Jesus Christ is not enough for us poor souls, and we must have some fellow man to be a mediator between us and God, to make expiation for our sins. I am glad to get anybody to pray for me, but I want no prayers of a so-called priest more than of any other man. No official station according to the New Testament idea gives a man's prayers more efficacy than they would have without the official station. A man's piety is more effective than his position. How ready people are to think that the minister's prayers, even where they don't call him priest, have a peculiar efficacy. According to the New Testament conception there is in one sense, then, but one high priest and we need no other, and in another sense we are all alike high priests to offer up spiritual sacrifices for ourselves and one another.

2. Turn now to the other conception, the conception of sacrifice; what does that mean in the light of the New Testament? It may be regarded in various ways.

(a) The sacrificial death of the Redeemer is in one sense a ransom for sinful man, a redemption, a purchase of his salvation. It is the idea of buying and selling, but especially the idea of ransoming from captivity. "Jesus paid it all," the little child of today gets hold of the thought

Jesus paid it all,
All the debt I owe.
Jesus died and paid it all,
Yes, all the debt I owe.

This is a very familiar thought to human experience, and it often comes home to us in simple forms. I am in debt, and all the debt I owe, Jesus paid it. I am a captive, I am a bondman, Jesus died to ransom me. You must not press the idea too far or you will be misled. But within limits it is just and instructive. We are bound captives, and Jesus is our ransom. He purchased our salvation.

(b) Again, the atoning death of Jesus Christ propitiates God. It makes God favorably inclined toward us. It makes God propitious toward those with whom for their sins he must otherwise be angry. It is a very common notion today that anger is wrong: that it is out of the question to speak of God as really feeling anger, and that must be in Scripture a mere figure of speech. But my friends, anger is right sometimes, anger is sometimes necessary. I would not give much for a man who is not sometimes thoroughly angry. A man that knows not how to burn with moral indignation at the wickedness he sees around him and the wrongdoing, there is something wrong in him. Anger is compatible with love. Parents are often angry with their children and yet love them all the time. We find that the apostle knew that it was possible to be angry, and sin not. Anger, I say, is compatible with love. It is altogether a mistake to suppose that anger is always wrong. It is a mistake to think you should not punish a child when you are angry. What was anger given you for but to stimulate you to punish when you should? Because anger is often carried to excess it does not follow that it is all wrong, but it follows that you must control it.

The whole thing is illustrated by the example of our Saviour, who was one day surrounded by a crowd of the unsympathizing and unbelieving, and it is said that he "looked around upon them with anger, being grieved at the hardness of their hearts." That is it, anger and yet grief: grieved and at the same time angry. That is what we need to be: angry and still loving. Anything less than that is a one-sided notion of truth and duty. And that being so, why should men shrink from the thought that God is angry with sin; that he hates sin; that it excites indignation in him, and that something was necessary in order to make God favorable toward sinful beings. Here again we must not press it too far: and we must not press anything too far when dealing with images. It is a gross caricature to say that God the holy Father hates his children and will not be gracious to them until the Redeemer propitiates him into doing what he does not wish to do. The Scriptures tell us he was sent to be the propitiation for our sins because God loved us. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be a propitiation for our sins. Yet it is true at the same time that the propitiation was needed because he hated our sins and was angry with them.

(c) Once again, this atoning death of Christ is set before us as necessary to vindicate the right. The most majestic and dignified conception that enters your soul is the conception of moral obligation. There is the word "ought"-"I ought to do this, and ought not to do that." If a man's soul in its deepest fibers responds thrillingly to that sentiment, he has got something in him. The right ought to prevail. Alas! how often, how sadly, how wretchedly, it is otherwise. Our observation of life often leads us to see how wrong goes up and right goes down and we think there ought to be a compensation somehow

for such a state of things, under the government of the supreme sovereign, the high and holy God. If our moral nature requires this and cannot be satisfied without some such idea, so does the law of God require it. What propriety is there in having a law if there is to be no punishment for those who violate it? Without some such idea as this the moral government of God would lose its stability. So too there must be something to make it right that God should forgive sin and save the sinner, so that he "may be just," as the Scriptures say he is, "and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus."

I do not undertake to explain it all; it is a problem that deals with the relations of the finite and the infinite, the relations between sin and holiness, between time and eternity, and if a man thinks he is going to explain and comprehend it in all its relations, of course he deludes himself. If a man is slow to accept it as a fact, until he has it all explained to him he may never accept it. You cannot explain the great fundamental facts of existence, and it is so here. But while not attempting to explain the atonement, we can see how it acts, as a redemption of sin-ruined man, as a propitiation of the holy and sin-hating God, as a vindication of the right. And thus seeing, we rest with satisfaction upon the great fact of the atonement, as revealed in the Scriptures.

There are two great reasons why men do not see the necessity of the atonement; these are inadequate views of sin and inadequate views of God. Let me speak of these. It is a terrible thing for a man to become so familiar with the idea of sin that he says glibly, "I am a sinner," and does not think what it means. It is yet more terrible when he deludes himself into denying the fact. I remember asking a young man who came to see me some years ago if he was a Christian. He answered, "I hardly suppose you would think me one." I said, "If you are not a Christian, you know you are a sinner." "Well," he said, "that depends." Poor sophisticated fellow! When people don't much believe that they are sinners, then it is utterly useless to talk to them about atonement. They see no necessity for it, of course not, if they feel that they personally have no need. Alas! how natural it is for us to have inadequate views of sin. We are so accustomed to it in ourselves and in life all around us. A man says, "Yes, I am a sinner, of course I am, all men are sinners," and that thought that all men are sinners breaks the force of self-condemnations of conscience, and the custom of prevailing immorality weakens our perception of the evil of sin. It is very hard at all times, and especially in an age so inclined to materialism, to have adequate views of sin. It is only in proportion as we realize the evil of sin that we see the necessity of atonement, and on the other hand a hearty recognition of the atonement gives us more adequate views of sin.

The other great reason why men fail to see the need of atonement is that they have inadequate views of God. I am weary of this everlasting talk about God as simply merciful and loving. Weary because that is only one side of the truth. God is not only merciful and loving, God is just. God is holy, and it is quite as needful to appreciate his holiness and his justice as it is to appreciate his love and mercy. My friends, we live in times when a dreamy humanitarianism prevails, when false notions of clemency are perverting the lives of very many well-meaning men. There are people who shrink from the notion of capital punishment, who believe it is wrong to inflict capital punishment for anything. A French writer has well said, "I should be pleased to see capital punishment discontinued, and the sacredness of human life respected, if the murderers will make the beginning." A sentimental pity for criminals may be a very hurtful thing. So likewise we are often told now that children must never be punished in school, and scarcely ever punished by their parents at home. What is to become of us if we give way to these milk-and-water notions, and lose sight of holiness, justice, and right?

But as I have already said, I do not attempt to explain the nature of the atonement. I only wanted to remind you of some of the reasons why, according to the Scriptures, it is necessary that there should be an atonement. If a man says to me, "Do you understand the exact nature of the atoning work of

Christ so that you can give me the philosophy of it?" I answer, "No, of course not, but if God is satisfied with the provision he has made, if it is his own provision, and if he proclaims it as sufficient, that is enough for me, and why should not that be enough for you? God says to you and to me, 'The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.'"

I remember reading a few years ago the story of a party of Hindus, who were traveling along one day, and one of them was stricken down and fell by the way. The other natives looking carelessly at him went along in their selfish fashion, but a missionary stopped by the poor man and kneeling by him said, "What is your hope for eternity? Have you any hope for eternity?" And feebly, with dying breath, the dusky native gasped, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin. 'Where did you learn that?'" the missionary asked. But he could tell no more and died. In the bosom of his garment the missionary found one leaf out of the New Testament in the man's own language, and there were the words that had struck into the soul of the man, the words that had helped him, living and dying-the words of our text today. "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

Ah! my friends, amid all the blessings of this great country, the light of science and the light of literature, amid all the nobleness and real sweetness of what we call culture, amid all the blessedness of Christian homes and Christian society, there is no higher thought for you and me than that uttered to the missionary as he knelt by the poor Hindu's side. Let us take those words as ours for life, and for death, and for-ever: "The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

[[Home](#)]