

The Atonement

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Preacher: Prof Donald Macleod

[0 : 00] Well, our theme, as you've been told, is the atonement. And this is, of course, God's answer to our human sin. And I suppose that in many ways the most important preparation for it, and our study of it, is the sense of our own personal sin and our own spiritual need.

And the outstanding discussion of the topic was by a teacher called Anselm. And it was objected to him once that his doctrine was too severe.

His response was, ah, but you haven't pondered the gravity of sin. And I believe that all shallow views of the atonement are the consequence of shallow perception of sin and superficial awareness of our own spiritual need.

If we know something of the depth of our own depravity and the extent of our own guilt, then we appreciate God's provision in the blood of his Son.

I want, first of all, to reflect on the facts, that is, on the suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 38] We recall that those sufferings began not at the cross of Calvary, but at the very inception of our Lord's life and ministry.

He is born in a low condition. He comes into this world at the lowest end of the social scale.

He is born into poverty, born into oppressiveness, born into weakness, born into homelessness.

And his whole life is homogeneous with that low beginning. He was the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.

There was, throughout his life, poverty, deprivation, and homelessness. Pain, thirst, weariness, misunderstanding, rejection by those he came to save.

[2 : 51] We recall that all those that intensified as the Lord moves into the shadow of Calvary.

We recall the great struggle of Gethsemane, where the Lord becomes sharply aware of the impending crisis.

And where, as he contemplates his own imminent encounter with God, an encounter in which he, as sinned in all its naked vulnerability, is going to stand answering for that sin in the near presence of God, as he becomes aware of the awesomeness of that collision, experiences the darkest and deepest side of our human emotions.

He moves into overwhelming sorrow. He begins to be so amazed, to be very heavy.

He begins to feel overwrought, overboard, as he ponders the encounter between his soul-frails, own frail humanity, and the unmitigated reaction of God against sin.

[4 : 36] And as he faces those realities, he moves into the deepest anguish, into the deepest fear, into that moment when he asks, maybe for the first time, whether he has in his humanness the strength with which to cope with this unspeakable collision.

Now, I think that often, in our own human experience, there are moments when we ponder whether we can cope.

And I think it's fair to say, in the goodness of God's grace, that those experiences we dread are seldom as awful in the moment of experience as they are in expectation and contemplation.

And then, I'm certain that for Christ, the opposite was the case. I'm certain that in the garden, his perception of the agony was limited.

I'm certain that no human imagination was really able to grasp what it was going to mean to be the sin of the world in the presence of God.

[6 : 29] And I'm certain that Gethsemane, as I'm thought was, was only a shadow of the horror of Calvary.

In that moment of Calvary, we know that Christ moved into unmitigated physical pain, moved into total social desolation, experienced all that hell could do by way of darkness and onslaught and temptation, experienced above all the agony of being forsaken by God his Father and

being left at last as the bearer of the world's sin, the great outsider crying, crying. there is a sense in which no being was less prepared and less apt for the dereliction than God's old Son.

There is a sense in which the very closeness and perfection of the bond between him and his Father made the desolation more excruciating.

He had never known in the remotest degree what the loss of God was. there is a beautiful emphasis in the story of Abraham and Isaac on the fact that father and son as they went up to Mount Moriah they went up both of them together and that's the way it was with God's Son and God the Father as they went up to Calvary they went up both of them together I am not alone but the father sent me with me and yet in the moment of the son's greatest need and greatest pain God is not there he cries and he is not heard the familiar resource the ultimate resource the only resource is not there the

[9 : 27] God who was always there the God who now was needed as never needed before that God was nowhere to be seen there was no answer to his cry there was no comfort and as we saw the Lord is left God less the Lord is left with no perception of his own sonship unable for the one and only time in his life to say Abba Father with no sense of God's love and no sense of the operation of God's purpose but only that why that comes out of the darkness long ago we saw that sin was lawlessness that sin was anomia we saw that as lawlessness it belongs in the black hole in the great and absolute outside and on the cross of

Calvary God's son is lawlessness and God's son is in the black hole and from that black hole he cries to his God and all he can say is the why that is the only appropriate word from lawlessness and yet is the son's final agony as reaches out to the God whom he needs but who must sin he doesn't deserve and from his presence he is banished because it was God his son not sparing but dealing with him a sin deserved to be dealt with he is not dealt with a son but he is dealt with a sin in the moment of his desolation it is a moment in the experience of the son it is also

I think a moment in the experience of the father it is a moment in the experience of the triune God too because there is a loss in the father corresponding to the loss in the son and although we're on the limits of the outer parameters of revelation we have to accept the new testament's constant emphasis that the cost is borne not only by God the son but borne by God the father and if we contemplate the great fact of the divine compassion that compassion is never simply the pity of the father it is also it is the pity of the father no less than the pity of

God the son the facts I take the facts because the impression is so often given that our understanding of the cross as evangelicals that our doctrine of the atonement somehow increases the pain of the savior it is not our theory that constitutes the pain of Christ it is the suffering the facts that constitute pain that on that cross he suffered in body and suffered in soul suffered from heaven and from earth and from hell the fact is Christ died the fact is that he paid the wages of sin that he was dealt with as sin deserved let me if I can for a moment increase let me intensify the problem there are three facts that make the central fact of the suffering even more appalling first of all there is the sinlessness of

Christ he dies it is a great shame that we are so little conscious of the anomalous of that that he who knows sin should die that he who had sin should pay the wages of sin which is death you are so familiar with the cross you are so familiar with the death of the sinless one that you don't appreciate the anomaly you don't see the problem because you have always been hearing of this fact that the sinless one died but you ponder the sinless one is paying the wages of sin why is the sinless one paying the wages of sin the problem does not lie in the theory lies in the fact of the sinless one die the sinless one paying the wages of sin the second anomaly is this that the one who receives or pays those wages of sin is the son of

[15 : 55] God and again you have heard that so often you have been hearing it maybe from your very earliest recollection and you are so familiar with it and you don't ponder the grandeur the glory the paradox the anomalousness of it we're told of the soldiers that sitting down they watched him him there who is he in yonder stall at his feet the shepherds fall tis the Lord what's he doing on the cross what's he doing between two thieves what's he doing paying the wages of sin what do you think the angels think or thought we explored that last time which things the angels decide peer down to look into to see that great creator being dealt with a sin deserved they can understand human mortality they can understand human death because we're sinners but what is he doing on the cross what's he doing paying the wages of sin you can imagine the whispered voices going

through paradise have you heard he's borne the wages of sin he's he's died his his blood has been shed the blood of the son of

God feed the church of God which he has purchased with his own blood watch him there God's own son son the sinless son pays the wages of sin there is a third factor which again tightens the problem and it's this that that cross is the act of God the father God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son he did not spare his own son but delivered him up for us all it is not Pontius Pilate it is not Judas Iscariot it is not the Jewish powers it is not even Jesus Christ himself the great high priest there is a priesthood that stands above and beyond the priesthood of the son there is an agency that even goes beyond the agency of the mediator

I believe with all my heart that at the cross on the cross Christ is priest that on that cross Christ is giving himself voluntarily prompted by his love for his people prompted by his love for you and his love for me but I believe that there is a higher agency still that that cross is the act and the work of God the father that he his son not sparing gave him to die I scarce can't take it in I said to you that you will never understand this cross except you come as sinners but I said too you will never understand it unless first of all you see does a gigantic problem as a problem of mind boggling proportions unless you see the scandal of it if you come to the cross and say what a lovely thing what a nice thing what a beautiful thing if you come to that way you never see the glory but if you come to and see what is this ugliness what is this blot on the moral universe what is this where God the father is crucifying his old son where the righteous God is extracting from the sinless one the wages of sin what is this blot this ugliness this horrendous anomaly this thing that we can't understand this offense this hateful wretched ugly thing the cross that's what it is that's why I want to begin with the facts it is not the theory that caused the Lord's pain it wasn't Amos's doctrine of the atonement that caused the Lord's pain it was that cross these facts in history that's where the cross belongs on a green hill far away outside a city wall where my dear Lord was crucified in time and space that's where the pain was in history God condemning sin in the flesh of his own son well you stand before it and I want you to see this problem

I want you to ask what on earth is going on what is God doing does God know what he's doing let me put it to you this way that the cross of Jesus Christ is a bigger problem than the problem of Belsen and the problem of Auschwitz and the problem of Lockerbie because there is something going on which at first glance is consummately evil and consummately irrational where God's own son is being dealt with by God the way that sin deserved to be treated and I ask in the words of Psalm 73 can that in the highest be knowledge of things below does God know what he's doing has God blown his mind when he's dealing with his own son as sin deserves to be treated that is the problem and what is the

[22 : 25] New Testament solution well it is this that the death of Christ was a sacrifice it was not an accident it wasn't an act of divine malice and I want you to remember how plausible that second interpretation is because the cross looks malicious it looks malevolent but no says the New Testament it was a sacrifice behold the lamb of God the lamb that bears the sin of the world this one who by one offering by one sacrifice has perfected forever those that are sanctified that's how the Bible sees the death of Christ fundamentally this anomaly this ugliness in the middle of history it is seen by the

New Testament as a sacrifice what do I mean what I mean that the apostles as they look through the eyes of God's spirit at the event and the facts of Calvary are led to say this is the fulfillment of all those Old Testament sacrifices this is the consummation of that instinct in the universal human heart that has led to sacrificial and piacular religion because it wasn't confined to the Jewish civilization it was part of Roman civilization part of Greek civilization it was a category which lay there so near to hand it was the supreme category under which they could subsume and through which they could understand the death and suffering of the

Lord Jesus Christ he was a fulfillment of all of those Old Testament sacrifices made what does it mean it means that he was the lamb without blemish and without spot it means that he was the one to whom the sin was imputed you remember how in the Old Testament sacrifices the offerer the sinner came put his head on the head of the sacrifice hands and confessed over that victim his own sins which were transferred symbolically to the intended victim Christ is the lamb without blemish Christ is the one to whom the sin is transferred transferred not only by the imputation of God but transferred by his own assumption that he loved the church takes our liabilities our debts to himself and how magnificent and how awe inspiring is the New Testament's language in this

connection he made him who knew no sin to be sin for us it is very similar you know to the language used of the incarnation in which God becomes man the word becomes flesh goes beyond that this marvellous presentation perforation penetration of the human by the divine becomes man becomes flesh becomes sin the sin of the world

Christ on that cross taking his identity from sin bearing all the liabilities of sin want to pause for a moment maybe there's some sin troubling you maybe there's that one sin that great sin can I get you to this point Christ dealt with it Christ bore Christ became it became invested with its guilt liable to its punishment was dealt with as that sin of yours that has caused you so much trouble today as that sin deserved to be dealt with made sin and because made sin made a curse all those becomeings of the

[27 : 45] New Testament genomenos made man made flesh made sin made a curse that's the penetration that's what's meant in the great process of incarnation and atonement you had the blameless the blemishless victim the transference of sin you had the bearing of the punishment and the slaying of the victim Christ goes through all of these dealt with God his son not sparing he might have looked at the sin and seen it as a sin borne by his son but have felt that that fact demanded some mitigation but no there is no sparing he is catara he is cursed he is manished the absolute recoil of

God to the sin that Christ was he is his son but his sonship is obscured by the anomia by the lawlessness the son belongs in his bosom the anomia belongs in the black hole and God puts the whole universe and more between himself and the son of his love an immeasurable distance to the farthest edge of reality and I think if I can stretch my own concept to its limit that he is banished even beyond reality because the black hole is what lies beyond reality outside it is the place of outer darkness light reality and light coextensive Christ in his banishment is not in the realm of light he is outside in the realm of unreality in that place where

God can't see sin he is so purer eyes than to behold in equity have you ever pondered how far the omniscient God would have to banish sin before it would be beyond his gaze how utter how total that recoil must be he is the victim the sacrifice without blemish he is the victim who bears the sin who is the sin who is dealt with as the sin deserves who pays the price the blood there are views of salvation which are magnificent on the incarnation which tell us the whole truth about the fact that God became man which suggests that in that fact itself of the incarnation our salvation lies in God taking our nature to himself and by that union transforming it there are those who tell us that Christ makes atonement by means of avicarious repentance and amen in the human heart of Christ to God's condemnation but please when God saved the world the process did not stop at Bethlehem and the process did not stop at Gethsemane if my sin were atoned for by incarnation then the Lord could have returned to glory from the cradle in Bethlehem if my sin could have been dealt with by an amen to God's condemnation then the saviour could have returned to glory from Gethsemane but my sin was such the offence

I had given to God such the depravity such the guilt such that the salvation could not be completed until Christ had gone into the black hole the son of man came to give his life a ransom for many he did not come simply to take my nature he did not come simply to say amen to my condemnation he came so that on the cross he would endure what my sin deserved obedient unto death and on that cross become an accursed thing that accursed thing which is in the very moment of its accursedness consecrated for their sakes I sanctify myself

[33 : 17] Christ as the great sacrifice the lamb without blemish and without spot the lamb who bears the sin the lamb who is dealt with as my sin never somebody else's sin but as my sin deserves that's what he is he is the Passover who secures my immunity to destruction he is the scapegoat who bears my sin into an area beyond reality where God cannot see it and my friends from where it will never return God will never bring it back a wilderness in which no man dwells he is the Holocaust the burnt offering left totally vulnerable to the exactions of God's righteousness not spared but totally exposed to all that my sin deserved the fact is he received the wages of sin you mention the penal theory of the atonement oh horror horror horror they say but what happened to

Christ on the cross he died what is death it's the penalty of sin the question whether Christ endured the penalty of sin it's not a question of theory it's a question of fact on that cross he was dealt with a sin deserved the glory of it is it wasn't his own sin it was our sin he bore the sin of the world long long ago now I read in John Duncan his sentiment that the best expression of the gospel he had ever heard was an attract which spoke of black American Christian who said either he die or I die

he die me no die

I have often found that that gives offense to Christians of some sophistication but I've never outgrown it and I still think that it's a superbly and unforgettably all that needs to be said either he die or I die he die me no die he is the sacrifice without blemish who bears our sin and to endure its penalty and what does that sacrifice achieve what does the cross contemplate as an act of the father's high priesthood in which he offers his son as a sacrifice for the sins of his enemies what does that sacrifice achieve well there are many great technical words for it let me summarize them very briefly first there is the effect of the cross on sin it expiates sin a word which means in its root covers the sacrifice of

Christ covers my sin the sacrifice of his obedience covers my sin you remember Romans 5 by the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners by the obedience of the one man the many were made righteous your disobedience covered by the obedience of Christ by the glory of a saviour's achievement and yet I tell you this remember you sin my sin so great that when Christ served God and obeyed and suffered in your place he didn't do more than had to be done the cross was no work of super irrigation sin on that cross

Christ did all that was necessary and on that cross Christ did no more than was necessary I say indeed it was not necessary that he be there but it was necessary that being in the place of his people and for his people and for their salvation. All he did had to be done because my sin is so great that when Christ completes the atonement there is nothing left that is superfluous.

[38 : 51] There is simply an expiation. There is a covering. But tonight your sin is invisible as a Christian to the eye of God. It's been cancelled. It's been cast into the depths of the sea. It is covered.

It's obscured by the obedience of the Savior. That sacrifice on the cross expiates sin. What is the effect of the sacrifice on God? The Godward movement of Calvary. Great problems there I know. But that's where the Bible presents it. That the cross impacts God. Has a great Godward effect and a great Godward consequence. There are three words to be used here.

The cross propitiates God. The reality of God's anger. That anger dealt with by the curse bearing of a sin, of a son. In other words, that atonement that covers my sin removes the anger of God and creates peace. He is our propitiation. There is peace between ourselves and God. Again, the cross reconciles God. Reconciliation presupposes enmity.

It is not simply that my human heart and intellect had something against God. But I tell you, God had something against me. He had my sin against me. And he had it against me. It mattered. And God took it seriously.

You see the glorious process in 2 Corinthians 5. God always loved his people. We've seen that.

[41 : 15] God has never been without loving you. But God did not proceed directly from loving you to being at peace with you. There is this terrible process that lies between his love and his peace.

He made him who knew no sin to be sin in our place so that we might become God's righteousness in Christ. And it's only when I become God's righteousness that God is at peace, that God is at peace with me.

He said, peace with me because I'm righteous in Christ. Because Christ has done all that needed to be done.

And I say again, how righteous are we? As righteous as Christ. How righteous is Christ? As righteous as God.

And the glory of God. And the glory of it is that when the church of God pleads, confessing sin, praying for forgiveness, it does not address its prayer to the divine clemency or the divine pity, but to the divine righteousness.

[42 : 42] He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sin. Grace reigns through righteousness.

I'm saying to you, you are so righteous in Christ that the great advocate demands your forgiveness, righteousness, insists upon it because you are righteous with all the righteousness of Jesus.

The cross propitiates, it appeases, it deals with the anger of God. The cross reconciles, it deals with all that God had against you.

So that tonight, God has nothing against you. You are whiter than the snow. There is no condemnation.

It was Luther's discovery of that mighty fact. Not only justification, but the atonement that lay beneath it, that liberated Europe from the bondage of an evil conscience.

[44 : 05] It's a great shame that so many of us in the reformed tradition, Luther's heirs, that we know so little of the exhilaration, the joy, the emancipation that should come from this knowledge. God has nothing against you. There are times in the day, maybe many times in the day, when you must say to yourself simply, simply, for your own encouragement, God loves you. And God has nothing against you. All he had against you has been dealt with between himself and his son. Your saviour. The cross propitiates or appeases God. The cross reconciles God. The cross satisfies. Not a biblical word, but a word with its own value under proper controls. It means that on that cross, God did all that was necessary.

[45 : 33] Please? All that was necessary. There is nothing left to do. There is no need to supplement it, to make good, the imagined deficiencies of a saviour's obedience and blood. There is nothing. He has satisfied. He has done enough. Done all that needed to be done. He cried. It is finished. It's complete. Let's look at it that way. What do we bring tonight along to God to satisfy him?

The whole glory of faith is that it is so completely satisfied with Christ.