

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ
Lecture 24
Redemption and Moral Influence

Today we are going to wrap up our long series on the doctrine of the atonement. But before we turn to our new subject for today I want to just say a final word concerning the satisfaction of divine justice that we closed with last time.

You will remember I said that on the analysis of the French-Swiss theologian, Francois Turretin, that the punishment suffered by Christ was God the Father's withdrawing from him the beatific vision of God and suspending the joy and the comfort and sense and fellowship of the full felicity of communion with God. It is important to understand that although Christ suffers this as a divine person, he does so in his human nature, not in his divine nature. It is Jesus Christ, the man, who makes atonement for our sin and who becomes our sin-bearer and bears the punishment for our sin and hence the necessity of the incarnation. Hebrews 2:14-15 says,

Since therefore the children [that's us] share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.

So it is in his humanity and that common human nature that Christ shares with us that he experiences death and the rupture of fellowship with God the Father on the cross thereby bearing our punishment.

I think that this understanding of Christ's punishment fits in very nicely with the model of the incarnation that I laid out in the previous section in this Defenders class. You will remember when we talked about the incarnation, I offered a model of the incarnation according to which the divine aspects of the second person of the Trinity (the *Logos*) were largely subliminal or subconscious during the life of Christ, and that his waking consciousness was purely consistent with a human experience. So as a human being he bore all of the anxieties and the sufferings and the weaknesses that we do and so could identify with us. It would be Christ in his waking human consciousness that would experience this bereavement of fellowship with God the Father on the cross and the forsakeness by God the Father. The divine subliminal – the *Logos* himself – isn't in his divine nature ruptured from fellowship with God the Father. But it would be in this waking human consciousness – in his human nature – that the person of the *Logos* would suffer these bereavements and so bear the punishment for our sin in his human nature.

It is the divine *Logos* himself who suffers these punishments but he does so in his human nature.

We've reviewed, first, penal substitution as an essential, and I would say, central element of any biblically adequate atonement theory. Secondly, we looked at the satisfaction of divine justice as an essential element of any adequate atonement theory. Today we come to number three – the third motif or facet or element – of any adequate atonement theory, and that will be redemption.

Redemption through Christ's blood will be a vital part of any biblically adequate atonement theory.¹ Christ's atoning death frees us from bondage to sin, death, and hell and so liberates us from Satan's power. Contemporary ransom theorists recognize that the ransom price of our redemption need not be thought of as paid to Satan (as the church fathers thought) in order to release us from bondage. Rather the ransom price is paid to God to discharge the debt of punishment that we owe to divine justice. Just as we speak of a criminal's having "paid his debt to society" by fully serving the sentence of punishment for his crime, so we can speak of Christ's having paid the debt that we owe to God. This is a debt of punishment. Talk of ransom is therefore a metaphor for penal substitution. We are back to penal substitution again. Ransom theories are thus not standalone theories of the atonement but they are a facet of any atonement theory that will have penal substitution at its very heart.

Redemption should be augmented by other motifs which we've not had the time to address such as becoming a new creation in Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says, "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and behold, the new has come." Part of our reconciliation to God will be becoming this new creation.

Atonement from sin is a forensic transaction. That is to say it is a legal transaction. A merely legal or forensic transaction would be powerless to transform our lives without the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctification. Justification is a legal transaction whereby our sins are imputed to Christ, he pays the penalty that those sins deserve, and therefore we are declared legally righteous before God. But we don't, in virtue of that, become virtuous, selfless, loving, good people. That requires regeneration by the Holy Spirit – being born again – then sanctification by the Spirit – walking in the Spirit, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, exercising the gifts of the Spirit, through sanctification. So while we are legally freed from condemnation and are imputed Christ's righteousness, we still need to be transformed by the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in actually infusing righteousness into us. That will be a life-long process of sanctification until we go home to be with God in glory.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I am curious – thinking here of 2 Corinthians 5, the new creation – what do you think are the implications for that on the subject of apostasy?

¹ 5:03

Dr. Craig: The question is: if a person is a new creation in Christ, can he walk away from Christ and commit what is called apostasy and go back to that state of condemnation from which he was redeemed? This is obviously a subject on which Christians differ. Roman Catholics and Lutherans, for example, believe that apostasy is possible and that a person can lose his salvation. By contrast, Reformed or Presbyterian churches tend to believe that this is impossible. When you see someone apparently commit apostasy, he was never really regenerate to begin with. It is not as though he has lost his salvation; he never had it. I think many Baptists, though not all, would tend to follow the Reformed thinkers in this regard.² We'll talk about this subject in detail when we get to the doctrine of salvation and look at the subject of whether you can commit apostasy as a believer. My own persuasion is that anyone who takes the warnings in Hebrews chapter 6 and chapter 10 seriously has to say that apostasy is a possibility for a regenerate believer. This is an incentive for us to constantly examine ourselves to make sure that we are walking in the fullness of the Spirit and that we are staying in the faith. It seems to me that what the book of Hebrews contemplates is the real possibility of deliberately rejecting Jesus Christ and so going back to that state of condemnation. The epistle, or letter, to the Hebrews was written to Jewish believers who were under persecution and under the threat of this persecution they were tempted to revert to Judaism. The author of Hebrews says, *If you do that, you trample underfoot the blood of the Son of God, and there is no more redemption for you. Therefore you must not do this. You must persevere.* I take those warnings at face value. But, as I say, this is a controversial question on which Christians disagree.

END DISCUSSION

Let's turn to the fourth motif that I wanted to briefly talk about, and that is moral influence. Christ's death is the source of a moral influence upon humanity which helps to draw people to faith in Christ and also to persevere through trials and even martyrdom. Taken in isolation, a moral influence theory, I think, is quite hopeless as an atonement theory. You will recall that we examined this with regard to the medieval theologian and logician Peter Abelard. Not only is a pure moral influence theory biblically inadequate (because it can't do justice to penal substitution, satisfaction of divine justice, and so forth), but it is also powerless to explain, for example, how redemption would be accomplished for all of those believers who lived prior to the time of Christ. His death had no moral influence upon them whatsoever because they had never even heard of Christ much less his passion and death. Therefore there would be no means of salvation for Jewish believers prior to the advent of Christ. Moreover, once penal substitution is removed from the theory then the moral influence theory becomes truly bizarre. In his

classic work *The Atonement*, the philosopher-theologian R. W. Dale gives the following illustration. He says,

If my brother made his way into a burning house to save my child from the flames, and were himself to perish in his heroic venture, his fate would be a wonderful proof of his affection for me and mine; but if there were no child in the house, and if I were told that he entered it and perished with no other object than to show his love for me, the explanation would be absolutely unintelligible.

I think that is a wonderful illustration. Penal substitution thus lies at the very heart of the moral influence of the passion and the death of Christ. It is because he has died for our sins to rescue and redeem us that it does show his great love for us.

The moral influence of Christ's self-sacrificial death upon mankind, when you think about it, is truly inestimable. It is repeatedly represented figuratively in literature and graphically in art. The death of Christ has, I think even more than his teaching, made Jesus of Nazareth a captivating and arresting person for hundreds of millions, and perhaps even billions, of people down through human history. It has inspired countless numbers of people to bear with courage and faith terrible pain and even death knowing that they are following on the same Calvary Road as their Lord.³ As I said earlier, I think it is not at all implausible that only in a world which includes Christ's passion and atoning death would the optimal number of people come freely to love and know God and so to find eternal life. Not only God's love and holiness, but especially God's wisdom, is manifest in the atoning death of Christ.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I am going to take a risk on a passage of new understanding which Jesus said, *I am the gate for the sheep.*

Dr. Craig: Can you give us the reference?

Student: Yes, it is John 10:7.

Dr. Craig: I'll read that aloud: "So Jesus again said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, I am the door of the sheep.'"

Student: This I never understood before but I had new understanding, I guess the Holy Spirit, and I am going to shoot it out and see if you can validate that. That is Jesus is the gate for a spiritual being where when a human in our fallen state lost that spirituality. So Jesus being fully God and fully man, he is the gate of spiritual and secular. When we follow him we can come in and out as a regenerated person. This says in verse 1, "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by

³ 15:14

some other way, is a thief and a robber.” It is whoever does not enter into this consolidation of being a spiritual person and at the same time with humanity is not going to follow Jesus. In that sense the moral standard comes from us identifying with that spirituality and following him as our shepherd. He also talks about the shepherd gives his life for the sheep. If that is the case then that is where the moral standard lies.

Dr. Craig: OK. I am having difficulty putting this together. I don't see in these verses the sort of dichotomy that you are drawing between the spiritual and the physical or the secular. What this passage to me seems to be saying is the exclusivity of salvation through Christ. He and he alone represents the way to eternal life and into the Kingdom of God and to be one of the sheep or children of God. I guess I just don't see that sort of dualism in this passage. The moral influence that I was speaking of, and that the classic moral influence theory of the atonement is speaking of, is the way in which the passion and death of Christ shows to humanity the tremendous love of God so that we are drawn to him. Our hearts are attracted to him. Look how much he loved us that he would go to this depth for our sake and our salvation. That is the notion of the moral influence here. I am suggesting that that is an important aspect of the atonement, but it is just not a standalone aspect. The heart of it is penal substitution in seeing Christ's self-sacrificial love in bearing this terrible punishment for us so that we could go free.⁴

Student: I agree. When I understood that Jesus is the only way, that exclusivity is that he integrated the spiritual and the humanity into one being, and we enter into that integration.

Dr. Craig: It is certainly true that he is unique in that respect in that he and he alone has both a divine nature and a human nature. None of us – no other person – has two natures in the way that Jesus Christ does. So that does make him unique.

Let me just advise you here, in Eastern Orthodoxy the incarnation has come to displace the cross as the center of gravity for the theory of the atonement. I fear that that might happen in what you are suggesting. You are saying that it is in his having a divine nature and a human nature that these two are truly integrated into one. Similarly, we can be integrated into the spiritual life. But notice how that neglects the death of Christ and his substitutionary punishment. I do think the incarnation is necessary, as we saw from Hebrews. The incarnation is necessary in order that a divine person in his human nature can pay the penalty for our sins, but it is not simply by integrating divinity and humanity that we are saved. If Christ were to become incarnate, live his life, give his teaching, and then ascend into heaven, there still would be no redemption because there would be no satisfaction of divine justice. So the incarnation alone isn't enough. It is not even the

center of gravity. It is the necessary threshold or the presupposition for the death of Christ that brings our redemption.

Student: When Jesus was hanging on the cross, he said, “My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?” Was he at that point in time still fully human and fully God?

Dr. Craig: Definitely, yes! Oh, yes, definitely he was at that point fully human and fully God. I thought you were going to ask a different question, but that one is easy. He is fully divine, he is the *Logos* (the second person of the Trinity), and he still has a human nature which is suffering terribly. The more difficult question is: does that represent the point that Turretin describes as the point at which Christ experiences this loss of full felicity and fellowship with the Father? That is the way it is often taken. This is often called the Cry of Dereliction which says here is Jesus forsaken and abandoned by God the Father. Until you realize that what Jesus is saying there is he is praying Psalm 22 which is the psalm of God's righteous servant in distress. If that is the case then this might be seen as a moment at which Jesus is very near to God the Father, faithfully enduring innocent suffering and expressing in prayer to God through the psalms his confidence in God. Then before he dies he says, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” That doesn't look like someone who is derelict of God the Father. The punishment of sin, we saw, is death. Therefore I don't think that Christ experiences that full punishment for sin until he actually dies. But that wasn't your question. Your question was: is he both fully divine and fully human, and that is clear, yes.

Student: He says also on the cross “it is finished.” I've heard people say that they think that that means the separation from God is finished. Then he gives up his spirit.

Dr. Craig: I think that is clearly wrong. Do you understand the question? Christ says, “It is accomplished” or “it is completed” or “it is finished.”⁵ I hate the translation “is finished” because that is the sort of word we use in idiomatic English to say “you are done for.” But the word “*tetelestai*” means “it is completed” or “it is accomplished.” Your question is: is that the moment at which now redemption has been accomplished? If that were the case then God could have immediately translated him into heaven, assumed him into heaven, and he wouldn't have had to die. Then it seems to me very clear the full punishment for sin would not have been exacted because the punishment for sin is death. So any intervention prior to the death would have aborted the process of redemption rather than completed it. I think what he is saying is that his ministry is completed, he has fully obeyed his Father and discharged his duties and now he is ready to die and give his life, and does so then.

Student: He also says, *I give up my spirit*. He gave himself up versus God killing him.

Dr. Craig: Right – he says, *Into your hands I commend my spirit*, and he also says elsewhere that, *No one takes my life from me but I lay it down of my own accord*. This was a voluntary self-sacrifice on the part of Jesus. I emphasized that when we talked about the way in which he is our representative. It is not as though God grabbed him and forced him into this role. He is voluntarily appointed to be our proxy.

Student: “*Tetelestai*” (however you pronounce it) is probably a good translation, but may be not the correct one. It can also be translated “paid in full.” There is pretty good evidence that on the bill of complaint against prisoners in ancient times that would be stamped on by the Roman court – paid in full. That certainly epitomizes what Christ did for us.

Dr. Craig: I guess I would just say, again, the same thing I said earlier. Until death actually occurs, it hasn't been paid in full. So that cannot be a retrospective saying. Maybe it could be prospective about his impending death. After all, if he dies, it is too late then to say it! So you could say he says this prospectively. But it can't be retrospective, otherwise it hasn't been paid in full until he dies.

Student: You mentioned a while back about the different church councils and how certain doctrines within it were dismissed as heretical. What within modern theology would fall outside of orthodoxy that is currently in the realm of things?

Dr. Craig: Any atonement theory that would deny the deity of Christ would clearly be heretical because it would lack his divinity which is essential to his atoning work. Certainly among modern theologians there are many who would deny the full deity of Christ and think of him just as a man. Very often these will be moral influence type theories where in Jesus' embrace of suffering and death we see the great love of God manifested on our behalf and that moves us to faith in him. It seems to me that those sorts of theories would be heretical.

END DISCUSSION

Jan suggested that I close this section with a summary of this long series. So let me just summarize by saying we looked first at the biblical data concerning the doctrine of the atonement. We saw that the doctrine of the atonement is a multifaceted doctrine like a jewel with many beautiful facets to it. The central facet of a biblical doctrine of the atonement would be the notion of sacrifice. Christ's death as a sacrificial offering. We saw that the function of a sacrifice is both expiation of sin and propitiation of God. We also saw that another central element of a biblical doctrine was the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 whom God punishes in the place of Israel for the sins that Israel has committed.⁶ We saw that divine justice was an important aspect of the atonement and the satisfaction of divine justice. We saw that representation was an important aspect of

⁶ 30:03

divine atonement. Christ is not merely our substitute but also our representative before God. Then we saw that redemption – the freeing or liberation – of us from bondage to sin and death and Satan is an important biblical motif. We then looked at various theories down through church history – the Christus Victor theory (or ransom theory), the satisfaction theory of St. Anselm (where Christ's death is a compensation paid to God for the dishonoring that we have done to God), the moral influence theory, usually associated with Abelard, the penal substitution theory of the Protestant Reformers, and then finally the governmental theory of Hugo Grotius (who, I argued, is also a penal substitution theorist). Finally, in reflecting philosophically on this doctrine, we tried to combine all of those biblical motifs into an adequate theory of the atonement that affirms at its very center penal substitution where Christ is punished in our place for our sins thereby freeing us legally from condemnation. I defended both the coherence and the justice of penal substitution. We then saw that Christ acts as our proxy before God in bearing our sin. He represents us so that our sins are punished via proxy. Therefore God's justice is satisfied as the Bible requires. Then we saw, finally today, that redemption or liberation from sin, death, and the devil is accomplished through Christ's bearing the punishment that we deserve. Finally the moral influence of Christ's death becomes understandable and important in virtue of this great act of self-sacrifice that he undertook on our behalf to redeem us from sin.

That completes our study of the atonement. Next time we will turn to the other facet of the work of Christ which is his resurrection from the dead.⁷