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**Love at the Heart of the Atonement**

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Atonement is one of the key doctrines of the Christian faith, and is central in both the Old and New Testaments, but it can often be taken for granted, or misunderstood. In order to properly understand the atonement, it is important to consider what it is, why it is necessary, and to understand its source. *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* defines *atonement* as “God's work on sinners' behalf to reconcile them to himself. It is the divine activity that confronts and resolves the problem of human sin so that people may enjoy full fellowship with God both now and in the age to come.”<sup>1</sup> This idea or concept of Atonement runs throughout all of scripture, and is referred to in the Old Testament with the Hebrew root כפר, which means to atone, to cover, appease, provide reconciliation<sup>2</sup>, and is the same word from which *Yom Kippur*, the day of atonement is derived. According to the *New Bible Dictionary*, “atonement’s use in theology is to denote the work of Christ in dealing with the problem posed by the sin of man, and in bringing sinners into right relation with God”.<sup>3</sup> Atonement plays a central role in the life of the people of God, with the Old Testament sacrificial system set up as a gracious provision of atoning for the sins of the people, though incompletely, and is more fully realized in the fulfillment of the sacrificial system through Christ’s once and for all sacrificial death on the cross at Calvary, or what is more readily identified as “The Atonement”. But what motivates God to grant atonement, to “work on sinners’ behalf” and “bring them into right relation” with him? If the estrangement between God and man is due to man’s sin, why should God, why *would* God, do anything to reconcile to man? God graciously provides atonement for sin, in both the Old and New Testaments because of his love for his creation. John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he

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<sup>1</sup> T Desmond Alexander, and Brian S Rosner. 2000. *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press ; Downers Grove, Ill.

<sup>2</sup> William Lee Holladay, and Ludwig Köhler. 2000. *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament : Based upon the Lexical Work of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans ; Leiden, Netherlands. Entry: כפר

<sup>3</sup> Wood, D. R. W., and I. Howard Marshall. 1996. *New Bible Dictionary*. 3rd ed. Leicester, England ; Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press. Entry: Atonement, pg. 102.

gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Christ’s perfect, obedient life, and gruesome, substitutionary death on the cross is, at its very core, a display of God’s love for his people.

Though God’s love is on display in a dramatic, glorious way in the atonement, that is not the beginning of God’s love, or the only place that it is on display. In fact, God’s love is found throughout Scripture, and is part and parcel of the way that God reveals himself to man, and how he identifies himself. When Moses went up on to Mount Sinai early in the morning to receive the law a second time after Israel’s rebellion in worshiping the golden calves, God began by saying, “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children’s children, to the third and the fourth generation” (Exodus 34:6-7). This mercy, this graciousness, this love stood in contrast to what Israel deserved, or even expected as the response to their rebellion and rejection of God and his law. This introduction made an impression on the people as a preamble to the giving of the Law - one that is echoed throughout scripture when God’s people refer to him. Moses’ prayer in Numbers 14:17-19 echoes this closely, but it can be seen in numerous other places (cf. Psalms 86:5, 103:8, 111:4; 116:5; 145:8; Nehemiah 9:17; Jonah 4:2; Joel 2:13; James 5:11).

God is identified as God who loves, and scripture speaks frequently of the love of God in different ways. God’s love is eternal: Psalm 136 relates different truths about God’s power in creation, and his providential love for his people, and after each line explains why: “for his steadfast love endures forever”. In Jeremiah 31, as Jeremiah is declaring the future hope for Israel in regards to God’s steadfast, eternal love and in verse 3 says, “ I have loved you with an

everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you”. God’s love has no end, he remains faithful to his people as he has been forever. His faithfulness is not contingent on anything outside of the everlasting love.

God’s love is also a relational love. God’s relational love is given on two different planes. The first plane is God’s providential love over all that he has created, because he created it and he cares for it. D.A. Carson says, “God creates everything, and before there is a whiff of sin, he pronounces all that he has made to be “good” (Gen.1). This is the product of a *loving* Creator”.<sup>4</sup> In Matthew 6:25-34 God is shown in relationship with the birds of the air and the flowers of the field as he cares for them, providing them food, and dressing them in beautiful splendor, for no reason other than his love for his creation. The second plane of God’s relational love is his covenant love. When God gives Abraham the sign of circumcision, confirming the covenant he made with him to be the father of many nations, through whom God will bless the world, he told him “I will establish my covenant between me and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your offspring after you” (Genesis 17:7). This language of “being their God” comes up time and time again when God speaks to his people, often as a reminder of the promises of care that God has for his people as special recipients of his love among the nations. It is seen in Exodus 6:7 when God tells Moses that he will free the Hebrew people from the Egyptians, “I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the Lord your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians”. In Exodus 29:45-46, after the people have already been freed from Egypt, and God had given Moses the law, only to find the people rebelling against him and worshiping golden calves, God promises that he will give the people the Tent of Meeting, so that he can dwell among them, and he tells them, “I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God”

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<sup>4</sup> Carson, D A. 2000. *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books. pg. 16

(Exodus 29:45). The phrase “I will be your God and you will be my people” comes up again and again throughout the Old Testament, referring to God’s covenant love for Israel, but finds significant use in the prophets - particularly Jeremiah and Ezekiel - as they call the people of God to remember his promises, and they look forward to his future care for them in the covenant love.<sup>5</sup> In particular, the love that is described in the relationship of covenant is looking forward to the new covenant, as promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34,

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

This new covenant that is being declared here in Jeremiah, is the covenant made by Christ. At the Last Supper, Jesus announced to his disciples that the new covenant was to be made in his blood. In Luke’s Gospel Jesus says that Jesus, “Took the cup saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood’” (Luke 22:20). Mark has it as, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mark 14:24). Matthew records it as Jesus saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matthew 26:27c-28). This sacrifice, this new covenant that is made in his blood is the covenant that is for the forgiveness of sins. Though they would have been familiar with the new covenant imagery from Jeremiah, those with whom Jesus was seated at the table, and before whom he broke the bread and poured the wine did not understand what he was telling them. Had they understood, they might have despaired less over the next several

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<sup>5</sup> Some form of this phrase is found seven times in Jeremiah and seven times in Ezekiel. Jeremiah: 7:23; 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 31:1,33; 32:38. Ezekiel: 11:20; 14:11; 34:24; 34:30; 36:27-28; 37:23, 27.

days than they did in reality. Jesus was explaining to them not only that he was there to make the new covenant in his blood, but that this new covenant was made for the forgiveness of sins, to reconcile sinners to God. Jesus was explaining to them that he was providing the atonement.

As John Murray writes, “the love of God is the cause or source of the atonement”.<sup>6</sup> The atonement flows out of God’s love, not simply because God loves his people, but because of the way the atonement was accomplished, and because of the result of the atonement. Simply put, the atonement is the work of Christ, being offered up as a sacrifice, a propitiation for sin, on our behalf, so that we can be reconciled to God. Old Testament sacrifices were given in order to cover the sins of the person with the blood of the animal sacrificed, so that God’s wrath would be averted. The sacrifice was given to propitiate him.<sup>7</sup> These sacrifices of the old covenant foreshadowed the coming of Christ, and were fulfilled in his sacrifice and atonement. Under the old covenant, these sacrifices were efficacious for the remission of sin, and were performed in faith that through these sacrifices that God had graciously given them, they would have remission of their sins. The faith that their sins would be taken away was finally realized in Christ.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most well known verses of the Bible is, John 3:16, in which Jesus explains the point of this new covenant to Nicodemus. He tells him that it is necessary for him, the Son of God, to come to earth, to take on flesh, to live an obedient, perfect life, to be humiliated, tortured, and crucified so that God’s people could have eternal life by belief in the Son. This is the reality that John the Baptist attested to when he first laid eyes on Jesus, calling everyone’s

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<sup>6</sup> Murray, John. 2015. *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

<sup>7</sup> Bavinck, Herman. 2006. *Reformed Dogmatics : Volume 3*. Baker Books. Pg 447

<sup>8</sup> Westminster Divines. *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms*. United States, Committee for Christian Education and Publications of the Presbyterian Church in America, 1983 WCF 7.5 & 8.6

attention to him proclaiming, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29). John was proclaiming that Jesus had come as the true passover lamb, and in order to take away the sins of the world, by fulfilling the old covenant system, and bringing the people of God into right relationship with him.

How did this atonement work? And what does that teach us about the love of God? In the Old Testament administration, there was a strict protocol for how sacrifices were to be made. Because the punishment for sin is death (Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 3:23), God’s justice demands blood in the case of sin, but graciously, God allows a substitute to take the place of the transgressor, which is how the sacrificial system began. But God’s justice is not satisfied by the spilling of just any blood, it must be the right kind of sacrifice (cf. the sacrifices of Cain and Abel in Genesis 4). In Exodus 12:4 God stipulates that the Passover lamb must be a male lamb without blemish, a year old, and in Leviticus 1:3 he stipulates that the animal to be given in the sacrifice must be without blemish. The same was true for Christ. For him to take the place of and atone for sinful people, he could not have any sin in him. If he did, then his death would have not been a sacrifice, a substitutionary taking on of due punishment, it would have been merely judgment. But Christ’s sinlessness was what allowed Peter to say that we have been ransomed not with perishable things, but with “precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:19). For Christ to be a fitting sacrifice to atone for the sins of man, he had to be himself fully human, but also without sin. This is why it is said that the Son of God, being fully God, took on flesh. He was humiliated in this, taking fallible, perishable flesh onto his perfect being, and “being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Philippians 2:8). Jesus’ humiliation, as it is called, “consisted [in part], in his being born, and in that low condition, made under the law, undergoing

the miseries of this life”.<sup>9</sup> When Paul refers to Jesus’ becoming obedient, he is speaking of Christ’s obedience to the law, fulfilling all of its demands, in his righteous living, as well as his receiving the penalty of the law, on the behalf of sinful humanity, so his obedience includes the rest of the WSC’s definition of his humiliation, his undergoing “the wrath of God, and the cursed death of the cross; in being buried, and continuing under the power of death for a time”<sup>10</sup>.

Christ’s obedience was not only that he lived a righteous life in our place, but that he also died the sinner’s death in our place, or as John Murray puts it, “Christ’s obedience was vicarious in bearing the full judgment of God upon sin, and it was vicarious in the full discharge of the demands of righteousness”.<sup>11</sup>

In the death of Christ on the cross, and in his being raised again to life, atonement was made for God’s elect. As Bavinck says, “By his sacrifice, he acquired his own exaltation, and, for his own, the blessings of salvation, notably the forgiveness and removal of our sins, peace with God”.<sup>12</sup> This is why Paul can say in Romans 5:6-11:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Much can be said about the love on display here. The substitutionary aspect of Christ’s sacrifice is of the greatest kind of love. In John 15, starting in v.9 Jesus explains that “as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you...” he then goes on to command them to love one another as he has loved them. So Jesus has traced the line of love from the Father, to Him, to his

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<sup>9</sup> Westminster Divines. *The Confession of Faith and Catechisms*. WSC 27

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

<sup>11</sup> Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 22

<sup>12</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 323.

disciples. But then he describes the greatest kind of love, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Jesus says that the greatest love that is possible is that someone lays down their life for their friends, and then he goes on to explain to his disciples that they are not his servants, but his friends - not because they chose him, but because he chose them. In less than 24 hours they would see him - the man identified as the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, their friend who chose them, the Son of God - laying down his life for them. But not only for the disciples, for all his friends. And who are his friends? John 15:14, “You are my friends if you do what I command you”, what he commanded them to do was just prior in v 12, “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you”. To summarize, Jesus’ death on the cross - his substitutionary atonement - accomplishes salvation for those who he calls his friends - those who keep his commandment to love one another, and those who keep the commands of the Father. The love of the Father, however, is the source of this love from Jesus. So Christ’s death on the cross to pay the penalty for sin is the conduit we receive that love from the Father which flows through Christ. Anthony Carter describes it like this, “At the very heart of our salvation is the love of God. We are not redeemed without it. This redeeming love is threefold. It is the love the Son shows for the Father in submitting to the will of God in the redemption of His people. It is the love the Father shows for the Son in redeeming us at all cost (John 3:16, Gal 2:20). It’s a love triangle. But unlike the love triangles we know, this one works, bringing joy and delight to all”.<sup>13</sup>

If that is not a clear enough picture of love, John declares it again in 1 John 4 where he explains that God is the source of all love, and that the love of God was made manifest through God’s sending of his only Son into the world, so that we might have life. The love of God is not on the basis of our love, but on the basis of the Son’s being sent to be the propitiation for sin (1

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<sup>13</sup> Carter, Anthony. 2019. *Blood Work*. Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing. Pg. 39

John 4:7-10). The love on display in the atonement is not only the love of Christ, but the love of the Father. “In the faithful work of Jesus, the heavenly mission of salvation, planned and executed by the triune God, was accomplished. Jesus emphasized it. His love for the lost was more than his alone. The love of the Son of God for the lost was an extension of the love the father had lavished on the Son”.<sup>14</sup> This sacrifice of Christ for his people is described in Scripture as a specific type of love, and that is a marital love. In Ephesians 5 Paul describes the marriage between a man and woman being like Christ’s love for the church, “Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (v 25). He goes on to say that “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (v. 31).

In the history of the church there have been some who have taken issue with the idea of Penal Substitutionary Atonement, particularly as it relates to love. Critics of the doctrine have called God a “cosmic child-abuser”, claiming that on the cross, God unfairly punished Jesus for something he did not do. They read 1 John 4:8 and take away that “God is love”, and cannot see how a loving God would allow for this to happen, or to require it to happen. An example of this is Anglican priest Jeffrey John, who asks the question, “What sort of God was this, getting so angry with the world and the people he created and then, to calm himself down, demanding the blood of his own son? And anyway, why should God forgive us through punishing someone else? It was worse than illogical, it was insane. It made God sound like a psychopath. If any human being behaved like this we'd say they were a monster”.<sup>15</sup>

The issue that John and others have is with a doctrine that is not taught in Scripture, if Penal Substitutionary Atonement did teach what is quoted above, then John and all Christians

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<sup>14</sup> Tolsma, Neil. 2012. *This Is Love : Tracing the Love of God throughout the Biblical Story*. Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Pub. pg. 125

<sup>15</sup> Bates, Stephen. 2007. “To Forgive Is Divine.” *The Guardian*, April 6, 2007, sec. Opinion. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/apr/06/atoleranteastermessage>.

would be right in rejecting it. But the caricature of that straw man argument needs to be answered. To call the atonement cosmic child abuse, ostensibly because God's wrath is poured out on the Son is to ignore the biblical data, and imagine that God is an angry, wrathful God who is simply looking for a victim. But as was introduced above, God is not angry, impatient and wrathful, but instead, God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness (Exodus 34:6-7). It also denies that God the Son had any agency in the arrangement, and ignores John 15:13 that has been discussed above, as well as John 10:17-18, "For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father", Jesus himself explains that this is something that he is doing willingly, joyfully, out of love for the people, and from God. See also, 1 John 3:16, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers." And John 10:13, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Jesus' participation in the atonement was not only one hundred percent voluntary, as an act of love laying down his life for his elect.

As a key doctrine in Christian belief, it is important to understand the atonement, and in order to properly understand it, it is necessary to understand that it "is the provision of the Father's love and grace".<sup>16</sup> The atonement could not have taken place, and would not have been efficacious apart from God's love, as the atonement is the place where God's love and justice meet, as Tolsma says, "

"Divine love is not a sloppy sentimentality. The righteous love of God calls for a justice that demands punishment. He is ready to forgive, but the guilty must pay the price. We should not be surprised that the New Testament constantly ties divine love to the cross... True love does

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<sup>16</sup> Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 57

not neglect justice. In a love that takes justice seriously, Jesus paid the penalty of the law for his loved ones”.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Tolsma, *This Is Love*, pg 132.

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