

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Dr. Spencer, last week we presented the wonderful truth that God will see to it that all of his elect will persevere in the faith. And so we have now covered four of the five points of reformed faith summarized by the acrostic TULIP: total depravity, unconditional election, irresistible grace and perseverance of the saints. I assume we are going to move on to discuss limited atonement next, right?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, but I also want to remind our listeners that these five points do not fully cover the biblical doctrine of soteriology. We started with them because they are often points of contention between different evangelical believers.

Marc Roby: Very well, so how would you like to begin looking at the doctrine of limited atonement.

Dr. Spencer: I want to begin with what Jesus himself said. In Mark 10:45 we read that he told his disciples that “even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”¹ Also, in John 10:14-15 Jesus said that “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.” And the apostle Paul wrote, in Romans 4:25, that Jesus “was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” And then in Hebrews 9:26 we read that Jesus “has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” And in Hebrews 9:27-28 we are told that “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people”.

There are many more Scriptures we could look at, but that is enough to establish the fact that the reason the second person of the Holy Trinity became incarnate in the man Jesus, was to serve as a sacrifice to pay for the sins of his people.

Marc Roby: In fact, after Jesus made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem the week before his crucifixion, he was speaking about his impending sacrificial death and said, in John 12:27, “Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.”

Dr. Spencer: Yes, Jesus knew what was going to happen to him and he knew why. He was preparing to bear the sins of all of his elect and suffer the wrath of God in our stead as had been foretold in the Old Testament. In Isaiah 53:5 we read the famous verse, “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” And then a bit later in Isaiah 53:10 we read that “it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the LORD makes his life

¹ All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the LORD will prosper in his hand.”

Marc Roby: That is astounding to consider. We are the ones who rebelled against God and sinned, but it was the Lord’s will to cause Jesus to suffer and to make him a guilt offering in our stead.

Dr. Spencer: The atonement is central to the Christian faith. Many modern professing Christians seem to have lost this focus. They ask “what would Jesus do?” in different situations, but they are only thinking of him as a kind-hearted teacher of morals, which misses the mark by a wide margin. As the angel of the Lord told Joseph in Matthew 1:21, “you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

We all deserve hell and Jesus came to suffer and die in our place so that we can come to be with him in heaven. Jesus is our Savior and Lord, not just a good moral teacher.

Marc Roby: Well, given the importance of the atonement, we should probably provide a definition. Everyone has some idea, of course, from everyday usage what it means to atone for something. If I forget my wife’s birthday, which I would never do of course, but *if* I did, I could, for example, atone for that lapse by buying her some roses and taking her out for a nice dinner. But what is a more precise theological definition of atonement?

Dr. Spencer: Well, J.I. Packer wrote that “*Atonement* means making amends, blotting out the offense, and giving satisfaction for wrong done; thus reconciling to oneself the alienated other and restoring the disrupted relationship.”²

I think that is a pretty good definition that contains two important points. First, we have offended God. We have done wrong and satisfaction must be paid. Second, we are alienated from God, and he from us, and we need to have that relationship restored. But there is another aspect we could include here, and that is the idea of redemption. We are all by nature “slaves to sin”, as Paul tells us in Romans 6:17 and the atoning death of Christ redeems us and sets us free from that bondage.

Therefore, I want to look at the topic of atonement using the outline presented in John Murray’s excellent book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*.

Marc Roby: And how does Murray define atonement?

Dr. Spencer: He notes that “The more specific categories in terms of which the Scripture sets forth the atoning work of Christ are sacrifice, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption.”³

Marc Roby: Well, we have our work cut out for us in looking at each of those terms.

² J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, Tyndale House Pub., 1993, pg. 134

³ J. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 19

Dr. Spencer: That we do, but before we get there, Murray makes another point that will probably come as a surprise to most people, but is extremely important in terms of the practical application of the doctrine of salvation.

Marc Roby: What point is that?

Dr. Spencer: Well, immediately after giving the list of specific categories for considering the atonement, he writes, “But we may properly ask if there is not some more inclusive rubric under which these more specific categories may be comprehended.” And then he answers the question by saying, “The Scripture regards the work of Christ as one of obedience” and Murray says that obedience can be “viewed as the unifying or integrating principle.”⁴

Marc Roby: Yes, you were right. That is an unexpected turn in considering Christ’s work of atonement.

Dr. Spencer: Well, stick with me for a few minutes and I think it will all make sense and the importance of his point will become apparent.

Marc Roby: Very well, please continue.

Dr. Spencer: Murray begins by pointing to Isaiah 53, from which we have already quoted. In that passage, which actually begins in Isaiah 52:13, Jesus is called the Lord’s servant.

Marc Roby: In fact that passage is the most famous of what are sometimes called Isaiah’s “servant songs”.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. And Murray’s point is simply that Christ’s work is described there as that of an obedient servant. He then also quotes John 6:38, where Christ says, “I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.” And Paul wrote, in Romans 5:19, that “just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.” Which obviously refers to Adam’s disobedience and to Christ’s obedience.

Marc Roby: And what a contrast that is! If we are still in Adam we are bound for hell, but if we are in Christ we are bound for heaven.

Dr. Spencer: Those are the only two options. We are represented by one or the other. But let’s get back to examining the Scriptures that support Murray’s contention that Christ’s work can be subsumed under the rubric of obedience. In the famous passage about Christ’s humility in Philippians 2, we read in Verse 8 that “being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” And, finally, Murray cites Hebrews 5:8, which says that “Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered”, which doesn’t imply that Christ was ever disobedient. It simply means that as the man Jesus grew he was tasked by the Father with greater and greater works and learned from each one of them how to do the Father’s will with perfect obedience.

⁴ Ibid

Marc Roby: And when we speak about Christ's perfect obedience, it is humbling to consider that in Romans 8:29 we are told that we have been "predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers."

Dr. Spencer: That is one of the reasons Murray's point about Christ's obedience is of great practical importance. It puts the lie to the idea that we can have Jesus Christ as our Savior but go on living a disobedient life. We all sin, but if our lives are characterized by disobedience to God, then we have not been born again. You will know a tree by its fruit. But, let's get back to the obedience of Christ as the rubric under which we consider his atoning work.

Marc Roby: Please do.

Dr. Spencer: Murray points out that Christians sometimes improperly speak about Christ's life as his "active" obedience and his death as being his "passive" obedience. But Christ was actively obeying the Father even in his death. The proper use of those terms derives from the fact that, as Murray says, "the law of God has both penal sanctions and positive demands."⁵ When Christ allowed himself to bear the penal sanctions, that was his passive obedience and when he fulfilled the positive demands of the law, that was his active obedience.

The key point here is that, as Murray writes, "The death upon the cross, as the climactic requirement of the price of redemption, was *discharged* as the supreme act of obedience; it was not death resistlessly inflicted but death upon the cross willingly and obediently wrought."⁶

Marc Roby: Which reminds me of John 10:17-18 where we are told Jesus said, "The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to 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 authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father."

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the point. Murray wrote that "When we speak of obedience we are thinking not merely of formal acts of accomplishment but also of the disposition, will, determination, and volition which lie back of and are registered in these formal acts."⁷

Marc Roby: In other words, our attitude matters! If we are grumbling in our hearts as we do what we are told to do, we aren't *really* obeying.

Dr. Spencer: That is the point. And now we finally get to the conclusion of this discussion about obedience. Murray wrote that "It is obedience that enlisted all the resources of his perfect humanity, obedience that resided in his person, and obedience of which he is ever the perfect embodiment. . . . And we become the beneficiaries of it, indeed the partakers of it, by union with him. It is this that serves to advertise the significance of that which is the central truth of all soteriology, namely, union and communion with Christ."⁸

⁵ Ibid, pg. 21

⁶ Ibid, pg. 22

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Ibid, pg. 24

If you look at God's overall plan you see that he created Adam and Eve perfect, but with the ability to disobey. It was that disobedience, and the resulting disobedience of their natural offspring, that brought all of the troubles we see in this fallen world. And so God's plan to fix this problem begins with the perfect obedience of Christ and we become partakers of that obedience by being united to Christ by faith.

Marc Roby: And we then demonstrate, or prove, that we are united to him by living obedient lives ourselves, albeit imperfectly.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And when we get to discussing the application of redemption to us as individual believers by going through the steps in what is called the order of salvation, we will see that our union with Christ is not just one step along the way, it is the foundation for the whole process.

Marc Roby: And according to the apostle Paul, there was a sense in which believers were united with Christ even before the creation of the world. In Ephesians 1:4 he wrote that God "chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."

Dr. Spencer: What a wonderful phrase that is, "in him", or "in Christ". The phrase "in Christ" shows up 89 times in our NIV Bibles and the phrase "in him" also shows up many more times with the same meaning. Union with Christ surely is, as Murray claims a number of times, "the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation."⁹

Because of our depraved sinful natures, we are incapable of saving ourselves. Jesus Christ came to save his people and it is only in union with him that we can be saved. As we read in Acts 4:12, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."

Marc Roby: And the fact that God chose us in Christ shows that God had this plan of salvation in mind from all eternity. It is not something he came up with because things didn't work out the way he had planned.

Dr. Spencer: That's very true. In making his glory manifest, God created mankind knowing that the fall would occur, but also knowing that he was going to save some from that fall for the praise of his glorious grace, while leaving others to justly suffer for their sins to the praise of his glorious justice. And there was agreement from all eternity within the Trinity that the Son would become incarnate and accomplish redemption for his people.

Every aspect of a believer's salvation is accomplished in union with Christ. Not only were we chosen in Christ, but we are also saved in Christ.

Marc Roby: Ephesians 2:10 famously says that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

⁹ Ibid, e.g., pg. 170

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's wonderful, we were "created in Christ", meaning our new birth was in union with Christ. And we also live the Christian life in union with Christ. In 1 Corinthians 1:4-5 Paul wrote that "I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—in all your speaking and in all your knowledge". Paul also wrote, in Galatians 2:20, that "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

Marc Roby: And Christians also die in Christ. Paul wrote in Romans 14:8 that "If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord."

Dr. Spencer: And he also wrote, in 1 Thessalonians 4:14 that "We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him." We will talk more about union with Christ later, but I first want to move on to discuss the specific categories, as Murray calls them, under which the Scriptures discuss the atonement of Christ; namely, sacrifice, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption.

Marc Roby: And I look forward to doing that, but we are out of time for today, so we'll have to pick this up next time. Before we sign off, I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, and we'll do our best to respond.