

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Dr. Spencer, in our session last week we started to look at the doctrine called limited atonement and you said that you wanted to follow John Murray's outline for covering the atonement. He began by noting that all of Christ's work could be subsumed under the rubric of obedience.

Dr. Spencer: And that is a critically important point since, as we read in Romans 8:29, we were "predestined to be conformed to the likeness"¹ of Jesus Christ. If his whole life's work can be properly characterized by obedience, and Murray is certainly correct in saying that it can, and if we are to be conformed to his likeness, then it must also be true that our lives should be characterized by obedience.

Marc Roby: Yes, that is a perfectly rational conclusion, and we could add that our obedience should be increasing all the time.

Dr. Spencer: We could add that yes. All true Christians are in the process of being sanctified. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:18 that "we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

And, in Christ's great high-priestly prayer in John Chapter 17, he says to the Father, as we read in Verse 4, that "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do." And we are told in 1 Corinthians 10:31 that "whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." The conclusion is obvious. To glorify God, which is our purpose in life, we must obediently complete the work he has given us to do, just as Christ himself did.

Marc Roby: And this reinforces the point we made at length in Session 121 that true Christians walk in what Paul called the obedience of faith².

And, after presenting the obedience of Christ as the "comprehensive category under which the various aspects of Biblical teaching may be subsumed", Murray went on to say 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 So, how would you like to begin to look at these categories?

Dr. Spencer: Let's take them one at a time and begin with the first one he lists; namely, sacrifice. I first want to show that Murray is correct in saying that the Bible presents Christ's work of atonement as a sacrifice and then explore a bit what that means. If we turn to the book of Hebrews, we find a clear presentation of this idea. In Hebrews Chapter Nine the author speaks

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² See Romans 1:5

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

about the Old Testament sacrificial system. He describes the setup of the tabernacle and refers to the inner room or Most Holy Place, which contained the famous ark of the covenant.

Marc Roby: That ark contained the stone tablets on which God had written the Ten Commandments.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. And our listeners may remember that the high point of the Jewish year is now, and has always been, the Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur. On that day during the Old Testament period, the high priest went into the Most Holy Place and sprinkled blood on the cover of the ark, which was called the atonement cover.

Marc Roby: And it is worth noting that only the high priest was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place and even he was only allowed to do so once a year.

Dr. Spencer: That is important. This was the most sacred duty the high priest had. Remember that the Most Holy Place was in the tabernacle, which was also called the Tent of Meeting since that is where God said he would meet with the representative of his people.⁴ The symbolism is that when God, who said he would appear in a cloud above the ark,⁵ looked down at the ark, he would see the blood of the sacrificial lamb on the cover and that would block his view of the law, which his people had broken.⁶

In any event, in Hebrews 9:7-9 we read that "only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper."

Marc Roby: In other words, the Old Testament sacrificial system was not ultimately capable of dealing with our sin problem. It pointed toward a greater reality.

Dr. Spencer: That is exactly the point. And the writer of Hebrews explains this. In Hebrews 9:11-14 we read, "When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"

⁴ See Ex 25:22

⁵ See Lev 16:2

⁶ See P.G. Mathew, *Romans: The Gospel Freedom* (Volume 1), Grace and Glory Ministries, 2011, pg. 150

Marc Roby: That clearly tells us that Jesus “offered himself” to God, which means he was the sacrifice, the ultimate Passover lamb. In fact, in John 1:29 we are told that when John the Baptist saw Jesus he said to his disciples, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

Dr. Spencer: And the writer of Hebrews also uses the word sacrifice. In Hebrews 9:26 we read that Jesus “appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” And the Greek word used here for sacrifice is *thusia* (thusia), the normal word used to describe the Old Testament sacrifices.

Marc Roby: Alright, I think we have established that Christ’s atoning work can be described as a sacrifice.

Dr. Spencer: And, in addition, we have shown how the Jews at the time of Christ would have understood that idea. They would have understood it in the context of the Old Testament sacrificial system.

Marc Roby: Which involved far more than just the sacrifices performed on the Day of Atonement. Sacrifices were a normal part of worship in the Old Testament.

Dr. Spencer: They most definitely were. The animals offered in sacrifice were intended to be received in place of the person bringing the offering, in other words, they were substitutes. God instructed his people through Moses how the sacrifices were to be made. In Leviticus 1:4 we read that the person bringing a sacrifice “is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.”

Marc Roby: This is the doctrine called substitutionary atonement. By laying his hands on the animal, the sinner was symbolically transferring his sins to that animal.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. It was the person who had sinned and deserved to die, but God graciously provided this means of atoning for his sin. It is bloody and disgusting, especially to modern people like us who purchase our meat in shrink-wrapped containers at the grocery store, but it was meant to be a reminder of the seriousness of sin and the fact that it must be punished.

And, as Murray notes, “the Old Testament sacrifices were basically expiatory. This means that they had reference to sin and guilt. Sin involves a certain liability, a liability arising from the holiness of God, on the one hand, and the gravity of sin as the contradiction of that holiness, on the other. The sacrifice was the divinely instituted provision whereby the sin might be covered and the liability to divine wrath and curse removed.”⁷

Marc Roby: And, as you noted, this provision is gracious. It would have been just of God to demand the life of every sinner.

⁷ Murray, op. cit., pg. 25

Dr. Spencer: In which case there wouldn't be anyone left. But God's plan is to create and to purify a people for himself. And this is the way he has chosen to do it. The Old Testament sacrificial system was incapable of ultimately solving our sin problem, it pointed to Christ.

The author of Hebrews points this out when we read in Hebrews 10:1-4 that "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."

Marc Roby: The logic of those statements is impeccable. If the Old Testament animal sacrifices had been ultimately efficacious, they would have stopped. There would not have been any need to repeat them.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, the logic is unassailable. And the writer goes on to contrast the limited nature of the Old Testament sacrifices with the ultimate efficacy of Christ's sacrifice. We read in Hebrews 10:10 that "we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

Marc Roby: I like that phrase, "once for all." It reminds me of what Jesus himself declared from the cross. We read in John 19:30 that "Jesus said, 'It is finished.' With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit." Christ's work of redemption was finished.

Dr. Spencer: That is important. In one sense, there is still work to do since God has not yet called all of those whom he has chosen to repentance and faith. And he has not yet finished working in those whom he has called, we are still in the process of being sanctified. But in another sense, the job is finished. There is no further need of sacrifice. The work of redemption is complete, all that is left is the application of that work to individual believers.

Marc Roby: It is wonderful to know that the end is absolutely certain. God's plan will be executed without fault. We can be absolutely sure of all of his promises.

Dr. Spencer: And of all of his threats. There truly is only one thing needful in this life, and that is to come to know Jesus Christ as your personal Savior and Lord. All of God's enemies will be eternally destroyed and all of his people will enjoy eternal life in his presence. The best bumper sticker I've ever seen simply said "I know what happens in the end, God wins!"

Marc Roby: I like that.

Dr. Spencer: There is, however, one more important point to make about Christ's atoning work being presented in the Bible as a work of sacrifice.

Marc Roby: What point is that?

Dr. Spencer: That Christ was not just the sacrifice, he was also the priest. John Murray wrote, "That Christ's work was to offer himself a sacrifice for sin implies, however, a complementary

truth too frequently overlooked. It is that, if Christ offered himself as a sacrifice, he was also a priest. And it was as a priest that he offered himself. He was not offered up by another; he offered himself. This is something that could not be exemplified in the ritual of the Old Testament. ... in Christ we have this unique combination that serves to exhibit the uniqueness of his sacrifice. The transcendent character of his priestly office, and the perfection inherent in his priestly offering.”⁸

Marc Roby: As we noted last time, Christ was not put to death against his will, he was actively obeying the Father in allowing himself to be crucified.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that is an amazing truth. And it makes me think of the best human illustration I’ve ever heard about God’s plan of salvation.

Marc Roby: What illustration is that?

Dr. Spencer: Well, I think it was R.C. Sproul that I heard tell this story, but I don’t know exactly where I heard it. In any event, it goes something like this.

There was an earthly king who discovered that someone had stolen something very precious to him. So he issued an edict that a search should be made throughout his kingdom to find the object. And, if the person who stole it was identified, he specified that the punishment would be 40 lashes with a serious whip.

Marc Roby: That’s a very harsh punishment.

Dr. Spencer: Well, as I said, the object that was stolen was precious to the king, and we must remember that the offense was against the king, not just against some ordinary citizen. But to continue with the story, when the object was found everyone was shocked to learn that it was the king’s own very old mother who had taken it.

Marc Roby: That would put the king in a very difficult situation given the punishment he had decreed for the offender.

Dr. Spencer: It would indeed. In fact, the king’s mother was so old and frail that 40 lashes would undoubtedly kill her. But the king had issued his edict and it would be patently unjust of him to change the punishment solely because the offender turned out to be someone he personally knew and loved.

Marc Roby: So what did he do?

Dr. Spencer: He did the only just thing, he ordered that she be given the 40 lashes. And you must picture the scene. The king’s men take his frail old mother and tie her to the post, and the man with the whip steps back and looks to the king for the order to begin the sentence.

The king does, in fact, order that the sentence be carried out, but at the same time he wraps himself around his mother so that the blows all fall on him and his mother’s life is spared. By

⁸ Ibid, pg. 28

doing this, the king could demonstrate both his justice in making sure that the appropriate punishment was meted out and his great mercy in taking the punishment himself in order to spare his mother.

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful illustration. Jesus had always had perfect fellowship with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, and it is impossible for us to imagine the pain he endured when the Holy Spirit abandoned him and the Father poured out his wrath on him.

Dr. Spencer: We get some small indication of the pain from Jesus' cry from the cross. We read in Matthew 27:46 that when Christ was on the cross, "About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, 'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?'—which means, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'"

Marc Roby: And Jesus was quoting from Psalm 22, where King David uttered the same cry.

Dr. Spencer: But in the case of King David, the reality is that God never completely abandoned him. Whereas God *did* abandon Jesus while he poured out the full force of his wrath upon him.

We need to recognize how terrible sin is. In order to solve our sin problem and save us, it required God the Son to become incarnate and it required that the perfect fellowship the Father, Son and Holy Spirit had enjoyed for all eternity to be broken for a time on the cross. It is simply not possible for us to fully grasp this. It is the ultimate possible expression of love, not just on the part of the incarnate Jesus, but on the part of the infinite, eternal, triune God.

Marc Roby: That is incredible to consider. Are we done with looking at the fact that the Bible presents Christ's work of atonement as being a sacrifice?

Dr. Spencer: Yes we are. So we are ready to move on to the second category Murray mentions; the Bible also represents Christ's work of atonement as being a propitiation.

Marc Roby: And that will have to wait for our next session. But now I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We would appreciate hearing from you.