

BIBLICAL SOTERIOLOGY: An Overview and Defense of the Reformed Doctrines of Salvation

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Limited Atonement, part 3

ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

II. INTENDED RESULTS OF THE ATONEMENT (continued)

B. Satisfaction of God's Wrath — The atonement was designed to satisfy God's wrath toward mankind so that God's justice could be met and man could be redeemed from condemnation.

"Behold, the day of the Lord is coming, cruel, with fury and burning anger, to make the land a desolation; and He will exterminate its sinners from it" ([Isa 13:9](#)).

The day of the Lord is the day of judgment. On this day God will exterminate sinners in cruelty, fury and burning anger. It is from this fate that sinners are saved by Christ's death.

"Surely our grief He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth. By oppression and judgment He was taken away; and as for His generation, who considered that He was cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due? His grave was assigned to be with wicked men, yet with a rich man in His death; although He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth. But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will

prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand. As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities. Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors” ([Isa 53:4-12](#)).

This passage contains many important elements to understanding Christ’s atonement because Christ is the fulfillment of the Suffering Servant portrayed in this messianic prophecy. The prophecy explains that Christ himself was perfect, and that his people were sinful. It also explains that God pours out his wrath on those who are sinful. Thus, in order for Christ to save his people, he became an atoning sacrifice on their behalf. In this sacrifice, the sins of the people were imputed to Christ. As a result, God found Christ guilty of the people’s sin and punished him in their stead.

The Servant portrayed here had done no violence, nor had deceit been found in his mouth. He was the Righteous One. Christ, the ultimate fulfillment of this prophecy, was likewise perfect and sinless. According to the Old Testament sacrificial laws, sacrifices to God had to be spotless and perfect ([Lev 1:2-4](#), [10](#); [3:1](#), [6](#); [4:3](#), [23](#), [28](#), [32](#); [5:15-19](#); [6:6](#); [9:2-3](#); [14:10](#); [22:18-25](#); [23:12-18](#)). This did not mean that these animals somehow escaped the corruption of the Fall, but it did foreshadow the supreme perfection that was to be found in Christ, and that was necessary if the people were truly to be forgiven. In the same way, the messiah had to be perfect in order to be an acceptable guilt offering to God.

While Christ was sinless, the people for whom he died were sinful. They had transgressed, gone astray, turned to their own ways. They were filled with iniquity.

Because of their sin, God’s wrath was due the people. They deserved the piercing, crushing, chastening and scourging that Christ endured. The people were those who should have been cut off from the land of the living, who desperately needed healing.

Thus, the Suffering Servant was to stand in the place of the people, taking the blame for their sin, receiving actual imputed guilt for sin, though not becoming sinful himself. He did this in order that he might be punished in the people’s stead. The stroke was due the people, but Christ bore their iniquities so that they would be spared.

Once Christ had received the imputed guilt of the people, God looked upon him with wrath. The sin itself was not the object of God's wrath. Rather, the object was the one who was held accountable for the sin, the one who was blamed for it. Because the sin had been imputed to Christ, Christ was guilty for that sin before God. Therefore, God punished Christ for the sins which had been imputed to him. In the language of the passage, Christ was stricken, smitten, afflicted, pierced, crushed, chastened, scourged, oppressed, judged, cut off from the land of the living, and numbered with the transgressors. All this suffering was due the people for their sin, but Christ willingly accepted their guilt and God justly punished him in the people's place once Christ had received that guilt to himself. Christ indeed bore the griefs and sorrows of his people by taking upon himself the wrath of God justly due the people.

By taking upon himself this wrath of God, Christ satisfied God's wrath. He received to himself the actual guilt for the actual sins of the people for whom he died. Thus, when God punished him in the people's place, God exhausted his wrath stored up against those sinners. This is why Isaiah was able to say that the Righteous One would see his own anguish and be satisfied — he could not be satisfied if he suffered to save people whom ultimately perished. As Isaiah said, by bearing the iniquities of the people, the Suffering Servant justified the people.

This passage stresses that the results of Christ's atonement fall necessarily to those for whom he died, so that he actually accomplished the total satisfaction of God's wrath toward those for whom he died. Specifically, it was prophesied that he would "justify the many, as He [would] bear their iniquities." Bearing their iniquities accomplishes the justifying of the many. There is a penalty due our sin, which penalty has been paid. Therefore, those for whom Christ died must ultimately be justified, acquitted before God's tribunal. Not all such people have yet come to faith, let alone been born. Therefore, the prophecy is still in the process of being fulfilled. However, the final outcome is sure — those whose iniquity Christ bore must ultimately be justified. God can never and will never subject to his wrath those for whom Christ died.

Another outcome of Christ's sacrifice is that "the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed." That is, not only will those for whom Christ died be justified, but they will receive peace in life and restoration of body and soul. Neither of these things can be true of anyone whom God punished in wrath. Those for whom Christ died will avoid God's wrath and instead receive his blessings.

It is also worth noting even at this preliminary stage of the discussion that Isaiah prophesied this atonement would be made not made on behalf of everyone, but only on behalf of “many.” Christ was to be “cut off out of the land of the living, for the transgression of my people to whom the stroke was due” — he was to die for “my people,” namely Israel, not for everyone indiscriminately. He was also to justify “the many,” not “all”; and he bore the sin “of many,” not “of all.” Further, seeing the result of the anguish of his soul, he will be satisfied. How could this be true unless everyone for whom he died was ultimately saved? Simply put, Christ will not be satisfied with the result of his labor if the thing he set out to accomplish does not come to pass. The thing he set out to accomplish, according to this prophecy, was the salvation of his “people,” the “many.” Therefore, Christ’s death must have satisfied the wrath of God toward those for whom he died, and secured their ultimate salvation.

“Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” ([Matt 20:28](#)).

Christ came to be crucified in order to ransom, or buy back, many. The Old Testament idea of “ransom” was that one paid a price to redeem someone or something. In the Old Testament, there were many types of ransoms, but all had in common that they resulted in sparing someone or something from some particular fate. Things that were holy to God and set to be sacrificed to him might sometimes be ransomed so as to spare their lives (see especially [Exod 22:29](#) with 34:20; but compare [Lev 27:28-29](#)). Others could be ransomed from the death penalty ([Exod 21:30](#); but compare [Num 35:31](#)). God also spoke of ransoming his people from exile in the restoration of the kingdom ([Isa 51:11](#); [Jer 31:11](#); [Hos 13:14](#)).

In Matthew, Jesus indicated that his own life would be the ransom paid to redeem “many” from some particular fate. Because he used the language of “servant,” he almost certainly had in mind his messianic role as Suffering Servant (compare [Isa 53](#)), in which he was to die to save those who themselves deserved death. His life was to take the place of the lives of sinners whom the law condemned to death. The fact that they needed to be redeemed demonstrates in this case that they were under God’s wrath. In the Old Testament there are no instances of a ransom being paid yet failing to accomplish its purpose. The assumption for the biblical audience was that if the ransom was paid, the one for whom it was paid was redeemed. Thus, when Jesus died to appease God’s wrath

toward the “many,” he ensured that God’s wrath would be fully appeased and the “many” would be successfully redeemed.

“The next day [John the Baptist] saw Jesus coming to him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’” ([John 1:29](#)).

The atonement was intended to take away the sin of the people by giving it to Christ. John, of course, spoke metaphorically here. Just as Jesus was not an actual sheep, he did not physically remove sin from the world (although one day he will; cf. [Rom 8:19-21](#)). John the author of this gospel used this historical account to set up the narrative of the entire gospel. His immediate interest in this book was not the removal of sin from creation, but the assertions of Jesus as Christ and of salvation in Christ ([John 1:12-18](#); [20:30-31](#)). Thus, it is best to understand that Jesus was the one who would take away sin by receiving the imputation of that sin to himself. Because Christ accepted the guilt of the sin of “the world” (a metaphor for people in this case), that guilt was no longer imputed to the people who had actually sinned. Thus, while these people remained sinful, they did not remain guilty for being sinful.

The immediate benefit to the people of the imputation of their sin to Christ was that they would no longer expect God’s judgment against them, but rather would receive eternal life. By taking the guilt away from the people, Christ ensured that God’s wrath would fall on him instead of on them. Just as the sacrificial animals were slaughtered for the people’s guilt, Christ was slaughtered for the people’s guilt. In both cases, the deaths of the sacrifices held back God’s wrath from the people.

Who were these people? The word *kosmos*, here translated “world,” literally means “the whole order of things” (our modern word “cosmos” is simply a transliteration of *kosmos*). It seems almost certain, however, that in this instance John used *kosmos* to refer to people (for whom a lamb might be sacrificed), rather than to the entire creation (though Christ will redeem that too, cf. [Rom 8:19-21](#)). *Kosmos* is a rather broad term, frequently used metaphorically, so it is impossible to determine its precise meaning in any instance apart from its context. [See the treatment of this verse in Responses to Objections to the Doctrine of Limited Atonement.]

“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” ([John 3:36](#)).

Here John the Baptists divides humanity into two groups: believers and the disobedient. Believers in Christ escape God's wrath, while the disobedient do not. It seems fairly clear here that believers are spared the fate of God's wrath through Christ. In the context of [John 3](#); the Baptist's words echo the previous statements in [John 3:16-18](#) that Jesus died so that those who believe in him would avoid judgment. Belief in Christ is a mechanism through which the benefits of Christ's death are applied to people to free them from God's wrath and judgment (cf. [John 3:18](#)). Thus, Christ's death procured the benefit of salvation from the judgment of God's wrath.

“I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. He who is a hireling, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, beholds the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep, and flees, and the wolf snatches them, and scatters them. He flees because he is a hireling, and is not concerned about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My own, and My own know Me, even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep. And I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock with one shepherd . . .’ The Jews . . . were saying to Him, ‘How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.’ Jesus answered them, ‘I told you, and you do not believe; the works that I do in My Father’s name, these bear witness of Me. But you do not believe, because you are not of My sheep. My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand’” ([John 10:11-16, 24-28](#)).

The atonement was intended to keep the sheep from perishing, and to give them eternal life. In the metaphor of the shepherd and sheep, the laying down of the shepherd's life represents the shepherd's interposing himself between his sheep and whatever would threaten to harm them, here a wolf. The sheep had to be in jeopardy before the shepherd would lay down his life for them, and the sheep had to belong to the shepherd before he would die defending them. The thing that stood to harm the sheep prior to Christ's atonement was the wrath of the Father as a result of the sin of the sheep. This was the same danger from which Christ's death saved them. In the same way Moses, a shepherd, attempted to interpose himself between the wrathful God and the people of Israel (see [Exod 32:31-32](#)). Christ laid his life down for the sheep on the cross, thereby successfully keeping the wrath of God from destroying his sheep.

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” ([Rom 3:23-26](#)).

A propitiation is a sacrifice that satisfies the root cause of God’s anger so that he is no longer angry. In this case, God’s anger was directed toward men because they had sinned. By receiving the imputed guilt for those sins and submitting himself to God’s wrath, Christ satisfied God’s wrath. Therefore, God’s wrath no longer awaits those for whom Christ propitiated.

“Therefore also it was reckoned to [Abraham] as righteousness. Now not for his sake only was it written, that ‘It was reckoned to him,’ but for our sake also, to whom it will be reckoned, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, he who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification” ([Rom 4:22-25](#)).

Jesus was “delivered up because of our transgressions.” Since the transgressions were a motivating factor in the crucifixion, and since Jesus was not punished for his own sins, it must be true that Jesus was offered as an atonement for the sins of others. Such an atonement could only have been offered to God, since God is the judge of mankind and the only one to whom man is ultimately accountable for all his transgressions. Since the atonement was offered to God as a result of sin, it must have been intended to satisfy God’s just standard which condemned that sin, and the wrath it incurred.

Paul said that Christ was “raised for our justification” because justification depends upon the application of the benefits of Christ’s atonement to believers. This application takes place only as Christ stand in his heavenly session before God’s judgment throne continually pleading the merits of his shed blood on behalf of believers (cf. [Heb 7:24–8:5](#) with 9:11-12). Notice that Christ was delivered up (died) for the same ones who are the objects of his heavenly intercession.

“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved

from the wrath of God through Him” ([Rom.5:8-9](#)).

Christ’s death accomplishes not only the declaration of justification and acquittal, but actual salvation from the otherwise unavoidable wrath of God.

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” ([1 Cor 15:3](#)).

Christ died “for our sins,” meaning that Christians should have died for their own sins, and that Christ died so that Christians would not have to die. This death was to have been inflicted by God as the just punishment of sinners ([Rom 2:5](#); [5:9](#); [9:22](#); [Rev 11:18](#)). Christians eternally escape God’s wrathful judgment through Christ’s death on their behalf. Since God does not allow his justice to go unsatisfied forever, it must be true that Christ’s death satisfied God’s justice and wrath toward the sinners for whom Christ died.

“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me” ([Gal 2:20](#)).

Christ suffered the wrath of God that was the due punishment of those for whom he died (“delivered Himself up for me”). Paul died in the person of Christ because Christ was his substitute, and because Paul was mystically united to Christ ([Rom 6:1-11](#)). Because Christians die in Christ, they are counted as having suffered God’s wrath in Christ. Thus, Christ’s death accomplished the satisfaction of God’s wrath toward those who are in him.

“In [Christ] we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace” ([Eph 1:7](#)).

In the blood of Christ, shed at the cross, believers have redemption and forgiveness. This is true because Christ paid the penalty incurred by sinners by taking upon himself the guilt of their sin and receiving from God the due punishment of that sin. In the atonement, Christ satisfied the justice and wrath of God toward those for whom Christ died.

“Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest. But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were

dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)” ([Eph 2:3-5](#)).

Those who have been made alive together with Christ are no longer children of wrath. That is, those who have eternal life through belief in Christ’s atoning sacrifice no longer abide under God’s wrath. Christ’s death and resurrection save them from that fate.

“Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her; that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless” ([Eph 5:25-27](#)).

Christ died for the church in order that she might be made holy and blameless, and in order that she might be his bride. Certainly, such a heavenly marriage could never take place while God harbored wrath toward any member of the church. Therefore, Christ’s death by which he cleansed the church must have satisfied God’s wrath toward the individual sinners that make up the church.

“For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony borne at the proper time” ([1 Tim 2:5-6](#)).

As a ransom for sinners, Christ traded his life for theirs. Their lives were only forfeit because they were guilty of sin, and the penalty for sin is death. Since Christ died the death that was the penalty for their sin, he freed them from the penalty, satisfying the requirement of the law and God’s wrath.

“Christ Jesus . . . gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” ([Tit 2:13-14](#)).

Giving himself “for us” clearly refers to the atonement. Since the intended result of the atonement was the redemption of his people from lawless deeds, the atonement must have been designed to pay the price required by the law for the sins committed by those people. Paying the price for those sins equates to the satisfaction of God’s wrath by the carrying out of his just demand of death in payment for sin. Since Christ did successfully

redeem his people from lawless deeds, the atonement was intended to and did satisfy God's wrath and justice.

“For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, in order that since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance” ([Heb 9:13-15](#)).

God's wrath and justice demand the death of sinners ([Isa 13:9](#)). The blood of the incarnate God, which is of infinitely more value than that of mere animals, is so valuable that it completely cleanses not only the flesh but also the conscience of man. This sacrifice also results in man's obedience to God, and in the redemption of man from his transgressions. God cannot justly condemn one for whom a sufficient sacrifice has redeemed, whose flesh and conscience are cleansed, and who obeys him. Therefore, no one for whom Christ died need ever fear wrathful punishment from God.

Further, Christ is the mediator specifically because he died for sin. Therefore, he mediates for those, and for only those, for whom he died, who are designated in this passage as “those who have been called.” Since Christ's death has taken place for the redemption of the sins of those who have been called, and since Christ himself mediates between those who have been called and God, God's wrath toward those who have been called must be satisfied. This follows because God must recognize the sufficiency of Christ's death, and must respect Christ's intercessory assertion that he has sufficiently paid the penalty for the sins of those for whom he mediates. As Paul wrote:

“Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” ([Rom 8:29-34](#)).

If Christ mediates, or intercedes, on behalf of someone, there is no one who can condemn that person. Therefore, all those for whom Christ died and mediates are safe from God's wrath.

“So Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, shall appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him” ([Heb 9:28](#)).

In order for Christ, who has already borne the sins of many, to appear without reference to sin, it must be true that the sins of those for whom he will come again no longer weigh against them. In order for this to be true, God’s wrath toward them must have been satisfied. If God’s wrath were not satisfied, then the Savior could not save his people without reference to sin.

“And He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed. For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls” ([1 Pet 2:24-25](#)).

The statement that Christ bore sins in his body on the cross indicates that Christ’s death was a substitutionary atonement. The sins rightly belonging to others were imputed to Christ, and he died the death required by justice for the acquired guilt. That this sacrifice resulted in the healing of the wounds of those for whom he died indicates that this sacrifice did not merely placate God’s wrath temporarily, but that it permanently satisfied God’s wrath so that true healing could follow. Christ’s death destroyed the enmity between God and sinful man, providing the appropriate relationship in which God could justly demonstrate grace to sinners by healing them and restoring them to righteous living.

“My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world” ([1 John 2:1-2](#)).

By definition, a propitiation actually satisfies the wrath of God toward, and removes God’s motive for wrathful condemnation of, those for whom the propitiation is offered. Christ’s death actually satisfied the wrath of God toward those for whom Christ died.

“Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To Him who loves us, and released us from our sins by His blood” ([Rev 1:5](#)).

Jesus' death did not merely cover the sins of John and the church ("us"), but actually released these people from their sins. Since sin could no longer hold them in bondage, Christ's death must have satisfied the wrath of God and restored a right relationship between God and his church. In order to accomplish this, the atonement must have first put to death the enmity between God and his Church by satisfying the requirement of the law toward sinners, thereby satisfying God's wrath.