

CHRIST'S VICARIOUS, ATONING DEATH

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Christ's Atoning Death on the Cross

Christ's death on the cross brought us salvation. It saves us from sin and guilt, and restores us to friendship and intimacy with God. It gives us forgiveness and peace of heart.

I believe our faith today as Christians needs to be renewed by contact with this central mystery at its source, which is the Bible. When we become uncertain about this central mystery, we become weak as Christians. For Christianity to be renewed today, we need to make contact again with the sacrificial, atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

The sin of Adam caused a break in our relationship with God. As Adam's descendants, we no longer inherit what he lost, namely, his original intimacy with God. Because of his sin, we have become mortal and are born in a state spiritual death. To reconcile us with himself, God revealed himself in the Old Testament. Abraham was justified by his faith that in his descendent all the nations of the earth would be blessed (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3). The Old Testament saints were justified, as we are, through their faith in this descendent of Abraham. God therefore forgave their sins through their faith, just as he forgives our sins through our faith in his Son, who died for us on the cross. The death of the only Son of God paid the debt of suffering due in punishment for our sins so that we would not have to suffer it, but could go free. God, who is all merciful, but is also all just, devised this way of forgiving us, which is consistent with his nature as God. In showing forth his perfect mercy, he does not violate his perfect justice. But in acting in such a just way, he is supremely merciful, for he himself, in the person of his Son, suffers the just penalty due for our sins, so that he in all justice, and without violating his perfect divine justice, might most mercifully forgive us.

The Father sends the Son to suffer vicariously our punishment, as a substitute for us. He suffered alienation from his Father on the cross, becoming a curse for us (Gal 3:13), crying out in anguish from the cross (Mk 15:34), so that *we* would *not* have to suffer this spiritual death. His dignity as the Son of God gave infinite value to his suffering, which he underwent in our place.

Yet God has only one nature, and there is but one God, one single divine being. So it is not as though God sent another being, separate from himself, down to earth to suffer for us. Rather he came himself in the person of his Son. The Father and the Son are distinct persons. Each addresses the other as thou. Yet they are but one being, sharing

the same divine mind and will, each in his own way, whether as Father, Son, or Holy Spirit. But there is only one God with only one divine mind and will.

In order for the Son of God, who existed from all eternity in the bosom of the Father, to die for us, he first had to become man in the incarnation. This act of incarnation was itself a part of our salvation, for in Jesus Christ God and man became one. In the incarnation, a human nature with a human mind and human will was united to a divine person, the eternal Son of God, with his divine nature, containing his divine mind and will, which he shared with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Thus Jesus Christ provided a divinizing contact point for the human race to touch God in the flesh, here on earth.

Jesus then died, paying our unpayable debt, and rose to new life so that we, once our debt had been paid through our faith in him, could rise with him to a new life in his resurrection. But before he died, he sacramentalized his body for us in the eucharist so that it could be extended in space and time, so that we might continue to offer him in sacrifice to the Father in the eucharist. Then we eat his sacramentalized body and blood in holy communion so that we might take into ourselves Christ's eucharistic human body, which contains his divine person and divine nature. We eat his body and drink his blood so that his divine person and nature may enter our bodies and spirits and unite us to God by sacramental, physical contact with Jesus Christ. Thus the very mystery of his incarnation—via the eucharist—unites us to God. The incarnate Christ thus becomes our sacramental and physical contact point with God, and we are divinized by coming into contact with him in the eucharist.

The eucharist is also our perfect worship of the Father. With all our love and devotion in the celebration of the eucharist, we offer Christ to the Father, together with Christ's offering of himself to his Father. Christ offers himself to his Father in love and self-donation, in praise and adoration, sacrificing himself on the cross. He gave us the eucharist so that we could take part in his one sacrifice. The eucharist makes us present at Calvary at the moment of his one perfect sacrifice, so that we might offer it with him to the Father, and offer ourselves with him to our common Father in the bond of the Holy Spirit.

Thus the sacrifice of Christ is also a gift of love, a gift of self which the Son makes to the Father, gaining for us eternal redemption. It thus becomes our perfect act of worship too, the sacrifice of the New Testament, which Jesus Christ has left to his Church as our perfect cult and worship of the Father in, through, and with Christ, in the bond of the Holy Spirit. The eucharist is thus at one and the same time the sacrifice which has won our salvation through Christ's *vicarious* death in *substitution* for us, paying *our* penalty *for us*, and also our own supreme act of worship, for it makes Christ's one saving sacrifice present for us to offer with him in love to the Father.

The animal sacrifices for sins (Lev 16; 4), which God gave Israel in the Old Testament, prepared them to understand this, for in them the sinner placed his hand on the head of the victim, transferring thereby his sins to the animal (Lev 16:21; 4:4), and then slew the animal, whose death vicariously substituted for the sinner. Thus an innocent victim bears the sin of the guilty, *suffering his punishment in his place*.

St. Paul teaches us that an animal does *not* have the power to take away sins (Heb 10:4), but rather sins *were forgiven* through these sacrifices in a *sacramental* way, in that the animal represented the one and only truly effective sacrifice of the Son of God, and so God forgave them when they offered these sacrifices in faith. He forgave them ahead of

time, for he knew that full and proper expiation would be made in the future by the death of his only Son on the cross, which these sacrifices represented for the people.

In all this, though, we should not make the mistake of thinking that it was *only after* the sacrifice of Christ that God was transformed from being a wrathful Lord into a loving Father. It was the eternally loving Father who took the *initiative* in the first place to send his only Son to die for us (Rom 8:32). The initiative for the whole thing came from the *Father*. It came from God. This was God's plan to forgive us by sending his Son to suffer our punishment for us, in our place, so that in forgiving us, he could not only be infinitely merciful, but also infinitely just. The just penalty was thus paid, and the all just God, most mercifully suffering the penalty himself, forgives us our sins in all justice and all mercy.

We are therefore *justified* through our faith, rendered and *made righteous* through the sacrifice of Christ. It is God who *makes* us righteous through the sacrifice of Christ. We receive this justification through our faith. Since it is *God* who makes us righteous in this way, we are *truly made righteous*. He not only *declares* us to be righteous but *actually makes* us to be righteous since his *declarations* are *effective*. Thus our justification through believing in Jesus Christ is also in itself the first step of our *sanctification*, which is a progressive life-long growth in holiness. Through our faith in Christ, especially through the sacraments, we are *made truly resplendent* and righteous in God's sight, and begin our growth in further holiness through our life of faith, prayer, obedience, and good works. We do not justify ourselves through our works. Only God justifies us and begins to sanctify us, but then by the cooperation of our good works, we continue to grow in holiness

What Christ Suffered

“But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water” (Jn 19:34).

The soldier pierced Jesus' side with a spear to verify that he was dead. But why did water also come out, and not just blood? Could this be an indication that he was not only dead, but that his *heart* literally *broke* from what he suffered on the cross spiritually, psychologically, and emotionally?

And what did he suffer? He suffered the hatred of those whom he had come to save. But the martyrs also suffered the hatred of their enemies, and yet many of them suffered this with joy and courage, such as St. Ignatius of Antioch, who longed and thirsted for martyrdom, and begged the Romans not to intervene on his behalf and commute his sentence of death. But Jesus, on the contrary, had great fear before he suffered, and asked his Father that his cup of suffering be removed from him (Lk 22:42); and in his agony before his death “his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground” (Lk 22:44). We also have Jesus' cry of dereliction from the cross, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34). How different was the death of Jesus from that of so many martyrs—like St. Ignatius of Antioch—who went to their death with joy and great desire to die for Christ. How different was Jesus' death from that of St. Polycarp, who died in silence as he was burned alive! What then did Jesus Christ

suffer in his heart *more* than these others, which made his death so much *more* horrible than theirs?

The answer is that he suffered the *wrath* of God for all the sins of the world in his love for us. God himself smote, chastised, and abandoned Jesus on the cross (Is 53:10) so that he might suffer in his heart the divine wrath which all sinners deserved, in order to free us from this great suffering of heart. He experienced in his heart the *abandonment* of God on the cross and the *depression* of hell, in our place, to save us from such suffering, so that we might live in the happiness of God, and even die in happiness like so many martyrs.

Jesus Christ was smitten and wounded by God in his human heart. This was his greatest suffering, the suffering of being *alienated* from God in his *heart*. "...he was wounded for *our* transgressions, he was bruised for *our* iniquities: the *chastisement* of *our* peace was upon him; and with *his* stripes *we* are healed...and the Lord hath *laid on him* the iniquity of us all" (Is 53:5-6 KJV). Jesus Christ *was even cursed* by God (Gal 3:13) in being hung from a tree (Dt 21:23); and in being cursed in place of us, he "redeemed us from the curse of the law" (Gal 3:13). Jesus suffered the abandonment of his Father in order to absorb the divine wrath for us, to free us from this wrath.

Christ Substituted for Us

"Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief; when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed" (Is 53:10 KJV).

Jesus died to save us from sin and from the *just wrath* of God against the sin of Adam, and against our own sins (Rom 1:18). God himself took the *initiative* in sending his Son to propitiate his *own* righteous and necessary wrath against human sin. A just God can only be wrathful in the face of sin, and sin, in all justice, must be punished by an all just God.

When, however, we speak of "wrath" in terms of God, we must purify the concept from what we as human beings understand and experience as wrath. Our wrath is human and very imperfect. We often lose control of our emotions and are carried away by them. None of this is true of God. In God, wrath simply means the strong reaction against all that is morally evil.

The Father, therefore, took the initiative and sent us his own Son to properly propitiate his righteous and necessary divine wrath by suffering the just penalty for our sins, so that God in his perfect justice can remain perfectly just, and yet not exact from us the punishment which we ought to pay. Hence Jesus' death satisfies the righteous and necessary divine wrath against our sins because it pays our debt of suffering in punishment for our sins, so that we, in all *justice*, can be set free.

This act of propitiation by the death of Jesus is at the same time supremely *merciful* because it is God himself, in the person of his own Son, who suffers this punishment for us, freeing us from having to suffer it. God is *one*. There is only *one* God. The Son is *one being* with the Father, *one single God* with him, although a distinct and different person within the Godhead. Hence it is *God himself* who comes to suffer for us, and in our place, the just penalty for our sins, so that the just God can in all *justice* let us go free, since our debt has been *paid*. *He himself* paid it! Therefore the Father is in no way being

cruel in sending his Son to suffer in our place, as though he were sending *another being, separate from himself*, to suffer in order to satisfy and placate his wrath. God comes himself. His Son is not a separate being—although a distinct person—from himself.

There are many places in the scriptures that speak of the wrath of God. Ps 84, for example, the beautiful Christmas psalm, is full of divine wrath. It says, “Thou didst withdraw all thy *wrath*; thou didst turn from thy *hot anger*. Restore us again, O God of our salvation, and put away thy *indignation* toward us! Wilt thou be *angry* with us for ever? Wilt thou prolong thy *anger* to all generations?” (Ps 84:3-5).

The death of Jesus, then, *truly propitiates* the divine wrath in that it *satisfies* it, that is, it *satisfies justice*, a just price is *paid* for our sins, and God can therefore *justly* forgive them. The righteous wrath of God is therefore turned aside, *propitiated*, and God is reconciled with us. God has done this to reconcile himself with us.

But does this picture of a *wrathful* God contradict our picture of a *loving* God? Not at all! God was always a *loving* God. There is never any question about that. Jesus does not transform a wrathful Lord into a loving Father. God was always a loving Father, even in his wrath against our sins. It was his great *love* that moved him to devise this method of saving us from his own necessary wrath by suffering it *himself* instead of inflicting it on us. The sending of Jesus to suffer in our place is the plan of an ever *loving* Father, who is also a *just* God, who will not violate his own justice in showing mercy. The death of Jesus on the cross is the way he did it.

Justice is part of God’s nature. It is not merely some external law that God has to obey. God himself *is* just. He is justice itself. He is also *love* itself, and *mercy* itself. This is God’s nature, and he always acts according to his nature, in a *just, loving, and merciful* way. The propitiatory death of Jesus on the cross is the way God has devised to remain a fully *just, loving, and merciful* God—all three at the same time—without one attribute violating the other.

The propitiatory death of Jesus Christ on the cross shows that God is just, even though he forgives and justifies us through our faith, without demanding any further punishment from us (Rom 3:25-26). Without the death of Christ paying our debt of punishment, God would indeed seem unjust in letting us off without inflicting on us a just punishment. God does not give us a mere “presidential pardon.” A just penalty *is paid*, and paid in full. And God himself paid it for us. The sacrifice of Christ, therefore, shows that God is *just*, even though he *justifies* us (Rom 3:25-26).

The death of Jesus on the cross, then, is far more than simply an *example* of love. It is *true propitiation* and *true expiation* of our sins in the blood of Jesus Christ on the cross. It is not just an *example* of Jesus’ love and forgiveness, in that he forgave even those who crucified him. It is *far more* than that. It is *real propitiation* of very real divine wrath. It is God himself in the Son suffering his own wrath to satisfy its just demands. God himself takes the *initiative* to *propitiate* his *own* divine wrath by sending his Son to die on the cross, in our place, so that the just penalty for our sins might be fully *paid*.

This is the great Gospel message, namely, the sacrificial, propitiatory, atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross. The proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the kerygma of the Church, the joyful good news that we are saved from the wrath and punishment of God, due to our sins, through the suffering on the cross of the only Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, and that our sins are therefore forgiven if we believe in him, and that we henceforth have a new life in him in his resurrection. This is

the joyful proclamation of the Gospel, that God sent his only Son to *substitute* for us and to *suffer instead of us* and in place of us the *punishment due to us* for our sins, and thus bring to an end his just wrath against us, and in this way reconcile himself to us. We receive this freedom from punishment and from our guilt for having sinned by means of our faith and through the sacraments, which make us clean and resplendent before God, and clothe us in the splendor of the righteousness of Jesus Christ himself.

Hence “it pleased the Lord to *bruise* him; he hath put him to *grief*” (Is 53:10 KJV). It was God himself who smote his own Son, inflicting on *him* the punishment due to *us* for our sins, in order to *free us* from this punishment and guilt. The *debt* of our punishment, once paid, is then removed from us. This is the Gospel of salvation which God has sent into the world in his Son. Christ justifies us through our faith in him when we invoke the merits of his death for us on the cross. He took our place. He *substituted* for us. God smote him instead of us. “...it pleased the Lord to bruise him; he hath put him to grief” (Is 53:10 KJV), “and with his stripes we are healed” (Is 53:5 KJV), made new, a new creation, new creatures, new men.

God then raised him from the dead to manifest that his sacrifice of substitution for us was accepted. Thus the resurrection manifests that we are truly justified, and illumines us with new light. St. Paul, therefore, says that Jesus Christ “was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25). That is, the resurrection manifests the justification achieved by his death.

“...and the Lord hath *laid on him* the iniquity of us all” (Is 53:6 KJV). “But he was wounded for *our* transgressions, he was bruised for *our* iniquities; the *chastisement* of *our* *peace* was upon *him*; and with his stripes we are healed” (Is 53:5 KJV). In his justice, God bruised him and put him to grief (Is 53:10 KJV), thus punishing all sin. But he did so with great mercy, for it was God himself, in the person of his Son, who suffered this punishment for us, to free us from it, and thus forgive us for our sins, that we might rejoice in the freedom of the sons of God (Rom 8:21).