# Systematic Theology: Soteriology

# Week 2: What is the Atonement? What are our benefits?

## Introduction to the series

* When you hear the word *soteriology*, what does mean to you?
* Some think of high theology, stuffy rooms, and old men arguing over large oak tables.
* Others think…I have no idea what that word means…and I probably don’t care even if I did.
* Hopefully you land somewhere between these two descriptions.
* Simply put, soteriology is the study of salvation or the study of the doctrine of salvation.
* In other words, it is the study of what one group of people believe about salvation. That group can be anything from a church to a political party. For our purposes, we are going to study what the Bible says.
* It is important to have a full and broad understanding of what the Bible says about our salvation so that we know that we are saved and so that we know what comes with our salvation.
* There are many different ideas and teachings about salvation, and it is our responsibility to make sure that we know what God has ordained and expects from His creation.
* Here is schedule for the upcoming lessons:
  + 09/08: Introduction
  + **09/15: What is the atonement, both declarative and practical?**
  + 09/22: What does effectual calling, faith and repentance mean?
  + 09/29: Missionary Share: Tim George from Mozambique
  + 10/06: What is justification or what does it mean to be justified?
  + 10/13: What does it mean to be adopted by God?
  + 10/20: What is progressive sanctification and how does it operate in my daily Christian life?
  + 10/27: Missionary Share: Jeff Street from Canada
  + 11/03: What does the perseverance of the saints mean for me today and for eternity?

## introduction about the atonement

* Central to Christianity is the doctrine of the atonement. As we will come to see, without the atonement we are left to either try and make our own way to heaven or try and make up for what we have not been forgiven of by the atonement.
* Simply put, the word atonement is found only in the Old Testament and represents someone who has sinned or has been defiled being cleansed from their filth.
* Without a doubt, the most common way the atonement is used in the OT is to represent a sinner who has had their sins “atoned” for by a sacrifice.
* **Numbers 8:12** “Now the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the bulls; then offer the one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering to the LORD, **to make atonement for the Levites**.”
  + The Hebrew word for atone is *to cover, purge,* or *make reconciliation.*
  + The idea is to take away or cover something in someone so that they can be brought into a right relationship with the offended person.
* Furthermore, the atonement had to be done with blood.
  + **Leviticus 17:11** “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; **for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement**.”
  + “Because the life of a creature is in the blood, blood makes atonement for one’s life. One life is sacrificed for another. The shedding of substitutionary blood on the altar makes atonement, since the blood of the innocent victim was given for the life of the one who has sinned.”[[1]](#footnote-2)
* “Right at the heart of Christianity there is a cross, and on that cross the Son of God wrought man’s salvation. Put simply, the atonement means that Jesus Christ in his death dealt completely with the problem that man’s sin had set. Whatever had to be done, He did it, and now those who come in faith may enter into full salvation.”[[2]](#footnote-3)
* **The atonement, while certainly not known exhaustively, can be known intimately**. We know what God wants us to know about the atonement. We know that man’s sinfulness keeps him away from God because we know that God is holy.
* We know that God must punish sin, either upon the sinner or upon the one who took their place. Man’s sins *must* be paid for by the standard that God has set forward.
* That standard, which we just read in Leviticus, is through blood.

## other atonement theories throughout history[[3]](#footnote-4)

* I think that is helpful to understand what has been proposed as a proper understanding of the atonement throughout church history.
* If we know what has already been tried and found lacking, we will not be taken by our current thoughts.

### Ransom to Satan Theory (Jehovah’s Witness and 7th Day Adventist…RCC?)

* This view sees the atonement of Christ as a ransom paid to Satan to purchase man’s freedom and release him from being enslaved to Satan. It is based on a belief that man’s spiritual condition is bondage to Satan and that **the meaning of Christ’s death was to secure God’s victory over Satan**. It is unbiblical in that it sees Satan, rather than God, as the one who required that a payment be made for sin…throughout Scripture we see that God is the One who requires a payment for sin.

### Recapitulation Theory (Irenaeus 2nd Century…least known today)

* This theory states that the atonement of Christ has reversed the course of mankind from disobedience to obedience. It believes that Christ’s life recapitulated all the stages of human life and in doing so **reversed the course of disobedience initiated by Adam**. This theory cannot be supported scripturally.

### Mystical Theory (Friedrick Schleiermacher…1768-1834)

* The mystical theory sees the atonement of Christ as a triumph over **His own sinful nature** through the power of the Holy Spirit. Those who hold this view believe that knowledge of this will mystically influence man and **awake his “god-consciousness.”** They also believe that man’s spiritual condition is not the result of sin but simply a lack of “god-consciousness.”

### Moral Influence Theory (Peter Abelard…1079-1142… “Today’s English Version” or “Good News Bible” was produced by men who hold to this view.)

* This is the belief that the atonement of Christ is a demonstration of God’s love which causes man’s heart to soften and repent. Those who hold this view believe that man is spiritually sick and in need of help and that man is moved to accept God’s forgiveness by seeing God’s love for man. They believe that the purpose and meaning of Christ’s death was to demonstrate God’s love toward man.
* Very popular view today among liberal Protestants, Postmillennial ideas, Social Gospel

### Example Theory (16th Century)

* This view sees the atonement of Christ as simply providing an example of faith and obedience to inspire man to be obedient to God. Those who hold this view believe that man is spiritually alive and that Christ’s life and atonement were simply an example of true faith and obedience and should serve as inspiration to men to live a similar life of faith and obedience. **The main difference between the moral influence theory and the example theory is that the moral influence theory says that Christ’s death teaches us how much God loves us and the example theory says that Christ’s death teaches how to live**.

### Governmental Theory[[4]](#footnote-5) (Hugo Grotius…1583-1645…William Booth/Salvation Army, some Nazarene members…popular among Arminian’s.)

* God is not an offended party regarding individual sins, nor is a debt owed to him due to individual sins, nor is there an equating of sin with death; and there is no correlation between debt and sin. **Instead, God is a moral governor who oversees proper moral truth and action**; and he reconciles people to himself without paying their legal debt on the cross. The cross, then, is an example of the horror of sin and a demonstration of its effect upon mankind as well as an exhibition of God’s displeasure with sin. The cross is to motivate people to believe in Christ (by seeing the horror of the effect of sin on God in flesh) and moves the sinner, by his free will, to choose to believe in God and repent of his sins.

### Penal Substitution Theory (arising during the Reformation)

* This theory sees the atonement of Christ as being a vicarious, substitutionary sacrifice that satisfied the demands of God’s justice upon sin. With His sacrifice, Christ paid the penalty of man’s sin, bringing forgiveness, imputing righteousness, and reconciling man to God. Those who hold this view believe that every aspect of man—his mind, will, and emotions—have been corrupted by sin and that man is totally depraved and spiritually dead.

### Issues with most of these theories.

* The death of Christ was not necessary, but something that was good.
* The death of Christ made salvation possible, but not definite.
* Man’s sinfulness was not so bad that Christ had to come and do all the work.
* God would be a moral monster if He were to punish Christ on the cross (cosmic child abuse).

## why do we need to know and study the atonement?

* “Nothing in the Christian system is of greater consequence than the doctrine of the atonement”[[5]](#footnote-6)
  + How we view the atonement of Christ on our behalf will ultimately shape what we believe about the rest of our Christian life.
  + We need to know and study the atonement because it is going to shape and influence how we live the rest of our Christian life.
    - **For example**: if you think that your sins have not been fully paid for, you are going to try and pay for them yourself. Either through works or self-beating.
    - If you are plagued by the guilt of your sin, perhaps you are not aware of what Christ’s sacrifice accomplished for you.
    - If you still see yourself as the “old man” and not who you are in Christ, your identity is rooted in the wrong place.
* “The accomplishment of redemption is concerned with what has been generally called the atonement. No treatment of the atonement can be properly oriented that does not trace its source to the free and sovereign love of God.”[[6]](#footnote-7)
  + To fully understand the atonement and the sacrifice, which was made for us, we must start with the love of God towards His creation.
  + Once again, if we think that the atonement is not full and final then we are not going to know the full love of God toward us.
  + **John 3:16** “For **God so loved the world**, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”
  + Without God’s love towards His people, the atonement would have never taken place.
  + **Romans 5:8** “But **God demonstrates His own love toward us**, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”
* The atonement accomplished the *expiation* of our sins. This means that Jesus bore our sins, took them on Himself and therefore did away with them.[[7]](#footnote-8)
  + Jesus took our sins upon Himself and did away with them. This is where the idea of Jesus being our *substitute* comes from. He took the full penalty for our sins since they were put upon Him.
  + **1 Peter 2:24** “…and **He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross**, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.”
* The atonement accomplished *propitiation* for our sins. This means that Jesus took God’s wrath and anger that was due to us because of our sin.[[8]](#footnote-9)
  + Jesus took the wrath and anger of God which was due to us because of our sin.
  + Our sin was removed and now God’s wrath is also removed.
  + **Hebrews 2:17** “Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, **to make propitiation for the sins of the people**.”
  + A more complete understanding of atonement for sin comes to light in the New Testament, where the word *propitiation* centers on the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. Christ’s sacrifice holds the power to cancel the penalty for sin, turn away God’s anger toward sin, and avert God’s wrath once and for all.[[9]](#footnote-10)
  + This removal of God’s wrath does not now mean that God loves us…He always loved us; it means that we now have God’s favor upon us.
    - **Ephesians 2:4-5** “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) …”
* The atonement accomplished *reconciliation* between us and God.[[10]](#footnote-11) This is only possible if our sins have been paid for in full (expiation) and He is no longer angry with us because of our sins (propitiation).
  + Now, we stand as friends and coworkers with God. We are no longer estranged from God.
  + **2 Corinthians 5:18-19** “Now all these things are from God, **who reconciled us to Himself through Christ** and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, **not counting their trespasses against them**, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”
* The atonement accomplished *redemption* as Christ’s death on the cross purchased His people back to God.[[11]](#footnote-12)
  + We now belong to God.[[12]](#footnote-13)
  + Our sins had put us in captivity from which we need to be delivered. The price that is paid to deliver someone from captivity is called a “ransom.” To say that Christ’s death accomplished redemption for us means that it accomplished deliverance from our captivity through the payment of a price.
  + **There are three things we had to be released from**: the curse of the law, the guilt of sin, and the power of sin. Christ redeemed us from each of these.
  + Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us” (**Galatians 3:13-14**).
  + Christ redeemed us from the guilt of our sin. We are “justified as a gift by his grace, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (**Romans 3:24**).
  + Christ redeemed us from the power of sin: “knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your fathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (**1 Peter 1:18-19**).
  + We are now free to live to righteousness. Our redemption from the power of sin is thus the basis of our ability to live holy lives: “You have been bought with a price; *therefore*glorify God in your bodies” (**1 Corinthians 6:20**).

### Accomplished or Made Possible?

* This is one of the biggest issues within the atonement thought process. Really, this comes down to what is normally called *Limited Atonement* or in more modern times *Definite Atonement.*
* Did Christ’s death make atonement possible for all people or definite for some people?
  + In other words, *for whom did Christ die?* His own people or everyone equally with the hope that some people would eventually be saved.
* **The question that needs a precise answer is this**: Did He or didn’t He? Did Christ actually make a substitutionary sacrifice for sins or didn’t He? If He did, then it was not for all the world, for then all the world would be saved. (Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism*, p. 47.)[[13]](#footnote-14)
* Everyone believes in some sort of *Limited Atonement*…or they believe in *Universalism.*
* The Arminian limits the atonement as certainly as does the Calvinist. The Calvinist limits the extent of it in that he says it does not apply to all persons…while the Arminian limits the power of it, for he says that in itself it does not actually save anybody. The Calvinist limits it quantitatively, but not qualitatively; the Arminian limits it qualitatively, but not quantitatively. For the Calvinist it is like a narrow bridge that goes all the way across the stream; for the Arminian it is like a great wide bridge that goes only half-way across. (Lorraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1932) p. 153.)[[14]](#footnote-15)
* We can think of it as Christ’s atoning work as a “pool of credit” that people can either take or leave. If Christ died for everyone, then there is going to be some left over “credit” in the pool.
* In fact, one can argue that there are people in hell that Christ died for but because they chose not to accept the offer from Christ, they ended up eternally tormented.
* I would argue that this line of thinking makes God out to be a real moral monster…essentially someone’s sins are *actually forgiven*, but because they didn’t want it, they are eternally punished.
  + That would mean that there are people in hell who were *actually forgiven* by God through the work of Christ on the cross.
* To think of limited atonement is to see that God chose before the foundation of the world (**Ephesians 1:3-5**) and then Christ died for those whom God chose (**Matthew 20:28**).

## Final thoughts

* This is not an easy doctrine to comprehend. Truly, the idea that Jesus is our penal substitutionary atoning sacrifice should bring all men great joy.
* He took the legal punishment for our sins (**1 Peter 2:24** “…and He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed.”) and was our substitute (**2 Corinthians 5:21** “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin **on our behalf**, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”).
* You are now free from the **power of sin**, from the **penalty of sin** and awaiting the day when we are free from the **presence of sin**.
* Regardless of what you believe about *Limited Atonement,* anyone who comes to Christ, confesses their sin, repents of their ways, and puts their faith and trust in Christ for the forgiveness of sin…they are saved.
* **Romans 10:9-12** “…that if you **confess** with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and **believe** in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, **you will be saved**; for with the heart a person believes, **resulting in righteousness**, and with the mouth he confesses, **resulting in salvation**. For the Scripture says, ‘WHOEVER BELIEVES IN HIM WILL NOT BE DISAPPOINTED.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, **abounding in riches for all who call on Him**…”

1. Rooker quoted in <https://www.blueletterbible.org/comm/guzik_david/study-guide/leviticus/leviticus-17.cfm?a=107011> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/1961/12/basic-christian-doctrines-23-atonement/> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. <https://www.gotquestions.org/atonement-theories.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. <https://carm.org/doctrine-and-theology/moral-government-view-of-the-atonement/> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. John Wesley, *A Compendium of Wesley’s Theology*, ed. R. Burtner and R. Chiles (Nashville: Abingdon, 1954), 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied,* 1979, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. John Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, 902. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Ibid., 903. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. https://www.gotquestions.org/Jesus-is-the-propitiation-for-our-sins.html [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Frame, 903. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. <https://mattperman.com/2011/04/6-things-christ-accomplished-by-his-death/> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. <https://www.aomin.org/aoblog/reformed-apologetics/was-anyone-saved-at-the-cross/> [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)