

## CHAPTER 5.

### CHRIST'S WORK OF ATONEMENT

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We began this volume by studying who Christ is or, as it is often called, the person of Christ. In particular, we looked at his two natures and his threefold office. Then we went on to examine Christ's work, both in his state of humiliation and exaltation. Now, in this chapter, we take a step back, look once more at his person and work, and ask this question: what is at the heart of everything Christ our Mediator has done for us? In a word, the answer is *atonement*.

Atonement is God's gracious answer to our deepest crisis. We referred to this crisis back in chapter 1. At that time we asked how a perfectly holy God can live in a covenant relationship with thoroughly sinful human beings. Won't the fire of the LORD'S holiness consume any sinner who dares to stand before him? (Deut 4:24) The simple answer is yes . . . unless there is atonement. Atonement is the work of our Mediator to reconcile God and man through his one sacrifice, which makes sinners holy and blameless. At this point it may be helpful to distinguish between the doctrine of atonement and the doctrine of salvation, which is also called soteriology. Although the two are very closely related, there is a difference: atonement is the work of Christ *for us* while soteriology focuses on Christ's work *in us*.

Perhaps an analogy will clarify this point. Poliomyelitis, commonly called polio, is a terrible disease. Thankfully, a vaccine has been developed and manufactured which can successfully eradicate polio; indeed,

some countries are already polio-free. However, if this vaccine is not injected into people, then polio can still spread. Although every analogy has limitations, for a moment, let us compare atonement to that vaccine. We can rightly say, “Christ has already obtained the cure, our redemption.” However, there is another step. Just as the vaccine will not do any good if it simply sits on the shelf, so also Christ’s work of atonement will not help us unless he also applies it to our lives through the working of the Holy Spirit. This application of atonement to us, and within us, is called soteriology. We will study this topic more closely in the last five chapters of this volume.

Yet already here, as we analyze the doctrine of atonement, there is every reason for joy. Those who were dead in transgressions and sins (Eph 2:1) take great delight in hearing that “people laden with iniquity” (Isa 1:4) can be made “whiter than snow” (Ps 51:7) and “alive together with Christ” (Eph 2:5). Studying atonement is learning about the very core of the good news which is being preached in the entire world (Mark 16:15).

#### ATONEMENT REVEALED IN SCRIPTURE

In the Old Testament the word that is usually translated as *to atone* literally means *to cover* (Hebrew *kaphar*). For example, the LORD instructed Noah to cover the ark, inside and out, with pitch (Gen 6:14). In this way, that large boat was made waterproof. Of course, the pitch that Noah used to cover the ark did a good job of keeping the boat dry, but even all the pitch in the world would not be enough to cover over our sins in God’s sight. For sin a different kind of covering is needed.

This becomes particularly clear in the instructions concerning the sacrifices in Leviticus 1–7. Atonement is mentioned frequently in these chapters. In fact, there are three different sacrifices concerning which the LORD explicitly says that “the priest shall make atonement” for those who bring the sacrifice: the whole burnt offering (Lev 1:4), the sin offering (Lev 4:20), and the guilt offering (Lev 5:16). Two things stand out immediately. In the first place, a priest must be involved for atonement to be accomplished. The action of a sacrifice, in and of itself, will not

suffice. Atonement requires a sacrifice, which is done through the mediation of a duly ordained and anointed priest. Secondly, the obstacle of sin is so complex that in the OT a single kind of sacrifice is not enough. To begin with, the sinful nature affects every aspect and ability of human beings. Therefore, the atoning sacrifice must be a *whole* burnt offering. Next, all sin involves breaking one or more of God's commandments (Lev 4:2, 13, 22, 27). These transgressions are not covered by an extra measure of compensating obedience to the commandments. That would be salvation by works. Instead, atonement is made through the *sin* offering. Finally, wherever sin is committed, it results in misery, damage, and brokenness. Restitution is needed (Lev 5:16), in addition to forgiveness. For this reason the *guilt* offering is also one of the atoning sacrifices. Clearly, atonement is not a Band-Aid solution. It addresses the problem of sin both deeply and thoroughly. The prophet Isaiah announces that atonement does not merely mask sin; it removes sin (Isa 27:9).

Several other aspects of atonement testify to the sheer size of what must be accomplished. Even when the sin committed is not done with a rebellious spirit, but more due to the weakness of our sinful nature, atonement is still necessary (Lev 5:14–19). In Scripture there is no lighter atonement for lesser sins. Sin is sin, and atoning for that sin still requires a sacrifice done by a priest. Whether the nature of the sin is more individual (Lev 4:27) or more communal (Lev 4:13), atonement is needed in both instances. Atonement is needed for the rich but equally for the poor (Exod 30:15). Whether one is a leader in the community, or just one of the masses, the necessity of atonement remains the same (Lev 4:22, 27). Even the altars upon which the atoning sacrifices were made were themselves in need of atonement—both the large bronze altar (Exod 29:36–37), as well as the smaller golden altar (Exod 30:10). In fact, once a year, on the special Day of Atonement, the LORD said, “He [the high priest] shall make atonement for the holy sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly” (Lev 16:33). Sin's reach is pervasive; therefore, atonement's remedy must also be all-encompassing.

Thankfully, already in the Old Testament, God's people could enjoy the blessing of atonement. To be sure, it was not the real and definitive atonement accomplished by God's Son, Jesus Christ (Col 2:17; Heb 10:1–10). Still, it was a blessing! Atonement found its source solely in the compassion of God, not the pious efforts of human beings (Ps 78:38). In other words, God was not compelled to accomplish atonement; he did it freely out of his sovereign good-pleasure (CoD 2.2). He also did it through blood. As the LORD says in Leviticus 17:11, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life." To some the use of atoning blood may seem unnecessarily violent. However, let us remember that the wages of sin is death (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23). Therefore, if real atonement is going to be made, then real death must occur. Anything less would not satisfy God's justice or truly cover over our sins. The lifeblood of the animal was then shed on behalf of the sinner. This was symbolized when the person bringing the sacrifice was to lay his hand on the head of the animal, just before it was slaughtered. This action indicated that the sins of the person were transferred to the sacrificial animal, and the sacrifice was "accepted for him to make atonement for him" (Lev 1:4). For this reason, we often speak of vicarious atonement, that is, reconciliation that someone makes on behalf of someone else.

The use of atoning blood culminated in the sprinkling of blood on Atonement Day. On that day the blood of the sacrifice was not only sprinkled on the altar of incense which was in front of the curtain (Lev 16:18), but also on the Ark of the Covenant which was behind the curtain, inside the Most Holy Place. To be accurate, the high priest first took the blood of a bull, and sprinkled it both on and in front of the ark (Lev 16:14). This sprinkling made atonement for himself and his family. Then, he also sprinkled the blood of a goat, again both on and in front of the ark (Lev 16:15). This was to atone for the sins of the people.

Consider the powerful imagery of this event. The Ark of the Covenant was a gold-covered chest with a special atonement cover made of pure gold (Exod 25:17). Below the atonement cover, inside the chest, were

the stone tablets upon which the Law was written (Deut 10:5). Above the atonement cover, between the golden cherubim, was the awesome presence of the LORD's fiery cloud of glory (Exod 40:34–38; Lev 16:2). The Law below made God's people aware of their sinfulness (LD 2). The stone tablets themselves also reminded the people of their rebellion at Sinai for it was there that Moses had broken the first set of tablets at the sight of their revelry (Exod 32:15–16, 19). By contrast, the LORD's cloud above spoke silent volumes about his intense and unfading holiness.

Now, since this ark is “the ark of the covenant” (Deut 31:26), we return once again to a crucial question. How can God's holy cloud of glory rest in such close proximity to the stone tablets of the covenant? Yes, the Law itself is holy and good (Rom 7:12), but it is also through the commandment that sin becomes utterly sinful (Rom 7:13). Therefore, how can utterly sinful people live in covenant relationship with such a holy God? The answer is found in the sprinkled drops of atoning blood, which were always there, renewed each year, on the atonement cover, which is also called the mercy seat. True, the people could not see this, for only the high priest went inside the Most Holy Place. Still, they knew about it, and they called to believe the truth it symbolized. The sight of that blood on the atonement cover, formed in their mind's eye, was a blessed comfort. Yes, they constantly sinned against the Ten Words of the covenant, inscribed on those stone tablets. Yet, they also knew that the atoning blood was constantly there, too. In the end, it was nothing more than a few, little sprinkles of atoning blood (Lev 16:14, 15), but it was enough—at least for the old covenant.

In the new covenant, all the essentials of atonement remain intact. Sin has certainly not changed; it still penetrates and pervades everyone and every aspect of life. The wages of sin is still death. Atonement still requires a priest and sacrificial blood. This atoning flow of blood still springs forth from grace, and grace alone. The one, significant change is this: the merely visual symbol in the Old becomes a full reality in the New, and it does so in Christ (Col 2:17). The very same word that is used of the atonement cover in the Old Testament is used of Christ's sacrifice in the New, when the apostle Paul writes about Christ “whom God

put forward as a *propitiation* by his blood, to be received by faith. (Rom 3:25; see also Heb 9:5 where the same word is translated “mercy seat”). Through the atoning blood of Christ, those who were previously enemies of God now become his beloved, reconciled people (Rom 5:10–11), and where real reconciliation has been made, sins are no longer counted against a believer (2 Cor 5:19).

So, the High Priest Jesus Christ made the once-and-for-all atoning sacrifice to remove sin and even cleanse consciences (Heb 10:22). There is no longer any need for an annual priestly pilgrimage into the Most Holy Place in order to renew atonement for another three hundred and sixty-five days. On the contrary, God’s only-begotten Son has taken his own blood directly into the heavenly Holy of Holies (Heb 10:19). The slain Lamb of God is constantly there in the real Most Holy Place (Heb 9:14; Rev 5:6). That is more than enough to secure atonement for God’s people, for “he is the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 2:2).

At the same time, we must not forget that this particular High Priest, the priest after the order of Melchizedek, is not only a priest but also simultaneously a king (Heb 7:1). In fact, the same psalm that prophesies about Christ’s ordination as priest also speaks of his enthronement as king (Ps 110:1, 4). These two offices are integrally wrapped up into one Person, the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, his death not only atones for sin (Heb 2:17) but also destroys the devil who holds the power of death and frees those whom the devil enslaved by the fear of death (Heb 2:14–15). The apostle Paul also indicates that Christ accomplished two things for us on the cross: the forgiveness of sins (Col 2:13–14) *and* the disarming of Satan and his host of demons (Col 2:15). Christ’s subjugation of his and our enemies is normally and correctly associated with his royal office. However, unlike earthly kings who disarm their enemies with weapons of their own, this heavenly King disarms and defeats his archenemy by making a sacrifice, which is obviously a priestly task. Thus, also in the doctrine of atonement, Christ’s work as priest and king ought to be distinguished but cannot be separated. In reconciling us, who were once enemies, to the Father through his atoning blood, Christ also sets us free from slavery to Satan. Atonement transfers sinners to the other side of

the antithetical line, or as the apostle says, “He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col 1:13–14).

## VARIOUS VIEWS OF ATONEMENT

Since the doctrine of atonement is at the heart of the gospel, various theologians have tried to describe its key features. As you might expect, different theologians have also come up with different views. Below are some of the most common views, along with an evaluation of them based on what we discovered in the last section about atonement in God’s Word.

### **Christ the Victor (or *Christus Victor*)**

As is clear from its name, this view emphasizes Christ’s victory over his enemies, especially Satan. There are two varieties of this understanding of atonement: one from the church fathers and one from a Swedish Lutheran theologian named Gustav Aulén (1879–1977). Some of the church fathers, in particular Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–395), reasoned that people who live in sin have enslaved themselves to the devil. Therefore, in order to set them free, the Father had to offer a ransom to the devil. According to this view, the Father offered his own Son as the ransom, and the devil readily accepted it. Thus, it was said, Christ died and descended into hell, the realm of Satan’s dominion. However, Satan soon discovered that since Christ is both holy and divine, neither death nor hell could hold him. In fact, as Christ arose on the third day, the devil suddenly realized that he had been deceived. Rather than receiving a ransom, Satan had been dealt a decisive blow of defeat. The church fathers even compared this view of atonement to a fishhook. The bait on the hook was Christ’s human body, which died on the cross, but as soon as Satan bit into that ransom, so to speak, he was snagged, caught, and conquered on the hook of Christ’s divinity. Thus, this view is sometimes called the fishhook view of atonement, or more simply, the classic view.

A more modern version of this view has been proposed by Gustav Aulén. He does not speak about bait or a fishhook, and he does not say that the

devil was tricked either, but he does wish to emphasize that the atonement involves more than satisfying God's justice with respect to sin. For him, Christ's dramatic victory over Satan, the demons, and all the forces of evil is a core truth in the doctrine of atonement. He is keen to see this victory emphasized more than it has been in the past.

As we saw in our study of Scripture, Christ's victory over Satan is certainly part of the gospel and it is also directly connected to the cross. The Priest-King after the order of Melchizedek sacrificed himself on the cross to cover our sins *and* to disarm our enemies (Col 2:13–15). However, looking carefully at the OT, especially the Day of Atonement and the atonement cover of the ark, it is clear that atonement is primarily about the shedding and sprinkling of blood to cleanse transgressors from their sins. This same point can be made in another way by asking why it was *necessary* for Christ to die on the cross. Lord's Day 16 gives the following answer: "Because of the justice and truth of God satisfaction for our sins could be made in no other way than by the death of the Son of God" (Q&A 40). Christ could have used his almighty power to disarm and defeat Satan in any number of different ways, but in order to atone for our sin Christ had to die, on the cross, shedding the once-for-all blood of atonement. Yes, Christ was victorious over the devil and his demons. And yes, this blessing certainly needs to be highlighted. It is also directly connected in Scripture to Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross. However, we must not lose sight of what is central in atonement. The priests in the order of Aaron made atonement *for all the sins of the people* (Lev 16:34). The only Priest after the order of Melchizedek did the same (Heb 2:17). Christ's victory over Satan is undoubtedly significant, but it is still secondary.

### **Satisfaction**

This view is usually associated with a theologian of the Middle Ages named Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). He wrote a famous book, *Cur Deus Homo? (Why Did God Become Man?)* In this book, Anselm argues that by sinning man robbed God of his honour, since it is through obedience that human beings show respect to their Creator. However,

God is very protective of his honour. He could not simply let the insulting actions of sinful human beings go unanswered. Therefore, Christ, the Son of God, became man, lived a perfect life, and even died while he was innocent. All of this, argued Anselm, was more than enough to compensate for the grave injustice that human beings have done to God's majesty. Thus, God is satisfied since his honour has been restored.

Again, there is an element of truth in Anselm's view. Whereas the classic view put too much emphasis on the place of Satan in atonement, at least this view focuses on God's justice and majesty. Sin may involve Satan's lure but it insults God's holy majesty. Without a doubt, the latter is more significant than the former. However, the problem with Anselm's view is that the cleansing power of atoning blood is not highlighted. To be sure, God's honour is restored, but what about Christ's work to "purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Heb 9:14)? From the OT onwards, the goal of atonement has always been to cover over sin. Unfortunately, this central emphasis is diminished in satisfaction view.

### **Moral Influence**

Another medieval theologian, Peter Abelard (1079–1142), developed his view of atonement from the starting point of God's love. By nature sinners spurn God's love and follow their own desires. Still, Abelard argues, God loves them all, and in order to win back their love, he decided to do something dramatic: send his own Son to earth in order to die on the cross. This purely selfless and sacrificial act of Christ testifies to just how deep and steadfast God's love really is. As Abelard goes on to explain, looking to this ultimate proof of God's love, some hearts will be softened and some will be inclined to love God once again, thereby bringing about reconciliation. So, in short, Abelard sees the cross as God's way of influencing the hearts of people, turning them back to him.

Abelard's view of atonement, which is shared by many people today, is essentially a humanized understanding of this doctrine. That is to say,

this is how things often work in our own human relationships. In marriage, if a husband feels spurned by his wife, he may do something special, such as buying roses, to win back her love. However, in our relationship with God, things are different. Let us remember what the LORD said right from the start: the wages of sin is death (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23), not just the loss of love. In atonement Christ did not just win back our love, he fully paid for all our sins (LD 1, Q&A 1) and obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life (LD 15, Q&A 37).

### **Penal Substitution**

This last view of atonement is essentially the one we discovered in Scripture and which is summarized in the Reformed confessions. The main word *substitution* emphasizes the vicarious nature of atonement. Christ offered himself as the atoning sacrifice instead of us (Isa 53; 2 Cor 5:21). In addition, the word *penal* reminds us that what he took in our place was the full and just penalty for sin, that is, death. In this way, the focus in the penal substitution view of atonement is on satisfying God's justice, appeasing his holy wrath against sin, and delivering us from the punishment, which we should have suffered, both now and eternally. This view of atonement can be found in the Belgic Confession (Art. 20 & 21), Heidelberg Catechism (LD 5–6, 15–16, and 21, esp. Q&A 56) and the Canons of Dort (2.1–2). Certain aspects of the other views may well be true, and they can augment the penal substitution view. At the same time, let us keep the core teaching of the atonement clearly in the centre. It is an all-sufficient sacrifice for all-encompassing sin.

### DIFFERENT VIEWS OF ATONEMENT AND PREACHING

Just before we leave the whole matter of the different views of atonement, it is relevant to consider how each one impacts the preaching of the gospel. The view of atonement which centres on Christ as the Victorious One often leads to preaching which focuses on the ongoing battle against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms (Eph 6:12). To be sure, taking a stand against the devil's schemes is a crucial part of the Christian life (Eph 6:11). However, we first need to hear the assurance that

Christ himself is our peace and in him we “who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13, but also 2:14–18). One thing that makes good news really good is that even though the battle against Satan is ongoing, the atonement for our sins is done, once for all (Heb 7:27).

Next, the satisfaction theory of atonement is prone to preaching which frequently exhorts people to live a pious and honourable live. Of course, preaching must call people to live holy and honourable lives, as for instance the apostle Peter does in 1 Peter 1:13–15. However, once again the order of things is so vitally important. The call to holy living must be proclaimed as a thankful response to the purifying blood that Christ shed on the cross (1 Pet 1:2).

Finally, the moral influence theory of atonement can cultivate a style of preaching which tends to avoid matters such as sin, punishment, the curse, and the cross. Instead, the preacher announces, in various ways, that God loves us and we should love God. Indeed, God is love, but we should also remember that “this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). True love does not eschew sacrifice; rather sacrifice is the epitome of true love.

In short, all the atonement views, except penal substitution, tend to shift attention away from the substitutionary sacrifice of the cross and shine the spotlight elsewhere. Even if that “elsewhere” is valid (e.g., Christ’s victory over Satan), it is still vital to keep the cross in the centre. This is what the apostle Paul did. His preaching may not have been very eloquent, but one thing was sure: he resolved to preach “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Preachers today must also remember that even though those who listen to them may be dealing with a vast array of different circumstances, they all share one experience: dealing with guilty consciences (LD 23, Q&A 60). A burdened conscience is a debilitating weight on one’s heart. There is only one antidote for a guilty conscience and that is the atoning blood of Jesus Christ (Heb 9:14; 10:22).

Preachers who do not regularly weave this core truth into their sermons rob God's people of the comfort that they really need.

#### THE EXTENT OF ATONEMENT

One important question remains on this topic of atonement. *For whom* did Christ offer the atoning sacrifice? Notice that this is different than asking *how much sin* is Christ's atoning sacrifice capable of covering. By way of comparison, a very rich father may have the financial means to pay off the mortgages of everyone who lives in his neighbourhood. Yet, in reality, he decides to pay off only the mortgages of his own children. That decision is his prerogative, and no one on the street should angrily protest that the rich man should have paid off all the mortgages simply because he could do it. Perhaps this little analogy helps us to see that there is a difference between capacity (i.e., what can be done) and actuality (i.e., what has been done). In what follows, we need to keep that distinction in mind.

In chapter 2, the Canons of Dort deal with the extent of Christ's atonement. A quick read of that chapter demonstrates that the Canons make a distinction between the sufficiency and the efficacy of Christ's atoning death. The first one, sufficiency, answers the question about how much sin Christ's death is capable of covering. Or, to put it in other words, how valuable is Christ's death? The simple answer of the Canons is this: infinitely valuable. "This death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin, of infinite value and worth, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world" (CoD 2.3).

In addition, when it comes to preaching the message of this infinitely valuable death, God is lavish in his grace and not at all miserly. The basic promise of the gospel, summed up in John 3:16, should be proclaimed throughout the world to everyone—male and female, young and old, rich and poor. Linguistic and ethnic backgrounds are not hindrances either. Instead, the promise "ought to be announced and proclaimed universally and without discrimination to all peoples and to all men" (CoD 2.5).

However, then we still need to ask for whom Christ offered his atoning sacrifice. To put the matter more precisely, when Christ came into this world to shed the blood of atonement, did he intentionally shed that blood for every single human being in the entire world? Or, did he go to the cross with a specific group in mind whom he knew beforehand that he would redeem? Before answering this question, we must be sure that we are going to answer it *in true faith*. True faith includes accepting everything that God has revealed to us in His Word (LD 7, Q&A 21). It is tempting to give an answer based on what we would like, or what we feel is the right thing to do. However, since Christ is the one who went through all the agony, it is *his* right and prerogative to inform us for whom he endured the agony—and so he does. In John 10 Jesus says that he is the good shepherd; he knows his sheep and his sheep know him (v. 14). Christ’s sheep are a definite group chosen out of the masses of humanity. As Jesus explains later, they are specifically the ones whom the Father has given to him (v. 29). The rest of humanity is the goats (Matt 25:32). Significantly and explicitly our Saviour adds, “I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:15). His atoning sacrifice was for his sheep, not for the goats.

Indeed, such a focussed and purposeful atonement fits well with his name, Jesus, which means, “He will save his people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). Notice that the angel who explained the meaning of his name does not say that Jesus will save *all* people from their sins but rather *his* people. Again, it is a defined group. Christ’s people are also a “chosen race” (Col 3:12; 1 Pet 2:9), chosen in him before the creation of the world (Eph 1:4–5). Consequently, the Canons of Dort echo the truth of Scripture with these words:

For this was the most free counsel of God the Father, that the life-giving and saving efficacy of the most precious death of his Son should extend to all the elect . . . This means: God willed that Christ through the blood of the cross (by which he confirmed the new covenant) should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and tongue all those, and those only, who from eternity were chosen to salvation and were given to him by the Father (2.8).

This doctrine is often called limited atonement; however, it can also be described as definite atonement. The word *limited* might suggest to some that God is miserly with his grace. Nothing could be farther from the truth! Rather, the point is that Christ's atoning sacrifice did not merely open up the possibility for everyone to be saved, but rather accomplished salvation for that definite, chosen group of God's elect children.

Now, to be sure, there will be protest against the doctrine of definite atonement. In the time that the Canons of Dort were written, the Remonstrants, who followed in the footsteps of Jacob Arminius, objected that the doctrine of definite atonement is simply unjust and portrays God in a negative light. "Why," they asked, "should some receive the benefit of Christ's atoning sacrifice, while others never even had a chance to share in such great benefits? It's just not fair!" Also, the Remonstrants felt that the doctrine of definite atonement makes God look arbitrary, granting the benefits of Christ's atoning sacrifice to some, but shutting others out, and doing so without any apparent reason. The Remonstrants of the seventeenth century are not the only ones to struggle with these matters. Right up until today, many sincere Christians wrestle with them.

However, there is one basic problem with the protest of the Remonstrants. In their mind they start with the thought that everyone deserves the opportunity to benefit from Christ's sacrifice. If certain individuals do not make good use of their opportunity, that is their responsibility, but at least everyone should have a fair chance. This thought is fundamental to the Remonstrant teachings; it is also fundamentally wrong. It is for this reason that earlier we chose the analogy of paying for mortgages. If someone goes into debt, then he does not deserve the chance to have someone else pay off his debt. If anything, he "deserves" to pay off his own debt. To be more specific, when the rich father paid off the mortgages of his own children, no one living on the street has the right to knock on the rich man's door and demand that, at the very least, the rich man should have offered to pay his mortgage as well. Such a rude demand would be entirely out of place! The rich man is allowed to do with his money as he sees fit. He is not obliged to pay off anyone's mortgage. For that matter, he did not have to pay off his children's mortgages

either. He may choose to do so, but he is certainly not compelled to do so.

So it is with the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The Father ordained this sacrifice to happen; the Son accomplished it. No debt-ridden sinner has the right to demand a chance for having God's Son pay his debt instead of him. Rather, the Lord has the right to distribute the blessings of salvation as he sees fit, according to his sovereign good pleasure. Christ Jesus made this clear in his parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matt 20:1–16), where the owner says to the protesting workers, “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?” (v. 15).

Thus, although it is understandable that people will struggle with the doctrine of definite atonement, if we recall who we really are and who God really is, then, in true faith we will accept this doctrine. We are only debt-ridden sinners who deserve both temporal and eternal condemnation (LD 4, Q&A 10, 11; LD 5, Q 12). *No one* deserves a so-called chance at salvation, and God is the one who does much more than open up possibilities for salvation. He saves—purposefully, definitely, and fully. He is the God who completes what he begins (Phil 1:6). From initial planning to final glory, God's work of salvation in Christ is one tightly woven tapestry of sovereign grace (Rom 8:28–30). Moreover, given all our wavering, wandering, and inconsistencies, it is most certainly good for us that Christ is definite about his atoning work.

*Suggested Readings: Leviticus 16:1–19; Romans 3:21–26*

#### QUESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING

1. Consider both the regulations for sacrifices (Lev 1–7) and the Day of Atonement (Lev 16). For each of these OT ceremonial laws, identify and explain *two* aspects that deepen our understanding about what atonement really all includes. How does this knowledge increase your own personal gratitude to the Lord?
2. Compare and contrast atonement in the OT and the NT. What remains the same? What changes?
3. Romans 3:25 speaks about the “propitiation,” or atoning sacrifice,

which God presented, namely, his Son Jesus Christ. In so doing, God demonstrated his justice in light of the fact that he had left sins committed beforehand unpunished. How did God show his justice by giving his Son as the sacrifice? (Belgic Confession Art. 20 may help.) What does this mean for the forgiveness of sins in the OT? Were they really forgiven?

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. We often say “sin is sin,” which means that one sin is not greater than the next. Yet precisely how does the Holy Spirit speak about this? On the one hand, there are passages that seem to suggest different severities of sin: Exodus 32:30, 1 Samuel 2:17, 2 Kings 17:21, and 1 Corinthians 6:18. On the other hand, the Lord Jesus himself said that the person who says, “You fool,” is guilty of murder and the man who looks lustfully at a woman is guilty of adultery (Matt 5:21–22, 27–28). How do we fit these two aspects of Scripture together? How should we nuance our use of the “sin is sin” phrase?
2. Think about the preaching and other Bible instruction that you regularly receive. Has it been firmly based on the correct understanding of atonement, as found in the Bible? Are there aspects that ought to be emphasized more clearly? Are there certain imbalances? If there are imbalances, how could these best be corrected in a Christian manner?
3. Some people argue that Titus 2:11 proves that the doctrine of definite atonement is false. That verse says, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for *all* people.” How do you respond to this argument? Hint: be sure to read this verse in its context, that is, the entire chapter.

Jason van Vliet