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# EXPOSITOR

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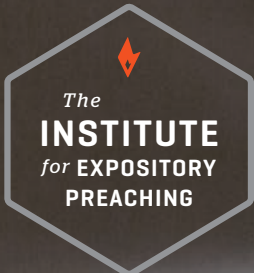
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PREACHING

## *Definite Atonement*



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# THE HEART OF THE PULPIT

DR. STEVEN J. LAWSON, PRESIDENT, ONEPASSION MINISTRIES



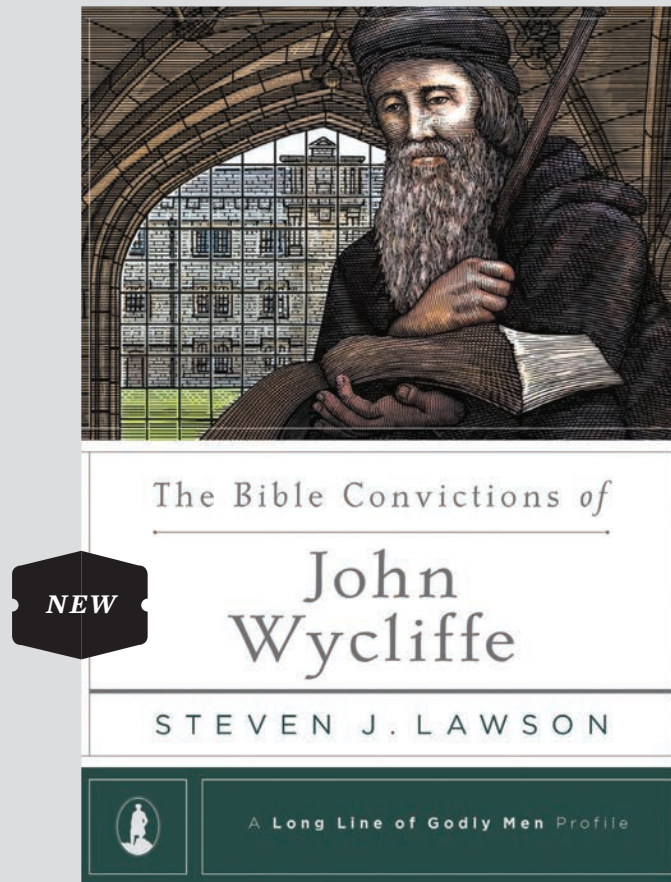
At the heart of all our pulpit endeavors is the desire to preach the person and work of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul writes, “We preach Christ crucified” (1 Cor 1:23). Again he writes, “For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Simply put, Paul states, “We proclaim Him” (Col 1:28).

Faithful preachers relentlessly proclaim “the unfathomable riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8). The Lord Jesus is the sum and substance of our public message, the Alpha and Omega of what we preach. All the lines of our theology intersect at the highest level in our heralding of Christ. He is the heart of the gospel, the power of God unto salvation (see Rom 1:16).

This is especially true whenever we focus our preaching

upon the cross of Jesus Christ. Proclaiming His saving death for sinners is not a peripheral matter for us, but our primary theme. It is not a secondary matter, but the truth of “first importance” (1 Cor 15:3). The blood of the cross must mark our pulpit ministries.

In the issue of *Expositor*, we want to sharpen our focus upon how we preach the death of Christ, most specifically the intent and extent of the cross. I trust that the articles that follow will help your preaching to magnify our great God. ♦



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**PREACHING  
THE TRIUMPH  
OF  
DEFINITE  
ATONEMENT**

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**STEVEN J. LAWSON**



The doctrines of grace are foundational truths taught throughout the pages of Scripture. If a church is to be well instructed in the Word of God, this transcendent theology must be carefully expounded from the pulpit. These core teachings give us penetrating insight into who God is and how He saves sinners. A person does not need to believe these truths in order to gain entrance into the kingdom of God. However, a believer does need to embrace them in order to understand the way anyone comes to believe in Jesus Christ. Few spiritual realities could be more important than this.

In previous issues, we addressed preaching the first two doctrines of grace, which concern the sinfulness of man (total depravity) and the sovereignty of God (unconditional election). These twin truths are inseparably bound together and lay the groundwork that leads us to Christ's saving work upon the cross (definite atonement). The last two doctrines of grace proceed to the work of Spirit (effectual grace) and the eternity of grace (preserving grace). All five of these truths stand together as

one confession of faith that God saves sinners.


Presently, we have reached the elevated ground of Mount Calvary, where the Savior bled and died. Here we will address the biblical teaching of *definite atonement*—or, as it is often called, *particular redemption* or *limited atonement*. This is the third doctrine of grace, and it concerns those for whom Christ died. This truth stands at the very heart of the five doctrines of grace. It is the centerpiece of these five statements of saving truth. It looms as the loftiest mountain peak of these profound teachings.

Specifically, this article will focus upon how to approach preaching definite atonement. Several factors must be taken into account when addressing this truth from the pulpit. The following considerations will provide guiding steps in expounding this doctrine.

### **DEFINE THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT**

To begin, the preacher must explain what the term *atonement* means. The word indicates that two estranged





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parties are brought together and made to be “at one.” It describes reconciling into a state of unity those who were previously hostile toward each other.

The death of Christ brought into right relationship with God those who were separated from Him. Because of sin, every human being is alienated from God and hostile toward Him (Col 1:21). And even more, God is at enmity with them (Rom 1:18). Sin has placed an otherwise insurmountable barrier between holy God and sinful man. The only way for the two parties to come together is through an atonement—one that is provided by God Himself.

In the Old Testament, God instituted the sacrificial system and designated that a blood sacrifice be made for sin (Lev 17:11). This offering prefigured the atoning sacrifice that Jesus Christ would make upon the cross. The prophet Isaiah foretold of His atoning death: “He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities...The LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him...the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities.... He Himself

bore the sin of many” (Isa 53:5, 6, 11, 12). This refers to a vicarious atonement that Jesus Christ would make for the sins of many.

In the New Testament, the death of the Son of God is revealed to be the perfect atonement for sins. Jesus said, “This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28). Christ said He would “give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). In shedding His blood, He announced that He would secure the release of those enslaved by their sin (John 8:32, 34, 36). When He cried out from the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30), He declared that the full payment for sins had been made.

Paul states that by the death of Jesus, He satisfied the righteous wrath of God toward guilty sinners (Rom 3:25). The apostle writes that He “was delivered over because of our transgressions” (Rom 4:25). The result is “no condemnation” for those who believe in Him (Rom 8:1). By His substitutionary death, Jesus became “our Passover,” who was “sacrificed” for our sins (1 Cor 5:7). Paul writes,

“In Him, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph 1:7). He “gave Himself up for us, . . . a sacrifice to God” (Eph 5:2). By laying down His life, Jesus “made peace through the blood of His cross” (Col 1:20). Paul continues, stating Jesus “reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him” (Col 1:22).

When He laid down His life, Jesus “made purification of sins” (Heb 1:3). Christ was “offered once to bear the sins of many” (Heb 9:28). “We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus once for all” (Heb 10:10). He redeemed us “with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless” (1 Pet 1:19). Concerning Jesus, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross” (1 Pet 2:24). “Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust” (1 Pet 3:18). Upon the cross, He became “the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 2:2; 4:10). “Jesus Christ . . . released us from our sins by His blood” (Rev 1:5).

The theological richness of these verses needs to be expounded from the pulpit. But the question remains: for whom did Jesus make this sacrifice? Was it offered for everyone in the world? Did He die for those already in hell? Or was His death only for those who would believe in Him? The answers to these questions clarify our preaching of the atonement. It is the testimony of Scripture that Jesus died a victorious death for the elect of God. Let us examine this truth further.

## DETERMINE THE INTENT OF CHRIST'S COMING

As you preach the atonement, you must teach the specified intent of Jesus Christ in entering the world. If He came to save the entire world, He certainly failed in His atoning work, because all the world is not saved. But Jesus did not fail in the mission that He received from the Father. He came with a more specific focus to “save His people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). This designation—“His people”—refers to those previously chosen by the Father and entrusted to Jesus as His chosen bride. He came to redeem them from their sins—and in His mission, He did not fail.

Jesus said He came to save “all that the Father gives Me” (John 6:37). This is a reference to the elect, who were given in eternity past by the Father to the Son. Jesus explained, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38). This meant that it was the Father’s will that Jesus would save His elect, those who were entrusted to Him. Jesus confirmed, “This is the will of Him who sent Me,

that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day” (v. 39). With unmistakable clarity, Jesus announced that He came to save those given to Him by the Father.

As Jesus explained His death, He declared that He would die exclusively for the elect: “I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Not all people are His sheep (v. 26). The sheep are those given to Him by the Father (v. 29). The sheep are those individuals whom Jesus calls by name (v. 3). They alone hear His voice and follow Him (v. 4). For these chosen ones, Jesus said, “I lay down My life for the sheep” (v. 15). He emphasizes, “This commandment I received from My Father” (v. 18).

As Jesus approached His death, He prayed to the Father, “You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life” (John 17:2). Here, Jesus acknowledges His absolute sovereignty over every human life. Yet He claims that He will give eternal life to those given to Him by the Father. Jesus did not come into the world to give everlasting life to all mankind. He clarifies, “I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours” (v. 9). Here, the unity between the Father’s election and His death upon the cross is further solidified. His sole intent was to die for those given to Him by the Father.

By preaching this understanding of the atonement, you show the triumph of Jesus’ sacrifice. Any other view of the Savior presents Him as failing to fulfill His assigned task. But by proclaiming this doctrine, you reveal that He successfully completed His mission to save sinners. Not one drop of His blood was shed in vain.

## DECLARE THE ACCOMPLISHMENT OF CHRIST'S DEATH

As you stand in the pulpit, you should explain what Jesus actually accomplished at the cross. In your sermon, contrast the two possible interpretations of His death: Either Jesus merely made sinners *saveable*—depending upon their response to Him—or He actually *saved* sinners. Either Jesus made the entire human race potentially *reconcilable* to God, or He, in fact, *reconciled* sinners to God. Either Jesus made sinners hypothetically *redeemable*, or He actually *redeemed* them at the cross. Either the payment for sins made to the Father resulted in *unfinished* business with the Father, or Jesus *finalized* a completed transaction with Him.

Those are the only two possible options in viewing the cross. Did Jesus offer only a hypothetical salvation,

dependent upon the response of man? Or did He actually accomplish a real redemption? According to Scripture, an actual atonement was made, and a definite transaction took place.

The language of Scripture states that Jesus accomplished a finished work of salvation upon the cross. He reconciled Holy God to all sinners who will believe in Him, and He joined these sinners to God. John the Baptist declared that Jesus actually “takes away” sin (John 1:29). Christ did not *possibly* take away sins, depending upon the response of the sinner. Rather, the text confirms that He actually “takes away” sin. This expiation is not contingent upon human activity or response. In His death, Jesus actually paid the full price for the redemption of specific sinners. He bore their sins, and a real payment was made to the Father on their behalf.


For all the elect, Jesus bore their sins and sprinkled

them with His blood (1 Pet 1:1–2; 2:24). Jesus entered this world and “gave Himself up” for His chosen bride (Eph 5:25). It was for them that Jesus came into the world. It was for these that He paid the price to secure their redemption. Upon the cross, He shed His blood and made a perfect covering for the sins of all who would believe in Him.

By His death, Jesus removed the barrier of sins that separated those who were chosen from God the Father. This death was not made for those who die in unbelief. Instead, this atonement was made exclusively for all those who put their trust in Jesus Christ.

#### **DISPEL THE MYTHS OF THIS DOCTRINE**

When you preach definite atonement, you should know that many will jump to false conclusions. They may conjure up incorrect assumptions that will build resistance to



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this teaching. These confusions are natural and must be anticipated and addressed. You will need to offer helpful explanations that remove obstacles and bring clarity to people's minds. For every wrong misperception, there are real biblical answers.

One straw man is the claim that there are people wanting to believe in Jesus Christ, but there is no atonement for them. The caricature is that many sinners will want to enter the kingdom of God but will be denied because they will be told Jesus did not die for them. This is a distortion of monumental proportions. To the contrary, the Bible makes it clear that everyone who comes to Jesus in repentance and faith will be received by Him. No one who puts his or her trust in Him will be without an atonement for sin.

Consider the words of Jesus, who said, "The one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out" (John 6:37). All who genuinely call upon His name—all, without exception—will be received by Him. None will be rejected by Him. All who come to Him with saving faith will receive the full forgiveness of their sins. Jesus promised, "He who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst" (John 6:35). He could not make it more clear. All who come to Him and believe in Him will never hunger or thirst again. They will receive the full benefit of His atoning death.

Another false notion is that definite atonement negates the free offer of the gospel. It is wrongly assumed that if a person believes in particular redemption, they can never preach, "Whoever believes in Him will be saved" (cf. John 3:16; Rom 10:13). Again, nothing could be farther from the truth. We preach, "He who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life" (John 5:24). We proclaim, "Everyone who beholds the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life" (John 6:40). We are to declare that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Tim 1:15). And whoever believes in Him will have "eternal life" (v. 16).

Some suppose Jesus died for souls that were already in hell. Such is the logical conclusion of a universal atonement. But there can be no biblical basis for believing that Jesus suffered a saving death for those who will never be saved. He did not make an atoning sacrifice for those who were already in the lake of fire. There would be no point—much less any glory—for Jesus to pay the penalty for those already suffering the eternal punishment for their sins.

### **DESCRIBE THE UNITY OF THE TRINITY**

In your pulpit ministry, present the extent of Christ's

atonement in light of the united efforts of the Father and the Spirit to save sinners. In the Trinity's saving works, there is perfect solidarity of purpose to rescue the same sinners—those foreordained to eternal life. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit act as one Savior in saving the same individuals (1 Pet 1:1–2). The Father did not seek to save one group of people (the elect), the Son an entirely different group (the whole world), and the Spirit yet another group (only those who hear the gospel). Instead, each Person of the Trinity works in perfect harmony to save the same sinners.


In your preaching, you should teach that God the Father chose His elect before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4–5). He then gave these chosen ones to His Son (John 6:37, 39; 10:27) to be His chosen bride (Eph 5:26). These elect ones were foreordained to believe the gospel (Acts 13:48). Jesus came into the world to purchase those who were chosen (Acts 20:28). This was in perfect agreement with the sovereign will of the Father (John 6:38). It is for these elect ones that He died, bearing their sins. Any equivocation on preaching the doctrine of sovereign election will undermine any exposition you bring on the extent of the atonement. These two truths—sovereign election and definite atonement—stand or fall together.

Jesus taught that each member of the Godhead works in perfect unity of purpose in saving the exact same sinners. Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). "One" does not mean that the Father and the Son are one Person. Rather, it means They are one in will, one in purpose, and one in mission. In other words, those whom the Father eternally purposed to save are those for whom the Son purposed to die within time—no more, no less. Only by this understanding of definite atonement is maintained the solidarity of will between the Father and the Son. Only with this doctrine of the death of Christ is preserved the unbreakable unity of the Trinity.

### **DESCRIBE THE JUSTICE OF GOD**

As you preach on the atonement, you should explain the meaning of the righteous justice and equity of God. This is an important aspect of His holiness. God can only pass verdicts that are in perfect accord with His absolute holiness. There can be no inconsistency with God. He can never deal with any individual in an unjust manner. He will never impose an unfair punishment upon sinners. His divine penalties for transgressions committed are never improper or too harsh. The punishment He renders will never exceed the crime committed.

As this relates to the atonement, God will never require a double payment for man's sins. If Jesus paid in full the



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penalty for iniquity at the cross, there can never be the execution of divine vengeance upon sin that has already been atoned for. If Jesus has made the payment for the sins of every man (a necessary position apart from definite atonement), then no further penalty can be enacted upon a sinner. If God condemned to hell a sinner, one for whom Jesus has paid the price for their sins, that double punishment would make God unjust. Dual payment for the same violation of God's law is an impossible incursion on His character.

The Bible teaches, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The word "righteous" (*dikaios*) means to render to each person his due. If Jesus paid for a sin upon the cross, it will never be paid for a second time in hell. Every sin in the history of the world will be paid to the full measure of the Law. Each sin will either be paid by the guilty sinner in hell or by the sin-bearing work of Christ upon the cross.

### **DETERMINE THE MEANING OF "WORLD"**

Your preaching will need to address what is often the most significant hindrance that prevents many from believing in definite atonement. That obstacle is the use of the word *world*. At the outset of Jesus' public ministry, John the Baptist testified, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the *world*" (John 1:29, emphasis mine). An understanding of the word "world" is critically

important as we define the extent of the atonement. If it was not for a misunderstanding regarding this terminology, this doctrine would likely be more widely embraced. From the pulpit, you will need to explain the various meanings and usages of this word.

"World" (*cosmos*) is used in many different ways in the Gospel of John. *Cosmos* appears 185 times in the New Testament—seventy-eight occurrences are in the Gospel of John, with eight in Matthew's Gospel, three in Mark's Gospel, and three in Luke's Gospel. It is also used twenty-four times in the three epistles of John and three times in Revelation. If "world" is to be rightly understood in John's writing, we must realize that there are no fewer than ten different ways *cosmos* is used in the book of John.

A survey of John reveals "world" is used for: (1) the entire universe (1:3; 1:10; 17:5); (2) the physical earth (13:1; 16:33; 21:25); (3) the organized evil world system ruled by Satan (12:31; 14:30; 16:11; Gal 1:4); (4) all humanity excluding believers (7:7; 15:18); (5) a large group (12:19); (6) the general public (7:4); (7) Jews and Gentiles (1:29; 4:42), (8) the sphere of mankind (1:10; 3:16), (9) the non-elect (17:9), or (10) the believing elect (3:17; 6:33; 12:47).

With these multiple usages of *cosmos*, we must not assume that every time we see this word used, it will clearly mean "every person ever born." Each usage depends upon its own individual context. With the words of John the Baptist, we must deal with the language used—"the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." This



verse clearly states that Jesus died for the world. But who is “the world” in this case?

One possibility, as mentioned previously, is that that wording means Jesus died for every person in the entire world. If so, then the sins of every person have been taken away from them forever. This would teach universalism, a clear contradiction to the rest of the Bible. This would suppose that each member of the Trinity is saving a different group of people—the Father choosing the elect, the Son dying for all, and the Holy Spirit sanctifying some. In the end, universalism places everyone in right standing before God regardless of his or her true status. This undermines the unity of the Godhead in His saving purpose. There is no biblical defense for this position.

### **DISCERN THE MEANING OF “ALL”**

Closely related to a misunderstanding of the term “world” is confusion surrounding the word “all.” In your preaching, you should explain the various passages that teach Jesus died for “all.” Careful thought needs to be given to these passages. Does this mean Jesus died for *all people*? Could it mean that He died for *all the elect*? Or might it mean that Jesus died for *all kinds of people*? For both Jews and Gentiles? Clear teaching from the pulpit will be necessary here, because many of your listeners may have never given thought to these distinctions.

As Jesus approached the hour of His death, He became troubled in spirit and said, “What shall I say? ‘Father, save

Me from this hour’? . . . But for this purpose I came to this hour” (John 12:27). Jesus then defines the saving purpose of His coming as follows: “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself. But He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die” (vv. 32–33). Being “lifted up from the earth” is the way Jesus pictured His death upon the cross.

According to Jesus’ statement, the effect of His death is that “all men” will be drawn to Him in saving faith. What could this mean? These words teach either a universal atonement resulting in universal salvation or a definite atonement resulting in the salvation of believers only. Either all the world will be saved by Jesus’ death, or all the elect will be saved. Some have suggested these words teach a mediating position—that He died for all, but that the atonement is applied to only believers.

To resolve this interpretive issue, it is necessary to know that the word “all” (*pas*) can be used in various ways. Depending on the context, this term can mean “all people without exception,” indicating every single person in the world. It is sometimes translated “every” (Matt 3:5, 10, 15) or “everyone” (Matt 7:8; 7:21, 26). Or it can mean “all people within one group of individuals,” such as “all Jerusalem” (Matt 2:3) or “all the chief priests” (Matt 2:4). As it relates to the atonement, it could mean the elect (John 5:28; 6:37, 39). Or it can mean all people without distinction, meaning all kinds of people (1 Tim 2:1–4). The determination of the meaning depends upon its immediate



# The atonement is an immense subject, and we will never fully plumb its depths.

context as well as the teaching of the rest of Scripture.

When John writes, “All things came into being through Him” (John 1:3), “all” means all *without distinction*—the entire human race. Jesus also said, “All that the Father gives me will come to me” (John 6:37) and “They shall all be taught of God” (John 6:45). This “all” means all of a specified group, a smaller subcategory within the larger whole. “He is baptizing and all are coming to Him” (John 3:26). Here, “all” definitely does not mean that Jesus and His disciples were baptizing every single person in the world. Rather, it simply means a large gathering of people were coming to Him in the wilderness.

Jesus said, “I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself” (John 12:32). He meant that He will die for all people of a selected group, namely, the elect of God. It cannot mean all people who ever lived—otherwise, all people would be saved. Jesus means He will die for “all” who are numbered among the elect. He shed His blood for “all” who were given to Him by the Father in eternity past. None for whom He will die will be left in the devil’s kingdom of darkness. According to the teaching of the whole Bible, the resolution is simple. Jesus died for all the elect—for all who will believe in Him—because these only have their sins truly taken away.

In addition, “all” is used to refer to all without distinction—that is, all kinds of people from many different groups. Paul writes, “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men” (Titus 2:11). This verse looks back to the first coming of Christ, when saving grace appeared in the person of the Lord Jesus. Paul says He brought salvation “to all men.” In this context, Paul refers to many different kinds of people: “older men” (v. 2), “older women” (v. 3), “young women,” “husbands,” “children” (v. 4), “young men” (v. 6), and “bond slaves” and “masters” (v. 9). This means that Christ’s death brought

salvation to every “tribe and tongue and people and nation” (Rev 5:9). Before the throne of God, the triumph of definite atonement is being sung to the Savior of redeemed sinners, Jesus Christ.

## DETECT THE MEANING OF “US”

Further, you will also want to explain the passages that state that Jesus died for “us,” “we,” or “me.” It should be shown that these first-person pronouns do not refer to every human. Instead, they make an exclusive reference to believers only. Recall that the epistles begin by addressing the saints—true believers. Among these many passages, the following are representative of those that speak on behalf of believers only: “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 gave Himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). Here, Paul confesses that Jesus died for him, as a believer in Christ. The same can be said confidently by every true believer in Christ.

A similar idea is expressed in Romans, when Paul states, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Paul’s use of “us” and “we” is synonymous with “Christians,” those who are justified by faith (v. 1). Likewise, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life” (v. 10). The same understanding is to be rightly assumed here. “We” refers exclusively to believers. Further, “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?” (Rom 8:31–32). In the immediate context, “us” refers to those whom He “foreknew,” “predestined,”



“called,” “justified,” and “glorified” (vv. 29—30)—in other words, the elect of God.

To the saints in Corinth, Paul writes, “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). This does not say that Christ died for the whole world, but for “us” who believe in Him. To the saints in Ephesus, Paul writes, “Christ . . . loved you and gave Himself up for us” (Eph 5:2). The use of “us” restricts the extent of the cross to believers only. To the believers in Colossae, Paul writes, “He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col 1:13–14). In this instance, “us” refers to those who are in Christ, who receive the benefit of Christ’s death, not to the world that remains in unbelief.

To the believers in Thessalonica, Paul writes, “Our Lord Jesus Christ . . . died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep, we will live together with Him” (1 Thess 5:9–10). The death of Christ is acknowledged to be for the saints in this church, not for the world at large. Once again, Paul writes, “Our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus . . . gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed” (Titus 2:14). With the same consistency, “us” refers to believers only, those for whom Jesus died, not to every person. This same “us” is identified as those who have received “the washing of regeneration” (Titus 3:5) and are “justified by His grace” (v. 7).

### **DEMONSTRATE THE PATIENCE OF THE LORD**

No matter how clearly you preach definite atonement, not everyone will believe this truth, at least not immediately. Most often, this will require that you demonstrate a great measure of patience with many of your listeners. As you teach this truth, you must give them time to work through the issues and come to the knowledge of the truth. Few people will embrace this doctrine the first time they hear it. Wrong understandings of the atonement will have to be corrected before a better understanding can take root. Many good questions will be raised in their thinking. It will be wise to ask probing questions alongside them, to point to the clear testimony of Scripture. You will have to answer each one of their questions carefully, whether in the pulpit or privately. This will necessitate much patience on your part.

Paul writes, “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction” (2 Tim 4:2). This passage teaches that your preaching of the Word must be accompanied with

“patience” (*makrōthumia*), which calls for longsuffering in the midst of difficulty. This command presupposes that there will be resistance to the teaching that is being brought. When resistance occurs, you must bear up under the hardship and persevere in your preaching. You must maintain steadfastness in your teaching ministry as you wait for people to come to the full knowledge of the truth.

As preachers, we do not come by patience naturally. In our zeal for the truth, we often want people to receive a doctrine as soon as they hear it. When they do not instantly embrace it, we can quickly become exasperated. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit that is produced supernaturally by the indwelling Spirit (Gal 5:22). The prophets demonstrated patience as they proclaimed, “Thus says the LORD.” In the face of much opposition to their message, they faithfully persisted in bringing the same truth again and again. So must every preacher today remain patient in presenting definite atonement.

### **THE BOTTOM LINE IN PREACHING**

The bottom line for our preaching is that we preach “Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). Our chief end is not that people are intellectually convinced of our arguments for definite atonement, important as they are. Rather, our main priority is that people believe in Jesus Christ and trust in the atonement He made for sinners. More than anything, we want to win people to Christ. Our listeners simply need to believe in Jesus Christ, who died in the place of sinners. They only need to trust Him in His saving death in order to be presented in right standing before God. This is the primary goal of our preaching.

When our listeners are converted to Christ, our preaching will more naturally take them to a deeper understanding of the death of Christ. The atonement is an immense subject, and we will never fully plumb its depths. Whether our listeners have come to embrace definite atonement—or not—we want to bring them closer to God. If they possess merely an elementary grasp of the cross, our desire is to lead them to a more profound view of the atonement. This doctrinal knowledge may well elevate their worship of God and increase their love for Christ. It should deepen their reverence and awe as they come to the Lord’s Table. It will provide a greater foundation for the hope and assurance of their salvation as they live the Christian life. And it should instill greater confidence in their witnessing of the gospel to others.

May the Lord bless your preaching ministry in the victorious death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who came to save His people from their sins. ♦

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## PREACHING

# How to Preach the New Birth, Part I

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# THE ONLY MEANS OF ATONEMENT

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JOHN MACARTHUR

Our Creator is full of compassion for broken sinners. But that reality doesn't negate or override His perfect justice.


Throughout this series on divine compassion, we've considered the compelling biblical truths of God's mercy and forgiveness—especially how Christ revealed those divine attributes in His parable of the prodigal son. But to consider His compassion without explaining His uncompromising righteousness would be to misrepresent God's character on the most egregious level.

It's true that the prodigal's father rushed to forgive his son unreservedly and unconditionally. But don't imagine for a moment that when God forgives sin, He simply looks the other way and pretends the sin never occurred. It must be atoned for. Moses' law was filled with bloody sacrifices precisely to make that truth inescapable.

This point is crucial, and ultimately pivotal, in understanding the story of the prodigal son. Remember that

the main point Jesus was making in this parable was for the benefit of His audience—the Pharisees. He was addressing their faulty concept of God—that He delighted in their self-righteousness while being tepid about the forgiveness of sins. Their theology was so lacking any sense of true grace that they simply could not account for how forgiven sinners might stand before God, apart from a lifetime of religious effort. Like every false religion and idolatrous idea today, the Pharisees' wrong view of what is required to make full atonement for sin lay at the root of their errant theology.

Don't forget how the Pharisees had overlaid the truth of the Old Testament with their own elaborate system of human traditions, man-made rules, and useless ceremonies. They were convinced sinners needed to do good works to help atone for their own sins. They had even enshrined their own intricate system of finely detailed



# Why would anyone ever think they could earn enough merit to atone for sin through their imperfect obedience to the law? That was the fatal flaw in the Pharisees' system.

traditions as the chief means by which they thought it possible to acquire the kind of merit that could balance out the guilt of sin. That is why they were obsessed with ostentatious works, religious rituals, spiritual stunts, ceremonial displays of righteousness, and other external and cosmetic achievements. And they clung doggedly to that system, even though most of their rituals were nothing more than their own inventions, designed to paper over sin and build the façade of righteousness.

Here was the problem with that: even authentically good works could never accomplish what the Pharisees hoped their ceremonial traditions would. That was made perfectly clear by the law itself. The law demanded no less than absolute perfection (Matt 5:19, 48; James 2:10). And it was filled from start to finish with threats and curses against anyone who violated it at any point. The reason we need atonement is that we are fallen sinners who cannot keep the law adequately. Why would anyone ever think they could earn enough merit to atone for sin through their imperfect obedience to the law? That was the fatal flaw in the Pharisees' system.

In fact, the law itself made perfectly clear that the price of full atonement was more costly than any mere human could ever possibly pay: “The soul who sins will die” (Ezek 18:4).

## **WE CANNOT ATONE FOR OUR OWN SIN**

Furthermore, and more to the point, the Old Testament never once suggested that sinners could atone for their own sin—either wholly or even in part—by doing good works or performing elaborate rituals. In fact, the dominant picture of atonement in the Old Testament is that of an innocent substitute whose blood was shed on behalf of the sinner.

The shedding of the substitute's blood was perhaps the single most prominent aspect of atonement for sin. “Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb 9:22). On the Day of Atonement, the blood of the sin offering was deliberately splashed onto everything in the vicinity of the altar. The priest “sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with the blood. And according to the Law, one may almost say, all

things are cleansed with blood” (Heb 9:21–22)—the worshiper included. This was not to suggest that the blood itself had some kind of magical, mystical, or metaphysical property that literally washed away sin’s defilement. But the purpose of this bloody ritual was simple: the blood everywhere made a vivid—and intentionally revolting—illustration of the fearsome reality that “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23). “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” (Lev 17:11).

By definition, then, no sinner can ever fully atone for his or her own sin. And that is why Scripture so frequently stresses the need for a substitute.


### **WE NEED A SUBSTITUTE**

When Abraham was told to sacrifice Isaac on an altar, God Himself supplied a substitute in the form of a ram to be slain in Isaac’s place. At Passover, the substitute was a spotless lamb. The main staple of the sacrificial system under Moses’ law was the burnt offering, which could be


a young bull, lamb, goat, turtledove, or pigeon (depending on the financial abilities of the worshiper). And once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest sacrificed a bull and a goat, along with an additional burnt offering, as a symbol of atonement—a substitute who suffered for the sins of all the people.

Now, it should be obvious to anyone that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:4; cf. Mic 6:6–8). That’s why the ritual sacrifices had to be repeated daily. Everyone who ever seriously thought about the sacrificial system and weighed the real cost of sin had to face this truth eventually: animal sacrifices simply could not provide a full and final atonement for sin. Something more needed to be done to make a complete atonement.

There were basically two possible answers to the dilemma. One approach was to adopt a system of merit such as the Pharisees’ religion, in which the sinner himself tried to embellish or supplement the atoning significance of the animal sacrifices with several more layers of good works. In the Pharisees’ case, this seems to be the very reason



**Everyone who ever seriously thought about the sacrificial system and weighed the real cost of sin had to face this truth eventually: animal sacrifices simply could not provide a full and final atonement for sin.**



**Every religion outside of Christianity essentially offers the same thing: a way to salvation through our own human effort. The parable of the prodigal son explodes that damnable lie. It illustrates instead the simple truth of how and why repentant faith is the only means by which any sinner can find justification before God. Forgiveness is not a reward for merits we earn by good works but rather the gracious and lavish gift of our loving Creator.**



they made up their own long list of exacting rules and regulations that went so far beyond what the law actually required. They knew very well that simple obedience to the law couldn't possibly be perfect and therefore could never achieve enough merit to atone for sin. So, they artificially supplemented what the law required, thinking that their extra works would enable them to gain supplemental merit. The inevitable result was a system that promoted the most blatant forms of self-righteousness while diminishing the proper role of true faith.

The other approach was the one followed by every truly faithful person from the beginning of time until the coming of Christ: they acknowledged their own inability to atone for sin, embraced God's promise of forgiveness, and trusted Him to send a Redeemer who would provide a full and final atonement (Isa 59:20). From the day when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and their race was cursed, faithful believers had looked for the promised offspring of the woman who would finally crush the serpent's head and thus put sin and guilt away forever (Gen 3:15). Despite some very strong hints (including Dan 9:24 and Isa 53:10), the actual means by which redemption would finally be accomplished remained shrouded in mystery, until Jesus Himself explained it after His resurrection to some disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:27).

Notice that Jesus did not mention anything about the actual means of atonement in the parable of the prodigal son. That, after all, wasn't the point of the story. But our Lord did, nevertheless, directly confront the heart of every works-righteousness religion—the insistence that all sinners need to perform certain works to atone for their own sin—and thus earn the forgiveness and favor of God.

## WE NEED RIGHTEOUSNESS

Every religion outside of Christianity essentially offers the same thing: a way to salvation through our own human effort. The parable of the prodigal son explodes that damnable lie. It illustrates instead the simple truth of how and why repentant faith is the only means by which any sinner can find justification before God. Forgiveness is not a reward for merits we earn by good works but rather the gracious and lavish gift of our loving Creator.

That isn't to say, however, that practical righteousness is of no value or meaning for God's people. Good works are the inevitable fruit of genuine faith. But sinners who repent and turn to God are fully and instantly justified, freely forgiven from the first moment of faith's inception—before a single good work is done.

That was the principal lesson of Abraham's life. He "believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as

righteousness" (Gen 15:6). His faith was the sole means by which he laid hold of God's promises. In Romans 4, Paul makes an extended argument showing that David was likewise justified though faith alone, rather than through the performance of any good deeds, religious rituals, or meritorious works designed to nullify the debt of sin.

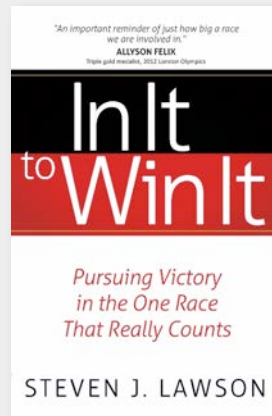
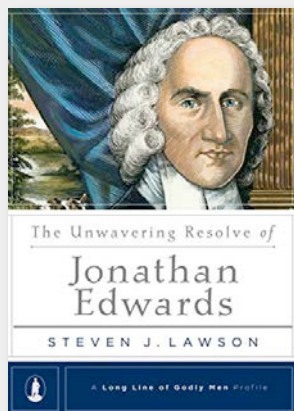
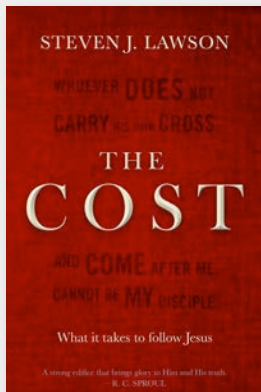
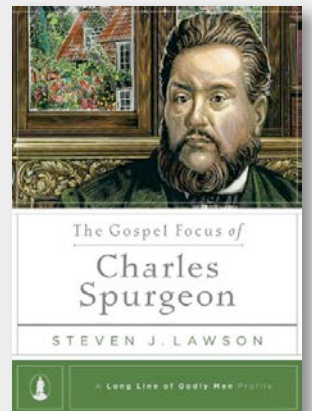
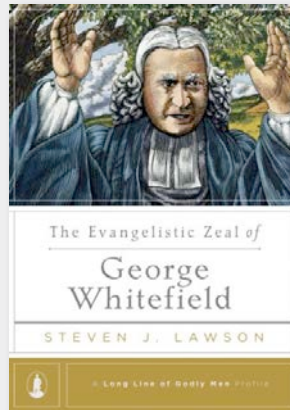
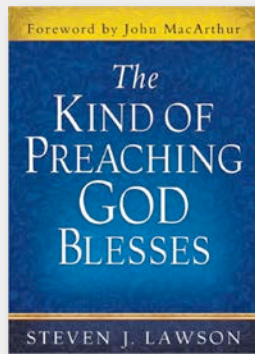
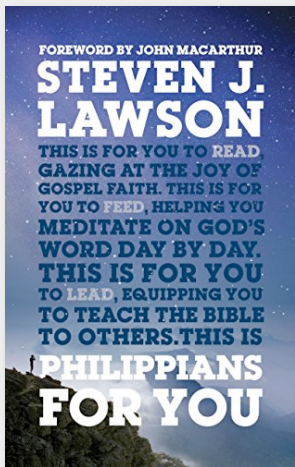
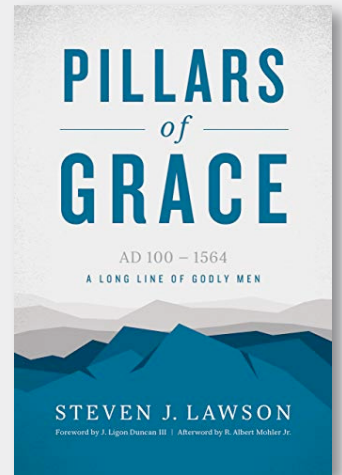
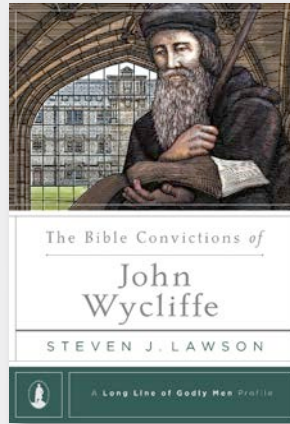
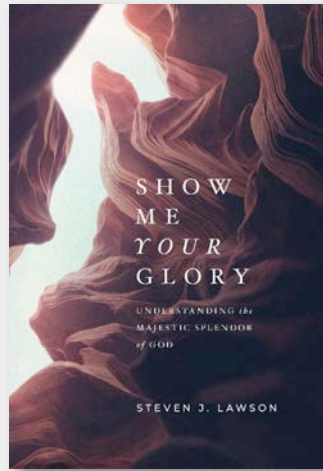
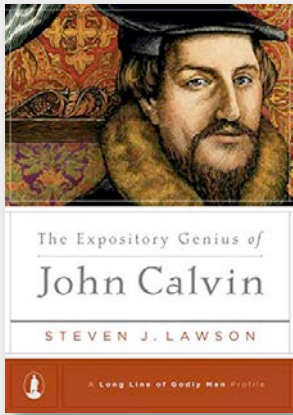
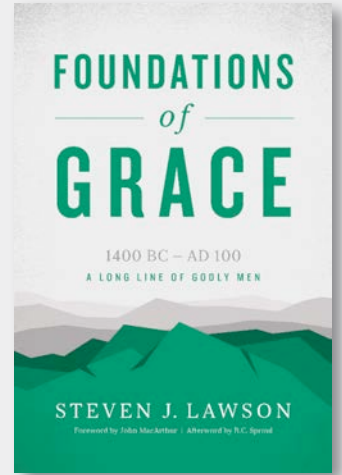
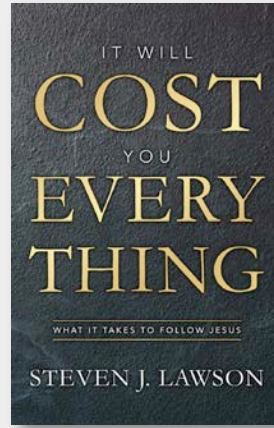
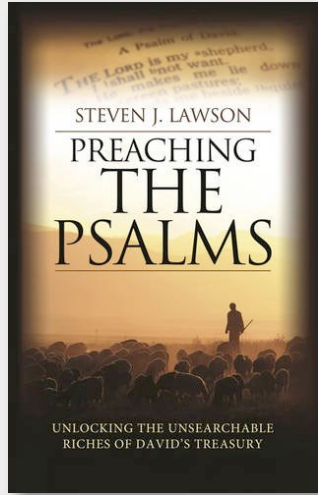
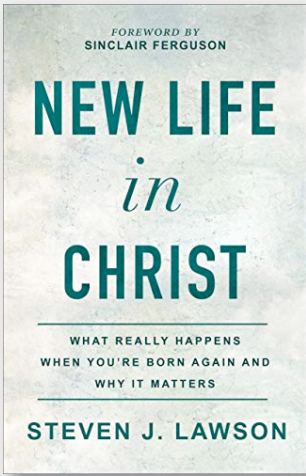
In a similar way, the prodigal son is a textbook example of someone who is justified by grace through faith apart from meritorious deeds.

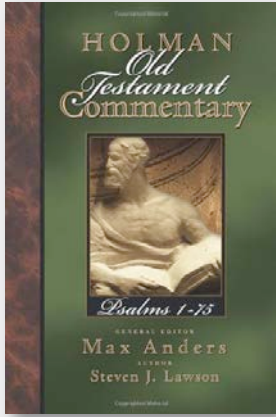
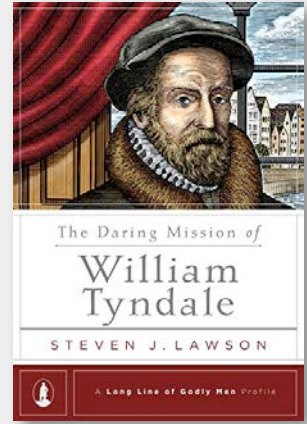
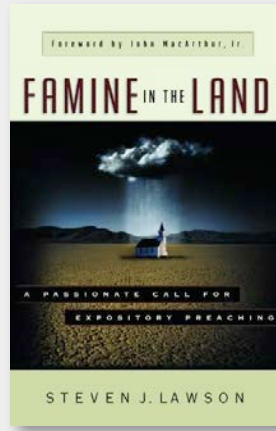
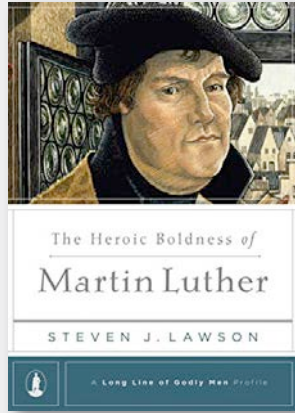
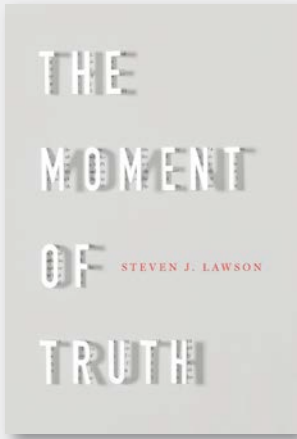
I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men." So he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his slaves, "Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found." And they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:18–24)

The prodigal's forgiveness was a fully settled reality, and his status as a privileged son was established beyond question before he ever even had an opportunity to finish expressing his repentance. And what about that lifetime of work he was prepared to offer as a servant to his father? It was utterly unnecessary as a means of earning the father's favor. The father had granted his full blessing and unconditional pardon by grace alone.

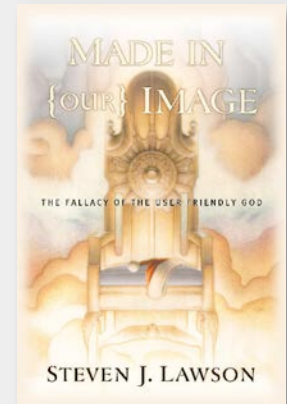
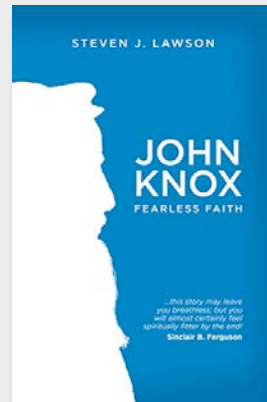
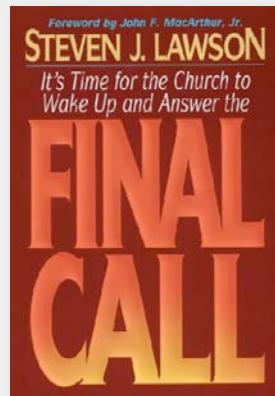
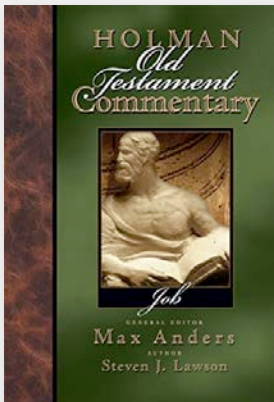
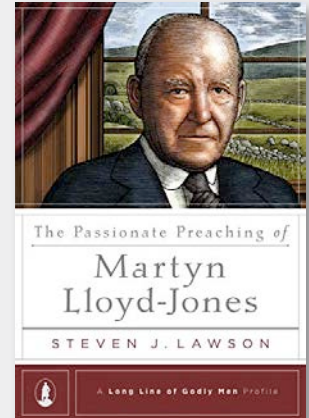
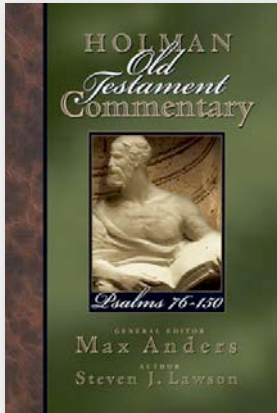
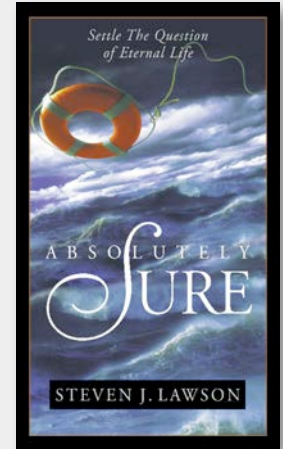
But this repentant young man would nevertheless be permanently changed because of the grace his father showed him. Why would he ever go back to a life of self-indulgence and prodigality? He had already pursued sin to its inevitable end and knew the results all too well. He was severely chastened by the bitterness of that experience. He had drunk the awful dregs of sin's consequences.

But now the blinders had been taken from his eyes. He saw his father in a new light, and he loved him with a new appreciation. He had every reason henceforth to remain faithful. He would be serving his father now with gladness—not as a hired servant, but with the full status of a beloved son. ♦





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# DEFINITE ATONEMENT

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JOEL R. BEEKE

In *The Other Side of Calvinism*, Laurence Vance says that Calvinists defend limited atonement with a vengeance, which simply adds insult to the injury of unconditional election. He goes on to say:

In the Calvinistic system, it makes absolutely no difference whatsoever whether Christ died for the “non-elect”—they could not be saved if Christ died a thousand deaths for them. Calvinists do not hesitate to insist that the reason Christ’s blood was shed only for the “elect” is because God did not want any others to be saved.

Vance then concludes that “the precarious doctrine of limited atonement renders the salvation of any man doubtful and uncertain.”

Such caricatures abound in the Arminian camp.

Therefore, I want to use this article to look at how the Calvinist view of atonement is biblical and more positive than many think. Then, I will seek to answer some common objections to the Calvinist view.

## **BIBLICAL SUPPORT FOR DEFINITE ATONEMENT**

Biblical terms, tenses, and testimonies make a sure case for definite atonement. Consider the following:

### ***Biblical Terms***

The Bible vividly describes what Christ did on the cross: He made a sacrifice; He made propitiation; He reconciled His people to God; He guaranteed the redemption of His own; He gave His life a ransom for many (but not all); He bore the curse of those for whom He died.

But do the biblical concepts of sacrifice, propitiation,

# Christ died to satisfy the justice of God for His people's sins. He saved a definite number of people, whom He refers to as His people, His sheep, and His elect.

reconciliation, redemption, ransom, and curse-bearing support Calvinism's assertion that Christ secured salvation, or do they support the Arminian notion that Christ made salvation possible through His death?

Arminianism does injustice to the basic biblical concept of redemption, which has its roots in the deliverance of the people of God out of Egypt. Redemption did not merely make their release from Egyptian bondage possible; it brought them out of bondage into the place of God's appointment. Likewise, with propitiation, God's wrath is satisfied by the offering up of a sacrifice, and once His wrath is satisfied, it turns away. A ransom releases the one for whom it is paid. Therefore, the onus is on anyone who says that Christ's death did not actually secure the salvation of a defined group of people to show that his view does justice to these biblical terms. Arminianism does not do that.

## ***Biblical Tenses***

The very nature of Christ's work is reconciliation. Hebrews 9 tells us that He has obtained redemption for us. Romans 8:29–30 speaks of Christ's work with such certainty that Paul can use the aorist tense for all of his main verbs, speaking as if even glorification is already accomplished. Ephesians 5:25–27 tells us that Christ so loved the church that He gave Himself for it, not that He might

make it a redeemable or perfectible church, but that He might redeem her in order to present her as His bride before His Father as a glorious church. Clearly, the intent of His death was nothing less than the completed salvation of every one of those for whom He died. Titus 2:14 says He “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (KJV, here and below).

## ***Biblical Testimonies***

The definiteness of the atonement of Christ can be affirmed irrevocably from biblical testimonies. The Bible speaks clearly of Jesus laying down His life for His sheep (John 10:11–13). In that context, He says of certain people, “Ye are not of my sheep” (v. 26). Scripture also speaks of Christ laying down His life for the children of God (John 11:51–52); dying for His church (Eph 5:25–27; Acts 20:28); saving His people (Matt 1:21); giving His life “a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28); seeing His seed (Isa 53:10; Ps 22); and redeeming His own from iniquity (Titus 2:14)—all as having already happened (Rev 5:9).

In sum, Christ died to satisfy the justice of God for His people's sins. He saved a definite number of people, whom He refers to as His people, His sheep, and His elect (Matt. 1:21; John 10:11–15; Rom. 8:28–39). As with God's election and the Spirit's calling, Christ's atonement



is efficacious. His sacrifice of His life saves the lives of His sheep. This precious life is not laid down in vain for just any sheep (John 10:10). Jesus did not die to make salvation possible for all; He died to make the salvation of His sheep certain. He is the Good Shepherd who knows His sheep and gives “his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). This little word *for* indicates a direct exchange, a definite one for a definite many. Not one part of the sacrifice was in vain. Here, surely, is the glorious truth of a certain, though limited, atonement, for Jesus also bluntly declares to some unbelieving Israelites, “Ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep” (John 10:26).

The doctrine of limited atonement does not mean that Christ’s death is limited in power. A. W. Pink said, “The only limitation in the atonement arises from pure sovereignty; it is a limitation not of value and virtue, but of design and application.” Christ died for the people whom God the Father elected and for whom Christ Himself intercedes. John 17:9 says Christ intercedes specifically and exclusively for those people: “I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.”

Christ died to save only His elect. That does not mean there is any insufficiency in His atoning blood. Because Christ is infinite God, His blood provides infinite satisfaction for the justice of God. If God had determined to save myriads more than He did, no more of Christ’s blood would have been required. Then, too, if He had died only for one, He would have had to suffer no less, since all sin is against an infinite God and demands infinite payment from the Mediator. But though Christ’s blood is sufficient for all, it is efficient only for the elect. It accomplishes its purpose; whomever Christ died to save will be saved. “He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied” (Isa 53:11).

The good news of Christ’s definite atonement is that it means He is a complete Mediator. He both merits and applies salvation. Both are necessary because we are unable to do either. Christ must be a full Savior because sinners are spiritually dead and cannot independently receive a Christ presented to them. Though Christ has merited everything, God’s people know that they have no legs to run to Him, no arms to embrace Him, no lips to kiss Him. He must do everything—both the meriting and the applying. Thus, He receives all honor and glory as the Alpha and Omega for His own.

## TEXTUAL OBJECTIONS ANSWERED

The major objections to limited atonement are based on textual and practical considerations. The textual

objections include the following:

1. Texts in which the word “world” is used to describe the objects of Christ’s death, as in John 3:16 and 1 John 2:2: “And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”

2. Texts in which the word “all” is used to describe the objects of Christ’s death, such as 2 Corinthians 5:15: “He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again”; Romans 8:32a: “He ... spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all”; and 1 Timothy 2:4–6, which speaks of Christ giving Himself as “a ransom for all.”

3. Texts that seem to state that some for whom Christ died may perish. One such text is Romans 14:15: “But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died.” Another is 2 Peter 2:1, in which the apostle speaks of false teachers who deny the Lord “that bought them.”

When these texts are handled carefully and honestly, considering their context and the intent of the author and measuring Scripture against Scripture, apparent problems are nearly always readily resolved. For example, the Greek word for “world” (*kosmos*) has several meanings in Scripture. Sometimes it refers to the entire elect world, meaning both the Jews and Gentiles; sometimes it refers to the public who surrounded Christ, especially the Jews; sometimes it refers to groupings of all kinds of people, such as kings and subjects; sometimes it refers to humankind under the righteous judgment of God or to the kingdom of evil forces, both angelic and human, as related to the earth; sometimes it refers to creation, or to the earth itself, or in the classical sense, to an orderly universe; and sometimes it simply refers to a great number of people.

As for specific texts, John 3:16 does not reflect on the atonement’s extent; rather, the key to John 3:16 is in the purpose clause of verse 17: in order that “the world through him might be saved.” Here, “world” is referring not to everyone, but to the world under judgment and condemnation. B. B. Warfield says *kosmos* is used in John 3 not to suggest that the world is so big that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it all, but that the world is so bad that it takes a great kind of love to love it at all, and much more to love it as God loved it when He gave His Son for sinners in it.

In 1 John 2:1–2, the apostle is saying that Christ’s defense before God is so complete that it is sufficient for the sins of the world. He is also saying that the sacrifice Christ made was not only for the Jews or for a small group



of first-century believers, but for people of every tribe, tongue, and nation through all time. John Murray speaks about the ethnic universalism of the gospel, meaning that those for whom Christ died are spread among all nations. Abraham Kuyper shows that the Greek word translated “for” (*peri*, not *hyper*) means “fitting for” or “with respect to.” Hence, the meaning of the Greek can be that Jesus is a propitiation just like we and the entire world need—or, that just as Jesus is our propitiation, so the entire world needs that same propitiation.

As for the texts that use the word “all,” 2 Corinthians 5:14–15 uses “all” in the context of the unity of death and resurrection. Christ rises for those in union with Him; therefore, His death must be thought of in those same terms. The phrase “delivered him up for us all” in Romans 8:32 is in the context of God’s foreordination of His people (vv. 28–30) and of Christ’s intercession for the elect (vv. 33–39). The words “ransom for all” in 1 Timothy 2:4–6 are clearly set in the context of prayers being offered for all kinds of people (vv. 1–2). Since the word “all” does not always mean “all individuals” in either Greek or English usage, there is no compelling reason to conclude that the

“all” in verses 4 and 6 refers to every single person.

What of texts that seem to speak of believers falling away from faith? The context of Romans 14:15 shows that the apostle is not talking about a brother for whom Christ died apostatizing from the faith altogether, but about one who would feel crushed if a fellow Christian became such a stumbling block in his life of faith that he would begin to traverse the road that leads to destruction. And 2 Peter 2:1 probably refers to false teachers who had been nominal members of the church but who, in their actions, were denying the Savior they once professed but never knew in truth. They may have had historical, even temporary and miraculous, faith, but they never possessed true saving faith, for they rejected the Savior and did “stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed” (1 Peter 2:8). Certainly, Christ did not redeem those who were ordained to be disobedient.

### **PRACTICAL OBJECTIONS ADDRESSED**

Most major practical objections to the doctrine of limited atonement can be summarized in the following two questions, each of which I will address in turn:



***How can the atonement be glorious if it is limited to some?***

This question really has two aspects. The first is the false idea that Christ died for a tiny remnant of people. Both the Canons of Dort and the Second Helvetic Confession reject that conclusion on the basis of Scripture passages that say heaven will house a great multitude of redeemed people that no man can number, from every kindred, tribe, tongue, and nation (Rev 7:9–17).

The second aspect is a false idea about who does the limiting in atonement. As Charles H. Spurgeon showed, it is the Arminian, not the Calvinist, who limits Christ's redemption. The Calvinist teaches that salvation is sure for every man, woman, teenager, boy, or girl who comes to the Lord Jesus Christ. None shall be turned away (John 6:37). The Calvinist says, "In His atonement, Jesus built a bridge from the depths of my depravity to God and heaven, and, by sending His Spirit, will bring every sinner for whom the bridge was laid all the way to glory." That statement is the essence of the gospel. God will not fail to gather in every single one of His elect. There will be no empty seats in heaven.

On the other hand, Arminians say that atonement only makes salvation possible. In doing so, they greatly limit the efficacy of the bloodletting of the Son of God. One Arminian put it this way: "The atonement would be just as efficacious and glorifying to God if not one sinner ever appropriated it." In the Arminian view, the atonement created the possibility of salvation, but men must complete the bridge by exercising their own free will.

***How can you preach the gospel to all men without distinction if Christ did not die to save all?***

In other words, if you cannot come to a sinner and say, "Christ died for you," how can you ask him to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ? Doesn't Calvinism dampen evangelistic zeal?

Let me offer three responses.

First, the content of the gospel is not that Christ died for this or that specific person. There is not one instance in the preaching of the book of Acts, private or public, where the apostolic gospel says Christ died for any individual. The gospel says that God has sent His Son, who lived, died, and rose again. That is adequate for the vilest

of sinners, for the promise is: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (Acts 16:31).

Second, the Calvinist view of the atonement guarantees the success of evangelism. The elect will be saved infallibly through the preaching of the gospel, for God determined that it would be so through the eternal covenant of redemption established among the persons of the Trinity. In His sovereign, gracious, distinguishing love, the Father has chosen certain people (Rom 9:11–13; Eph 1:4) whom He gave to His Son (John 6:37, 39; 17:6, 24), who, in turn, committed Himself to accomplish their redemption by obeying the precepts of God’s moral law perfectly on their behalf (His active obedience) and paying the penalty due them for their disobedience to the law (His passive obedience). Thus, God can be just and the justifier of those who believe in Jesus (Rom 3:26). Under the Trinitarian covenant, the Spirit is sent into the world by the Father and the Son (John 15:26; 16:5–15) to apply Christ’s saving work to the elect.

We need to remember that the decretive and covenantal will of God is effectual. What God purposes, He performs. Christ’s atonement is the work to which He committed Himself from eternity. Definite atonement flows out of the electing purpose of God and adheres fully with other doctrines of Christology that are grounded in eternity, such as the doctrines of Christ as the second Adam, of His high-priestly work, and of His covenant role.

Knowing that the elect will be gathered by the second Adam (John 17:12; Rom 5:12–19) makes Calvinists bold in evangelism. They also are patient in it, knowing that God will save sinners in His time and way through the priestly work of Christ (Isa 55:10–11). They are zealous, knowing that God’s glory will come to be (1 Cor 1:27–31), and prayerful, knowing that He alone will and can accomplish salvation as an ever-faithful, covenant-keeping Lord (Eph 2:1–10). Nearly all the great and zealous evangelists of the church from the sixteenth century Reformation to the early nineteenth century, before Charles Finney (1792–1875), were committed to definite atonement rooted in this God-centered covenant theology. Would anyone dare say that George Whitefield lacked evangelistic zeal in preaching the gospel? Would anyone say the same of Spurgeon, William Carey, David Brainerd, Jonathan Edwards, or Asahel Nettleton? Each of these great evangelists professed a definite design in the atoning work of Christ and boldly heralded Him as a freely offered and willing Savior to all who repent and believe.

Third, while we cannot fully grasp with our finite minds how to reconcile a definite, limited atonement with Christ’s all-sufficient blood and a universal invitation to

believe, such is the pattern of Scripture and the way of God (John 6:37–40). Moreover, since the atonement is not limited in itself, though it is in its design, and since the promise is that all who by faith truly come to Christ for salvation will certainly be saved (Rom 10:13), limited atonement is not inconsistent with a universal call to faith.

This is also the position of the Canons of Dort. Affirming that Christ’s blood is shed effectually only for those “who were from eternity chosen to salvation and given to Him by the Father” (Head II, Art. 8), the Canons read:

The promise of the gospel is, that whosoever believeth in Christ crucified, shall not perish, but have everlasting life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel. (Head II, Art. 5)

Roger Nicole says our major problem in understanding definite atonement is that we think that a coextensive provision is necessary for a sincere offer of any kind; that is, Christ has to have died for every person in order for every person to be offered salvation in Him. Nicole says this premise is false even in mundane human affairs:


For instance, advertisers who offer some objects on the pages of a newspaper do not feel that honesty in any way demands of them to have a stock coextensive with the circulation figures of the newspaper. Really, the only requisite for a sincere invitation is this—that if the conditions be fulfilled, that which is offered will actually be granted.

Jesus says, “Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37). Unlike stores with limited inventory, Jesus’ stock is never exhausted.

William Symington argues likewise:

We hold that the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus possessed an intrinsic value sufficient for the salvation of the whole world. In this sense it was adequate to the redemption of every human being.... The worth of Christ’s atonement we hold to be, in the strictest sense of the term, infinite, absolute, all-sufficient.... This all-sufficiency is what lays the foundation for the unrestricted universality of the gospel call.... Such is my impression of the sufficiency of the atonement, that were all the guilt of all mankind concentrated in

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# Arminianism and Calvinism are based on different premises. Calvinists believe in a definite atonement, one that holds that Jesus Christ actually redeemed everyone He intended to redeem through His substitutionary death.

my own person, I should see no reason, relying on that blood which cleanseth from all sin, to indulge despair.

Symington concludes:

Let sinners everywhere know that if they perish it is not because there is not merit in Christ sufficient to meet all the demands of law and justice against them. Let them all turn and embrace the kind, the sincere, the urgent call to life and salvation by mere gratuity on the part of God: “Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely.” [cf. Rev 22:17]

If, by grace, you take this water of life, you will be saved. No one has ever perished who has believed in the Lord Jesus Christ. The message of the gospel is: “The bridge is finished. Christ will enable you to put your weight on it,

and He will carry you all the way across. He welcomes all who come. Trust Him.”

Without faith, Christ’s atonement does us no good. We experience the benefits of Christ’s accomplishment only when we, with our empty hands, embrace Christ. The good news is that the atonement has been achieved before we exercise faith (Rom 5:5–11). The reconciliation is there to be received, and by grace we receive it when Christ, by the Holy Spirit, draws us to Himself.

## **REDEEMED BY PRECIOUS BLOOD**

Arminianism and Calvinism are based on different premises. Calvinists believe in a definite atonement, one that holds that Jesus Christ actually redeemed everyone He intended to redeem through His substitutionary death. As Tom Ascol says, “Just as the high priest under the old covenant wore the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on his breastplate when he performed his sacrificial service,

so our great High Priest under the new covenant had the names of His people inscribed on His heart as He offered up Himself as a sacrifice for their sins.” Not one who belongs to Christ will be lost.


Nicole has often said that when Calvinists declare they believe in a limited atonement, Arminians can proclaim an unlimited atonement, but when Calvinists proclaim a definite atonement, no Arminian wants to claim an indefinite atonement. Though “definite atonement” or “particular redemption” are better expressions than “limited atonement,” let us not forget that every Calvinist and Arminian, in actuality, believes in a limited atonement. As Ascol points out, “The Arminian view, claiming that the atonement is unlimited in its extent, is forced to conclude that it is limited in its efficacy. It failed to accomplish its universal purpose.” Spurgeon describes this failure well:

Many divines...believe in an atonement made for everybody; but then, their atonement is just this. They believe that Judas was atoned for just as much as Peter; they believe that the damned in hell were as much an object of Jesus Christ’s satisfaction as the

saved in heaven; and though they do not say it in proper words, yet they must mean it, for it is a fair inference, that in the case of multitudes, Christ died in vain, for he died for them all, they say; and yet so ineffectual was his dying for them, that though he died for them they are damned afterwards.

Speaking with Spurgeon, we Calvinists may say to our Arminian friends: “You are welcome to your atonement; you may keep it. We will never renounce ours for the sake of it.” For we need a Savior who truly saves (Matt 1:21) with a redemption that truly redeems by “the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you, who by him do believe in God, that raised him up from the dead, and gave him glory; that your faith and hope might be in God” (1 Pet 1:19–21).

Christ’s atonement did not partly fail; it totally succeeded. Jesus never fails.



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# REDEMPTION ACCOMPLISHED

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GEOFFREY THOMAS

“Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Eph 5:25–27, NIV).

For fifty years, I have believed that the Bible teaches the limited design of Christ’s atonement, that is, that His purpose in dying was to effectually save every one of His people from their sin, taking them to heaven and transforming them into his likeness forevermore. I remember half a century ago being part of a group of students discussing animatedly the purpose of the death of our Lord, and then we went to a meeting in which we sang, “Lo! He comes with clouds descending, once for favoured sinners slain.” At that very line, I had a moment of recognition and turned and exchanged a little smile with a student called David. We had been asking “For whom had Christ

died?” and we had just been confirmed in the answer as we sang to one another these words, “for favoured sinners slain.”

We could ask the question in this way: “On the cross, whom is Christ saving?” and the answer is, “All who are saved.” Then we ask, “Did he do that on purpose, or was it an accident?” We can only say, “He did it on purpose.” That is limited atonement; Christ purposefully shed His blood on Golgotha as the Lamb of God and effectually saved all for whom He died.

Every building has a design. You go to the architect with your plan; it’s for a conservatory, or a single-bedroom flat, or perhaps a four-bedroom detached house, or even a 75,000-seat stadium. You describe what you want, and the architect must plan and accomplish your end. His work will be limited by your purpose.

Every work of engineering has a plan, and in the

# Why the death on Golgotha's cross? To save his people from their sin. Why the resurrection? To save his people from their sin.

engineering of redemption God had a plan when he sent his Son into the world. It was the outworking of the covenant of grace He had made with Abraham, that Abraham's seed would be vast, blessing all nations of the world, every one of them receiving the Holy Spirit. God is going to accomplish that plan through His Son, Jesus Christ.

## **THE OLD TESTAMENT KNEW ONLY A DEFINITE ATONEMENT**

The Old Testament only knew a limited design to sacrifice and atonement, didn't it? There was no universal purpose in the Mosaic sacrifices, was there? The Egyptians who worshiped their gods, and the Babylonians similarly sacrificing to their idols, and the Assyrians, and the Canaanites, and the Medes, and the Persians prostrating themselves before figures of stone, gold, and silver—none of them had their sins purged away by the Jewish sacrifices made at that altar erected outside the tabernacle and later at the temple in Jerusalem.

Only Israel's sins were pardoned on the Day of Atonement when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies with the blood of the sacrifice. Only the names of the twelve tribes of Israel were carried upon his breastplate. You will look in vain for the names of Egypt, or Babylon, or Assyria and the rest. Full atonement was limited to the repentant, obedient, sacrificing people of God.

Were all who died in Noah's flood covered by the altar that Noah built and the sacrifice he made after the flood waters went down? Not at all! Just the eight who believed and got into the ark were saved. The rest died, because they rejected the message he had preached to them of the seed of the woman who would come in the fullness

of time and save sinners. Gentiles like Rahab and Ruth needed to turn from their gods and put their trust under the wings of Jehovah. Naaman the Syrian leper needed to consult the prophet of God and dip seven times in the Jordan to be cleansed. Jonah was sent to Nineveh not to confirm that the sacrifices the Ninevites made to their idols had atoned for their sins but to urge them to repent and call upon the name of the Lord.

In the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, there is one strong exhortation, and that is that the people should come and reason with God as He pleads, "Be willing! Be obedient! Make sacrifice for your sins as I have made provision! Do you scorn the blood of sacrifice? Apply yourselves to the means of atonement, and then, though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (cf. Isa 1:18). Whose sins were atoned for? Was it all of the physical descendants of Abraham, without exception? Is that right? No. It is wrong.

The false prophets were descendants of Abraham, and the people who worshiped the Baals, King Ahab and Jezebel, the drunkards and the sluggards, the liars and the careless—they also were circumcised sons of Abraham. Did they all have atonement for their sins merely because Abraham was their great-great-grandfather? You'd better not believe it, or such faith will take you into presumption, and that is a step from hell.

Atonement was for those who took a lamb without spot and blemish and led it to the altar, where they, in faith, put a hand on its head and then handed it over to the priest to be slain and have its blood sprinkled on the altar. Only such a person could have any assurance that his sins had been atoned for.

Atonement was limited to the one who sought it in God's way—not the careless; not the scorner; not the godless and unrighteous who were too mean and unbelieving to offer a lamb, who never made a sacrifice. Those people had to bear the weight of their own sins. They carried that guilt throughout their lives. Those who were merely the physical descendants of Abraham bore it to the throne of judgment and answered to God for it. No one and nothing had made any atonement for their sins. They had no provision by a sacrifice and by divine pardon. Their sins were all un-redeemed; they all stood naked in their guilt before God; they answered for all their sins.

### **THE NEW TESTAMENT KNOWS A PURPOSEFUL, DEFINITE ATONEMENT**

Consider in the very opening chapter of the New Testament, Matthew 1, the statement made there by the angel of the Lord to Joseph about the child that Mary would soon bear: "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins" (v. 21).

Why the incarnation? To save His people from their sin. Why the virgin birth? To save His people from their sin. Why that life lived under the law of God? To save His people from their sin. Why the death on Golgotha's cross? To save His people from their sin. Why the resurrection? To save His people from their sin. Why does He continue to make intercession for us? To save us from our sin. Why has He gone to prepare a place for us? To save His people from their sin. As He said in Matthew 20:28, "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." He gave His life for many, yes, for a company of people more than any man could number.

Or again, consider the words of exhortation to the elders in Ephesus in that moving farewell address of Paul. The apostle tells them, "Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Get out of your house and go searching for the sheep when they've gone astray. Why? Because Christ bought the church with His own blood. Feed them with the purest doctrine and holiest truths. Why? Christ bought the church with His own blood. Pray for them all without ceasing. Why? Christ bought the church with His own blood. Be an example to them in godliness and loving kindness. Why? Christ bought the church with His own blood. They are a purchased people, that is, a redeemed people, and the price paid was not silver and gold but the precious blood of Christ.

Again, think of the people whom Jesus was conscious

God had given Him in a glorious donation of grace before the foundation of the world. He refers to them in John 6:37: "All those the Father gives me will come to me." He could see them coming to Him, every single one of them; none would be lost! That was His confidence, and for those people He interceded. John 17:9 says, "I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours."

There are some people for whom Christ does not pray. Think of it! Doesn't that give you a chill of fear, that you could be going through life without a mediator with God, no high priest, no one interceding for you, no one saying, "Father, I plead my sacrifice for that woman. May it not be in vain. Bring that woman safely home. She is going through such difficulties; Satan is giving her such a hard time; she is beset with doubts and her faith is failing, but I am praying for her, Father, that she will not give up"?

Is Jesus Christ praying for you? How do you know? One way only, that your hope is in the blood of Christ. In other words, if I should ask you why God should let you into heaven to be with Him forever, then you would reply, "Because the Savior died to make atonement for my sins." Right! Then for you, the risen Savior ever lives, and he makes intercession for you (Heb 7:25). It is a limited intercession if you believe the words of Jesus: "I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours" (John 17:9).

Or again, let us consider the words of our text in Ephesians 5:25–27: "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless." Notice three things about these words:

#### ***Christ Loved the Church***

Who was the object of Christ's love? The church—that is, all the believing, repentant people of God, those who will be saved, those whom the Father had given to Him. "Christ loved the church"; those are the exact words of Scripture, aren't they? (Eph 5:25) All the Old Testament believers who made atonement for their sins did so by the sacrifices of bulls and goats and lambs and pigeons, just as God prescribed. They knew perfectly well that the blood of an animal couldn't cleanse their souls of their guilt. They knew it was a picture, a figure pointing to a great divine atonement that one day would be proved by the promised seed of the woman, their Messiah, the seed of Abraham. But they faithfully did what God told them, putting their hands on the head of the sacrifice. The

Messiah loved them for doing that.

He also loved all the people who after His death would entrust themselves to Him and would be saved. Saul of Tarsus, that cruel torturer and persecutor of the church who was converted, said it like this: He “loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). It was such a personal love. Christ did not love some amorphous blob! His affection was not focused on a crowd, on His fans! He loved His own people passionately. He knew everything about them. They were all individual men and women to Him, no two of them identical, and He loved each one of those different personalities. He was their lover and their bridegroom, as you sing it in those familiar words from “The Church’s One Foundation”:

From heav’n He came and sought her  
to be His holy bride;  
with His own blood he bought her,  
and for her life He died.


He was desperately in love with them. He had been given them by His dear Father—what a precious gift!—and so He would look after them; He would do nothing to lose a single one of them. He would live to make a robe

of righteousness, like a bride’s robe, with which He would cover them from head to foot. He would die to make full atonement for their sin that they might go at last to heaven saved by His precious blood. Why did He do all this?

Because of His immeasurable love for His people, all of whom had been loved with everlasting love. How glorious is the love of God! God’s own infinite, eternal, and unchangeable love, and it is focused upon favored sinners. Remember, it is love! It is not just His mercy and kindness, or even His forgiveness, that Paul is speaking about here, but the passionate affection, the undying love of Christ for His own people. There can be no greater blessing than to feel one is loved by God. But Paul goes on.

#### *Christ Gave Himself Up for Her*

He did not say to an angel, “Gabriel,” or “Michael, give yourself up as a sacrifice for those people whom the Father has given to me.” He did not address men and women saying, “Favored sinners, my Father has given you to me, but you need to make atonement for your own sins. You have to suffer exhaustively for your sins until they are all paid for. You must all go to a place where you will submit to suffering until you have earned the right to come



**Because of His immeasurable love for His people, all of whom had been loved with everlasting love. How glorious is the love of God! God’s own infinite, eternal, and unchangeable love, and it is focused upon favored sinners.**

to heaven.” No! There is nothing like that. Not angels and not men and women were asked to give themselves up. It was Christ who humbled Himself! He chose to drink that cup. It was Christ alone! He loved favored sinners, and He gave Himself up to this fallen world, to constantly contradicting sinners, so wearily and wearily. He gave Himself up to the utter loneliness of His last hours, when God and men forsook Him. He gave Himself up to the whipping, the thirty-nine stripes making a lattice-work of His back, crisscrossing in ugly, raw, bleeding welts. He gave Himself up to carrying His cross, to being stripped and nailed through His hands and His feet and lifted up, hanging suspended by those nails in the blaze of the Middle Eastern sun until it turned dark, facing the chanting mockery of the mob. He gave Himself up to enter the anathema of His Father’s wrath against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of man. He gave Himself up to the abandonment and the dereliction. He gave Himself up to death. He did it, and He did it alone.

There was none other good enough. There was no other way. God must maintain the righteousness of His nature; He is always absolutely fair and straight. But God’s heart longs to forgive, to pass by the transgressions of those He loves and pardon them all. How can such be done without God compromising His own integrity? This is the way: Christ Jesus, the Son of God, stood in man’s place. He gave Himself so freely; He humbled Himself upon Mount Calvary instead of man. He drank that cup of agony and damnation that was being brought to us. He drank all the suffering and misery and anguish such as only God knows, as He is the only one who knows what sin deserves, and Christ gives Himself to bear the eternal torment of everyone who shall at last stand in heaven justified. His death buys their redemption. He drank all the dregs in a great draught of love. He drank damnation dry when He gave Himself up for us.

### ***Christ Made Her Holy***

What is the purpose of His loving her and of His giving Himself up on the cross for her? Paul says, “To make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.” This was Jesus’ purpose in dying the accursed death of the cross, and this is what Jesus had achieved when He finally shouted out “It is finished” (John 19:30). He had finished doing all this for His people. If Christ had loved her, and if He had given Himself up for her, then this was the necessary effectual consequence, that those for whom He had died could not be

anything but holy; they were cleansed by the Word; they were presented to Christ radiant, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish; they were righteous and blameless. If Christ had died in the place of a sinner, then this is what must happen to Him.

Do you understand what the death of Christ accomplishes? It is not that Calvary makes atonement *possible*. It is that Calvary makes atonement *effectual*; it is an accomplished atonement. We understand the difference between a possible deliverance and an accomplished deliverance, don’t we?

There is a chain of lifeguards sitting on their high seats along the beach, one every hundred yards. See them there stretched out along the shore, sitting with their tanned bodies and sunglasses looking out to sea, their life-saving certificates nailed to the side of their chairs. They are saying by their presence, “The lives of all swimmers in difficulty may be saved.”

So, will no one drown? Of course people are still going to drown; the presence of the lifeguards on their seats makes life-saving only possible. To actually save a life, they must jump out of their seats, run along the beach, dash into the water, swim out to the drowning man, and deliver him, keeping his head above water, bringing him to the shore, and giving him the kiss of life and artificial respiration. That is accomplished salvation. Their being there on the high chairs and looking out to sea presents to the drowning man only the possibility of salvation.

We have a fire-brigade in our town. There are twenty men and two fire engines, and the firemen are all qualified in rescuing people from danger. So, will no one die in a burning house? Of course they will die, unless that possible salvation is transformed into accomplished salvation when the men slide down the pole and get into their suits as they clamber onto the fire engine and drive off, the warning siren of a fire-brigade speeding along, sending the cars to the side of the road that they might hurry past. Then they get to the burning house, and they train their hoses on it and put their ladders against it, entering it and rescuing the children from the burning building. Then it is not just the possibility of salvation that they are offering to the people of the town; it is the accomplishment of salvation.

Again, I can use the illustration of a local hospital in the same way. People are still going to die of curable diseases though there is a 240-bed hospital full of trained physicians and nurses and expensive equipment within half a mile. That building, and the qualified personnel with all their skill, are there. The drugs and the X-ray machines are also there, but they simply make deliverance from

death possible. Their mere presence is not enough; they must also be applied to you, or you will die.

So it is with the redemption of Christ. What He has done is not to plan and build a vast redeemability plant—*Golgotha Redeemability Incorporated*. It is not that everyone in the world has been placed in a redeemable state through Calvary. Rather, what Paul is telling us in our text is that Christ’s dying love for us has actually made all those for whom He died “holy” men and women—that is, they are now a people set apart to God.

That is what our text says. Christ has cleansed all of them by the washing with water through the Word. They are clean in God’s eyes, however filthy they’ve been. Christ has presented them to Himself as a radiant church. Christ has so effectively redeemed them that they are without stain, or wrinkle, or any other blemish, but He has made them all utterly holy and blameless. That is what the atonement of Christ has achieved—according to the Bible, not according to my theories or my theology, but according to the plain claims of Scripture. We are pleading with you to face up to what Scripture teaches.

The cross of Christ has obtained eternal redemption for all for whom Jesus died (Heb 9:12). Jesus has got it! The eternal redemption of favored men and women is all in the hands of Christ, who has all authority in heaven and earth (Matt 28:18). God has given Him a name above every name (Phil 2:9). Where would be a better place for our redemption? It is all in the hands of King Jesus.

Again, Paul reminds Titus of this in chapter 2 of the letter that he sent to him, writing of “our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (vv. 13–14). That is what the cross of Jesus Christ has accomplished; He has not made possible a redemption from all wickedness. He is not now anxiously watching to see whether one or more will respond. He has, in fact, actually redeemed us from all wickedness and purified for Himself a people eager to do what is good. That is the achievement of the blood of Christ.

Then you must ask the question, “For whom has He done this?” And the answer Paul gives Titus is “a people that are his very own.” They are the ones who live a new life. They are the ones who have been redeemed from wickedness. They are the ones who have been purified, who are now eager to do what is good. They are the ones who will one day be in heaven, saved by His precious blood.

Here is the plain teaching of the New Testament concerning the accomplishment of the dying of Jesus. If

Christ has actually died in my place on Golgotha, then He has once and for all dealt with all the sins of my life, of my heart, and my nature; my original sins and my actual sins; my sins of omission and my sins of commission. They have all been nailed to that cross in Christ. Think of every sin that you are aware of, and if you are in Christ, then He was made that sin for you. Take all the sins that you cannot be aware of now, and yet when He gave Himself for you, He was giving Himself for those sins too. That means henceforth I cannot consider or acknowledge my sins in isolation. I can think of them only as they have been made Christ’s. They are no longer mine alone, in this sense, that I will never answer for Christless sins to God, because Christ has comprehensively answered for them already. There are no un-dealt-with sins for the people of God.

It is a magnificent and even an incredible concept that our sins no longer control or modify our relation to God today. It is as if they weren’t there. There is no guilt at all; there is no defilement at all; there is no blame at all; there is no shame; it does not exist; they have all been removed by God and laid on His Son. He has been made sin for me. He has taken our sin, our past sin, our present sin, and our future sin, and He has put it all away forever. So, we are washed; we are clean; we are, as Paul says so astonishingly in our text, “without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”

I am not sure that my conscience believes it. I am not sure that there is not in me something that wants to cling in self-pity to some remnants of my guilt so that I wallow in my past and turn my eyes on my yesterdays and tell people how badly I have lived, and thus can feel sorry for myself. I am pleading with you to let the truth of these words be the whole truth about the way things are between you and God today. There is no barrier whatsoever; there is no impediment; there is no closed or limited access.

It has all been forgiven; it has all been forgotten. There are people who cling to faith in the fantasy dark land of “purgatory,” where they themselves are going to deal with the pollution of their sins. There they are going to handle their outstanding sins until they are all finally dealt with. A result of that error is that it actually encourages them to sub-Christian living—a little less dedication, a little less commitment, a little less sanctification—because they feel they themselves will have to deal with those sins and their consequences after they die. Ultimately, they are going to be delivered from them by their own sufferings. So, they are not perturbed to let out the occasional swear word and blasphemy, to display carelessness about the



Lord's Day, to allow for the odd explosion of anger and the occasional drunkenness and some sexual sins. They shrug, because they'll have to face up to the consequences of their own sins on the fantasy island of purgatory. I am telling you that the only purgatory there is either in this world or the next is the cross. Only there are our sins dealt with; only there you will find the blood of Christ. God has made no plans for a purgatory.

I am saying that the sins of all the people of God—as many people as there are sands on the seashore—have all been forgiven; He has borne them all. Every speck, every spot, every such thing has been dealt with by Christ. There is absolutely nothing left—do you know it? There is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus (Rom 8:1).

All of this means that the single determinant today of your relationship with God is what happened on the cross. Nothing else matters; nothing else is relevant. There are only two factors in the equation: what God did and how Christ responded. God made Christ sin (2 Cor 5:21), and He received that sin lovingly. And how you feel about your life, and how sometimes you doubt, and what you are doing for Jesus, and how you fail—that is not remotely relevant to Golgotha. The one thing that matters is that Christ loved us and gave Himself for us there. And

I don't for a moment believe that the heart that knows that will take advantage of it and go out to get drunk or steal or deceive or live a life without law, because the cross won't let you.

I believe, on the contrary, that if substitutionary atonement has no place in your thinking, if you are living your life with the smallest consideration of what Jesus Christ did for you on Golgotha, and if you are feeling that God still has things against you, then that often serves as some unconscious grudge against God that somehow justifies you from being less than perfect and permits a relapse here and a shortcoming there. I want to know in the depths of my heart that when God made Jesus Christ sin for us that Christ made a good and decent and proper job of that sin, that He dealt with it all, one hundred percent, that He cleared it all away, that He experienced its hell in my place, that He entered its outer darkness instead of me so that I shall never, never know the unquenchable fires. When God comes to me searching for my sin, He finds it on the cross of Jesus condemned and covered, and on that fact is my whole confidence of forgiveness grounded.

He does not find on Calvary the possibility of redemption; He finds redemption accomplished. ♦





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free will?



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change things?



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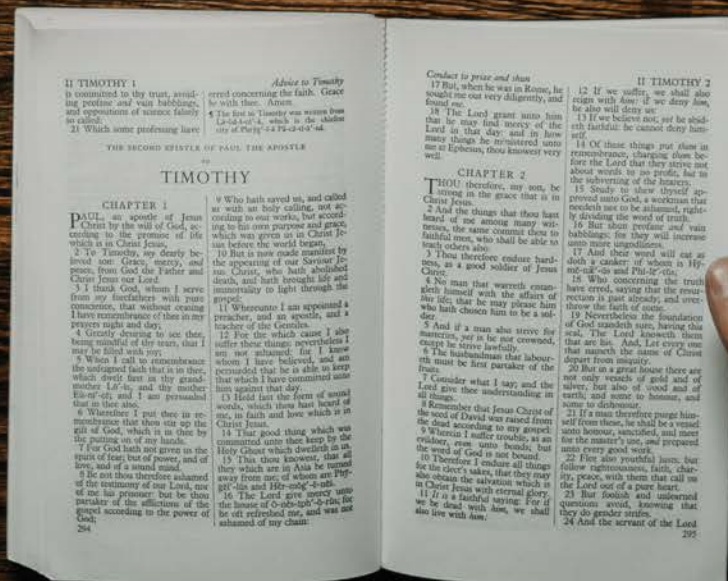
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