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Introduction

When the apostle Paul wanted to remind the Corinthian church of the gospel, he wrote, “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3).

Christ died for our sins. The gospel is the solution to our sin problem. So, before we can understand and appreciate the gospel, we need to understand the doctrine of sin. The basis for this understanding takes us back to the garden of Eden, where, from the moment Adam ate of the forbidden fruit (Gen. 3:6), sin became humanity’s overarching problem. Adam, by God’s appointment, stood as the representative of the entire human race so that his guilt became our guilt, and his resulting sinful nature was passed on to all of us. Paul speaks of this representative nature of Adam’s sin and its consequences when he states:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned. . . . Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. (Rom. 5:12, 18–19)

Thus, we were born sinners. In fact, David wrote that we were sinners even from the time of conception in our mother’s womb

(Ps. 51:5). And because we were born sinners, committing our own personal sins serves to compound our condition on a daily basis.

What is sin? It is often described as “missing the mark”—that is, failure to live up to the rigorous standard of God’s holy law. But the Bible makes it clear that it is much more than that. In Leviticus 16:21, sin is described as *transgression*; literally, as rebellion against authority. In the prophet Nathan’s confrontation of David over his sins of adultery and murder, Nathan describes sin as a *despising* of both God’s Word and God himself (2 Sam. 12:9–10). And in Numbers 15:30–31, Moses characterizes sinners as acting “with a high hand,” meaning defiantly. Therefore, we can conclude that sin is a rebellion against God’s sovereign authority, a despising of his Word and his person, and even a defiance of God himself. It is no wonder Paul wrote that because of our sin, we were by nature objects of God’s wrath (Eph. 2:3).

We would like to think that, as believers, such descriptions of sin no longer apply to us. We look at the gross and obvious sins of society around us, and we tend to define sin in terms of those actions. We fail to see that our anxiety, our discontentment, our ingratitude toward God, our pride and selfishness, our critical and judgmental attitudes toward others, our gossip, our unkind words to or about others, our preoccupation with the things of this life, and a whole host of other subtle sins are an expression of rebellion against God and a despising of his Word and person.

The truth is that even the most mature believers continue to sin in thought, word, deed, and especially in motive. We continually experience the inward spiritual guerilla warfare Paul describes when he states, “For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do” (Gal. 5:17). That is why it was necessary for the apostle Peter to exhort us to “abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul” (1 Pet. 2:11).

This, then, is the doctrine of sin. Because of Adam’s sin as representative of the entire human race, we are born with a sinful nature

and as objects of God's wrath. We then aggravate our condition before God with our personal sins, whether they be the gross, obvious sins, or the subtle sins we too often tolerate in ourselves and in our Christian circles. And it is in view of this truth of the doctrine of sin that we should understand Paul's words, "Christ died for our sins." It is with this understanding of the nature and reality of sin that we should understand the words of the angel to Joseph, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21).

Christ died for our sins. This phrase suggests two ideas—substitution and sacrifice. Christ died in our place as our substitute and representative. Just as God appointed Adam to act as representative of all humanity, so he appointed Jesus Christ to act on behalf of all who trust in him. There is no better Scripture to see the idea of substitution than this one:

Surely *he* has borne *our* griefs
and carried *our* sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But *he* was wounded for *our* transgressions;
he was crushed for *our* iniquities;
upon *him* was the chastisement that brought *us* peace,
and with *his* stripes *we* are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned every one to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on *him*
the iniquity of *us* all. (Isa. 53:4–6)

Note the repeated contrast which the Spirit-inspired prophet draws between the words *he* and *our*, or *him* and *us*. Surely any unbiased reader cannot fail to see in the passage the idea that Jesus suffered as our substitute, bearing the punishment for sin that we deserve.

The second idea, sacrifice, is foreshadowed in the sacrificial system of the Old Testament era, especially in the sacrifices required on the annual Day of Atonement as described in Leviticus 16. On that day,

the high priest would cast lots over two goats, one of which was to be killed, its blood carried into the Holy Place to be sprinkled over and in front of the mercy seat, thus symbolizing the propitiation of the wrath of God.

After performing this ritual, the high priest would emerge from the holy place and place his hands on the live goat and confess over it all the sins of the people, symbolically putting those sins on the head of the goat. Then the goat would be led away into the wilderness, signifying the removal of the people's sins from the presence of both God and the people. The result of Christ's death was foreshadowed by both goats. The sprinkled blood of the first goat pictured the death of Christ as propitiating or exhausting the cup of the wrath of God toward us because of our sin (Matt. 26:39; John 18:11). The sending away of the second goat pictured the result of Christ's death in removing our sins from us. As Psalm 103:12 says, "As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us."

Psalm 103:12, as well as other Old Testament word pictures such as "blotting out our transgressions" and "remembering sins no more" (Isa. 43:25) and casting "all our sins into the depths of the sea" (Mic. 7:19) speak of the forgiveness of our sins. This message of forgiveness of sin through the death of Christ was central to apostolic preaching. See, for example, Acts 2:38; 10:43; and 13:38, as well as Paul's words in Romans 4:7-8; Ephesians 1:7; and Colossians 2:13. And as the writer of Hebrews wrote, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). (In fact, for those who want to pursue further the nature and purpose of Christ's sacrifice, Hebrews 9 is a good place to start).

But forgiveness of our sins is not the ultimate purpose of Christ's death. As Paul says in Titus 2:14, "[Jesus Christ] gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works." It was never God's intent that Jesus should die to pay the penalty for our sins so that we might continue to live in them. He died so that all who believe in him might become new creations (2 Cor. 5:17).

But that could not occur until after the sin that separated us from God had been dealt with through the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

The key word in Leviticus 16 is the word *atonement*. Animals were sacrificed to make atonement for sins. This, of course, was only a picture of the one great sacrifice of atonement that Christ would make, once for all time, to put away the sin of all who would ever trust in him. Atonement is defined as: “The satisfactory compensation made for an offense or injury, in which a price is paid on behalf of the offending party, resulting in their discharge from the obligation to pay the due penalty.” Atonement allows for restoration of the previously disrupted relationship. Simply stated, atonement is the price paid to reconcile enemies.

In the biblical context, we have the following:

- *The offended party* is God—the holy and omnipotent sovereign.
- *The offense* is sin of any kind, as defined by the Bible.
- *The offending party* consists of sinners, that is, all humanity.
- *The penalty* is the full force of God’s inconceivable eternal wrath.
- *The price paid* on behalf of sinners is the atoning death of Christ.

Because Christ made atonement for our sins by suffering in our place as our substitute, we speak of the *substitutionary atonement* of Christ. A similar expression used to sum up the work of Christ is *penal substitution*, meaning that as our substitute, Christ paid the penalty for our sins. These two terms have, to some degree, fallen out of fashion in today’s evangelical world. But they are basic to our understanding of the gospel and so need to be restated and reaffirmed for twenty-first century readers. That is what we are seeking to do in this book.

Although *atonement* rarely appears as a stand-alone word in the New Testament, the concept of Christ’s atonement and its

application comprise the primary themes of the entire Bible—Old and New Testament alike. The passages included in this study contain synonyms of the word *atonement* or concepts related to atonement, such as: *the death of Christ, the blood of Christ, the cross, sacrifice, ransom, propitiation, redemption, mediator, and reconciliation.*

There are two features of Smeaton's book *The Apostles' Doctrine of the Atonement* that make it relevant and important to us today. First, he examines and expounds every passage of Scripture from Acts through Revelation that deals with the atonement. Because of Smeaton's design to address every passage dealing with the subject, the book is redundant in a wonderfully effectual manner—the reader keeps getting the same message from slightly different perspectives so as to enhance, embellish, and deepen his or her understanding of the gospel. And with that comes passion for the person of Christ and gratitude for his finished work on the cross.

Second, Smeaton provides excellent description and emphasis on the believer's union with Christ as the basis for our ability to enjoy the benefits of Christ's atoning work. Today, for example, some people ask how it can be just for God to punish an innocent man, Jesus, for the sins of other people. The answer, which is clearly taught in Scripture, is found in the believer's legal union with Christ; that is, because Christ was our representative in his life and death, it was just of God to punish him for our sins. As the prophet Isaiah said, "The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:6).

Before Christ died for our sins, however, he lived a perfectly obedient life. He fully obeyed the moral will of God every second of his life. And just as our sins were charged to him so that he justly paid their penalty, so Christ's perfect obedience, which culminated in his obedience unto death on the cross, is credited to all who trust in him—once again because of our legal union with him. And it is Smeaton's grasp of this truth and his continual emphasis of it that makes his book so exciting. For example, he writes in this vein: "When Christ lived a perfect life, we believers lived a perfect life. And when Christ died on the cross, we believers died on the cross."

In other words, Christ didn't just live and die for us. Rather, we are so united to him by faith that God sees his perfect life as our life and his death as our death.

It is often said that the life of Jesus is to be imitated by his followers. This, of course, is the idea behind the popular question "What would Jesus do?" That we are to follow the example of Christ is indeed taught in the Scriptures (for example, see John 13:13–15 and 1 Pet. 2:21). The reality, though, is that our very best efforts at following his example are always imperfect and defiled by our sinful nature. By contrast, his obedience was always perfect and complete and never defiled. Therefore, we should always look first at what Jesus did *as our representative* before looking at him *as our example*. All our efforts toward spiritual growth should flow out of the realization of what he has already done to secure for us our perfect standing before God.

George Smeaton also authored a companion volume to *The Apostles' Doctrine of the Atonement* entitled *Christ's Doctrine of the Atonement*,¹ which examines similar Bible texts in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and in which Christ personally explains the scope, nature, and outcome of his upcoming death on behalf of sinners. Smeaton examines how Jesus explains his death and resurrection as the guarantee that God indeed forgives those sinners who trust in his substitutionary death for the resolution of their personal sin dilemma. In these gospel accounts, Jesus offered insight into the *divine view* of the cross.

Whereas Christ spoke of his upcoming suffering and death for sin, the apostles offered the *completed view* of Christ's work of atonement since they spoke and wrote of it after the fact. The apostles refer to it as an eternally valid, historical, and central fact bursting with blood-bought blessings that abide now and forever. In their inspired works, they explore Old Testament Scriptures and relate them to the life and death of Christ to explain how his great atonement covers, colors, and shapes the lives of those who receive it and are thereby saved by it. In this book, we will focus on the apostles' view of the atonement.

This book, then, is about Christ's glorious work of atonement culminating at the cross. There are no stories inserted to illustrate points. There are no anecdotes added to entertain the reader. None of this is needed, because a rightly understood view of the cross as the treasure of all time can never be boring, trivial, or lacking in excitement. Our goal is to assist the reader in exulting in the unfathomable riches of Christ's atonement as contained in God's Word.

This book is for every Christian, regardless of one's level of spiritual maturity. Many believers view the gospel only as a message to be shared with unbelievers but not personally applicable to themselves anymore. We have learned from personal experience, as well as from the writings of some of the great writers of previous centuries, that we need the gospel as well. We need it to remind ourselves that our day-to-day standing with God is based on Christ's righteousness, not our performance. We need the gospel to motivate us to strive in our daily experience to be what we are in our standing before God. We need it to produce joy in our lives when we encounter the inevitable trials of living in a fallen and sin-cursed world.

It is our prayer, then, that God will be pleased to use this book to help many believers think afresh and more deeply of the gospel so that they may rejoice in the good news of the gospel of Christ's great atonement, and that, above all, Christ may be glorified.

Christ's Atonement: The Apostles' Summary

Coming face-to-face with the resurrected Christ in the aftermath of the crucifixion, the apostles finally and clearly understood Jesus to be God incarnate, that is, God in the flesh. Jesus no doubt intended to impact these men with this truth when he declared to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (John 20:27–28).

This new understanding—Jesus is God—filled the apostles with wonder and delight. It became one of the foundations for their testimony to the atoning work of Christ. Later in their inspired writings where they describe the Lord’s work of redemption, the apostles always directly or implicitly ascribe to him a divine nature. For example, they speak of the Jews killing the Author of life (Acts 3:15) and of them crucifying the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8). The writer of the book of Hebrews describes the Son who made purification for sins as “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact

imprint of his nature” and showed that “he upholds the universe by the word of his power” (Heb. 1:3).

The deity of Christ in his atoning work is of paramount importance in understanding the gospel. In order for Jesus Christ to qualify as the atonement for the sins of the redeemed, he must be personally *perfect*—that is, holy, having lived a sinless life. In order to be perfect, Christ must be more than a mere man—he must be divine. God’s chosen mediator, Jesus Christ, is himself fully God (John 1:1, 18) and thus uniquely qualified to complete the work of redemption.

However, because man sinned, man must bear the penalty of sin, so in addition to being fully God, the mediator must also be fully man in order to bear the sin of man as their representative. Also, the mediator must be a man since the mediating act of atoning for sin requires a sacrificial death (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:22), and it is impossible for God to die. The apostles affirm that the eternal Son of God, who exists outside of the realm of time and who created the universe (Heb. 1:2b; John 1:1–3), allowed, accepted, and welcomed an infinite reduction in stature in order to become the incarnate Son of Man. Perhaps this can be seen most clearly where Paul states:

[Jesus Christ] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6–8)

Furthermore, the apostles explicitly assert that the incarnation took place in a single, historic person who became the *representative head* of the redeemed multitude who find their righteousness, justification, and sanctification in Christ as the Last Adam (Rom. 5:18–19). Paul writes, “Thus it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. . . . The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven” (1 Cor. 15:45, 47). Both the first Adam and the Last Adam were men. But the Last Adam is a man who came from heaven. His incarnation,

sinless life, and substitutionary death on the cross were inseparable steps toward accomplishing his unified purpose: conquering death and giving eternal life to those who are united to him by faith.

Jesus Christ is the God-man. He was “born of woman . . . to redeem man” (Gal. 4:4–5). He took on flesh and blood that “through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (Heb. 2:14b). He “appeared . . . to destroy the works of the devil” (1 John 3:8b). And he “came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15b). Much more than merely a sinless man, the Son of God, Jesus Christ, embodies the union of the two natures, possessing all-sufficient value and validity. Jesus Christ, the God-man, was, therefore, the perfect sacrifice.

The Legal Aspects of Christ’s Atonement

The apostles placed the death of Christ in a judicial context: God is the supreme judge of his creation, and his judicial actions always reflect his holiness and perfection. God is a God of justice—absolute justice. Therefore, he must by his very nature condemn and punish sin. He never deals with the due penalty of sin by sweeping it under the rug of the universe. With regard to sin, he never lowers the bar or turns a blind eye. If he did, he would become unjust and defiled—something that is unthinkable. In order to remain holy he must hold court, declare sinners guilty, and execute the sentence due, which is eternal condemnation and death for all mankind (Rom. 3:10–18).

But is this God of perfect justice not also a God of perfect love? Aren’t these two attributes of his in conflict? To deal with this judicial dilemma, God devised, initiated, and executed the perfect plan of judicial redemption. It is a plan that required atonement, a judiciously paid penalty. It is a plan that involved the cross:

And you, who were dead in your trespasses . . . God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. (Col. 2:13–14)

At the cross, forgiveness was achieved by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. What are these demands? They are the demands that the lawful penalty be actually and fully executed. What is the penalty? The penalty is the punishment that sinners rightly deserve—death. This penalty must be executed by a holy God. Yet, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). While we were still sinners, God nailed the record of our legal debt to the cross of Christ’s death.

Man’s sin was not a mere paper debt. It was not a hypothetical debt. It was an actual legal debt. It was Christ’s own flesh that was nailed to the cross, as he was made sin on our behalf (2 Cor. 5:21). Paying our legal debt cost Christ agonizing pain and separation from his Father as he bore the full force of God’s wrath against the offense of sin.

At the cross, Christ extinguished the wrath of God toward believing sinners by his own bloody death, thereby paying the full legal debt due by sinners. The result: with the penalty paid, the justice of God was forever satisfied, and sinners united to Christ have been justly forgiven (declared not guilty), and justified (declared righteous). In God’s plan of redemption, he remains just in forgiving sinners, since a qualified person actually paid the legal penalty required by the law. At the infinite cost of his Son’s life, God constructed the judicial solution in such a way that does not cause God to be defiled or believing sinners to be eternally condemned. Biblically speaking:

God put forward [Christ Jesus] as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (Rom. 3:25–26)

The death of Christ is the basis for the believer’s exemption from condemnation, the courtroom equivalent of acquittal, pardon, and

forgiveness. As Paul said, “Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died . . .” (Rom. 8:34).

Numerous other passages in the Bible describe God’s forgiveness, all of which presuppose atonement. One example of this is found in Ephesians where the apostle Paul argued, “In [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7). Here, Paul shows redemption and forgiveness to be a direct, objective benefit of the blood (death) of Christ.

In another example we are told, “[God] will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more” (Heb. 10:17). As can be seen in the context of Hebrews 10, the Judge chooses to remember sins no longer for a very specific reason—the sacrifice of Christ (vv. 10, 12, 14, 18–22). Because of Christ’s great atonement, our sin record is completely expunged forever!

It must be noted that the death of Christ bought more than a strictly legal settlement. The phrase *in Christ*, which appears seventy-three times in the New Testament, refers to a union with Christ in which the redeemed have one life with him, as truly as the head and the members of the same body have one life. This is a great, sacred, and glorious mystery, one to be further explored in chapter 7. But for now, let it suffice to say that none of this is possible apart from the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the perfect sacrifice.

Sadly, not everyone understands this requisite necessity for God to be just. Many picture him exclusively as absolute and unconditional *love*, thinking he will dismiss the legal demands that result from mankind’s sin on that basis alone. This approach is offensive to God because it demeans two of the other essential facets of his unfathomable nature—holiness and justice. In addition, to see God solely as *love* is to overlook the beauty and the purpose of the cross. For at the cross, the perfect holiness of God meets his perfect love in action. Worse, it is to belittle the costly price of Christ’s sacrifice. Neglecting the holiness of God and misunderstanding the vital significance of the cross is more than simply a theological error—it may have damning consequences, since apart from appropriating

Christ's great atonement, sinners must eternally bear the judicial penalty for their own sin.

The Cross: The Perfect Place for Curse Bearing

Today the cross has been romanticized and mythologized. In order for us to understand its significance, it must be placed back into its original, horrific context. History records that crucifixion incorporated a method resulting in the deepest possible humiliation and disgrace. It was the most scandalous and shameful of punishments, inflicted only on slaves. Free men could not be crucified until first being degraded into the category of a slave by the public application of servile stripes known as scourging, such as was done to Christ prior to nailing him to the cross.

Romans and Jews alike considered those executed by crucifixion to be cursed. To the Jews, a person suspended on a wooden cross had a special significance: it was a form of being hung on a tree, synonymous with being cursed by God for sin. This is clearly seen in the Old Testament:

If a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. (Deut. 21:22–23a)

To get a context for that passage, we must travel all the way back to the garden of Eden. In Genesis 3, the Bible reveals that sin originally entered the world by Adam's willful violation of God's commandment regarding the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil in the garden. As a result, mankind was placed under a trifold curse: separation from God (spiritual death), physical death, and pain in labor (in obtaining provision and in childbearing). Furthermore, all of Adam's descendents inherited both the penal consequences of his sin and a predisposition to sin personally, and, thus, these curses were diffused over the entire human race. Paul states this succinctly when he writes, "Therefore, just as sin came into

the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12).

The original sin and its resulting curse are associated with a tree, and so it is no coincidence that God’s plan for redeeming us from sin and curse would also involve a tree, the wooden cross. Could there ever be a more appropriate place for the sin-bearing and curse-bearing work of the atonement to take place? As Peter states in his epistle, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24a). There, on that tree, Christ bore our curse.

Christ became a curse, not because of the cross, but because God “made him to be sin” for our sake (2 Cor. 5:21). Thus, the cause of the curse was the sin with which he was charged. Hanging on the tree was simply the public display of the fact that he *became a curse*. Paul said it like this to the Galatians: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” (Gal. 3:13).

The punishment of God was just and fitting: the public and cursed death of a cursed man hung on a tree.

The Great Exchange: Trading Places with Christ

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. (2 Cor. 5:19)

The reconciliation of the relationship between God and sinners is a result of forgiveness and is seen in this verse as vitally connected with his *not counting*, or not imputing, Christians’ sins against them. The non-charging of sin to the believer, by charging, or imputing, it to Christ instead, demonstrates the first part of the Great Exchange. Paul develops this thought in the first part of 2 Corinthians 5:21, where he declares, “for our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin.” God did this. And he did it for our sake out of his infinite love. The sinless Christ was made to be sin, a demonstration of the very essence of imputation. Since Christ had no sin of his own, the only place from which sin could have originated was

man. Christ, in essence, assumed the sinner's identity; he became the Christian's sin substitute.

We see the second part of the Great Exchange in the latter half of the verse: "so that in [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21b). Once they are *in* Christ, sinners *become* the righteousness of God, because God credits (imputes) Christ's perfect righteousness to them. In the eyes of God, these sinners have fulfilled the requirement of the law because the Sinless One fulfilled the law on their behalf by his perfect life and obedient death on the cross; they are, in effect, clothed in Christ's righteousness (see the foreshadow of this in Isa. 61:10). In an overwhelming miracle of grace, in God's eyes these sinners have taken on Christ's identity—they are equally as righteous as Christ himself.

Thus, the Great Exchange that results from the death of the perfect sacrifice is a twofold substitution: the charging of the believer's sin to Christ results in God's forgiveness, and the crediting of Christ's righteousness to the believer results in his justification. More than being declared not guilty, in Christ believers are actually declared righteous. Redeemed sinners and their Christ have traded places.

This is a glorious transaction. If this is not the best news of all time, what is? Paul proclaims in Colossians, "You, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before [God]" (Col. 1:21–22). "Holy," "blameless," and "above reproach" are words that describe Christ's own righteousness—a righteousness in which the Christian is presented before God because of Christ's great atonement. As a result, God and redeemed sinners can enjoy each other in perfect unity.

The Centrality of the Cross

Once Christ illuminated the apostles as to the meaning of his atoning death for their own sins, they promptly gained an understanding of its application to all people for all time—past, present, and future. From that point on, the message of Christ's atonement became

preeminent in all their preaching, teaching, and writing, and the cross became emblematic of and synonymous with the atonement they taught.

The apostles triumphed and gloried in the cross; it became their confidence and their boast (Gal. 6:14). They could not live without it, and they were willing to die for it. The apostles were faithful to the message of the cross, and in so doing, they exposed themselves to hardships and danger, persecution and death. And yet they preached the cross, undeterred and undaunted, assured they were ordained to deliver this message, which was unspeakably dear to their souls.

The message of the atoning death of Christ for sin is the heart of their gospel and is forever to be the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Paul wrote:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. (1 Cor. 15:1–4)

The apostles' teaching shows that Christ's work of atonement colors the entire range of Scripture, Old and New Testament alike. All doctrine and practical application is drawn from the grace and truth that flow from it, which, moreover, is the central message of the entire Bible, since it forms the sole basis for sinful man's relationship with a holy God. The apostles exalt this message of the cross above all human wisdom as the central fact in all of the entire history of the world. It is the chief topic and essential truth from which they always start and to which they always return.

Furthermore, and of extreme significance to us, almost without exception the apostles address their New Testament writings to specific churches or groups of believers. We can conclude that the message of the atonement is for all believers, not just unbelievers or new believers. As Christians, we do not meet the Savior at the cross and then move past it or outgrow our need of it. The blessing

of a restored relationship with God does not become something we merit apart from the cross as we grow. All our blessings were blood bought. And the only hope of avoiding false doctrine and heresy, such as legalism (inadequate grace) or license to sin (abused grace), is to continually treasure the cross and the tremendous price of Christ's atonement.

In view of this, the church should beware whenever the moral code taught by Jesus, or the example of Jesus, is declared the essential Christian message. In such cases, the true central message of the Bible, the atoning death of Christ, may become diminished or even lost. While following the moral code may lead to outward obedience, it will never lead to true forgiveness of sin or a transformed life. It inevitably results in a shallow spirituality or worse—legalism, spiritual pride, and eventually burnout under the weight of law keeping and shipwreck of one's faith.

The Apostle Paul: Adamant about Christ's Atonement

[Christ Jesus] gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time. For this I was appointed a preacher and an apostle. (1 Tim. 2:6–7)

Here the apostle Paul declares the purpose of his preaching and apostleship—to testify to the world that Christ gave himself as a ransom. Elsewhere he summed up his preaching as “the word of the cross” (1 Cor. 1:18) and “Christ crucified” (1 Cor. 1:23a). Later in the same letter, he emphatically displays the epicenter of his message when he declares, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2).

In the epistle to the Galatians, the apostle Paul contends that the gospel is no gospel unless the full significance of the cross is kept central. He condemns the Judaizers, teachers who did not present the cross as the sole ground of acceptance before God but instead constrained the Galatians to observe the Law of Moses as a requirement for acceptance with God. In effect, they attempted to supplement the cross with circumcision and obedience to Mosaic law and

Jewish customs. The apostle vehemently attacked any suggestion that the basis of man's acceptance by God could ever be anything other than, or in addition to, the cross. He wrote:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:6–9)

Paul pronounces, with seriousness and repetition, a curse on anyone, including himself or any angelic being, who would attempt to distort or undermine the true gospel in which the atonement is the sole basis of redeemed sinners' position of acceptance before God.

Paul flatly rejects all semblances of legalism—the rites, the ceremonies, and the legal observances—on which these legalists based their pride and confidence. In the epistle to the Philippians, he denounces them with the remarkable words: “[They] walk as enemies of the cross of Christ” (Phil. 3:18b). They were enemies of the cross of Christ in the sense that they denied that salvation is available only by the bloody, substitutionary death of the sinless sin bearer. In addition, they were enemies of the cross in the sense that they devalue the atoning obedience of the Savior and instead exalted their own works as if those works had saving merit.

Furthermore, Paul repeatedly declares that the cross is his sole source of glory. He states, “Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14). And so it is clear that Paul personally and profoundly identifies with Christ's crucifixion. Furthermore, he reveals that a response of gratitude for Christ's love, as demonstrated at the cross, is the compelling motive for a justified sinner's subsequent obedience:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. (2 Cor. 5:14–15)

These words do not mean that the believer suddenly ceases sinning the moment his legal union to Christ by faith takes place. No justified sinner has ever immediately become experientially sin-free. The cross is not a mere first step toward spiritual development; it is the all-encompassing foundation for Christian growth. The cross does not mystically infuse spiritual life or experiential sinlessness. Instead, it first provides complete forgiveness of past, present, and future sins, and then it becomes a means of the deliverance by which we are freed from bondage to sin. As Paul affirms, “[Christ] gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age” (Gal. 1:4a).

By tying the transformation of the believer to the cross, Paul makes his point abundantly clear: everything we need for life and eternity is provided by virtue of Christ's great atonement. Furthermore, in everything God is for us; he is for us *in Christ* wisdom instead of ignorance, justification instead of condemnation, sanctification instead of sinfulness, and redemption instead of slavery. “[God] is the source of [our] life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). In view of this, it is no wonder Paul is adamant and unwavering regarding the centrality of the cross of Christ. The fulfillment of every hope we have is blood bought by the atoning work of Christ on the cross. And the work of Christ on the cross must remain our only hope.

The Cross: A Stumbling Block to Jews, Foolishness to Gentiles

As the apostles preached this message of the atonement after receiving the Holy Spirit, their good news of the cross was in perpetual collision with Jewish arrogance and legalism, as well as with Gentile pride and philosophical wisdom. The apostles preached “Christ

crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23).

What was the essence of the Jewish stumbling? It was the fact of grace, righteousness gained by faith in the atoning work of Christ, not self-willed or self-meritorious law keeping. Paul states it like this:

Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works. They have stumbled over the stumbling stone, as it is written, “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense; and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” (Rom. 9:31–33)

The cross required the Jews to acknowledge their personal sinfulness, helplessness, and need for reconciliation. It summoned them to reject their perceived personal merit and self-justification and to accept the righteousness of the suffering Messiah. This was humbling to the Jews; their pride became an obstacle to faith in Christ crucified and deterred them from participating in the Great Exchange.

To the Gentiles, on the other hand, the message of the cross was foolishness because it was devoid of man-centered, philosophical rhetoric. The gospel is so simple a child can understand it; there is no pride in understanding its message or articulating its complexities. No self-satisfaction can be gained from mastering its meaning. But the Gentiles prided themselves in their ability to invent schemes of reality. The gospel, presented as God’s design, not man’s, did not appeal to the natural inclinations of the ancient Gentile mind.

In all probability, the cross would not have been offensive to the Gentiles if the apostles had explained it as merely evidence of the *sincerity* of Jesus, demonstrating that he was willing to die for his beliefs. The Gentiles certainly would have perceived the cross as adding validity to Jesus’ argument and to his teachings, as in the case of Socrates and other philosopher-martyrs. But this was not the apostles’ message.

Amazingly enough, although Jewish and Gentile oppression was frequently severe, the apostles never lost confidence or felt shame.

Instead, they confidently boasted in the cross as the power of God and the wisdom of God, with its impact infinitely beyond all the resources of human law keeping or wisdom. Paul writes, "But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor. 1:23–24).

The stumbling block of the cross cannot be removed by the notion that Jesus was a philosopher, an occupation in which sufferings incur no disgrace. Nor can it be removed by portraying him as the founder of a rational religion taking the place of a ritualistic one. The offense is removed when the personal presence of sin and its consequence is acknowledged; when the God-appointed Sin Bearer is believed and treasured, and when his atoning suffering and death on behalf of undeserving sinners is embraced, resulting in forgiveness, redemption, imputed righteousness, and reconciliation. Only then can the stumbling be removed. Then, and only then, will glorying in the cross begin. Then will we, the redeemed, boldly proclaim with the apostle, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Rom. 1:16).

Galatians

The apostle Paul visited Galatia on two occasions. While there he preached the atonement, publicly portraying Jesus Christ as crucified (Gal. 3:1b). Within a short time after his second visit, a false and dangerous doctrine, legalism, began to gain a foothold, which asserted that our acceptance by God was dependent on observing certain Jewish rites and that participation in these ceremonies was necessary for the Christian to acquire righteousness.

Legalism occurs wherever a sinner attempts to earn God's favor by his or her personal righteousness instead of by Christ's transferred righteousness. Legalism demeans the value of Christ's work of atonement by requiring sinners to perform activities that are man-centered and, in essence, man-exalting. Even subtle, unspoken legalism sets forth a course that inevitably leads to spiritual pride and eventual defeat under the weight of unsuccessfully attempted law keeping. Paul reacted against all forms of legalism with force and focus, calling for those who teach such lies to "be accursed" (Gal. 1:8-9) and even wishing that those who were unsettling the Galatian Christians would "emasculate themselves" (Gal. 5:12). This is strong language. But such attacks by Paul do not seem shocking when we pause to consider what is at stake. By substituting man-

centered performance as the basis for acquiring righteousness, the very essence and foundation of redemptive truth is compromised.

In this epistle, Paul shows that the atonement is the sole basis of man's forgiveness, righteousness, and acceptance by God—nothing can or should be added.

Galatians 1:4–5

[Christ] gave himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (Gal. 1:4–5)

Nobody took Christ's life from him without his consent. Instead, he "gave himself for us." No one could have taken Christ's life if he had not presented himself as a voluntary sacrifice. Not the Jews or Pilate or the Romans or the crowds. Jesus made his willingness clear when he stated, "I lay down my life. . . . No one takes it from me" (John 10:17–18). He went to Jerusalem at the proper time for that very purpose. Before then no one could lay a hand on him, though many times they wanted to kill him for what he said or did (Luke 4:29–30). Even at his arrest in the garden of Gethsemane he could have saved himself by appealing to his Father with a single word (Matt. 26:53).

Clearly, Jesus' sacrifice was voluntary, in compliance with "the will of our God and Father." In the *giving*, Jesus provided the priestly action. In the giving of *himself*, Jesus provided the actual sacrifice. So Christ is the sacrificer and the victim in one. He is the priest of his self-sacrifice.

We must also take note that the sins mentioned here were not merely the sins of those who physically drove the nails into his innocent hands. These were our sins, as well. Therefore, you and I are personally culpable for his death. Death is always required as the payment for sin (Rom. 6:23a); the case of the sinless Christ was no exception. Our sin killed him, and no amount of fixing or patching ourselves up can change that fact. Our best personal righteousness is at best incomplete and therefore completely insufficient. Even if

we never commit another sin as long as we live, the fact remains that our sin still killed him.

But there's good news. If Christ died for our sins as our representative, it follows that we are no longer required to die for our own sins. God does not punish the same sin twice. Because the justice of God was already satisfied on our behalf, there no longer remains any wrath, punishment, or death for us. Because of his death, we are no longer culpable for our sin. His death exculpated us; it freed us from the just accusation of our guilt because all-sufficient justice was served on the cross. Thus we are forever exonerated, acquitted, and declared not guilty.

And there's even more good news. The Lord Jesus Christ not only gave himself for our sins, but he also gave himself to deliver us from the present evil age—to set us free from our enslavement to the evil forces in today's world. In other words, Christ's death sets us apart for the process of transformation into Christlikeness. Not only did Christ's death accomplish our acceptance with God, it also launched the progressive renovation of our natures, the process of sanctification.

The order of the events here deserves notice. We sinners, previously dead in trespasses and sins are *made alive* together with Christ (Eph. 2:5) by the unilateral act of the Holy Spirit known as regeneration. Receiving and applying the gift of faith is the very first action in which we participate in our new life. In it we are united to Christ by participating in his redemptive work as our legal representative, resulting in our *justification*. Only after this legal union with Christ is established does the process of *sanctification* begin, as we are provided with ongoing access to the power of the Holy Spirit. In this living union we are progressively released from the forces that previously bound us to doing evil. So justification always precedes sanctification.

All of this is based on grace made ours through the atoning death of Christ. And because it is based not on man but on God, we do not get the glory; he does. As Galatians 1:5 declares, "To [God] be the glory forever and ever. Amen."

Galatians 2:20–21

I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. (Gal. 2:20–21)

Underlying Paul's words in this passage is his rebuke of the apostle Peter, who feared that the legalists would condemn him for eating with believers who hadn't been circumcised (vv. 11–14). Paul exposes Peter's hypocrisy, pointing out that Peter's actions were motivated by fear of the circumcision party. The circumcision party were legalists, teaching that Christ's work on the cross was insufficient for salvation. What was needed, they said, was Christ and the ceremonial rite of circumcision. In the wake of this, Paul states:

A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Gal. 2:16)

Paul adds, "Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God" (v. 19). Any and all hope of our being justified by our personal performance of works of obedience must first be put to death before we can *live to God*. We must embrace Christ as our perfect Savior and our all-sufficient righteousness. This puts our dependency on self-righteousness to death so that, like Paul, we can say, "I have been crucified with Christ."

We are crucified with Christ when we deny our self-sufficiency and declare it to be dead and thus unable to save us, embracing Christ instead as our only hope and representative before the holy Judge. In union with him through his death, we died to the guilt of our sin and to enslaving power of sin over us, just as if we had actually died. In addition, our futile attempts at self-justification are killed as well.

In order to understand the nature of the way our union with Christ works in this co-crucifixion, we must recall the way God designed

the entire human race. In Adam, one acted on behalf of all, and so all are born into sin and its consequences. In the same manner, one representative man—the God-man—obeyed on behalf of his redeemed and died in their place (Rom. 5:12–20). Therefore, God the Father views the entire redeemed church as if it were hanging on the cross with him.

In addition, we also share in his reward, so along with Paul we can say, “Christ lives in me.” Paul, having just described our death in union with Christ, in the same breath describes our new life—a life attained by virtue of our union with Christ. Our death in him and our life in him are inseparable, just as Christ’s death and life are inseparable, because we are one with him as our representative in both conditions. Christ is the source of our life—not just of our mortal, created, physical life, but also of our eternal, regenerated, spiritual life. Just as the union of soul and body sustains natural life, the union of the sinner’s soul with the broken and resurrected Christ sustains spiritual, eternal life. The crucified and living Christ lives in me. This is the meaning of the living union between Christ and us.

This new life in Christ differs from our natural life in Adam in that it is never ending. It is secured forever, based on permanently satisfied justice that resulted from the finished, atoning work of Christ. The authority of God himself, by his own unchangeable plan and covenant, guarantees it.

This new life in Christ is similar to our natural life in Adam in that our experience of its reality occurs through the activity of the senses. That is to say, those who possess this new life “hear the voice of the Son of God” (John 5:25), they have eyes enlightened to the hope and calling of a rich and glorious inheritance (Eph. 1:18), and they taste that the Lord is good (1 Pet. 2:3). In spite of maintaining their distinct, individual identity and personality, believers live as active members of Christ’s own body. Paul revealed this truth to the Corinthians when he said, “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it” (1 Cor. 12:27).

Just as the fact of natural life is evidenced by physical growth, the spiritual life is evidenced by growth as well in “holding fast to

the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together through its joints and ligaments, grows with a growth that is from God” (Col. 2:19). All of those made spiritually alive by union with Christ will inevitably demonstrate it by growing in Christlikeness, and “the fruit of the Spirit” will be evidenced: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22–23).

However, the opposite is true as well. Where there is no growth, no fruit bearing, there is no evidence of the presence of the life that comes from union with Christ. In a profound statement to his disciples of the subject of union with himself, Jesus told the disciples:

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:4–5)

The union between Christ and his redeemed is reciprocal: he is “in you” (Col. 1:27; John 14:20; 2 Cor. 13:5), and, in passages too numerous to cite here, we are “in him.” This union, this mutual abiding, is complete and inseparable, and at times our awareness of it is such that we cannot discern where one entity ends and the other begins, so that we exclaim, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me.” As our awareness of the fact of our union with Christ grows, we find the essence of abiding in Christ. We become increasingly satisfied with all that God is for us in Christ Jesus. Here he becomes our sole treasure and delight and desire as all others fade by comparison. Here we rejoice in exalting his glory. This is the essence of true worship. This is the essence of heaven on earth. At times like these, “we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling” (2 Cor. 5:2) where we will be finally and completely at home with him forever.

All of this is dependent on the Great Exchange. If the Son had not intervened for us by offering his perfect obedience on our be-

half and by becoming a perfect atoning sacrifice for our sin, this life could never have been bestowed on us sinners—even if we had committed only a single sin.

Paul repeatedly expressed the sentiments of a justified man glorying in an ongoing sense of acceptance and experience of grace. Our justification is not merely a single event in our past; we stand in the present reality of the righteousness of Christ every minute of every day. Paul continually sought to “be found in him, not having a righteousness of [his] own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:9).

Those in authentic legal union with Christ are irreversibly clothed in the righteousness of Christ in which they stand before a holy God. The faith that initially connected them to Christ for justification continues. They now live in his perfect, transferred righteousness, and at no time do they revert to depending on their own merit or goodness to gain God’s blessing.

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into *this grace in which we stand*, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. (Rom. 5:1–2)

Safely in Christ, we need not fear the wrath we deserve any longer; because of the atoning work of our all-sufficient wrath bearer, we are personally known, loved, and redeemed. The significance of this statement is impossible to overstate. It overshadows everything pertaining to us.

It is worth noting how significant it is that the verbs *love* and *give* are written in the past tense (Gal. 2:20). Christ’s great atonement is a *fait accompli*, a finished work. It is fixed in history; it can never be undone. It culminated on the cross.

What is Paul’s response to Christ loving him as a sinful wretch? Paul considered himself co-crucified with Christ and co-resurrected to “live by faith in the Son of God.” If we are called to the same Shepherd, we are also called to the same response.

Paul turns to identify a sure way we can nullify this great grace of God. It is by failing to grasp the application of it to our lives. We fail to live in grace if we believe and trust that we are justified based on our personal obedience and live as if we can work our way to God by our performance. But the all-encompassing truth is that “none is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10). No one will stand on their own merit before the infinitely holy God of the universe. All who would be saved must trust the work of Christ alone.

As we saw in the case of Peter refusing to eat with the Gentile believers, it is absurd to claim that the observance of the law is required as a supplement to Christ’s atonement, and that his death alone is not adequate by itself to save redeemed sinners. This lie was precisely the one to which the Galatians were falling prey. But how can an imperfect, personal obedience play any role in supplementing the reconciliation between a relatively good sinner and a perfectly holy God whose curse and wrath is upon the committer of a single sin? Any level of personal righteousness falls drastically short. Its perceived ability to reconcile is a fatal illusion, because often our sin is not even known to our deceptive and self-justifying hearts. We dare not trust in any righteousness apart from Christ’s atonement. Paul didn’t; he boasted only in the cross. We are deceiving ourselves if we think that our lives could in any way add any merit to the work of Christ. Furthermore, it is to demean the value of both his sacrifice and the new covenant. Is this not the preempting of God’s Word, his plan, and his Christ? Is this not a form of blasphemy—an elevating of man to God’s level? Is this not in itself the worst of sins? Our justification must stand completely on his work, not our own.

Paul’s argument leads to a logical conclusion: if justification were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose. But the Son of God would not have died without a purpose—it would be inconceivable. Instead, the mission of Christ had the grandest purpose of all time: his incarnation and death ushered in an eternally perfect righteousness for sinners based on the transfer of his own obedience, a perfect obedience to the point of death, even death on a cross

(Phil. 2:8). This is the gospel of Jesus Christ; this is the message of God's Word and Spirit. Therefore, Paul challenges the Galatians with strong words to set aside the illogical notion that this perfect plan is lacking in any way, or that they can add to its effectiveness by human effort. Just a few verses later, he confronts them with a stinging question, a question we should ask ourselves often: "Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?" (Gal. 3:2–3).

Galatians 3:10, 13–14a

For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them." . . . Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles. (Gal. 3:10, 13–14a)

This passage in Galatians 3 bears a strong resemblance to 2 Corinthians 5:21, where Paul describes the transfer of our sin to Christ as our sin bearer: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin." Here in Galatians Paul describes Christ as curse bearer, the one that took away our curse, because he had taken on our sin that had placed us "under a curse."

God's curse extends far beyond the mere civil punishments inflicted by human judiciaries on law breakers. This curse refers to the consequences inflicted by God for disobeying his law:

But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. (Deut. 28:15)

Multiple layers of the consequences of being under God's curse are spelled out in detail in the verses that follow (Deut. 28:16–68). A fresh reading of this passage will shock and awe anyone who is aware of his or her own failure to perfectly obey. Careful meditation over

this passage should immediately result in tremendous gratitude for Christ's work of curse bearing.

Adam and Eve were also subjected to a multifaceted curse for their single sin. It culminated in their banishment from God's presence in the garden of Eden (Gen. 3:23–24). Accordingly, for us, being cursed by God includes being subjected to God's pronouncement that "your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear" (Isa. 59:2).

God's curse applies to "everyone who does not abide by *all* things written in the Book of the Law" (Gal. 3:10b). Therefore, a single sin is an affront to a holy God and cannot and will not be overlooked by him. It is in no way acceptable, no matter how picayune. A person who has committed a single sin is a sinner. A sinner who is "relatively good" is still a sinner. There are no exceptions. As James said, "Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it" (James 2:10).

Does this exclude the Galatians because they were Gentiles and not Jews? Certainly not, because:

When Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of *the law is written on their hearts*, while their conscience also bears witness. (Rom. 2:14–15a)

And:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. *So they are without excuse.* (Rom. 1:18–20)

So, apart from Christ, Jew and Gentile alike are equally under God's curse and subject to his wrath. There are no exceptions.

The fact that Jesus actually bore the full weight and fury of our curse is quite apparent in the most agonizing aspect of his suffering when “at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Mark 15:34). Though many have gone to great length to display the intense physical agony, torture, and bloody scourging that Christ underwent for our sake, none of these constitute the most dreadful part of his suffering. The total separation from the Father was the vortex of his curse bearing.

Separation from the Father was something the Son had never experienced in all of eternity past. Even after his incarnation as a human, Jesus never experienced an inkling of separation from the Father. He enjoyed unbroken personal fellowship. As he told his disciples of the Father, “He who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him” (John 8:29).

The curse necessitated separation; God could not simply overlook this part of the curse any more than he can overlook the separation of the eternal death that his just condemnation will bestow on all sinners who die outside of Christ’s representation as curse bearer.

Galatians 4:4–5

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. (Gal. 4:4–5)

Whereas redemption from the curse of the law was the subject of Galatians 3:13, this passage (Gal. 4:4–5) describes our redemption from the law itself. The process that secured our multi-faceted redemption began the day Christ started bearing our sin, that is, the day Jesus was conceived—an event planned before the creation of the world. God determined to send Christ to redeem us at the precise moment in human history when the fullness of time had come.

The timing of the central event in human history encompasses much mystery, much that is outside our realm and ability to grasp,

because it goes beyond us to the infinite mind of God. However, as we noted earlier, the prophecies and foreshadows of the Old Testament offer indicators for recognizing God's perfect timing in providing the Redeemer and the ushering in of the new covenant.

Another aspect of "the fullness" was the fact that sufficient time had been provided to prove that all man-made schemes for reconciling sinners with God had failed—art and education, culture and civilization, even the law itself. All such attempts fell far short of removing man's guilt and restoring friendship and intimacy with God.

Jesus made it clear that "the Father consecrated and sent [Him] into the world" (John 10:36). The fact that God *sent* him indicates that the Son existed prior to his incarnation in Bethlehem's manger. Where was Jesus sent from, if not God's very presence? The clear implication here, then, is that Jesus is of divine origin (Heb. 1:1–3; John 1:1–3). Jesus was God's Son before he was Mary's son. There is no one like him; he is the God-sent God-man.

Paul states that the Son was "born of woman" (Gal. 4:4). No mention is made of a human father here, which is an allusion to the virgin birth of Christ. The immaculate conception of Jesus is yet another aspect of the uniqueness of the Redeemer's identity and qualification. The Son's humanity was not directly imparted to him by God. To share fully in our nature, it had to be derived as ours is—from a human mother. This is a vital element of the atonement. Without Christ's humanity, he would have no natural or legal relation to us or union with us, and he could not be our representative.

There is, however, a vital difference between Christ's humanity and ours—he is not personally represented in Adam. As a result, he was not born with a sin nature. Instead, Christ is the Last Adam, i.e., the last representative man (1 Cor. 15:45). Since Christ was personally exempt from receiving Adam's imputed sin, he became qualified and available to receive our sin.

In a stunning display of the redemptive power of the God-man's sanctifying blood shed on behalf of the redeemed sinners he repre-

sents, we are told, “He is not ashamed to call them brothers” (Heb. 2:11b). He thus became our kinsman-redeemer. Think of that! He shamelessly calls us, known sinners, his own brothers. No man ever imagined achieving a higher privilege, or one less deserved.

The fact that Christ had to be “born under the law” indicates that prior to his birth he was not under the law. Christ’s existence prior to the incarnation was fully above the law’s authority. He had no personal obligation to obey the law because, in triune union with the Maker of the law, he was above it. The law did not have authority over the Son; the Son had authority over the law. He placed himself under the law both voluntarily and at the direction of the Father (Phil. 2:6–8) in order to become the true substitute for the law-breaking sinners he came to redeem.

And ultimately he did it “so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal. 4:5). The final outcome of the eternal plan is this: we are adopted into the very family of God. We are no longer cursed outsiders. We are no longer enemies. We are made more than friends. We find ourselves ushered into a new standing as adopted sons and daughters. We find ourselves to have an adoptive Brother, the “firstborn among many brothers” (Rom. 8:29), the very One who:

is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. (Col. 1:15–18)

In this Great Exchange, we find ourselves arriving at God himself, adopted “through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:5–6). And because we “are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal. 4:6) in an intimate expression of this new blood-bought relationship. Far from being slaves, we are now God-esteemed sons of God and Christ-esteemed brothers of Christ. And as if this were not more

than enough, Paul points out the inconceivable fact that, if we are sons, then we are also heirs through God (v. 7). What can this inheritance possibly mean? What blessing can be excluded? What a reward, what grace, what a God, what a Christ, what a gospel!

Galatians 6:14

But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. (Gal. 6:14)

Paul had many of the qualifications in which men of the day would have taken pride. He states:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness, under the law blameless. (Phil. 3:4b–6)

But Paul forsakes all this and counts “everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus” (v. 8). Why does Paul take this radical step? Why does he hold this astonishing view? He tells the Philippians, “I count everything as loss . . . in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:8–9).

In striking contrast to the error of the Galatians, who prided themselves in circumcision and other rites, ceremonies, and legal observances, Paul puts forth a single claim—Christ crucified. Recognizing the cross as the sole basis of his acceptance by the Father, he discards any allusions to supplemental offerings and “excludes” all personal boasting (Rom. 3:27).

However, Paul *does* glory in something; he glories in his participation in the cross. He implies that this type of boasting is one in which the Christian can never overindulge. We are to glory in the

cross as the source of our blood-bought forgiveness, righteousness, redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, and adoption. This is the only form of boasting that rids man of pride and self-aggrandizement and glorifies Jesus Christ and God the Father. This should be the continual boast of our heart and mouth.

By declaring the cross to be the instrument “by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14), Paul removes all doubt that the cross will ever become a source of self-exaltation or self-promotion in the eyes of the world. Instead, those who participate in the blessings of the atonement also participate in a twofold crucifixion in which their connection with the world is terminated.

“The world has been crucified to me” denotes that we now see the world as if it were a crucified person—disgusting, unwelcome, and undesirable. Both the allure of the world and our tendency to claim relative legal righteousness in it are nailed to the cross. Neither has any greater influence over us than a cursed and crucified corpse can have.

On the other hand, Paul’s expression “. . . and I to the world” denotes that we now see ourselves as if we were crucified people, dead to the world because another has won it over. Our tastes and desires for the world are to be as dead as those of a crucified man. No longer do we live for the world and its pleasures (James 4:4). No longer do we seek from it fame or fortune. Like dead men, we have lost our attachment to the world—it has become alien to us, no longer our home.

May we someday, by God’s grace, sooner rather than later, be transformed into the image of Christ. May we say wholeheartedly with Paul, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21), and, “If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom. 14:8). This is the approach we will have to the world when Christ has captured our very hearts and minds.

However, being crucified to the world should not shut us off from its people. In practical terms, and in view of the fact that we remain “in the world” (John 17:11), we are called by Christ to take

this gospel of hope to the world (Matt. 28:18–20). We also must not hate the people of the world (Rom. 12:20), although the world will certainly at times hate us (John 15:19). The animosity that we receive should not dim our enthusiasm to take the glorious message of the cross to the world. Knowing that Christ will be with us (John 17:24), and that his message will have glorious effect on all those he has called (John 10:26–29), we can rejoice in the kingdom work Christ has given us to do as we live and die to the glory of God.

1 Peter

Although the apostle Peter denied the Lord on the eve of his crucifixion, he was privileged to preach the first evangelistic sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14–41). It was through Peter that the door for the Gentiles to receive the gospel was opened in the home of the Roman centurion named Cornelius (see Acts 10). Peter is known as the apostle of hope the way John is known as the apostle of love. As we will see, this designation comes across in his letters, where the atonement is presented as hope-giving deliverance from both the consequences of sin and slavery to sin.

Peter presents the gospel in the light of its fulfillment of messianic prophecy (e.g., see 1 Pet. 1:10–12; 2 Pet. 1:19–21), and also in terms of his direct contact with Christ. Peter describes himself as “a witness of the sufferings of Christ” (1 Peter 5:1) and an “eyewitness of his majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16). He blended these together—fulfilled prophecy and personal testimony—in a most cohesive and poignant way when he described his firsthand experience of Christ’s fulfillment of Isaiah 53:4–11:

He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did

not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls. (1 Pet. 2:22–25)

So it is with unquestionable authority that the apostle Peter sets out in this epistle to strengthen the church by describing its hope in terms of the blood of Christ's great atonement.

1 Peter 1:2

According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you. (1 Pet. 1:2)

Peter addresses his epistle to “those who are elect” (v. 1). Certainly, as the one who created time and exists outside the boundaries of time, God the Father knew the individual identity of all of his elect before the world began. This is in precise agreement with Paul, who said, “[God the Father] chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (Eph. 1:4).

Peter goes on to say that the elect are “in the sanctification of the Spirit” (1 Pet. 1:2). By this he refers to definitive sanctification—the separation of the elect from the rest of the people to become his own people. The expression “for obedience to Jesus Christ” refers to the obedience of faith, as we have described elsewhere. We make these assertions because of the immediate reference to “sprinkling with his blood.” What Peter is telling us here is amazing: believers are “elect . . . by God the Father” to be set apart, to believe, and to be atoned for.

The expression “sprinkling with his blood” is reminiscent of the sacrificial language foreshadowed in the old covenant. It is the language of atonement, the language of transferred guilt, the language of substitution. The blood of Christ, indicative of his atoning sacrificial death, is sprinkled on behalf of those he represents.

They are connected to him by the obedience of faith, set apart by the Spirit as his own, and elect by the foreknowledge of God the Father. How much more secure can a believer be?

Incredibly, though, there is yet another anchor. This “sprinkling with his blood” is attached to a covenant, an irrevocable promise of God. Christ himself both initiated and commemorated this at the Lord’s Supper, saying, “Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:27b–28).

It is remarkable then, in light of all this blessing, that Peter would close his salutation by asking for even more by adding, “May grace and peace be multiplied to you.” This reflects the fact that Peter knew that the fountain of God’s grace is inexhaustible.

1 Peter 1:18–20a

Knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot. He was foreknown before the foundation of the world. (1 Pet. 1:18–20a)

Given that Jewish Christians constituted Peter’s audience, it is not surprising that he alludes to old covenant imagery. Here he recalls the census which Moses took after the exodus from Egypt:

The LORD said to Moses, “When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a *ransom* for his life to the LORD when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them.” (Ex. 30:11–12)

Each person “twenty years old and upward” was required to pay this ransom in the amount of a “half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary,” a weight in silver of about half an ounce. Interestingly, this ransom is also referred to as an “offering to make atonement for your lives,” thus equating the meaning of the word *ransom* with the words *offering* and *sacrifice* (Ex. 30:13–15). This passage sheds

light on Peter's comparison of Christ's ransom of "precious blood" with the foreshadowed ransom of "perishable things such as silver or gold." Peter's use of the word *ransom* also reminded his readers of Christ's statement to his disciples: "The Son of Man came . . . to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

In Peter's day, the word *ransom* had a different meaning from the one we have today, as we noted earlier. Back then it was always used in connection with slaves or prisoners of war—a ransom was the price paid to deliver them from captivity to freedom. Thus a redeemed individual was a former captive who had been set free by the payment of a ransom. To ransom is to redeem. Concisely stated, Christ gave his perfect human life and his perfect sacrificial death as a ransom, that is, as a payment made by him to God on our behalf, to free us from the debt we owed to God because of our sin, thus delivering us from the consequences of sin, namely, eternal death.

While this payment began upon our redeemer's incarnation and proceeded throughout his sinless life, the final installment of our ransom was paid upon his death on the cross. Just as a slave was set free only when the ransom was accepted by the owner, likewise, in the court of heaven Christ's redeemed were set free from condemnation and punishment only when the blood of Christ was accepted by God as payment in full on their behalf.

There can be no other way with a holy God. Either he forfeits his holiness and becomes defiled by letting unredeemed sinners go free without a just payment, or an adequate ransom price is paid on our behalf by a qualified representative. Therefore, God must sacrifice his holiness or his Son. And sacrificing his holiness was never an option.

Those who make a metaphor of the ransom by asserting that the cross is merely an example to follow or an idea to emulate deny and demean the holiness of God. In addition, they degrade and devalue the historical incarnation, suffering, and death of Christ. Metaphors are metaphors. Blood is blood. Furthermore, to hold to the teachings of Christ and yet refute his numerous public claims

about the significance of his bloody death is to hold to the teachings of a liar. Both of these approaches must be dismissed as repugnant and utter nonsense.

Instead, we hold to the truth revealed in God's Word, which is that a real ransom was paid to secure a real redemption. We have shown that there was an additional subjective component, the cleansing of guilt from our consciences, but that couldn't occur without the solid basis of a real and appropriate payment of a tangible ransom by a qualified redeemer. As priest of his own sacrifice, Christ was both redeemer and ransom. There is no biblical basis for unconditional, unpurchased pardon.

The words ransom and sacrifice are closely related. Both remove penalty—one with money, the other with blood. Both represent a price paid to satisfy the demands of justice and in order to redeem offenders. Thus both are forms of atonement. So it is easy to see the crossover from a money-based ransom to a blood-based ransom. And as Peter will soon explain, this blood is more costly than an infinite amount of silver or gold. Suffice it to say that Christ's substitutionary death can be viewed as both a ransom and a sacrifice. By it, as cause and effect, he accomplished his great atonement and our redemption.

In addition to redeeming us from the price we owed God because of our sin, the precious blood of Christ also ransomed us "from the futile ways inherited from our forefathers" (1 Pet. 1:18). The expression "futile ways" refers to the system of animal sacrifice that the Jewish forefathers depended upon, a system that failed to atone permanently for any kind of sin and failed to atone ever for moral sin. For us today, "futile ways" refers to anything inherited from our forefathers that leads us along a path of attempting to supply our own righteousness rather than to depend upon the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

The fact that we are ransomed means that our old ways will necessarily change. We become the property of the one who redeemed us. We have a new master—Christ. We can never be the same once our lives are touched by his precious redeeming blood. Because

once we are made holy by virtue of our union with the Holy One, we enter into the process of becoming in practice what we already are—holy in him.

Peter writes, “If you call on him as Father who judges impartially according to each one’s deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers” (1 Pet. 1:17–18a). Futility. That describes everything that is not connected to Christ’s great atonement: the pursuit of our own righteousness in an attempt to satisfy God’s justice by our performance, manmade doctrine designed to make us feel self-sufficient or self-justified, the pursuit of a personal agenda designed to maximize pleasure and minimize pain, the overly busy lifestyle preoccupied with temporal pursuits, and the empty lifestyle lost in the purposeless passing of time. All of that fails to see and savor God as the all-surpassing treasure and fails to live in view of our dependency on him. All this is futility.

But Christ offers us redemption from all of these dead-end rabbit trails, false treasures, and broken cisterns that will never satisfy. Redemption—we desperately need it. Money can’t buy it, for the redemption we need is far too costly to be obtained in return for “perishable things like silver or gold” (1 Pet. 1:18). We need a lasting redemption, an eternal redemption. God named the price. And God provided the payment in Christ. What else could ransom us if not the eternally valid substitutionary obedience and sacrificial death of Christ, whom God then raised “from the dead” and “gave . . . glory so that [our] faith and hope are in God” (1 Pet. 1:21) and not in our futile ways? Peter describes the blood of Christ as “precious” (v. 19). The value of sacrificial blood is determined by the value of the being that shed it—in this case a Person of infinite value because of who he is—none other than the God-man, Christ himself.

Peter began this epistle by stating that believers are “elect . . . according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” (1 Peter 1:1–2). Likewise, Christ himself was “foreknown before the foundation of the world.” Peter’s first official sermon on the Day of Pentecost indicated the same. Then and there Peter declared to the Jews:

This Jesus, delivered up *according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God*, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it. (Acts 2:23–24)

Here we see yet another reason the blood of Christ has infinite value. Christ and his blood were in the mind and plans of God when he created the world through Christ. No other person is like him; no other blood is like his.

1 Peter 2:24

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Pet. 2:24)

The context of this verse shows Peter's instructions to Christian slaves who were suffering ill-treatment and injustice at the hands of their masters. Peter taught, "For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps" (1 Pet. 2:21). But lest his readers misunderstand the purpose of Christ's suffering as one limited to simply providing an example for them to follow, he directs their attention to the ultimate reason Christ's body hung on a cross—his role as sin bearer.

"He . . . bore our sins in his body" (v. 24) conveys the imagery of our sins as a heavy load or burden applied to the body of Jesus. This imagery would have resonated with Christian slaves who knew what it was like to strain under overwhelming amounts of weight. Slaves encountered an inner struggle as well as a physical one. Likewise, the word *body* constitutes all that was encompassed by Christ's entire human personhood—both body and soul.

It was "on the tree" that Christ's sin-bearing, sacrificial death took place. All sacrifices are made by priests, and in this case, the priest was Christ himself. As the priest of his own sacrifice, Christ transferred our sin to the Lamb (himself) and carried the sin-bearing Lamb to the altar (the cross) where the Lamb was slain. Oh, what a

tree, what a precious tree indeed, because it was there the precious atoning blood was shed.

And it was shed on that tree in order that “we might die to sin and live to righteousness.”

When Peter states that Christ “bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness,” he demonstrates that our progressive sanctification is the eventual goal or purpose for which Christ bore our sins in the atonement. The atonement purchased a path on which every true believer experiences growth in personal obedience. The process of progressing along that blood-bought path is woven into the very fabric of God’s plan of redemption. It can never be separated from the other great blessings of the atonement, blessings such as justification, forgiveness, eternal life, and faith. None of these blessings stands alone. And as we will be reminded in the next section, there is one ultimate goal of all these blessings: God himself.

“By his wounds you have been healed” is a clear reference to Isaiah 53:5b. In fact, 1 Peter 2:22–25 shows how Christ fulfilled the multifaceted and detailed messianic prophesy of Isaiah 53. Peter offers this reference to prophecy as a proof that Jesus was indeed the sinless sin bearer (Isa. 53:4–6, 8–9b, 11b–12).

1 Peter 3:18

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit. (1 Pet. 3:18)

The context surrounding this key verse on the atonement is a discussion of Christian suffering as a result of persecution (vv. 14, 17). But here Peter shows that the cause of Christ’s suffering was not persecution but rather suffering “for sins.” Christ “suffered” the punishment of our sins, which culminated in his death. It was because of our sins that Christ suffered and died. The sin that we sometimes regard so flippantly and indifferently actually sent Christ to the cross. Oh, that we might remember this the next time we

contemplate giving in to temptation, and instead may we reach out to him for strength to do battle.

Once again we see that Christ did not die simply as a metaphorical example for us to follow. If he did, the expression “Christ . . . suffered . . . for sins” would be preposterous, especially in light of the fact that he had no personal sin for which he had to suffer the consequences. Instead, the meaning of the expression denotes vicarious substitution; the suffering was punishment endured as one on behalf of others.

The phrase “Christ . . . suffered once” could easily be misinterpreted. This expression does not mean that all the penal suffering of Christ was confined to the hours he was suspended on the cross. Instead, it means that there would never be a need to repeat the sacrifice again (as was the case with the Levitical animal sacrifices). Christ’s single, all-sufficient atonement has everlasting validity.

Indeed, the suffering of Christ encompassed all of his debasement. It began with his incarnation, in which he lowered himself from a position of equality with God to partake of the limitations of a human body—a baby’s body, no less. It encompassed his obedience to the plan and moral will of God the Father during his entire earthly life. His suffering culminated in Christ’s “becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:6–8) and ended with Christ’s cry of “it is finished.” (John 19:30)

When Jesus cried out from the cross, “It is finished,” he was making a profound claim: the work of atonement was over forever because all the punishment for all the sins of the redeemed had been fully rendered. Therefore, Christ’s priestly work, where he sits on his royal, eternal throne at the right hand of the Father, is no longer an atoning work; it is an intercessory work, a work of mediation where he applies his atoning work to those he makes his own. And when he comes again in glory to reign on earth as King of kings, there will be no new cross, just a magnificent reminder of the old rugged one where he was “put to death in the flesh” when he “suffered once for sins.”

In the expression “the righteous for the unrighteous” (1 Pet. 3:18) we have yet another clear, emphatic expression of vicarious substitution. The sinless Christ, the righteous, suffered and died for the unrighteous, the undeserving sinful ones he redeemed by his sin bearing. It was the innocent for the guilty, the pure for the impure, the holy for the unholy. The exchange is unmistakable; it is our sin for his righteousness.

Next Peter reveals the goal of the gospel—the very purpose behind Christ’s great atonement. All the other grand and glorious aspects of the gospel are means to this end—“that he might bring us to God.” There is nothing that can satisfy us more. There is no greater treasure than God himself. Likewise, there is no better way for sinners made righteous to glorify God than to see and savor him now and forever. Christ paid an infinite price—all for this! Christ brings us to God as the only one qualified to introduce us on friendly terms. He opened the door as priest of his atoning sacrifice on our behalf, and he keeps the door open through his eternal royal priesthood where he intercedes on our behalf.

As a result of his dual priesthood, Christ goes so far as to invite us to join him in calling God “our Father” (Matt. 6:9). Should we not shudder whenever we call God our father, remembering what a blood-bought privilege that is? And should we not continually leap for joy every time we are made aware of God’s kind, warm, loving presence or receive anything from his holy hand other than the wrath we deserve? Even when we are disciplined by him, we should not “regard [it] lightly” or take it for granted, for it, too, is a blessing we do not deserve because it is proof of an intimate, family relationship (Heb. 12:5–13).

When Christ “brings us to God” he does it in such a way that the relationship with God lasts forever. We need never fear that God will have a change of heart toward us. Why? Because the person of “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8), and likewise, his great atonement is a finished work, completed “once for all time.” God himself initiated the plan, as Peter declared, saying “The God of all grace . . . has called [us] to

his eternal glory in Christ” (1 Pet. 5:10). For all these reasons, our reward is sure, our “inheritance . . . is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading” (1 Pet. 1:4).

God himself is our ultimate reward. God is what makes heaven, heaven. Without God, without Christ, heaven would be as unfulfilling as this present world. In the upper room, in a prayer overheard by the disciples on the night before his death, Jesus revealed the meaning of eternal life—it is to know “the only true God and Jesus Christ whom [God] . . . sent” (John 17:3). Then, in a remarkable request, Jesus asked, “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:24). To know him is heaven; and to be with him is to see his unimaginable glory.

Thus, the picture becomes a little clearer. Throughout eternity, our finite knowledge of his infinite glory is never static; it is always expanding. And since our joy is directly proportional to our knowledge of him, our eternal joy as believers in Christ increases and increases and increases forever. All of this wonder emanates from Christ’s great atonement, where he suffered once for sins.

1 Peter 4:1

Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin. (1 Pet. 4:1)

Peter again returns to his favorite theme—Christ’s atoning death sets us apart (definitive sanctification) for the process of a life of transformation from sinfulness to sinlessness (progressive sanctification). It all starts with Christ’s suffering. It must start there, because until his completed atonement is applied to us by faith, we have no spiritual life at all. Jesus clearly implied this when he said, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead, but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:60). But when “according to [God’s] great mercy, he . . . [causes] us to be born again

to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (1 Pet. 1:3), a whole new life begins in which we grow more Christlike and less sinful.

Our union with Christ in his suffering and death means that we must arm ourselves. What is the weapon with which we must do so? It is a new “way of thinking.” This mind weapon is also described by Paul, who writes, “Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.” Paul went on to summarize the sufferings of Christ: debasement, servanthood, lifetime obedience, and obedience “to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:5–8).

We, as believers, are one with Christ, and, thus, we are co-crucified with Christ. His death is our death (Gal. 2:20). So we are to embrace this thought pattern and enter into the battle with sin. This is the Christian mindset, the Christian worldview. We are to be atonement-minded as we humbly suffer and serve and obey and die to sin—all of which is connected to Christ’s own death. Peter reminds of this connection when he says, “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24).

In view of this, how should we think about ourselves? Paul said, “You also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11). This is a paradigm shift of the greatest proportions. Peter goes on to show how this applies to our day-to-day life: “Whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin” (1 Pet. 4:1). Paul made a similar statement: “For one who has died has been set free from sin” (Rom. 6:7). We must understand these life-changing statements in terms of vicarious substitution. In other words, when Christ was “put to death in the flesh” (1 Pet. 3:18), so were we. When we “died with Christ” (Rom. 6:8), we paid our last tribute to our old slave master, sin. Paul said it this way in the book of Romans: “For the death [Christ] died he died to sin, once for all” (Rom. 6:10). Therefore, by virtue of our representation in Christ’s great atonement, we are already dead to sin—its guilt, its condemnation, and its penalty.

Dead people don’t sin, so why do we sin if we are dead? We have died to the dominion of sin, our previous enslavement to sin as a

controlling master. The statement that applies to us, then, is: dead people don't have to sin. As Paul pointed out, "We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin" (Rom. 6:6).

A *dominion* is a kingdom. A dominion has a ruler, a king who controls his subjects. We were once in sin's kingdom, under sin's domain. But when we became united to Christ, we changed kingdoms. The Father "delivered 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). Peter states it this way:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for [God's] own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. (1 Pet. 2:9–10a)

Thus, our new kingdom has its own King. He is our new ruler. He has set us free from our old ruler so that we are free to obey him instead. We are to "live as people who are free, not using [our] freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God" (1 Pet. 2:16). The harmony between Peter and Paul on this subject is remarkable. Paul says, "But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life" (Rom. 6:22).

So our death to sin in union with Christ's death to sin in the atonement is the basis for progressive sanctification. Without the cross, there would be no true transformation. By connecting Peter's thoughts in 1 Peter 4:1 and 2, it can be shown that Christ suffered in the flesh so that we can live for the rest of [our] time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God. Are you struggling to change? Go back to the cross; connect with him there, rest there. And when you get up to leave, never leave the cross or the one who suffered in the flesh.