

-XI-

ATONEMENT THROUGH MERIT

Evangelicals give the impression that the modern gospel is clearly stated in scripture and has been a staple of Christianity since its inception.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

We are told being a Christian means believing Jesus died for our sins so we could go to heaven. Were that the case, there were practically no Christians for the first several centuries of Christianity!

Both the *purpose* and the *content* of salvation taught in the early church differ in almost every way from what is taught today. That fact alone should give us pause since it not only indicates the apostles taught a gospel that does not match what we hear now, but obviously the modern message could not be *clearly* found in scripture if it lay undiscovered for 1000 years.

I have placed a short discussion of the early church's views on atonement in the appendix. I find this a particularly interesting topic as it grants us a window into how less indoctrinated minds conceived of the gospel. I recommend J.N.D. Kelly's *Early Christian Doctrines* to all who desire to take honest ownership of their beliefs. Here, I'll just note that even our current versions of the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds make no mention that our final destination is based on faith, nor do we find in them the emphasis on the Judgment found in today's church. Even hundreds of years after Christ, the idea that Christ's coming was about saving us from hell had not caught on.

One has to wonder why the Church ever came to consider Christ a sacrifice given to affect the final Judgment. Christ is the *mediator* of the new covenant. That is how the book of Hebrews repeatedly refers to Him (7:22; 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). He describes His own blood as the blood of the covenant in every description of the Final Supper found in the New Testament. (*Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; and 1st Corinthians 11:25*). This covenant, described in *Jeremiah 31:31-34*, is a description of the new kingdom Christ is claiming today. The

Judgment has nothing to do with *mediation* between God and man because Jesus (not the Father) is quite clearly the Judge, not the defense attorney.

In this chapter, I try to give a more biblically motivated paradigm for Christ's work and atonement. While attempting to give a very general, biblically consistent picture, I also want to answer in some specificity the following questions:

- Why was a savior needed?
- How is Christ's work a sacrifice?
- How is Christ's work related to God's wrath?
- What roles do His earthly life, death, resurrection, and post-resurrection glory play in God's plan?
- How can we make sense of passages like John's calling Jesus the **propitiation for the whole world** and Paul's labeling Him the **savior for all men, especially those who believe**?

Jesus' Merit Before God

As I am trying to show that Christ's merit before God is the true lynchpin of atonement — and relevant in ways not commonly realized — it is useful to get a better understanding of that merit before moving forward to discuss details.

Jesus' Death as Proof of His Righteousness

Often, people see Christ's sinlessness as His chief merit — not too surprising given the picture of the Judgment often suggested, where only our sin really matters. Furthermore, this sinlessness is mostly seen as merely a qualification for His being a sufficient sacrifice, as though the whole point of His life up until Golgotha was to be a blemishless lamb.

I claim a more biblically acceptable view is to see Christ's death as the final display and test of Christ's righteousness, and the natural ending of a program of merit. It's useful to consider how Christ's death shows Christ's merit directly. I see four major parallel facets, each worthy of consideration: Obedience, Love, Perseverance, and Faith.

Obedience

The gospels give **The Law** a strange double-meaning. They present it:

1. as the collection of requirements for God's people
2. as a coded set of unrecognized prophecies Jesus fulfilled.

Christ's willingness to go to Jerusalem at the appointed time was but one of many done to fulfill **everything written about Me in the Law of Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms.**¹

Nowhere are these two aspects so clearly interwoven as in *Matthew 5:18* where Jesus says **I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke of a letter will pass from the law until everything takes place**, and then He launches into a discussion of "The Law" as a set of commandments. *Luke 16:16–17* is another interesting passage where Jesus claims **The Law and the Prophets** are no longer preached, but yet no part of the Law **can fail**. Christ's baptism by John in *Matthew 3:14–15* is another example. At first, John refuses to baptize Jesus. However, Jesus declares it is required **to fulfill all righteousness**.

There are several examples of Christ fulfilling various parts of scripture that have nothing to do with commands from God. John provides the final example of this in *John 19:28*, **After this Jesus, realizing that by this time everything was completed, said (in order to fulfill the scripture), "I am thirsty."** Those at the cross then hoisted up a sponge soaked with sour wine, fulfilling the 15th verse of *Psalms 22*, which Christ had already made reference to on the cross.

Love

While Christ's death was a command, it was also a choice. *John 10:15* clearly describes that Christ suffers for the sake of those who desire God. *John 15:13* echoes this sentiment, which Paul states explicitly in *Ephesians 5:2*. It is the same kind of love Moses shows repeatedly in protecting the wandering Israelites — a love similar to that portrayed in the parable of the fig tree (*Luke 13:6–9*).

There is nothing new to seeing Christ's work as a demonstration of love, but what is not considered strongly enough is that this love itself contributes to Jesus own righteousness. After all, Christ's loving work is so godly that it is the basis of a new command (*John 13:34*) while being the epitome of the second greatest commandment, given in *Matthew 22:39*. Indeed, a reading of the passage enveloping *John 10:17* suggests that God loves Christ *because of His sacrificial love for us*. It would not be too much of a reach to suggest this is one of the deepest points to the parable of the prodigal son. The elder son is shown to not be truly after his father's heart — if he were, he would have rejoiced with his dad. Jesus, the genuinely righteous son, rejoices at the welcoming back of the sinner, the son who had previously been dead to his father.

¹*Luke 24:44*

Perseverance

Christ's willingness to suffer, even when He could call down angels to save Himself, is a separate contributor to Christ's merit. The value of suffering for God is referenced repeatedly in the gospels prior to Christ's death, and this pattern continues afterward. In many passages Christ's crucifixion is seen more as the death of the first Christian martyr rather than a separate, singular event.

For example, Jesus speaks of His coming death as **the cup** His Father has given Him at the Last Supper (*Matthew 20:22*), while praying in the Garden (*Matthew 26:39*), and while chastising Peter upon His arrest (*John 18:11*). What is often ignored when considering these verses is that Christ also says that the disciples will drink the same cup (*Matthew 20:23*). This makes perfect sense if we think of the cup as the sufferings in store for those who follow God, but it makes very little sense if we think of the cup as the wrath of God Jesus was to singularly endure in our place (as is commonly claimed).

Note that this idea of pre-determined persecution and suffering is common in the New Testament. I'm not suggesting anything that is not found in several other places. See *Mark 9:13; 10:30; John 21:19; Acts 5:41; 9:16; and 21:11*.

Faith

Christ's death as a martyr is discussed significantly less than the first two, but the final facet receives even less attention. Christ's willingness to die not only says something about His *faithfulness* but also is a testament to the *contents* of His *faith*. Rather than merely showing a slavish willingness to do what God requires or live with the repercussions of His desire for God, Christ's surrender exposes how strongly He holds certain claims about God.

In particular, Jesus showed faith in God's righteousness, in the Almighty's resolve not to allow a righteous person to be put to shame. In accepting death, Christ was saying "It is God's judgment that matters, and God will judge Me as righteous." He was practicing what He preached in *Matthew 10:28*, **Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Instead, fear the one who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.** The Greek term (*eulabeia*) in *Hebrews 5:7* describing Christ's prayers to God to save Him from death emphasizes this idea of choosing what is right due to fear of God.

Hence we read that Christ **entrusted Himself to the one who judges rightly** in *1st Peter 2:23*. He knew that God would not allow a sinless person to remain in the grave. In a broader sense, He was showing faith that God cared about righteousness and had the power to **reward those who seek Him**, as the writer of *Hebrews 11:6* claims is a key aspect of Christian faith.

Jesus' Death Related to His Life

Examining the four threads described above, we see that the merit in Christ's death is not genuinely disconnected from His righteousness portrayed in His life.

Obedience Throughout Jesus' life He was obedient not only to God's general commands but also to the special plan set out for the Messiah.

Love Jesus' love and compassion toward humanity is evident throughout the gospels.

Persecution His final persecution was the product of years spent criticizing the Jewish leaders — criticism He knew would lead to His death, just as it had led to John's.

Faith I discussed at length in chapter 7 that at the heart of Jesus' teachings is the type of faith shown in His willfully accepting death — faith that God has both the power and will to vindicate the righteous.

Two Key Blessings

What do Jesus and Darth Vader have in common?

Well, the short answer is “not much.” But there is an eerie similarity in how we form our perceptions of each.

If you are like most people born in the '60s or '70s, you saw the first three *Star Wars* movies (which are really the final three) early in life and then waited 10 to 20 years to see the rest. When you saw the original movies, you thought the story was about Luke Skywalker saving the universe from the evil Empire. However, when you watched the prequels later you realized that that is not what *Star Wars* is about at all. The six-movie saga is really a story of the rise, fall, and redemption of Anakin Skywalker, Luke's father.

Similarly, most Christians focus on Christ's work as it benefits them as individuals. We do not remember that Christianity is an outgrowth of a very community-based religion. We don't focus on our membership with God's people in a covenant relationship. We focus on forgiveness of sins because we place so much importance on the Judgment. We should stop seeing salvation as a saga built around our gain and instead see ourselves as part of a larger story whose plot revolves around the problems God has lamented since ancient times.

We should thank and praise God for all the goodness shown to us: providence, patience, mercy, and the opportunity to walk toward (and in) the Light. But any perspective that places our immortality as an end is thoroughly un-

acceptable. We should rather build our theory around God's Word. A plan is evident from Genesis to Revelation founded on the promise to Abraham:

1. Abraham's seed would inherit the Promised Land.
2. The world will be blessed through Abraham's seed.

The first of these promises originally referred to the land of Canaan, but later is seen as the entire world (*Romans 4:13*). The latter is described many times in the later prophets, where often **Israel** is seen as "the seed," but Paul claims the seed is Christ Himself in *Galatians 3:16*.

Rather than seeing Christ's death as paramount, a more biblical picture of His work and God's plan comes from studying how His suffering fits into the two promises above. It is better to see Christ's work as a whole, not only His death, as *sacrificial* than to see Him as a *sacrifice*, and there is very little to suggest or support that His death was a sacrifice *to God*.²

Moses and Christ

Jesus and others make clear how the Old Testament scriptures were a type of grand prophecy, a huge picture that both described the relationship between God and the Sons of Jacob and also, hidden within it, gave clues about the coming Christ so that the Jews of Jesus day could recognize Him. This is why Jesus is so exasperated in *Luke 24:25–27* that His own disciples had not figured out from the Jewish scriptures that the Christ had to die and rise again.

We can get a better feel for what these blessings mean by comparing Christ's work with Moses', who both liberated Abraham's descendants and, through that liberation, caused God's name to spread far beyond the sons of Jacob. *Exodus 9:16* presages this, and the theme is revisited in *Numbers 14:21–22*. A one-page summary comparing the two is on the next page.

²The only passage in the Bible where Jesus is referred to as a sacrifice *to God* is *Ephesians 5:2*, but the New Testament writers used this kind of language to refer to general good deeds or persecution. See *Romans 12:1*; *Hebrews 13:16*; and *1st Peter 2:5*. In particular, Paul uses similar terminology when referring to his own work for the sake of others in *Philippians 4:18*.

- Both fulfillments have two stages.
 - The Israelites wander in the desert for 40 years.
 - Christians languish in temptation-vulnerable flesh, waiting for the post-Judgment Kingdom. In particular, they wait for the **redemption of their bodies**. (*Romans 8:23*)
- Both Moses and Christ free people from slavery in the first stage.
 - The Israelites were physically forced into hard labor and spiritually had fallen into idolatry, worshiping the same gods the Egyptians did.
 - Christ frees people from the domination of sin.
- In both instances two confirmations are given to prove God has not forgotten the promise.
 - In the desert, the Israelites were given the manna as a sign and the Mosaic Covenant as a promise.
 - Christ's life, death, and resurrection is a sign, and the Spirit is the seal of Christ's covenant, a foretaste of the post-resurrection life.
- In both cases, the final blessing is seen as an **inheritance** given to Abraham's heirs according to the promise.
 - The Promised land is clearly an inheritance for the sons of Abraham. (*Exodus 15:17; Numbers 26:53–65*; and many more)
 - The coming kingdom is an inheritance for those who are sons of Abraham through faith. (*Acts 26:18; Romans 4:13–16*; and *Galatians 3–4*)
- In both instances the merit of the leaders safeguard the covenant community itself, but individuals can still be excluded for disobedience.
 - The exchange in *Exodus 32:7–35* regarding the golden calf and the aftermath of Israel's unfaithfulness on the edge of the promised land (*Numbers 14:10–38*) are two examples showing this combination
 - *Hebrews 7:22–25* describes Christ as the **surety of a better covenant** because He is continually able to make intercessions before God. However, this does not protect individual believers who do not do His will. (*Matthew 7:21; John 15:10; Acts 3:23; Galatians 5:21; 1st Corinthians 6:9–10; Ephesians 5:5; Hebrews 4:11; 5:9; Revelation 2:2–5*)

Seeing these parallels makes it easier to understand how the New Testament writers saw Christ's work. Moses led the Israelites out of slavery to found a Kingdom set apart for God. Christ is doing the same for Abraham's spiritual heirs, but the Promised Land is the kingdom Christ is coming back to claim. That kingdom has been promised to Christ as Abraham's seed,³ and all of Christ's adopted brothers and sisters have a stake in it.⁴ While the Israelites were in the desert, they were *heirs* but had not received their inheritance. In the same way, believers have not received the new, transformed, resurrected bodies attained when adoption as a fellow child of God is complete.⁵

Thus, we see that God's justice and wrath have no primary place in the description of salvation that is in Christ. Similarly, whatever importance Christ's death has in the gospel story, His exaltation and merit have far greater primacy.

Exaltation Based on Merit

Because we humans are largely interested in our own salvation, there is precious little discussion among Christians about why or how God exalted Christ after His work on earth was done. Some might be uncomfortable dwelling on the topic because it tends to brush up awkwardly against certain understandings of the Trinity. Others might not think there is anything interesting here because one could just as easily ask "Why *wouldn't* God exalt Christ?"

However, the reasons behind Christ's exaltation are intricately woven into our salvation, and something is lost by taking the simple perspective of "God exalted Christ because it was part of the Plan." For example, God could easily have equipped a random Israelite in Egypt with the power to work miracles and (with the aid of a few plagues) provoke Pharaoh to free the Sons of Jacob. But could such a leader have saved the Israelites time and time again when God was ready to wipe them out?

Similarly, God could have allowed Saul to remain king over Israel. Saul was not, in comparison with later kings, a particularly bad one. In fact, at the very end of his reign we see a very repentant, contrite ruler who still had faith in God.⁶ But would Saul have pleased God so greatly that Judah would be shown mercy by God for centuries to come due to his memory?⁷

³Galatians 3:16

⁴Romans 8:17 and Galatians 4:5

⁵Luke 20:36 and Romans 8:23

⁶1st Samuel 15:24–31

⁷2nd Chronicles 21:7; Isaiah 37:35; and Jeremiah 33:25–26

Indeed, *1st Chronicles 14:2* has interesting wording: **David realized that the Lord had established him as king over Israel and that he had elevated his kingdom for the sake of his people Israel.** That sounds an awful lot like God blessing Israel through David's exaltation, just as the world is blessed through Christ.

Paul describes most clearly the reason for Christ's exaltation in *Philippians 2:8–9*, where the entire gamut of His obedience, from initial humbling all the way to His death, is credited. *Hebrews 12:2* refers to Christ enduring the cross **for the joy set before Him.** The same author also points out that it was because **of the suffering of death** He is now **crowned with glory and honor** in *Hebrews 2:9*. But *Hebrews 5:7* describes how ultimately God saved Him from death **because of His reverence.**

I claim that the various blessings we see as the fruit of atonement are actually the necessary consequences of Christ's exaltation. There are two principal ways in which such blessings can be a natural result of God blessing Christ:

- Certain things are *required* for Christ to be exalted, so God naturally brings them about as part of the exaltation process.
- Certain things are made *made possible because* of Christ's exaltation (or the merit that underlies it).

The works associated with atonement are some of the "Certain things" described above. We will go through three major examples, showing how each blessing is related to Jesus' work and God's exaltation of Christ.

Work 1: Repentance

Repentance is the most central and emphasized work of Christ. It was the core of both His and John the Baptist's message, and Christ cited it as His purpose in *Luke 5:32*. Describing Christ's fulfillment of the promise to Abraham, Peter says in *Acts 3:26*, **God raised up His servant and sent Him first to you, to bless you by turning each one of you from your iniquities.**

The question is, how does Christ do this? *John 3:20–21* gives an excellent picture:

For everyone who does evil deeds hates the light and does not come to the light, so that their deeds will not be exposed. But the one who practices the truth comes to the light, so that it may be plainly evident that his deeds have been done in God.

Jesus is the light, and provides those who honestly desire to do God's work a sign to walk toward. Many Christians claim that none of us really want to do God's will, but John claims there are those who do desire this, and there are those who do not. Those who desire God will recognize Christ's words as the voice of God (*John 7:17*) and follow Jesus' commands. Those who do not desire God will not repent, **even if someone rises from the dead** (*Luke 16:30–31*).

Jesus does not provide mere guidance. His coming is also a wake-up call of sorts to those who desire God but have hitherto not known the Almighty. Christ's miraculous deeds and resurrection are a beacon to those looking for a guide and, at the same time, a resounding warning to everyone that there is no longer any excuse for ignorance. The time to repent is now. Paul says as much in *Acts 17:30–31*. Peter's message in *Acts 10:41–42* is similar.

Christ also brings about repentance by providing a perfect example for others to follow — teaching by example. This was particularly important for believers who would undergo persecution for their faith during the next several centuries. God's vindication of Christ after His execution strengthened the resolve of later martyrs. This is a separate way in which His life, death, and resurrection are important for atonement. Rather than seeing Christ's death as a completely fenced off act, the apostles appealed to others to follow in Christ's footsteps. Peter holds Christ up as an example in *1st Peter 2:21* and again in *3:17–18*. Paul does the same in *Romans 8:17* and *Ephesians 5:1–2*.

Christ's death as an example is shown in the gospels as well when Christ washes His disciples feet and then links this to His coming death,⁸ and in John's version His example is the basis of a new command.⁹

Israel's history shows all the above was unlikely to be enough. God had sent prophets to Israel for centuries, but they had failed to call God's people to repentance. Elijah worked powerful miracles, raised the dead, and even was vindicated by God over death. Yet he and the other prophets were ignored by a nation who did not think righteousness was required. They had a relationship with God and believed they could safely ignore God's commands.

Jesus' ace-in-the-hole was the Spirit. The *power* of the Holy Spirit was routinely used to prove Jesus was Lord to unbelievers, while its *presence* was a continuing source of faith once someone believed.¹⁰ We will be considering this blessing, the sending of the Spirit, separately.

⁸*Matthew 20:25–28; Mark 10:42–45; and John 13:15*

⁹*John 15:12–13*

¹⁰*John 15:26; Acts 3:6–16; 4:10; Romans 8:16; 1st John 3:24*

Work 2 – The Holy Spirit

The second major blessing of Christ's work is the availability of the Holy Spirit. From a metaphysical view, two things had to be done. The Spirit had to be sent *and* it had to be receivable.

Sending the Spirit

Christ said the Spirit could not be sent until after He had died.¹¹ The sending of the Spirit is seen as an answer to Jesus' prayer in *John 14:16*.

Why can Jesus cause this greatest of blessings by merely praying for it? John provides the answer to this as well in *John 16:15*, **Everything that the Father has is mine; that is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what is mine and will tell it to you.** The underlying idea is that God gave Jesus the Spirit, and so we can receive it by His **will** and in **in His name**.¹²

But the above should just make us ask, *Why has everything been given to Christ*, which brings us back to Christ's general exaltation due to His merit. Hence we see that the sending of the Spirit is a blessing based on Christ's merit rather than His death as a separate event. (Of course, as described already, Christ's willingness to die was a significant contributor to His merit.) Paul puts it nicely in *Romans 5:19*, Christ's **obedience** makes us righteous.

Receiving the Spirit

Receiving the Spirit is a separate issue altogether — one where Christ's sacrificial death rises to prominence. Our souls were not prepared to receive it.

As described by Jesus in all three synoptic gospels, **No one pours new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the skins will be destroyed. Instead, new wine is poured into new wineskins.** He puts it differently in John, **I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now.**¹³

But why could his disciples not bear it then?

The short answer is given in *Hebrews 9–10*, but I think it is more interesting to see John's version. The third time Jesus says **where I am going you cannot follow** (*John 13:33*), it begins a discourse illuminating the purpose of His death.

After Judas leaves, Jesus speaks to His disciples. **Where I am going, you cannot come.** In *13:36* He adds **but you will follow later.**

¹¹*John 16:7*. John affirms this in *John 7:39*.

¹²The clearest description of this is shown in *Acts 2:33*, but see *John 1:33; 5:21,26; 6:53; 14:26; 20:31; Galatians 4:6; Hebrews 9:15–17; 1st John 3:15; and 5:11* for more.

¹³*Matthew 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:37–38; and John 16:12*

We get more information in *John 14:2–3*: **In My Father’s house are many dwelling places...If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you to Myself, that where I am you may be, too.**

Many think Jesus refers to the second coming. But where *is* Jesus taking people? **I will...take you to Myself, that where I am, you may be, too.**

Huh?

The Greek behind this phrase is particularly interesting. The word for **take** here *already* means “to join with.” In fact, the emphasis in that word is not the idea that you are *going* anywhere, but rather that you are *together*. It is an indication that someone is willing to be associated with another person. It is the term used when saying someone “takes” a wife. So, if the verb here *already* has the idea of association or joining, and then Jesus says He is taking them **to Myself**, we should understand that *Jesus is the destination*. As odd as it sounds, this is the same thing Jesus says in *John 12:32* when discussing His death: **And I, if I am lifted up from the Earth, will draw all men to Myself.**

You might be thinking, *Hey, shouldn’t the Father’s house be the destination? Isn’t that where Jesus was going to prepare a place?*

For the Jews, the **House of God** could refer to two things. The primary meaning for **House of God** is the temple. There are about 100 instances of this usage in the Bible. The other possibility, which Peter, Paul, and the writer of Hebrews use, is to see **house** as referring to the members of a grand household. Just like House of Israel and House of Judah refer to all the people of those nations, the House of God would be believers in the new covenant — the new nation of God Christ rules. These meanings combine when we see the temple of the new covenant as being the body of believers.

Cleansing the Temple

Christ is the **cornerstone** of the new **House of God**, and believers are **living stones** being built upon Him. This temple had to be consecrated and purified, for sin pervaded creation, a preparation described in *John 14:2*. After this purification, the Spirit dwells within the temple, and hence within each believer.¹⁴

¹⁴The background for this summary: *Matthew 21:42; Mark 12:10; Luke 20:17; John 2:19–21* (Note all four of these come right after the cleansing of the temple and a discussion of the kingdom being taken away from the Jews and given to the Gentiles in the narrative, but the writers *chose* to place the story there: *Mark 11:27*, for example, shows these events did not happen immediately after one another, but all four writers chose to put these next to each other.) *Acts 4:10–12; Ephesians 2:20–21; 1st Peter 2:6–7; Hebrews 9:7–25; 13:11–20; 1st Corinthians 3:16–17; and 6:19*

This might sound far-fetched, but look at the passage after *John 14:2*—Jesus refers time and time again to God dwelling inside believers. He first indicates that His own power comes because the Father is in Him (*14:10*); then He describes that believers will similarly do miraculous deeds (*14:12*), but this is only possible because Jesus is going to die. Why can they do these deeds? Because the Spirit will live inside them (*14:16*), and those who have the Spirit will know **I am in the Father and you are in Me, and I am in you.**

One disciple asks if only they will be given this revelation, and Jesus' answer (*14:23*) repeats the theme of God taking up **residence** in those who do God's will. This is what Jesus means when He says He will **come back to take you to Myself**. In *John 14:18–19* He speaks of returning **in a little while** and in a way invisible to the world — hardly a description of His Second Coming!

Leviticus' 16th chapter describes how and why the temple was consecrated. Israel's sin contaminated the temple. This was separate from the danger individual sinners faced. Once a year, the temple was washed of this contamination on the Day of Atonement. The high priest sprinkled the blood of a sacrificed bull or goat to cleanse the impurity caused by Israel's sin.

In the same way, Jesus' sacrifice purifies our souls [or **hearts** as described in *Acts 15:9* and *Hebrews 10:22*] from impurity so that the Spirit can reside there. The Day of Atonement sacrifice was to make the temple a fit house for God's Spirit, and Jesus' sacrifice did the same, but for a different temple.

So, the disciples **could not follow** Jesus yet because (as John comments in *John 7:39*) **the Spirit was not yet given because Jesus was not yet glorified**. But they could **follow later** because Jesus was going to come back and reside in them. The Pharisees could not follow because Jesus' word had no place in them (*John 8:37*). Contrast that with the disciples in *John 15:3*, who are clean already. Why are they clean already? **Because of the word I spoke**. The Word Christ spoke, which we noted in chapter 9 referred to commands from God, was essentially the initial requirements of the new covenant. The Pharisees rejected that covenant by rejecting Christ's commands. The disciples did not.

Cleansing the People

Christ's death cleansed the temple, but also cleansed the world so anyone (Jew or Gentile) could enter it.

Today we read in the Bible of being **cleansed** and tend to think of our sins being removed. But that's not what the term meant to the Jewish writers. Being clean was a requirement *to enter the temple*. This involved ritual cleansing to remove uncleanness, which was not the same as sin. For example, a menstru-

ating woman was unclean, as was anyone who touched a corpse. Cleanliness or uncleanness did not have to do with punishment or sin, but rather dealt with separation. The unclean could not enter the temple (on pain of death).

Thus, being clean was the Jewish notion of *being holy*, which means “set apart.” The temple and those who worshipped in it were to be set apart, divided from the rest of the world. We Christians have taken the term *holy* and transmogrified it to suit our needs. It isn’t about sinlessness, but rather about consecration to the Lord.

And what does God say to Peter in *Acts 11:9* to signal that the Gentiles have been allowed into God’s nation? **What God has made clean, you must not consider ritually unclean!** The New American Standard Bible quite accurately translates the **ritually unclean** term as **unholy**.

Thus, Christ’s death cleansed the Gentiles to enter the temple of the new covenant, a living temple built with the souls of believers wherein the Spirit dwells. This makes baptism the perfect ritual for receiving the Spirit. The Jews had to undergo ritual cleansing to enter the temple of the old covenant, and we undergo ritual cleansing to enter the temple of the new. This is, of course, just another way of looking at how the forgiveness of sins described in the New Testament refers often to opening up of God’s kingdom to all those who desire to serve the Almighty. We read **forgiveness of sins** and think the point is that the sins are going *unpunished*. While there is certainly an aspect of that in that the entire world was not destroyed due to the sins done in the centuries before Christ, it more commonly means that the stage is set for rapprochement. God had declared the sins of the past are no longer an obstacle to those who desire a relationship with the Almighty. That is, after all, what *Romans 3:25* says — God **proclaims** through Christ the **passing over of the sins previously committed**.

Indeed, it is possible to read *Romans 3:25* as making the same point as *Hebrews 10:19–20*, that Jesus’ suffering allows us access to the most holy place in the temple of God. Indeed, this would be a rather shocking way of seeing what God has done through Christ. The Gentiles, who earlier could not even enter the main courts of the temple, are now allowed in the holiest of holies! (Some translations have the term **propitiation** in *Romans 3:25*, but that is not the word in the Greek. The Greek is the term used repeatedly in the Greek version of the Old Testament to refer to the Mercy Seat, which was in the holiest place of the temple, where earlier only the High Priest could go, as referenced in *Hebrews 9:7*.)

Work 3: Propitiation/Forgiveness of Sins

The final crucial work of Christ is the forgiveness of sins. It is important to realize that there are two kinds of forgiveness discussed. The forgiveness of sins *on an individual basis* is due to the repentance described as Christ's primary work (*Luke 24:47*). However, there is a larger-scale kind of forgiveness that has nothing to do with an individual's personal sins. It is this forgiveness that we will investigate since the above verse describes the basis for an individual's forgiveness. Repentance has always been a sufficient means for forgiveness: see *Jeremiah 36:3; Ezekiel 18:27; 33:14–16; Mark 1:4; and Acts 3:19*.

Old Testament history is critical for understanding the purpose of this forgiveness. Israel (the northern tribes) had fallen into idolatry a thousand years ago. Having abandoned the Law, they intermingled with other peoples and lost their cultural identity. Judah (the southern tribes) maintained the covenant regulations, but their wickedness, in particular their mistreatment of the poor, kindled God's judgment nevertheless. In *Jeremiah 3:11*, God remarks **Faithless Israel has proved herself more righteous than treacherous Judah**.

God gave these nations over to the Gentiles as a form of chastisement. Those kingdoms then mistreated Israel and Judah, causing God's anger to flare up against them as well. Thus, there is wrath against all creation because both the Jews and Gentiles had sinned against God for several generations.

This sin acted as a barrier to peace with God. God would not take Judah back because Judah would not repent. God sent prophets, and they were ignored. Furthermore, centuries of Gentile oppression of Jews created hostility between the two, increasing the separation already present due to the Mosaic law.

So, we see the past sins are impediments to Christ's exaltation:

- Christ could not have a people until people repented.
- Christ was to rule over a united kingdom, just as David did. There could not be hostility between factions (Jew and Gentile) within.
- Wrath and destruction had been prophesied as fitting punishments on the earth for the generational, global sin of Jew and Gentile. Obviously, the destruction of creation works against Christ's interest as Lord over it.

The first of these has already been addressed in the repentance section. The second is found throughout the New Testament. Christ commands people to forgive others. Luke in particular attacks nationalism, highlighting Christ's teaching the Jews that they must accept all repenting people — even the Samaritans. Not only is forgiving others required, but Christ stresses in *Matthew 18:35* that our own eternal security depends on it. I've already spent considerable ink describing Paul's interest in peace. The early parts of Colossians and Ephesians

describe how Christ reconciled all things, even angels, into a single kingdom.¹⁵

The final bullet is the subject of *1st John 2:2*, which calls Jesus a **propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world**. The question everyone cares about is *how* is Christ a propitiation? But perhaps the first thing we should discuss is *what does propitiation mean?*

The more conservative elements of the evangelical church talk a lot about propitiation. The idea is that it is not enough to merely deal with our *sin*. There is also a need to address *God's wrath* that exists in reaction to that sin. The cleansing and removal of sin is referred to as *expiation* and the addressing of God's wrath is referred to as *propitiation*.

Common Misunderstanding of Propitiation

There is no problem with understanding *propitiation* as the addressing of God's wrath. The problem is that those who do this tend to slip in *by sacrifice*, and it is assumed that Christ dealt with God's wrath by receiving it Himself or that His death was an appeasing sacrifice to God.

This claim, that *propitiation* is always through blood is propped up with *Leviticus 17:11*, which describes how God has **given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your lives**. This utilizes a basic principle that the blood of an animal is identified with its life.¹⁶ What's so disconcerting about this leap of logic is that there are plenty of examples where propitiation occurs without blood. It is mind-boggling how often this verse is cited as proof that only blood can satisfy God in the face of so much scripture to the contrary.

In *Exodus 30:15*, propitiation is made through silver. In *Numbers 16:46*, God's wrath is averted by the burning of incense. Jewelry is used in *Numbers 31:50*. Grain is instituted as a means of propitiation for those who cannot afford to bring animals in *Leviticus 5:13*. And if one were to add on the examples where both animals and grain were required, dozens of examples could be given.

Furthermore, there is no need for any kind of gift to accomplish propitiation. *Exodus 32:30* shows Moses turning away God's wrath by simple intercession. *Numbers 8:21* describes Aaron as making atonement for the Levites without any sacrifice. Hezekiah's prayer in *2nd Chronicles 30:18* is another.

Note that *every* example I give above uses the same Hebrew word (*kaphar*) used in the blood sacrifices. This tight match prevails in the Greek version of the Old Testament written by Jewish scholars — the Greek word for propitiation in

¹⁵*Colossians 1:16–20; 2:13–17; and Ephesians 2:14*. It should be remembered that Paul has both the actual historic hostility and the division caused by the Mosaic Covenant in mind.

¹⁶*Hebrews 9:22* is also used to defend this view, but the context there is the consecration of the temple, which is the focus of most of *Hebrews 9–10*.

1st John 2:2 is the same word chosen for what Moses does for Israel with no sacrifice whatsoever. *Isaiah 27:9* describes how Israel will be pardoned purely by doing godly acts — the destruction of the altars to false gods.

Similar observations hold when we expand our study to include verses that do not use the exact Hebrew term for *propitiation*. *Genesis 20:17*; *Numbers 11:2*; *14:19–20*; *21:7*; *Deuteronomy 9:18–20*; *2nd Samuel 24:25*; *2nd Chronicles 12:5–12*; *30:18*; and *Ezra 10:2–14* are a few examples where God’s wrath due to sin has been averted due to righteous action or the intercession of a righteous person with no sacrifice whatsoever. As we will see in the next subsection, even the propitiation described in the context of rituals involving animal sacrifices appear to be based on intercession by the righteous priest.

Forgiveness by Intercession Even in the Temple Rituals

The heading above may sound strange. It is one thing to suggest, as I did in the last section, that forgiveness *requires* no sacrifice. Rather, the **prayer of a righteous man** is enough (*James 5:16*). It is quite another to claim the sacrifices themselves appear to have little to do with avoiding the punishment for sins.

I’m not saying the sacrifices had no atoning power. I would claim, however, that the *sacrifices* in the Levitical regulations addressed a different problem altogether — the *purification* and *cleansing* of the altar and temple. The sins of the Israelites defiled God’s house, and the blood of the sin offerings were used to *purify* the temple. We will discuss this separately because it is inextricably linked to the sending of the Spirit, which is the third blessing.

I’m also not claiming that sin was being ignored. After all, in many regulations we read of someone who sins, brings the sacrifice, and then we are told **the priest makes atonement on his behalf, and it will be forgiven him.**¹⁷ However, the sacrifice itself has little to do with this forgiveness. Note, some Bibles will try to make it appear that the **atonement** here is the actual ritual outlined, including the sacrifice. For example, their translation for a verse like *Leviticus 4:35* may read **In this way the priest will make atonement for him.** But, the Hebrew there is simply the word for **and**: **And the priest shall make atonement for him.** I’m grateful that the English Standard Version, one of the most conservative translations available, renders these verses accurately.

There are two standard views on how these sacrifices caused forgiveness. I want to describe each briefly and indicate some significant biblical problems. Then I’d like to show a third model where, even within the context of these sacrificial rituals, the forgiveness itself is due to the intercession by the priest.

¹⁷Many in *Leviticus 4–5*. Also see *Leviticus 6:2–7*; *19:20–22*; and *Numbers 15:22–28*.

Standard Model 1: Appeasing God through Gifts

One model of propitiation is that someone "pays back" God or appeases God through the gifts brought to the temple.

Overall, this is not such an untenable view. The sacrifices were seen originally as a type of "food and drink" for God, and there are many discussions of a "soothing aroma." Furthermore, this model at least explains all the instances where someone could gain forgiveness without sacrificing a living creature (unlike Model 2, below). However, it does have some problems.

The main problem is that the guilt and sin offerings (the ones in *Leviticus* 4–5 where rituals are prescribed for various sins) are not really gifts from the sinner to God. The *whole burnt offerings* were the ones dedicated to God. The sin and guilt offerings are eaten by the priests. Only a very small amount of them is burned up, and that is best seen as the *priests* giving God a portion of what has been given to them, as they did for *all* sacrifices. The Israelites are not allowed to eat the fat of any beast under any condition (*Leviticus* 7:23–24). Thus, the *sinner* is giving nothing to God at all! He is giving the animal to the priest, who gives a small part to God as a tithe. This is similar to the fraction of the grain offerings that are given to God (see *Leviticus* 2:2; 5:12; 6:15; and 24:7)

You can check this by reading the regulations for the burnt offerings (*Leviticus* 6:8–13), the sin offerings (*Leviticus* 6:24–30), and the guilt offerings (*Leviticus* 7:1–7). If the sin and guilt offerings were supposed to be payments to God, the regulations ended up backwards.

Another problem with this model is that passages like *Leviticus* 19:20–22 suggest the guilt offerings were actually the punishment itself. Rather than a bribe or payoff of God, the sacrifice is more like a fine designed to deter sin.

In addition to these, there are other points that this model has a hard time explaining. I will elaborate on these when discussing my model.

Standard Model 2: Vicarious Punishment

Conservative evangelicals stress this model. The idea is that the animal brought into the temple has the guilt/sin of the sinner placed upon it, and its death is God's wrath being executed. By this view, there is no forgiveness, really. Rather, someone else is getting the punishment. Strictly speaking, this is not even *propitiation*, which refers to wrath being cooled due to a change of disposition. Merriam-Webster's defines *propitiate* as "to gain or regain the favor or goodwill of." This was the meaning of the Greek word used in *1st John* 2:2 as well. The Vicarious Punishment model does not provide actual propitiation. It simply claims the wrath was vented on someone else. Some claim the wrath

had to be spent as a precondition to our regaining God's goodwill. As I described earlier, that is simply not the biblical picture of how God's favor works. When God relented of the wrath in store for Nineveh (*Jonah 3:10*), the Almighty didn't have to go blow up one of Jupiter's moons to exhaust the pent-up anger.

The above aside, there are all sorts of biblical problems with this view.

First, if the animal received the guilt/sin of the person, its very presence would defile the temple and the Altar.

Second, the treatment of the animal's remains shows the animal retains its purity throughout the ritual. Its meat is so holy that it actually sanctifies those who eat it (*Leviticus 6:29*). Furthermore, it must be eaten in a clean place. In those rare instances when the sacrifice could not be eaten, it had to be burned and its ashes disposed of in a clean place. This hardly sounds like the fate of a creature that has become forensically guilty before God!

Third, there is no indication whatsoever that the sins were laid on the animal. The exception to this, of course, was the scapegoat which was not sacrificed in the temple. Scripture makes clear the iniquity is put on the scapegoat (*Leviticus 16:21-22*), yet such verbiage is unseen anywhere else for the sacrifices killed in the temple. Instead, the Bible says that the priests, not the animal, bears the iniquity (*Leviticus 10:17*).

Fourth, if this was the way that guilt was defused, it would not explain how grain, silver, incense, etc. could procure propitiation.

Finally, this viewpoint suggests that death was the natural punishment for all sin, because in each case the sacrificed animal died. But that is not what the Bible says. There are instances, like intra-family sexual sins, where the punishment was less than death (but no sacrifice was allowed: *Leviticus 20:20*).

These middle-level sins cause a major problem with the Vicarious Punishment model, which claims the animal receives the punishment due for the offense. By that logic one must conclude that accidentally touching a dead animal (*Leviticus 5:2*) has the natural punishment of death while having sex with your uncle's wife is less offensive, having only the penalty of a closed womb.

If, instead, we see these sacrifices as penalties, the punishments match the crimes — giving up a sheep is less a punishment than being barren; touching a carcass is less an offense than having sex with your aunt. *Leviticus 20:20-22* specifies that having sex with a slave promised to another is not worthy of the same punishment as having sex with a free woman engaged to someone else.

But the idea that some sins have different natural penalties than others has no place in a framework where the sacrificed animal is seen as bearing the guilt and taking the punishment of the sinner. That framework requires all sins to have the same penalty, for the fate of the animal was always the same.

My Model: Priests Share Burden of Guilt — Propitiation by Intercession

I propose a model where the priests are representatives of Israel before God. When an individual sins, the priest shares in bearing that iniquity (*Leviticus 10:17*). This goes both ways, for the entire community bears the sin when the High Priest sins (*Leviticus 4:3*). This *sharing* in the lot is exactly what Moses was willing to do when he interceded for Israel in *Exodus 32:32*, **But now, if you would forgive their sin — but if not wipe me out from your book. . .**

Not only do the priests bear the iniquity, but they also lift up prayers (just as everywhere else we find wrath averted in the Bible) for pardon. The idea of the priests praying for people of the covenant is seen in *1st Samuel 12:23*; *Hebrews 7:25*; and *1st Timothy 2:5*. This last verse is likely a backhand to the Jewish cult. Paul is essentially saying “there are no longer an entire caste of mediators between God and humanity. There is only one.” A particularly interesting example from the old testament where **prayer** is credited as the reason for deliverance *even in the midst of a sacrifice* is *2nd Samuel 24:25*.

The sin and guilt offerings are then seen as given to the priests to help them fulfill their role. These sacrifices not only mean the priests have a supply of food (for they cannot be out doing other work if they are busy mediating for the people) but the sacrifices are so holy that they sanctify the priests who eat them, ritually addressing the iniquity they were continually bearing for the people.¹⁸

It was exactly this sanctification through *eating* the offerings (a privilege of the priests) that Samuel speaks of in *1st Samuel 3:14*. God says **I swore an oath to the house of Eli, “the sin of the house of Eli can never be forgiven by sacrifice or by grain offering.** But when one reads the rest of the story about this curse (*1st Samuel 2:27–36* and *1st Kings 2:27*) it becomes evident that what is meant is that Eli’s descendants will be demoted from their priestly rank and privilege to eat the grain, sin, and guilt offerings that sanctified the eater. These sacrifices *only* priests could eat, as opposed to the peace, votive, etc. offerings that *did not* sanctify the eater, but that anyone in his household could eat.

It is particularly fitting that Eli’s house be demoted and cursed so that they cannot eat of the grain or sin offerings anymore, for it was precisely because Eli’s sons were being disrespectful in their eating of these sacrifices that the curse was laid in the first place. (*1st Samuel 2:15–17,29*)

¹⁸6:18,27 shows the grain and sin offerings consecrate the priests who eat them. *Leviticus 7:7* suggests the guilt offering does the same.

Ritual Summary and Bigger Picture

Here is, then, how the sin offering “works” according to the observations of this section:

1. **The sinner brings the sacrifice to the temple.** This represents a confession of guilt (e.g. *Leviticus 5:5* — keep in mind that most of these offerings were for unintentional sins or sins done unwittingly.) It also represents a loss to the person, for he will receive nothing from the offering (the priests will end up being the one who eats his ram/goat/lamb/flour). This loss is a deterrent and memorial that sin is a serious issue with serious consequences. It is also an easement of sorts — the priests are bearing the guilt of the community, the guilt the sinner has contributed to. The priests are praying for the community. Thus his sacrifice both subsidizes their work and is meant to undo some of the damage, for the priests that eat of the sacrifice will be sanctified.
2. **The animal is killed and the blood is applied to the altar.** This cleanses the altar (and by extension the temple) from the taint of the sin. This makes the temple a more fit house for God’s Spirit.
3. **A small amount of the animal is burned up (the fat, kidneys, etc.)** This is God’s share of the animal the priest has received. The sinner has given the animal to the priests as a payment for bearing their sin. The blood and fat are God’s portion. This goes back all the way to Abel (*Genesis 4:4*) and is a common facet to Jewish life. It was the breaking of this regulation that caused the curse on Eli (*1st Samuel 2:16* and later). Note that the original sinner is out of the picture. The fat is given to God because the priest gives some part of everything to God, regardless of what kind of sacrifice it is (c.f. *Leviticus 2:2; 5:12; and 6:15*).
4. **The priest makes atonement for him, and he is forgiven.** The priest intercedes on his behalf, praying for the wrath to be turned away. Moses said **perhaps I can make atonement for your sin** in *Exodus 32:30* before going to pray for his people, when the Levitical accounts say **The priest will make atonement for him**, it refers to the same. Note that in the case where the High Priest himself sins, no such intercession is possible and there is no atonement. (Compare *Leviticus 4:3-12* with the other 12 descriptions of offering in response to a particular sin.)
5. **The priests eat the sacrifice.** It is not only a form of sustenance, but an act of sanctification to absolve the sin whose guilt they bear.

Application to Eucharist

If we see the sin offering in this way, the Eucharist gains a new meaning. In the old sacrifices the altar “drank the blood” of the sacrifice and the priests ate the flesh of the sacrifice. Each of these had a cleansing effect. The blood cleansed the temple from the taint of Israel’s sin. The flesh sanctified the priests who were bearing that sin. In the new covenant, *we are the temple* and *we are the priests*, and the source of our sanctification is Christ.

In our covenant, sanctification refers to the work of the Holy Spirit inside us. John often uses the term **life** to refer to the Spirit. Hence (putting everything together) we arrive at *John 6:53*, . . . **unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves.**

Summary of Forgiveness

This has been a long section. In summary, forgiveness of sins has always been available via the intercessions of righteous people, and that is how it is done with Christ, who **intercedes for us** now (*Romans 8:34* and *Hebrews 7:25*).

This forgiveness is not done with an eye toward the Final Judgment. There is little indication that forgiveness by the Father has any relevance at the Judgment, which makes sense as God has given all judgment over to the Son (*John 5:22*). In particular, the Bible clearly states this forgiveness does not automatically roll forward based only on faith. The writer, addressing those who have already been **made holy**, makes this abundantly clear in *Hebrews 10:26–31*. In *Revelation 2:3–5*, Christ directs John to write the church at Ephesus warning them of the consequences of their continued sins. This warning comes practically in the same stroke as a commendation for their steadfast faith in Him!

The purpose of the forgiveness is to allow for God’s desired global, unified kingdom.¹⁹ Christ has propitiated God’s wrath against **the whole world** from destruction due to the **sins previously committed**.²⁰ In particular, the availability of this forgiveness on a global scale announced that the Gentiles, who were **without the Messiah, alienated from the citizenship of Israel, and strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world**, were equally allowed to approach Christ.²¹ The barriers of the past had been removed. It was now time for all people to repent for the forgiveness of their sins. That is the message given to the disciples to spread in *Luke 24:47*.

¹⁹*Colossians 1:20*

²⁰*1st John 2:2* and *Romans 3:25*

²¹*Ephesians 2:12*

Summary and Final Notes

In Christ, God replays the Exodus story.

Before the Exodus, God shows power by the plagues visited on Egypt. In Jesus' time God shows power by the resurrection of Christ. In the Exodus story, after the Israelites wandered for 50 days, God inaugurates a covenant with them, gives them requirements, and directs them to build a tabernacle so the Almighty can dwell within their midst. In the apostles' time, *after the same 50 days*,²² God gives the Holy Spirit, the sign of the new covenant, which itself instructs us in God's requirements. Jesus' blood acts to purify and strengthen our spirits so that the Holy Spirit can dwell in us, the temples of the new covenant, just as the Spirit dwelt in the tabernacle (the portable version of the temple) the Jews carried around in the desert.

Believers are wanderers in that desert, heirs to the kingdom that will come when Jesus returns. We have been freed from sin but have not attained our full inheritance — our transformed, resurrected bodies. For now we have “the Promise,” which is the Holy Spirit — a down payment of sorts on our transformed bodies.

The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the Spirit He sent, serve as a beacon for all those who earnestly desire God. Christ's commands allow anyone who desires God to do God's will. Those who have shown such an interest will claim their inheritance, unlike the generations of Israelites who failed to receive their inheritance due to disobedience (*Hebrews 4:11* and *Acts 3:23*)

Jesus' merit saved the world from destruction, and the same merit allows Him to pray as a High Priest for stumbling believers. His sacrificial death cleansed the temple of the new covenant and also cleansed the whole world so that any may enter that temple and receive this Holy Spirit, the seal of the new covenant.

The paradigm I suggest makes sense of passages that refer to the reconciling of **the whole world**, including **all things in earth and in heaven**. It also explains verses like *1st Timothy 4:10*²³ more adequately than the modern gospel.

Perhaps most satisfying — it finds critical meaning in all phases of Christ's story: His earthly ministry, His death, His resurrection, and His life after resurrection. This is a significant (and well known) deficiency with the version of salvation taught by most Christians. The “Jesus died so I could be forgiven” version of the gospel finds little import in anything other than Christ's death.

²²Pentecost occurs on the exact day of the year as Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai.

²³ ...for He is the Savior of all men, especially those who believe