

Christian Ministry Unit 1

Introduction to Theology

Week 4 – Substitutionary Atonement

Introduction

For the next three weeks, we will be studying soteriology—the study of salvation. Specifically, we will address three questions:

- THIS WEEK: How did God make our salvation possible?
- WEEK 5: How does salvation change our standing with God? Is our salvation secure, or can we lose it?
- WEEK 6: Do we choose our salvation, or does God determine in advance who will be saved?

It is important to understand that, while all major world religions are concerned with salvation, they differ on the two most important salvation issues:

- What is humanity's biggest problem?
 - Animistic religions view our biggest problem as appeasing the various spirits that control different aspects of our lives.
 - Pantheistic religions view our biggest problem as desire (Buddhism) or ignorance of our oneness with God (Hinduism).
 - Monotheistic religions (Judaism; Christianity; Islam) view our biggest problem as true moral guilt—*our objective guilt before God because of our violations against his holy character.*
- What is the solution to this problem?
 - All other major world religions except for Christianity teach that salvation (however it is defined) is something that we must accomplish or earn through religious observances and/or good works.
 - In biblical Christianity alone are we told that God accomplishes salvation for us, and that we receive his gift of salvation by trusting his promise (NEXT WEEK).

The Bible teaches that God makes salvation available to us through substitutionary atonement. “Substitutionary atonement” means that *God in his love provides a blameless substitute to bear his righteous judgment of our sins.* NOTE:

- Substitutionary atonement is a "given" in the Bible. We can explain its logical coherence (i.e., the only way a righteous God could accept sinful people without compromising his character is by punishing someone in our place), and we can provide analogies of it from human life (e.g., CIVIL WAR DRAFT; I.R.S. DEBT)—but we cannot prove its necessity.
- God was not *obligated* in any way (by anything in us or outside himself) to provide atonement for us; it is a free, unmerited gift extended by him. The motivation for the

atonement comes from within God himself—his righteousness and justice demand the payment of death for our sins, and in his love and mercy he provides that payment for us himself (1 Jn. 4:10). According to the Bible, the *only* way God can do this is through the death of his own Son (Gal. 2:21). Knowing this ought to stir within us a deepening gratitude that God has provided, at infinite cost to himself, a way to forgive us and fully accept us even though we daily deserve his judgment!

- Both the Bible and animistic/tribal religions emphasize the offering of sacrifices, but they view these sacrifices in very different ways:

TRIBAL RELIGIONS	THE BIBLE
The gods' wrath is arbitrary and capricious.	God's wrath is rational and dependable.
Sacrifice is often meeting a god's physical need (hunger, sensuality).	Sacrifice satisfies God's righteous wrath upon our sins.
The worshipper innovates ways to appease the gods.	God ordains and prescribes the way to atone for sin.
The sacrifice is an animal, vegetable, mineral, or a human.	The sacrifice is ultimately God himself in human form.

Progressive revelation of substitutionary atonement

The term “progressive revelation” means that God revealed his plan of salvation *gradually* over time. Substitutionary atonement is not something that Jesus or the apostles made up (contrary to this charge by many Jews and Muslims). God taught this theme with increasing specificity throughout the Old Testament, through hundreds of specific predictions and foreshadowing types, so that that the New Testament can say that Jesus’ substitutionary death was “according to the scriptures” (see 1 Cor. 15:3). That’s why Jesus showed disciples that the whole Old Testament was filled with passages that predicted his substitutionary death (Lk. 24:26,27,44-47). That’s why Paul said this message was “witnessed by the law and the prophets” (Rom 3:21). This growing stream of revelation provides the context for understanding the *meaning* and *significance* of Jesus’ death, and also *validates* His death as the predetermined plan of God. Let’s begin with some of the Old Testament passages.

BEFORE JESUS’ DEATH:

Clothing for Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21): Adam and Eve were ashamed of their nakedness after they sinned, and sought to cover their shame by dressing in fig leaves (3:7,8). God rejected this way of dealing with their guilt by providing clothing made from animal skins. Was God teaching Adam and Eve that a death had to occur for their shame and guilt to be truly covered?¹

¹ "Immediately after their rebellion, (Adam and Eve) were now afraid and tried to cover themselves. But in verse 21, God took this covering away and gave them a coat of skins . . . This indicates, I believe, that man could not

SUMMARY: *Death of animals provided to cover our shame and guilt?*

Cain and Abel's offerings (Gen. 4:3-5): God had apparently already instructed Adam and his children that they must approach him through sacrifice. Why was Abel's sacrifice acceptable? It was offered by faith (Hebrews 11:4). (This attitude may be reflected in the description of Abel's offering as "firstlings" and "fat portions"—was Abel's costly offering an expression of his trust in God?) Cain's sacrifice was evidently rejected because it was not offered by faith. (Is this why his sacrifice is simply referred to as "an offering?") Was Abel's sacrifice also acceptable because it was animal (inferred from later revelation), and was Cain's offering unacceptable because he insisted on approaching God his own way, through the fruit of his own labors?

SUMMARY: *God instructed humans to approach him through faith and a sacrifice that he prescribes.*

Noah's sacrifice (Gen. 8:20,21): Noah had obviously been instructed about animal sacrifice—including which animals were "clean." This sacrifice is connected with the idea of sinful people avoiding God's judgment—God accepted this sacrifice and promised never to destroy the earth by flood again. Because of inherited human depravity (8:21), we are dependent upon God's mercy and forbearance. The sacrifice is probably thus a picture of *how* God extends that mercy.

SUMMARY: *God extends mercy to sinful human beings through his chosen sacrifice.*

Abraham's offering of Isaac (Gen. 22:1-18): Abraham and Isaac had knowledge about animal sacrifice, including what would serve as an acceptable animal (22:7,8). God orchestrated this event, in part, as a prophetic picture of the way he would provide a sacrifice for our sins:

- 22:14 is a prediction that God would one day provide his sacrifice on Mount Moriah. Mount Moriah is the site of Jerusalem, the Temple (2 Chronicles 3:1), and Jesus' death.
- God, like Abraham, offered up "his son, his only son, whom he loved" (22:2). Jn. 3:16 probably purposefully echoes this wording.
- Jesus, like Isaac, in obedience to his Father carried the instrument of his own death to the site (22:6; Jn. 19:17).
- Jesus offered himself voluntarily in faith (22:7-9), just like Isaac likely did. Isaac was old enough to carry wood for the sacrifice up the mountain. It is unlikely that Abraham in his old age could have forced Isaac down on the altar.

stand before God in his own covering. Rather, he needed a covering from God—a covering of a specific nature—a covering that required sacrifice and death, a covering not provided by man but by God . . . It is my opinion that this was the beginning of the Old Testament sacrificial system looking forward to the coming of the One who would crush Satan's head . . . God himself provided this picture." Francis A. Schaeffer, *Genesis in Space and Time, The Complete Works of Francis A. Schaeffer, Volume 2* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1982), p. 75.

- Isaac's deliverance from death was a prophetic type of Jesus' resurrection (22:5; see Heb. 11:19).
- Isaac was the progenitor of the promised “seed” (Gen. 12:3). Through this event, God explained further *how* God would make his blessing available to all the nations—through the offering of his fully obedient Son (22:16-18).
- Jesus was likely the “angel of the Lord” who stopped Abraham from killing Isaac (22:12). he is distinct from God (“I know that you fear *God*”), but is somehow also God (22:12 – “you have not withheld your son from *Me*”). Even as he prevented Isaac’s death, he knew that he would later submit to his own death so that we might be saved from the death we deserve.

NOTE: Although Abraham evidently did not yet know this, God later made it very clear that he detested child sacrifice as a form of religious worship (Lev. 18:21; Jer. 32:35). It is not, however, morally objectionable for God to require the life of sinful human beings. He will require this ultimately at the Final Judgment, and he required the life of his own Son in order to spare us of this judgment.

SUMMARY: *The location (Moriah) of the future sacrifice; the identity (only Son) of God’s Substitute; a picture of the horrible cost of this blessing; a picture of resurrection*

The Passover meal (Ex. 12:1-14): This became the great Spring festival for Israel. The good news was that God was going to judge Egypt so that Pharaoh will let God's people go (11:4-8). The bad news was that the Israelites would be judged also—unless they observed this ritual. If they did observe it, his judgment would “pass over” those houses. Note these key elements in the ritual meal:

- The sacrifice must be *without physical defect* (12:5).
- The sacrifice must be *killed* (12:6). The *blood* of the sacrifice (proof of its death) is why God's judgment “passes over” (12:7,22,23).
- The Israelites were to display the blood, eat in haste (unleavened bread), and dress in readiness to demonstrate their faith that God would deliver them through this sacrifice. In other words, they appropriated God’s provision by faith.
- God commanded that they celebrate Passover yearly as a memorial (Ex. 12:14,26,27). He also commanded them to celebrate Passover *in the land* (12:25). God eventually specified that Passover must be celebrated *in Jerusalem* (Deut. 16:5,6; 2 Chron. 6:6). This has prophetic significance, as we shall see.

SUMMARY: *Substitute must be without defect; individuals must place faith in the death of the substitute to avoid judgment; location of sacrifice (Jerusalem).*

The Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:1-22**): This Fall festival teaches several important lessons:²

² INSTRUCTORS: You may find it helpful to use overheads that show the layout of the temple and the contents of the Ark of the Covenant.

- Aaron's sons (16:1) were killed because they offered "strange fire" (Leviticus 10:1-3). We may come into God's presence *only* in the way which he prescribes—or else his holiness will consume us.
- The high priest was the only one who could enter the Holy of Holies, and he had to dress and bathe in a way which symbolized purity (16:4). He symbolized God's chosen mediator. The high priest had to offer a sacrifice for his own sins (16:11), which was one of the inferiorities of this symbolic system (Heb. 7:26-28).
- The Ark of the Covenant (16:7-10,15-17) was a box a little larger than a family-size cooler (roughly 45"x27"x27"). It resided in the Holy of Holies, a cube-shaped room (15'x15'x15') in the center of the tabernacle. The phrase "Ark of the Covenant" literally means the "box of the evidence." The contents of the Ark were an indictment against the sins of the people (MANNA: rejection of God's provision – Ex. 16:32-34; ROD: rejection of God's leadership – Num. 17:10; TABLETS: rebellion and stubbornness – Deut. 31:26,27).³ The Ark was covered by a lid called "the mercy seat." Two cherubim (angels often associated with God's righteousness) were attached to the mercy seat, one on either end. They faced each other and looked down onto the top of the mercy seat. Their downward look apparently symbolized God's focus on the sins of the people.
- Two goats were used as sin-offerings representing the nation of Israel (16:5). The fact that they were chosen by lots for their roles (16:8) teaches that the sacrifice is chosen by God rather than by humans. The fact that they were offered to the Lord at the doorway of the tent of meeting may emphasize that God is communicating substitutionary atonement to all the people. It may also foreshadow Jesus' public death.
- The high priest killed one of the goats and offered its blood on the mercy seat ("mercy" means literally "to cover" or "to atone") to atone for the nation's sins that year (16:16,17). The high priest emerged alive from the Holy of Holies, signifying that God has accepted the sacrifice. He then laid his hands on the other goat and confessed Israel's sins—symbolizing the identification of their guilt with the sacrifice. Then he chased the animal off to the wilderness—symbolizing that the guilt of their sins had been sent off because of the atoning death of the substitute (16:20-22).
- The Day of Atonement is a powerful symbol of God's provision for dealing with our true moral guilt—God removes our sin from us through the death of a substitute. The fact that this sacrifice had to be reenacted year after year indicated the insufficiency and temporary nature of the system (Heb. 10:1-4).

³ INSTRUCTORS: See Exodus 25:10-22 for a detailed description of the Ark. We are assuming that when the ark was in the tabernacle, it contained manna, Aaron's rod, and the Law (see Ex. 16:33-34; Num. 17:1-11; Ex. 25:16; 31:16; Heb. 9:4). But when the ark was moved to Solomon's temple, the ark apparently only contained the tablets of the law (1 Kings 8:9).

SUMMARY: *Greater development of separation caused by sin; removal of guilt through the death of a substitute; the priest is a mediator who must be “clean;” the emergence of the priest from holy of holies signifies God’s acceptance of the sacrifice*

The Anonymous Servant (Isa. 52:13-53:12**): This passage shows that God never viewed the animal sacrifices as efficacious in themselves. They were always a prophetic picture of God's chosen Servant—a blameless Jewish person whose voluntary death would pay for the sins of both Jews and Gentiles. This passage is the culmination of four passages about the Suffering Servant (42:1- 9, 49:1-13, 50:4-11). Note the repeated emphasis on substitutionary atonement:

- 52:14,15 “. . . he will sprinkle many nations . . .”⁴ The death of the Servant (Jesus) will be the basis of forgiveness for the whole world.
- 53:5 “. . . pierced through for our transgressions . . . crushed for our iniquities . . . by his scourging we are healed . . .”
- 53:6 “. . . the Lord caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him . . .”
- 53:8 “. . . he was cut off out of the land of the living for the transgression of my people, to whom the stroke was due . . .”
- 53:10 “. . . if he would render himself as a guilt offering . . .”
- 53:11 “. . . my servant will justify the many, as he will bear their iniquities . . .”
- 53:12 “. . . he himself bore the sin of many . . .”

NOTE: Why is the Servant described in the past tense? This is a stylistic device ("prophetic past tense"), in which God often describes future events in the past tense to emphasize his sovereignty over human history (see Jer. 51:24-32). Furthermore, the passage indicates that this Servant's death is a future event (see “will” in 52:13-15; 53:11).

NOTE: What about the view that the Servant is the nation of Israel? 53:8 says the Servant is killed “*for* the transgression of my people.” Also that he is righteous (unlike Israel), and that he is described as an individual, not as a nation.

SUMMARY: *God will send a blameless human to atone for humanity's sin; he will die and be resurrected.*

John the Baptist’s description of Jesus’ mission (Jn. 1:29): John the Baptist (the last Old Testament prophet) declared that Jesus was the fulfillment of the symbolism in the sacrificial system and the stream of prophecy predicting that a man would come and “take away” (*airo* - “bear”) the sin of the world.

⁴ INSTRUCTORS: Some commentators translate the Hebrew word *nazah*, here translated “sprinkle,” as “to startle.” But there are good reasons for selecting “sprinkle” as the best rendering. (1) This form of the word is used in only one other place in the OT (Lev. 16:14), where it is also translated “sprinkle” (the high priest sprinkles blood on mercy seat to atone for sin). (2) In Isa. 52:15 and in Lev. 16:14, *nazah* is in the “Hiphil imperfect” form (future causitive), which is always translated “to sprinkle.” See Koehler and Baumgardner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Brill, 1995), p. 683.

SUMMARY: Jesus' substitutionary death was his main mission

Jesus' claim about his mission (Mk. 10:45): Jesus clearly understood that his substitutionary death was his main mission in his First Coming: he had come to serve and to give his life as a ransom for the many. Jesus did not go to the cross merely to be the perfect expression or example of sacrificial love. The cross *does* communicate this (1 Jn. 4:10; Phil. 2:3-8), but its primary purpose was to actually pay for our true moral guilt. Paul insists that unless Jesus' death was atoning, it was needless (Galatians 2:21).

SUMMARY: Jesus' substitutionary death was his main mission

Jesus interprets the Passover meal (Matt. 26:26-30): Understanding the way the Passover was observed yields additional insight into Jesus' statements.⁵ The Synoptic authors primarily mention the ways that Jesus diverged from the normal Passover liturgy:

- The head of the household normally passed the bread out in silence—but Jesus spoke, explaining that it represented his body/physical death for them (26:28). The covenant to which Jesus referred is the New Covenant promised in Jer. 31:31-34—that promised the day when all God's people would know him personally, when God will empower them to obey his commands, and when they receive complete forgiveness of their sins. It is Jesus' substitutionary death that makes all these blessings possible.
- They normally drank four cups—two before the meal and two afterwards. Each cup represented a different phase in Israel's deliverance from Egypt ("I will bring you out" "I will rid you of their bondage" "I will redeem you" "I will take you for my people" – Exodus 6:6,7). The third cup was called the "cup of redemption," and Jesus explained its significance in 26:28. The fourth cup was called the "cup of consummation" looking forward to God's future kingdom. In 26:29, Jesus refused to drink this cup until he comes back (see Isa. 25:6-9).
- The Jews customarily ended this meal by singing Ps. 116-118. Note especially Ps. 118:6-9,17,18,22,23, which speak prophetically of Jesus' death and resurrection.

SUMMARY: Jesus' death is the ultimate fulfillment of the Passover meal, and the means through which God brings the blessings of the New Covenant.

AT JESUS' DEATH:

All of these predictions and foreshadowings (and many, many others) came together when Jesus gave his life on the cross.

Jesus was crucified on the Day of Passover, as the ultimate Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:7).

One of Jesus' last statements from the cross was "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30), which announced that his death fulfilled God's plan of substitutionary atonement.

⁵ For more on this see William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text With Introduction, Exposition, and Notes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), pp. 504-509.

Matt. 27:45-54 narrates three unique events that demonstrated that Jesus' death was an atoning sacrifice:

- The land was covered with darkness (27:45), which signified that God was pouring out his judgment on his Son as he bore our guilt.
- The Temple curtain was torn at the moment of Jesus' death (27:51), which signified that Jesus' death had opened the way into God's presence for all who come through him.
- Dead believers were raised from the dead after Jesus' resurrection (27:52,53), signifying that Jesus' death and resurrection broke the power of sin and death.

AFTER JESUS' DEATH:

Many, many passages in Acts through Revelation ("the Lamb" 26x) expound on the substitutionary meaning of Jesus' death. Here are two important summary passages:

Rom. 3:21-28 is one of the clearest and most comprehensive statements in the Bible concerning substitutionary atonement (NLT is very readable):

- 3:21 says that the Old Testament clearly taught and predicted salvation through substitutionary atonement.
- 3: 23,24* explains humanity's dilemma (our sinfulness and God's righteousness) and concisely explains Jesus' atoning death as the answer.
- God "passed over" the sins of the Old Testament believers because of Jesus' future payment for them (3:25). They were *not* forgiven by the animal sacrifices.
- 3:26 summarizes substitutionary atonement as the way God can accept sinful people while remaining righteous himself.
- Note the repeated emphasis on faith and belief in this passage. This is not universalism (salvation for all regardless of belief), but salvation by grace alone, through Christ alone, through faith alone.
- Note the three terms Paul uses to describe the freedom we receive through Jesus' substitutionary atonement (see also Gal. 5:1):

TERM	PASSAGES	HUMAN SETTING	MEANING	SPIRITUAL RESULT
JUSTIFICATION	Rom. 3:24	Law-court	Acquitted; declared innocent	<i>Freedom from guilt</i>
REDEMPTION	Rom. 3:24	Bondage in Egypt; slave-market	Delivered by payment of ransom	<i>Freedom from bondage</i>
PROPITIATION	Rom. 3:25	Temple	Satisfaction of wrath	<i>Freedom from judgment</i>

Heb. 9:11-14,23-26 contrasts the temporary and insufficient sacrificial system of the Old Testament with Jesus' atoning death:

	LEVITICAL SYSTEM	JESUS' DEATH
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	(Old Covenant)	(New Covenant)
WHO?	<i>Sinful priest</i>	<i>Christ/Messiah</i>
WHERE?	<i>Earthly tabernacle; temple</i>	<i>Heaven; the presence of God</i>
WHAT?	<i>Animal sacrifices</i>	<i>His own blood</i>
WHEN?	<i>Year after year</i>	<i>Once for all</i>
RESULT?	<i>Ceremonial cleansing only</i>	<i>Full salvation</i>

Why is it that we no longer do animal sacrifices? Not because we now see they are primitive, barbaric, etc., but because they have been fulfilled by the most terrible sacrifice of all! And now that Jesus has fulfilled the Old Covenant system, it is obsolete (Heb. 8:13). As we covered in Christian Growth, this is why New Testament Christianity should not be ritualistic. Old Covenant worship prescribed a ritualistic approach to God in order to teach God's people the elements of redemption. But now that Christ has come and God's Spirit indwells us, God wants us to relate to him personally rather than ritualistically (Gal. 4:3-11). Ritualism (central to Roman Catholic and Orthodox worship) contradicts God's movement from ritual to personal relationship.

Concluding observations

- **Substitutionary atonement is the heart of biblical theology/soteriology. Apart from it, there is no salvation.** Any interpretation of what happened on the cross that does not include a full understanding of substitutionary atonement goes against the clear, repeated witness of scripture. Through substitutionary atonement and the cross, we see both how serious our sin problem is to God, and how much he loves us.
- **People have *always* been saved by grace through faith (Hebrews 11:2), and always through Jesus' death.** Old Testament believers were saved by faith in Jesus' *future* death; we are saved by faith in his *past* death. The main differences between us and Old Testament believers are that we know more clearly *how* God made this payment, we know it *has been made*, and we have the *Holy Spirit*.

Memory Verses

Leviticus 16** – The Day of Atonement is a clear example of substitutionary atonement for the nation of Israel.

Isaiah 53** – This passage makes it clear that the Old Testament sacrificial system must be fulfilled by a Person—the Servant of the Lord.

Romans 3:23,24* – All humans fall justly under God's condemnation because of their sins, but all humans are acceptable to God if they receive Jesus' atoning death for their sins.