

# The Great Exchange

*My Sin for His Righteousness*

An Exposition of the Atonement of Jesus Christ  
Patterned after *The Apostles' Doctrine of the Atonement*  
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# Contents

Foreword	9
Preface	14
Introduction	19

## *Part One: Christ's Atonement: Overview and Context*

1. The Unique Qualifications of the Apostles	29
2. Christ's Atonement: The Apostles' Summary	34
3. Atonement Foreshadowed: The Old Testament Sacrifices	48
4. Atonement Expected: The Old Testament Prophecies	60

## *Part Two: The Apostle-authored Scripture on Christ's Atonement*

5. The Acts of the Apostles	75
6. The Epistles of Paul on "the Righteousness of God"	82
7. Romans	93
8. 1 Corinthians	126
9. 2 Corinthians	143
10. Galatians	156
11. Ephesians	172
12. Philippians	182
13. Colossians	186
14. 1 and 2 Thessalonians	192
15. 1 and 2 Timothy	198
16. Titus	201

17. Hebrews	205
18. 1 Peter	250
19. 1 John	263
20. Revelation	272
Conclusion	279
Appendix:	
An Outline of the Doctrine of the Atonement	289
Notes	291

## 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*,<sup>1</sup> 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.

Part One

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**CHRIST'S ATONEMENT:  
OVERVIEW AND CONTEXT**

## The Unique Qualifications of the Apostles

**T**he word *apostle* means “representative,” in the sense of one who is sent with the full authority of the sender. After Christ accomplished the great atonement on the cross, a radical transformation took place in the lives of the apostles. Prior to the resurrection, John and Peter shunned the idea of Christ’s death whereas Paul looked on and applauded it (Acts 8:1). But once the eyes of these men were opened by Christ himself to the fact and meaning of the completed transaction and its saving effect, they were truly ready to live, suffer, and die for the message of the atonement, the gospel of Jesus Christ. But still, why should we listen to them?

We should listen because, made apostles by God, these men were uniquely qualified as divinely appointed messengers of the atonement in three ways: first, as eyewitnesses of the atoning events and personal instruction in the Scriptures given by the risen Lord; second, in their supernatural empowerment by the Holy Spirit; and third, in their unique and personal commissioning by the Lord himself.

For these reasons, the testimony of the apostles is of supreme value and worthy of our careful time and attention.

### The Apostles: Eyewitnesses

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:1–3)

The apostles were eyewitnesses to Jesus alive, then dead, then alive again. As they followed Christ for three years on earth, they often heard his teaching on the atonement; it foreshadowed the sacrifice that was to come, but at the time they understood little of this message. After the resurrection of Christ, however, they saw *promised* atonement become *fulfilled* atonement; they saw promise become fact, anticipation become reality, and Old Testament give birth to New Testament. Where they had previously “regarded Christ according to the flesh” (2 Cor. 5:16), after the resurrection they gained a revolutionary new understanding of who Christ is and the purpose of his atoning work, based on their direct experience with him.

The lips of the resurrected Christ imparted fresh oral instruction to the apostles, uniquely equipping them for their mission. Christ took pains to explain everything necessary for them to possess the most accurate knowledge of the atonement—especially by revealing how the Old Testament Scriptures described and pointed to himself and to his atoning work. This is clearly seen in this important passage at the end of the Gospel of Luke:

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that *everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.*” Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise

from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.” (Luke 24:44–48)

Notice the extent of Jesus’ exposition: “The Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms.” Jesus supplied the apostles with the keys for understanding his atoning death from three major divisions of Old Testament Scripture. The Law of Moses calls to mind the animal sacrifices for sin and the institution of priests—both symbolic of Christ’s atoning role as sacrifice and priest. The Prophets, from Isaiah through Malachi, contain hundreds of prophecies of the coming Messiah, which were fulfilled in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Psalms recall the phrases Christ uttered as the suffering Messiah. The direct interpretation of these passages by the risen Christ formed the basis and authority for the apostles’ interpretation. It provided the foundation for all that the apostles subsequently taught and wrote.

With regard to the apostle Paul, even though Jesus did not personally instruct him prior to the cross as he had done with the other apostles, Paul nevertheless learned the gospel directly from the risen Christ. We can see this clearly in Galatians 1:12, where he states, “For I did not receive it [instruction] from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ.”

Furthermore, Paul’s personal encounter with the resurrected Lord on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:3–9) and his experience of being “caught up to the third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:1–13) constitute firsthand experiences that qualify him to be counted among the apostolic eyewitnesses.

### **The Apostles: Supernaturally Empowered by the Holy Spirit**

Prior to his death, Jesus promised to send the great “remembrancer,” the Holy Spirit, to give the apostles special empowerment to enable them to accurately recall all the Lord did and taught. This is evident in John 14:26, where Jesus said, “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you

all things and bring to your *remembrance* all that I have said to you.” The Gospel of John quotes Jesus a few chapters later declaring, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:13a).

After his resurrection Jesus again assured the apostles that this promise of divine power would be fulfilled, saying “Behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). The Holy Spirit, with his infinite power capable of flawlessly evoking the past from the cache of human memory, resuscitated all the words and deeds of Jesus necessary to display his person and explain his atoning work. Furthermore, the Holy Spirit exerted supernatural influence on the human authors of the Bible so that they composed and recorded God’s message to mankind without error. He fixed the words in the apostles’ minds, mouths, and pens with precision and clarity for our benefit (2 Pet. 1:21). Therefore, we are not listening to the words of mere men, but to the words of God. It would behoove us to listen.

### **Uniquely and Personally Commissioned by Christ**

Not only were the apostles eyewitnesses to the resurrection and later supernaturally empowered by the Holy Spirit, but they also were personally sanctioned by Jesus, who had said, “Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me” (Matt. 10:40). Clearly, the importance and authority of the apostles’ writings as canonized in New Testament Scripture cannot be overstated. All they declared and wrote is divine revelation and no less true than if it had been personally spoken by Christ himself. To disregard apostolic writing is unthinkable and unwise, since Jesus personally and emphatically commissioned them.

Following the completion of the redemptive work of Christ, the apostles, in their teaching, preaching, and writing, put the great atonement in its proper place as the central article of Christianity. They proclaimed the work of the atonement finished for all time, never to require repetition (Heb. 7:27). It was left to the apostles,

under the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit, to interpret, apply, and further develop Christ's teaching on all points, including the great doctrine of the atonement. Their role extended to defending the doctrine against the heresies that arose in many of the early churches, as well as those appearing right up to the present day.

Some have argued that in order to restore Christianity to its original simplicity, one should abide exclusively by the "red letter" words of Jesus. Others maintain that the apostles altered the truth of Christ's message. The church must be vigilant to mark and oppose such false teachings, because to disregard the apostles is, without a doubt, to disregard not only them, but also the one who chose, taught, commissioned, and sanctioned them. As Jesus said, "The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (Luke 10:16).

Thus, direct experience with Jesus combined with the supernatural empowerment of the Holy Spirit and the apostles' personal commissioning by Christ provide a threefold assurance of a full conformity between the teaching of Christ and the God-breathed writings of the apostles. The writings of the apostles can therefore be trusted as infallible and inerrant witnesses to the truth of Christ's great atonement; they should be regarded as equal in reliability and importance to the teachings of Christ.

## 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).