

Romans - Commentaries by Frank Binford Hole

Foundations of the Faith: Key Teachings, Atonement: Its Meaning and True Character (5:11)

The atoning character of the death of Christ is of transcendent importance.

No truth contained in Holy Scripture has suffered more from those who handle the Word of God deceitfully. We shall do well, therefore, to devote a chapter to it.

The word atonement is found only in the Old Testament. Its one occurrence in the New is a mistranslation. We refer to Romans 5:11, where the margin of a reference Bible shows reconciliation as the alternative reading, and this latter is, without any question, the right translation.

In the Old Testament it is frequently used, and it is an interesting and significant fact that the Hebrew word for it— kaphar— is one which has as its root meaning “to cover.” This at once links it on with the whole burden of Scripture testimony that sinful man is exposed by his guilt to wrath and condemnation, and therefore needs that which will cover him in the sight of a holy God. The significance of this will, however, become plainer as we proceed.

Directly Adam fell and sin came into the world it became manifest that a guilty sinner needs covering. The sewing of the fig-leaf aprons and the hiding behind the trees of the garden proclaimed it as being the instinctive feeling of the guilty pair. Even more loudly did God’s own action proclaim it when He made “coats of skins and clothed them” (Gen. 3:21). Skins, notice, which meant that death fell upon some animals that the sinful pair might be covered. Abel’s faith seized this first revelation of the divine way of covering a sinner, and hence in chapter 4 we read of his offering a firstling of his flock when drawing near to God. Covered by the death of that offering, “he obtained witness that he was righteous” (Heb. 11:4).

Traveling down the course of time we reach the flood; and here again the need of a covering when God’s judgment is poured forth was very evident. In the ark Noah and his family were covered. Gopher wood was all around them, and not a crack was left, for the instructions were to “pitch it within and without with pitch” (Gen. 6:14). Significantly enough the very word used in the Hebrew for “pitch” is one closely related to the word for “covering” or “atonement.” The covering in Noah’s case was complete. Yet even so he did not recommence his career on the cleansed earth apart from sacrifices of blood— (see Gen. 8:20).

Subsequent to Noah the patriarchal age was reached, and we find these men building their altars to the Lord and offering sacrifices as the basis of their relationship with Him. Judging by the record in Genesis it appears, however, that as time went on the energy of their faith declined and such sacrifices became less and less frequent. Abraham was far more active in this matter than any of the others. They had no definite command from God as to it, but they evidently acted in the light of Noah’s great sacrifice of the seventh of the clean beasts and clean fowls— those odd ones over and above the three couples— provided for in the divine instructions.

Still following the course of time, we reach the era of Israel’s servitude in Egypt, and during this period of eclipse we have no record of any sacrifices at all. Directly, however, the Lord commissioned Moses to deliver them the word was, “Let us go... that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God” (Ex. 3:18), and this led up to the sacrifice which stands out preeminently in the Old Testament— that of the lamb on the original Passover night as recorded in Exodus 12. Here again, clearly, the firstborn of Israel were covered when the stroke of judgment fell upon the firstborn of Egypt.

From this point the divine scheme of atonement by blood came fully into the light— as fully, that is, as it is found in Old Testament scripture. Brought out of Egypt and in the wilderness the law was given to Israel, and sacrifices of blood were the chief cornerstone of the whole legal system then instituted. As the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, “Almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission” (Heb. 9:22).

The use of the word almost in the verse just quoted would lead us to expect a few exceptions to the general rule. One such exception was found in the law concerning the taking of a census in Israel, as given to us in Exodus 30:11-16. Here, instead of the shedding of blood, the offering by every man of a small silver coin was commanded. Read this passage carefully for it affords very helpful evidence as to the true meaning of atonement.

If a man was to be numbered amongst the children of Israel, and in that way be acknowledged by God as one of His people, he could only be so on the ground of there having been made an atonement for his soul— that is, as a sinner his soul must be covered ere it came under the divine eye. The half-shekel of silver was the coin appointed as the “atonement money.” Rich and poor alike had to offer it, for all alike were sinners with no difference between them, and it was not a question of the intrinsic value of the coin.

Had that been the point then incalculable wealth would not have been sufficient, and Moses would have had to ask with Micah, “Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil?” The small silver coin was just a token and nothing more.

But, a token of what? A token representing the animals that otherwise had died in their stead, and therefore a token of the fact that every man of Israel was a man of forfeited life, and consequently he must be ransomed, that is, bought back from the servitude to sin into which he had fallen, before he could be numbered.

But perhaps these two points need a little amplification. Turn, then, to 1 Peter 1:18: “Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold...” — the inference being that their fathers had been so redeemed. But when had they been? The answer evidently is— their redemption was always purchased thus. If a pious Israelite desired to be right with his God then must he always be expending silver and gold in the purchase of sacrificial animals which brought him by death that measure of redemption which he knew. Now at the census time God did not require, as we might have surmised, the death of sacrificial animals on an immense and national scale. Rather He cut down His requirements to a minimum, if we may so say, and only demanded this small silver coin from each man as a token that sacrifice was needful.

But the atonement itself: what was the nature and character thereof? This, too, is made very clear in the law of the census. The half-shekel which each was to give is called “the atonement money.” Its object is twice stated in the words “to make an atonement for your souls,” and once it is put in these words: “Then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul unto the Lord.”

Pay attention to this. False theories of atonement abound, and every one of them aims at emptying the word of its proper meaning and filling it with a meaning more pleasing to the tastes of fallen human nature, but foreign to Scripture.

Our passage gives us clearly its Scriptural meaning and usage. That which makes atonement, or covering, for the soul is that which ransoms the soul. But why this necessity of ransom? Because the soul is forfeit owing to sin. And what is the nature of the forfeit which lies upon the soul because of sin? The extreme forfeit of death. That which ransoms the soul, by lifting the forfeit that lies upon it, is therefore the only thing that makes atonement.

And what will lift the forfeit of death? This is the supreme question. The death sentence stands alone in its gravity and weight. We have never heard of the death sentence having any alternative equivalent. There is no alternative to it in the eyes of law, because it has no equivalent. Nothing but death can meet the death sentence. In other words, nothing but the yielding up of life can meet the case of the one whose life is forfeit. The shedding or pouring out of the lifeblood is the pledge and guarantee of life being yielded up. Hence the fact that the doctrine of the blood runs like a scarlet thread through Scripture until it reaches its climax in the cross as recorded in John 19:34. Here we reach historically “the precious blood of Christ.”

The meaning of atonement and its true character were thus developed in Old Testament scripture; and yet when we turn to such a New Testament scripture as Hebrews 10:1-3 we are fully assured that there was no intrinsic value in any of the offerings of which the Old Testament speaks, for at best they were but types, shadows of the antitype, the substance. They had a value just as any promissory note payable so many months after date, or other form of paper currency has value, in view of its being ultimately realizable in hard cash. The actual worth of that promissory note for £1,000 viewed as a piece of paper with ink traced upon it may be well under one penny. Its potential value at due date is exactly £1,000. So with the sacrifices of old: their intrinsic value was trifling, and their value lay in their being pledges of the coming of that great sacrifice of the ages which was accomplished at the cross.

The atoning death of our Lord Jesus Christ lies right at the heart of everything. Its value is as infinite and incalculable as is the glory of His essential deity. The preciousness of His blood can only be estimated by the dignity and purity of Him who shed it. We were tainted by sin, and being defiled beyond remedy had forfeited our lives. He was God, and having become Man, proved Himself even as Man to be holy, harmless, undefiled, One upon whom death had no claim. And then He of the unforfeited life, He who both as God and as Man had every title to live, being Himself the very Fount and Origin of life, laid down that life for us of the forfeited lives. Here is the miracle of miracles indeed!

Two other observations we would make. The first is: how poor and paltry are all those false theories as to atonement when compared with the truth as we have it in Scripture. What sublime heights of divine love are seen in the cross of Christ! How supreme and conclusive the vindication and display of God’s righteousness there!

Proud men, who have no wish to own themselves under the forfeit of death, may ridicule God’s Word and denounce atonement by vicarious suffering and death as wrong, but they have nothing to put in its place that does not violently infringe all that is righteous and holy and true. They remain satisfied with their own schemes only because they obstinately close their eyes to the true facts of the situation. Once admit the facts of man’s utter ruin and God’s essential righteousness and truth, and no solution is possible but that of the vicarious sufferings, the atoning death, of Christ. In His cross, and there alone, every divine attribute was harmonized as regards its dealings with sin. All was brought to balance and rest. There it was that “Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other” (Psa. 85:10). And because these seemingly opposite attributes of God have met harmoniously in the cross, they meet with equal harmony in the experience of the ransomed sinner, and will yet meet harmoniously in a redeemed earth in the millennial age.

Lastly we would say, remember that the word atonement does not exhaust the meaning and fullness of Christ’s death. It is, as we have said, an Old Testament word. When we come to the New Testament we find a great expansion of this fundamental truth. Indeed, we must remember in regard to every divine reality or fact that no one word, or one side of the matter, fully sets it forth. Divine things are too big to be grasped in one embrace by finite minds.

“Vicarious atonement” is a phrase often used, and to it many modern theologians raise great objection. Just what is the meaning of it?

A “vicar” is a substitute or representative—the Pope claims to be Christ’s vicar on earth, for instance— and hence the adjective vicarious simply means substitutionary. By vicarious atonement we simply mean an atonement wrought by One who stands in the room and stead of those for whom He suffers. Their sins are expiated in His blood.

Those who object to vicarious atonement generally prefer to treat the word as if it were at-one-ment. Is there any real basis for this alteration?

None whatever. In the first place the meaning of a word is to be decided not by its derivation but by its use; and the use of the word in Scripture is with the meaning of making satisfaction for sin by enduring the penalty, and therefore expiating, and not with the meaning of reconciling. For instance, the word prevent, according to its derivation, would mean to come before or anticipate. When the Authorized

Version was made in 1604 A.D., its use agreed with its derivation, and hence the translators inserted it in Matthew 17:25 and 1 Thessalonians 4:15. Today it is never used in its derived sense but always as meaning to hinder. If we always insist on taking words according to their derivation we shall have some strange misunderstandings before we are done!

Secondly, there is the fact, to which we have before alluded, that the word atonement is the translation of the Hebrew word, kaphar, which means "to cover." The translators of the Bible nearly always chose atonement as their rendering of the word, just a few times using other words such as reconcile, pacify, purge, etc. The using of the word at-one-ment every time would not have altered the fact that God originally spoke of covering what was sinful by sacrifice, and that that is His meaning. The worst of it is that the men who mislead, by thus juggling with the spelling of atonement, are not usually men who are in ignorance of these simple facts.

Can you explain at all why the word "atonement" does not occur in the New Testament?

The only suggestion we have to offer is that the Old Testament deals with truth in a general fashion with more or less shadowy outline, whilst in the New we have it in far more clearly defined shape and fullness of detail. Atonement is a word which gives us the truth of the gospel in its general outline. The New Testament furnishes us with propitiation, justification, and other terms which give us the truth with greater precision, and it is therefore simply full of what atonement signifies, though the actual word does not occur.

Nothing has been said as to the perfect life of our Lord. What part did that play in the work of atonement?

No part at all, save in an indirect way. He "bare our sins in His own body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). Atonement was made on the tree and there alone.

Again we read: "The Son of Man came ... to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28). "His life," someone may exclaim, "see it says 'His life a ransom for many.'" True but that is not all it says. He "came... to give His life." It was the giving of His life— the yielding of it up in death— that affected the ransom. The perfection and spotlessness of His life made the offering up of it so acceptable to God, and thus was one of His great qualifications for the sacrificial work. He was indeed the Lamb "without blemish."

It has been commonly taught that the death of Christ puts away our evil, but that His life of perfect law-keeping is reckoned to our account and forms the positive righteousness in which we stand. Is this doctrine of "the imputed righteousness of Christ" scriptural?

It is not. The very term "righteousness of Christ" is not found in Scripture. "Righteousness of God" we do read of, and also that righteousness is imputed to the believer in Christ dead and risen, just as it was imputed to Abraham of old (see Rom. 4).

Do we cast, then, any doubt on the righteous life of our Lord? Nay, on the contrary we affirm that His obedience and devotedness as set forth in that matchless passage in Philippians 2 far exceeded any righteousness demanded by the Law of Moses. But we also affirm that the teaching of Scripture as to the believer's relations with the law is not that Christ kept the law for us, but that He "redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13), and in so doing He redeemed us from "under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal. 4:5)

We had broken the law, and Christ bore its curse for us that we might never bear it. But to say He kept the law for us— which would lead to our saying He did so, that we might never keep it!!— that emphatically is not scriptural. The truth is that we are redeemed from the law itself as much as from its curse, and as now sons of God we have Christ Himself as our rule and standard and not the law.

Nor is it the teaching of Scripture that a certain amount of Christ's law-keeping is credited to us before God, but that cleared by Christ's atoning death we now are before God in the life and standing and favor of the risen Saviour. We are "in Christ Jesus" "accepted in the Beloved" a vastly higher thing.

The only passage that might seem to support the idea of Christ's imputed righteousness is Romans 5:12-19. But here the whole contrast lies between Adam's one act of sin and disobedience and Christ's one act of righteousness and obedience clearly His death, though we would not exclude from our thoughts His whole career of righteousness and obedience which culminated in His death.

A very important question is this: Does Scripture make known to us any atonement apart from blood?

A very important question indeed, and the answer is none whatever.

We would even go one step further and say that Scripture knows of no atonement apart from shed blood.

Deut. 12:23 tells us that "the blood is the life." Leviticus 17:11 says "the life of the flesh is in the blood." These two passages make quite clear what the meaning of blood is according to Scripture, and the latter verse ends with the words: "It is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul."

As we have already seen, an exceptional case such as Exodus 30 can be found where silver did duty as representing the sacrifices that could be purchased with it, but when we come to the great atoning work of Christ, of which all Old Testament atonement was but a type, it is "not... with corruptible things, as silver and gold... but with the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18, 19).

No atonement, then, apart from the blood of Christ and apart from that blood shed, for the verse already quoted in Leviticus says, as to the blood, "I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls." The blood in the veins of the animal destined for sacrifice accomplished nothing. It was its life, truly, but only as given upon the altar, i.e., as shed sacrificially, did it make atonement and that only in type. All hinges on the death of Christ. Not life merely, but life yielded up, atones.

There is undoubtedly great objection in the minds of many to the doctrine of the Blood. Can you explain why?

The explanation is not far to seek; it lies in their refusal to admit that man is a creature of forfeited life.

They will admit readily enough that man is not what he ought to be. They view him as a victim of misfortunes and cursed with an unpleasant environment; but with a life that is ever struggling upward and thereby evolving itself into finer and yet finer planes of existence.

God's word, on the contrary, reveals him as originally perfect yet speedily corrupted by sin, and that corruption so deep-seated and irremediable that the forfeit of his life becomes a necessity.

Believers in the innate goodness of man naturally reject the truth of atonement by the Blood of Christ. Those who know their own lost and ruined state gladly receive it as their only hope. There is no Unitarianism in the Bible.

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Foundations of the Faith: Key Teachings, Propitiation and Substitution (3:23-26)

The Old Testament abounds with types of the sacrifice of Christ, but not until we come to the doctrines of the gospel as set forth in the Epistle to the Romans do we meet with the first of the two words that stand at the head of this chapter. The words themselves express the two great aspects of His atoning death.

First, let us recall that all sin is against God. It affects Him and not only us who are sinners. Truly, it ruins us and brings us under the power of death and judgment; but it is also an outrage upon His holy nature, a flouting of His authority, an attempt to dishonor Him in the sight of His creatures. Hence the sacrifice of atoning virtue must not only be such as shall relieve the sinner by removing his sin, but shall also, and first, meet all the demands of God's holy nature, and of His righteous throne, and so thoroughly vindicate Him.

This is clearly recognized as a righteous principle amongst men. If an offense arises between two parties both are affected, and the first consideration must be for the offended party. Take the matter of debt, for instance. The debtor, if a right-minded man, is oppressed. He acknowledges the debt but cannot pay it and is miserable. We are sorry and anxious to relieve him, but we must not expend all our pity upon him. What about the creditor? He perhaps is not a man of wealth and cannot afford to lose what is rightly his, and hence he is oppressed as much, if not more, than the debtor.

How can the situation be relieved? Only by the intervention of a third party in such a way that the creditor's claims are properly met. The deliverance of the debtor follows as a matter of course. There can be no question as to the relative order: it is, first the creditor's claims, second the debtor's necessities.

All this is quite simple, yet when we turn to the work of Christ, with which we as sinners are so vitally concerned, how easy for us practically to forget God's side of the question in occupation with our own. Let us observe the way in which the death of the Lord Jesus is presented in Romans 3 and 4 as an antidote against this.

The first two and a half chapters of that Epistle reveal the total bankruptcy of mankind, and from Romans 3:21 we read of the steps God has taken to meet the situation; for the great Creditor Himself has acted in the matter. What has He done? He has manifested his righteousness in such a way that it rests as a shield of protection "upon all them that believe" (v. 22) instead of falling upon them as an avalanche of destruction as we might have expected.

But where was righteousness of this kind manifested? we may well ask. The answer is— at the cross.

But how? we further inquire. What particular feature in and about the cross of Christ accounts for righteousness of this character? What is it that has enlisted God's righteousness on our side, and not merely sheltered us by the wing of compassion and mercy from the onslaught of the righteousness which otherwise would condemn? The answer is: propitiation.

At the cross God "set forth" the Lord Jesus "a propitiation through faith in His blood" (v. 25). The word used here is "propitiatory" or "mercy seat" not propitiation exactly but rather the place where, under the law of Moses, the propitiation was made. The force of this will be apparent if we turn to Leviticus 16 where we have the appointed order of the offerings on the great Day of Atonement in Israel, which occurred annually on the tenth day of the seventh month. On that day the high priest slew a bullock as a sin offering for himself and his house, and a goat as a sin offering for the people. The blood of these two victims was not applied in any way to the people, but was carried into the holiest of all and sprinkled on and before the mercy seat, and later was sprinkled on the altar of burnt offering. Thus in type God's claims were met and His character vindicated in view of the sins of the people.

What the mercy seat was in this typical system, this region of shadows, the Lord Jesus is in the great reality itself. The mercy seat was the place where God met with man (see Ex. 25:21-22) and He is the One in whom God has put Himself into touch with men in a manner and degree altogether unknown before. All, too, has become effective "in His blood" just as the "mercy seat" only became effectively a seat of mercy because of the sprinkled blood. Otherwise it would have speedily proved itself to be a seat of judgment.

What, then, is the effect of Christ's propitiation as recorded in Romans 3? Just this, that God has been vindicated as regards His dealings with sin and with sinners, as shown in verses 25 and 26. In times past He had passed over the sins of His saints in anticipation of those sins being dealt with at the cross; in this present gospel age He is not merely "remitting" or "passing over" sins, but positively justifying believers in Jesus. Propitiation thus fully made, His righteousness in both these actions is fully declared. No voice can now for one instant be rightly raised to criticize what He has done. Before the death of Christ unbelief might question, though faith, even when confronted with God's dealings which seemed most perplexing, always said with Abraham, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?"

Still, now such a question is needless. He has done right. In Christ's propitiatory work we see every satisfaction due to divine righteousness and holiness rendered in supreme and surpassing degree. We see every sanction of the law upheld, and every attribute of the divine nature displayed in harmonious completeness.

The consequence of all this is that God now presents Himself to men universally as a Saviour-God. Verse 22 of our chapter speaks of "the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe... for all have sinned." The preposition "unto" indicates the scope or bearing of the thing in question, whereas "upon" indicates rather its actual effect. The need to which the gospel addresses itself is absolutely universal. No less universal is the bearing of the gospel offer. The actual effect of the gospel is more limited; the words now are "all that believe." The gospel offer in its universality thus rests upon propitiation as its basis. Because God has been completely satisfied as to all that sin is and has done, and therefore every hindrance on His side is removed, He presents Himself to man universally as a forgiving, a justifying God. Except, however, the hindrances upon man's side be removed hindrances such as pride, self-complacency, and unbelief the gracious gospel offer does not come to fruition. It is only when a sinner comes to repentance and faith in Christ that divine righteousness is "upon" him in blessing. Justification belongs to "all them that believe," and to them alone.

But this brings us to the second aspect of Christ's atoning death. The actual word "substitution" does not occur in Scripture. That which the word expresses is found again and again: indeed in one Old Testament chapter it is found quite ten times. We refer to Isaiah 53. In one verse of that chapter we get it four times: "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon Him; and with His stripes we are healed" (v. 5).

The essence of substitution is that one is put in the room and stead of another, and each of the four clauses of this great verse contains that idea. The great and glorious "He" stands in the room and stead of the poor and sinful "us." The transgressions and the iniquities were ours; the wounding and the bruising were His. Ours are the peace and the healing; His were the chastisement and the stripes that purchased it.

Now if we turn to the closing verse of Romans 4 and the opening verse of Romans 5 the same truth confronts us, only stated with a clearness of detail impossible in Old Testament times. "Jesus our Lord... was delivered for our offenses and raised again for our justification. Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Here note again the "our" and the "we." He truly was delivered up to death and judgment, but it was for our offenses and not for everybody's, though as the propitiation He has settled the whole question of sin so that the gospel can be offered to all. He was raised again for our justification, i.e., the justification of all who believe; for we are "justified by faith," as the next verse shows.

When we consider Christ's death in its substitutionary aspect, then, we are looking at it not from God's side but from ours. The point is not how His sacrifice has satisfied the Creditor, but rather how fully He has intervened on behalf of the debtors and of the full clearance which is theirs as a result; always bearing in mind that only those who believe can reckon upon Him as their substitute.

An illustration may help to set the two aspects more clearly before us. Years ago a popular accident insurance scheme was much advertised in the daily press as offering benefits for practically nothing. All you had to do was to give a definite order for the paper in question to a newsagent, and then register as having done so. "A registered reader is an insured reader," is what one of the papers said.

"How very simple!" you might have exclaimed, "have I nothing to do beyond that?" Nothing! But you must not overlook the fact that the newspaper proprietors had a very big thing to do before the offer was made. The thousands of little registration transactions cost but the stamp that posts them to the office, but behind these lies the great transaction when the newspaper proprietors drew the big check running into many thousands of pounds in favor of the insurance company that undertook the liability.

Now that big premium payment, in view of which the offer went freely forth to all buyers of the paper, is not a bad illustration of propitiation. The offer of God's forgiveness goes forth on the ground of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice, and its scope and bearing is nothing less than all men.

When the premium was paid no questions, as to any particular individuals benefiting under the scheme, were raised. The point was that the insurance company was so satisfied that it was able to issue the offer upon a sound basis.

The act of registering under the scheme was on the other hand, purely individual. After all, only the registered reader was the insured reader, and therefore only the one who had registered had the right to speak of the premium paid by the proprietors as a substitute for the premium they otherwise must have paid, had they as individuals approached the insurance company to insure against similar risks. The registration very well illustrates what takes place when a sinner turns to God in repentance and faith. He registers, so to speak, under God's great salvation scheme. Such an one alone can rightly speak of Christ as being a Substitute for himself, and bearing his sins in His own body on the tree.

We have not labored this point at unnecessary length, for it is a matter of vast importance. The gospel can only be declared with clearness and consistency by those who see the relative place of propitiation and substitution, and thus make the former the great theme of their preaching when addressing themselves as heralds to men at large, and give to the latter its distinctive place as instruction to those who believe. And, further, a correct grasp of these things goes a long way towards solving those intellectual difficulties which so many have found in putting together the two things equally taught in Scripture the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man, connected with the free offers of God's grace.

By some propitiation is derided upon the pretext that it reduces God to the level of some heathen deity who is supposed to be only kept in good temper by sacrifices of blood. How would you answer them?

By asserting two things. First, that the teaching of the Bible is not that God is ill-disposed toward us, a frowning Deity to be continually pacified by propitiatory sacrifices which change His feelings toward us. That is the corrupt heathen conception. The Bible presentation of the truth runs thus, "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Far from our having to change His heart toward us by a propitiatory sacrifice, His heart which is toward man is the very source

of all our blessing. Our sins had made propitiation necessary, but He Himself provided the necessary sacrifice.

Secondly, we point out who the propitiation was. He “sent His Son.” One who Himself was God became the propitiation! A profound mystery, surely, but how far removed from the degrading heathen ideas which have been quoted. Propitiation emphatically was not needed to change God’s heart from being against us to being for us. It was rather the most perfect expression of His love. This the Apostle points out, exclaiming, “Herein is love!”

If propitiation was not needed to change God’s disposition in regard to us, in what did the necessity for it lie?

The answer is: in the essential holiness of His nature and the righteousness of His throne.

It must never be forgotten that God is the supreme Governor of the universe. If He permits any moral laxity, any deviation from strict righteousness, who will maintain what is right anywhere? God’s righteousness, maintained unflinchingly and without compromise, is the sheet anchor upon which everything depends. If that drags the whole universe would drift upon the rocks of utter wrong.

Therefore it is that the maintenance of righteousness and holiness always stands first with Him, and nothing in the way of blessing can reach sinners except their every claim and demand is first met.

Propitiation is the meeting of all those prior claims in such full fashion that instead of righteousness being totally against man it is now “unto all” (Rom. 3:22). On the ground of propitiation righteousness stands, as it were, with outstretched arms bidding any and every man to find shelter in its bosom. And the propitiation itself is the fruit of the love of God.

With propitiation we generally connect the idea of appeasing wrath. Is this correct in regard to God?

Clearly it is. Righteousness and wrath stand closely connected as a matter of eternal fact. Wrath gives sanction to righteousness and enforces it. Without it righteousness would be impotent. The practice of government amongst men is an illustration of this. No matter how righteous and virtuous a government may be, without powers and penalties to enforce its decrees it comes to grief.

Righteousness and wrath are also closely connected in Scripture. Verses 17 and 18 of Romans 1 are a proof of this.

In the presence of sin God’s righteousness has tremendous claims. He also has infinite power and will execute wrath and vengeance as Romans 2:2-9 states.

Does the fact of propitiation authorize us to go to any man and tell him that his sins are forgiven?

It does not. It quite authorizes us to go to any man and tell him that Christ has died for him, and consequently forgiveness is preached to him (Acts 13:38). This we can do because as a propitiation He gave Himself “a ransom for all,” He died “for the ungodly.” The forgiveness of sins, however, is the portion of those who believe only, inasmuch as it involves substitution.

Forgiveness may indeed be freely preached to all men, but only those who believe are forgiven.

The Lord’s parable of the two debtors in Luke 7 would seem to imply that Simon, the unbelieving Pharisee, was as much forgiven as the penitent woman. Is this interpretation of the Lord’s words a correct one?

Our English translation runs: “When they had nothing to pay he frankly forgave them both” (v. 42), and this quite seems to support the interpretation you name. But, as a matter of fact, the word used here and translated “frankly forgave” in verse 42 and “forgave” in verse 43 is one which means to be gracious or favorable to; whereas the word used by the Lord in verses 47 and 48 is the usual word for forgive, meaning to send off or away. Any good concordance, such as Young’s or Strong’s, will show you this.

The creditor of the Lord’s parable was gracious to both debtors in view of their bankrupt condition, just as God, on the ground of propitiation, is at the present acting in grace towards all men, and presenting to them in the gospel forgiveness of sins.

The woman who drew near to Jesus with tears of repentance and faith had her sins actually forgiven. “Thy sins are forgiven” — i.e., sent away— dismissed. That was never said to Simon the Pharisee.

Does not such a statement, such as “Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many,” make it appear that Christ only died for the elect?

Such a scripture views His death strictly from the standpoint of substitution and is concerned only with the actual effects of His work amongst men. From this standpoint He bore the sins only of those who believe, and these are the elect.

A similar scripture is: “The Son of Man came... to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Here again the actual result of His death amongst men is in question. But we also read: “The Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all” (1 Tim. 2:5, 6). Here, taking up the standpoint of propitiation, the value of His death before God is in question, and hence the scope and bearing of His death towards all men comes into view.

Does not the teaching that Christ died for all logically lead to universal salvation?

The teaching that Christ died as a Substitute for all would obviously lead to universal salvation as a logical conclusion; but the Bible teaching is not that, but that He is the propitiation for “the whole world” (1 John 2:2). This no more involves the ultimate salvation of everybody than the newspaper’s big premium payment involved the definite insurance of every one of its readers.

It did involve this: that every reader was eligible for the insurance and had the offer of it; just as propitiation involves an open door into salvation for all, and a worldwide gospel message.

But definite insurance was secured by registration. "A registered reader is an insured reader," was the slogan adopted. We may take upon our lips the statement that "a repentant and believing sinner is a forgiven sinner." This, thank God, is the truth of the gospel.

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Foundations of the Faith: Key Teachings, Future Punishment: Its Character and Duration (2:1-16)

There is no point within the whole compass of divine truth where human thoughts and opinions are of any value. But at no point is it more necessary to rigidly exclude them than from the solemn subject which is now to occupy us. Immediately the punishment of sin is in question we are all of us alert and inclined to make our voices heard. We are none of us disinterested spectators, but rather in the position of a criminal in the dock being tried for his life. Now a criminal is never an unprejudiced judge of his own case, neither are we in this matter of future punishment. So let us begin by recognizing the very natural warp of our fallen reason in relation to this theme, and resolving to close our minds to our own thoughts as to what ought to be, and to listen to the plain declarations of what is going to be, given to us in Scripture by God the Judge of all.

It may be well to begin at the very beginning and inquire if the Bible indicates that there is to be such a thing as punishment at all? There are not wanting those who would do away with the whole idea in relation to God's government of His creatures, just as there are also those who are always inclined to bewail the bitter fate of the assassin when brought face to face with justice, whilst having scant sympathy, or none at all, to spare for his victim!

Read carefully Romans 2:1-16, and you will find that Scripture testifies with no uncertain sound to the reality of future punishment. There is such a thing as "the judgment of God." That judgment is going to be expressed in "wrath" in the coming "day of wrath." It is going to probe beneath the surface of things in that day and deal with "the secrets of men." And if any should inquire what exactly "wrath" may mean, we are told in further detail when it is said that to those contentious, and who do not obey the truth, God will render "indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish" (v. 9), and that without any respect of persons.

There is nothing surprising in these statements. They are guise after the analogy of those dealings of God's government which are visible to us. He most evidently has attached temporal penalties to sins, which are often clearly to be seen in this life. Why not, then, the full and proper penalties in the life to come?

Another question now comes up for settlement. Granted that the future punishment of sin is a reality, what is to be its character? Is it remedial and reformatory, or is it penal and retributory? A very important question, for the answer to it will go a long way towards settlement of the subsequent question as to its duration. If punishment in the life to come is with the object of making its subjects better, it stands to reason that it cannot be forever.

Is future punishment spoken of in Scripture as an instrument of reformation? Is hell to be a great penitentiary, designed to effect that betterment in recalcitrant mankind which the preaching of grace never effected? We unhesitatingly answer, No.

Not only do we answer, No, but we go further and assert that at no time do we find reformation produced by God's dealings in judgment. In Egypt God dealt with Pharaoh, increasing the severity of His strokes. Was his heart softened? No, it was hardened. Later, God dealt in the same way with His apostate people Israel as He said He would in Leviticus 26. After foretelling some of the dreadful calamities to come He says in verse 23, "If ye will not be reformed by Me in these things... then will I... punish you yet seven times for your sins." Were they reformed? No; the extremes punishments indicated came upon them as a nation. Concerning future judgment we read in Revelation 16:11 how men will blaspheme the God of heaven because of their pains and their sores, and will not repent of their deeds.

Today, thank God, men do repent, but why? Because, as Romans 2:4 tells us, it is "the goodness of God" that leads to repentance. But it is this very chapter that asserts that if men do not suffer the goodness of God to take them by the hand and lead them to repentance, they will find themselves seized by the severity of God and brought to judgment.

We do not need to go outside that passage to discover what character the judgment of God bears. It is said to be "against them which commit such things," for they are "worthy of death" according to the last verse of Romans 1. The sinner is asked if he thinks that he shall "escape the judgment of God." This language is not that which befits reformation but points clearly to retribution.

The fact is, this idea that hell is a kind of penitentiary, which is hardly distinguishable from the purgatory of the Romanist, cuts right at the roots of the gospel. Salvation never has been, is not today, and never will be by reformation. Salvation is by faith and on the ground of the penalty and retribution of sin having been borne— of old typically in connection with the sacrifices, now borne really and fully by the sacrifice of Christ Himself upon the cross.

Salvation by a reformation which, it is claimed, the fires of hell will produce, might be conceivable if it were accomplished today by a reformation which the gospel produces. Since, however, it is today only to be found in the bearing of sin's righteous penalty and retribution by another, the Lord Jesus Christ, it could only be found in eternity by a similar bearing of the penalty, and this will never be; for Christ will not suffer again, and no sinner can take up the penalty and exhaust it. If a sinner passes under sin's penalty, under it he must remain forever.

No Scripture referring to future punishment treats it as a matter of reformation, and a great many of the passages are so worded as clearly to negate that idea, and show it is a matter of retribution. As an instance of this latter class take 1 Peter 4:17-18. That Apostle asks, "If it [judgment] first begin at us [Christians] what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God? and if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear?" He evidently knew well enough that no one with any show of truth could turn round and say, "Why, of course, the end of those that obey not the gospel will be just the same as that of those who obey: the ungodly and sinners

will ultimately appear, refined by age-long fires, in the same heaven as the godly and the saints.”

That which lies ahead of the ungodly and sinners as their end is “judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries” (Heb. 10:27).

Now we approach the fateful question: Does Scripture indicate that this coming fiery indignation of God against sinners will be forever? The answer is that it clearly does so.

Take as one example out of many scriptures, Matthew 25:46. The words we allude to were spoken by the Lord Himself as the climax of His description of the judgment He will execute on the living nations assembled before Him, as He begins His millennial reign. “These shall go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal.”

That particular judgment, then, will have a twofold issue. It will be either life or punishment. Life in its full and proper sense will embrace all that aggregate of privileges, relationships, and blessings, the crown of all being the knowledge of the Lord, of which the earth will then be full. Punishment will embrace all those woes and penalties which are appropriate to the state of sin in which men generally are found, and to the individual sins of those in question, including the crowning one of the rejection of the divine testimony through those whom the King acknowledges as His brethren. And both the life and the punishment are eternal. No one seems anxious to prove that eternal life is not eternal. Multitudes labor to explain that eternal punishment is not eternal. Why? It is simply a case of the prisoner in the dock revolting against his sentence! Apart from such prejudice— natural enough, but very fatal if indulged in— there is no reason for denying to eternal in the first half of the sentence what is freely admitted as to it in the second. Scripturally both parts stand or fall together.

This scripture is only one out of many that might be cited, from the solemn warnings of our Lord as to the worm that never dies and “the fire that never shall be quenched,” in the gospels, to the awful words as to “the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death,” in the last book of the New Testament. There really is no doubt as to what is the testimony of Scripture on the point, though the attempts to juggle with its words and make them give another voice have been, and still continue to be, without number.

With all the ingenuity that has been expended and wasted in this way only two alternatives to eternal punishment have ever been imagined. The one is that in some way or other all will finally be saved. This is known as “universalism.” The other is that man naturally just dies as the beasts that perish and that endless being and existence are only his as born again and in Christ. This is known as “annihilationism” or the “conditional immortality” theory.

Now one verse of Scripture— John 3:36— utterly destroys both theories. We read: “He that believeth not the Son shall not see life.” The universalist theory is that ultimately, no matter how remote the age may be, he shall see life. The Lord Jesus says he shall not. He added, “But the wrath of God abideth on him.” According to the annihilationist he is non-existent and therefore not there for the wrath of God to abide upon. According to the Lord Jesus he is there and upon him the wrath abides, without any hint of a moment when it ceases to abide.

The Lord Jesus thus, with divine foreknowledge, negated these specious theories of a later age.

By this denial of the two rival theories, therefore, we come back to the solemn fact, so abundantly stated in a positive way in Scripture, that there is such a thing as future punishment, that it is in the nature of solemn retribution for sin, and that once falling it endures forever.

That the punishment of sin should be eternal is a dreadful thought. Can it be defended as just, and therefore right?

It is truly a dreadful thought, and the reality will be more dreadful still; but, then, sin is a dreadful thing. Who can measure sin’s demerit? Can we embrace within our finite minds the full bearing, the uttermost ramifications, of an act of lawless rebellion against God? No, indeed. That would be as impossible as to embrace within our arms the solar system of which this earth is a very insignificant part. Who are we, then, to form and express opinions as to what may be the just and proper punishment to fit the case?

God is “the Judge of all the earth” and He will do right. Let us quit the folly of attempting to pronounce upon what He ought to do, and rather pay attention to what He has stated in the Scriptures that He will do; for that, and that alone, will ultimately stand.

Is it, however, quite certain that the Greek word rendered “eternal” and “everlasting” in our version really has the force of “endless”? May it not just mean “age-long,” as its derivation would indicate?

As quite true that the Greek adjective *aionios* is built up from *aion*—an age, hence age-lasting may have been one of its meanings. The word, however, acquired the sense of eternal, and this is its sense in Scripture, as a good concordance will easily show you. It is used in regard to God, the Spirit, salvation, redemption, life, and many other great verities of the faith. So that we may say that except it does denote endlessness we know of nothing at all that is endless.

One of the most conclusive passages we can cite on this point is 2 Corinthians 4:18, where the Apostle contrasts the things which are seen with those not seen. The former, he says, are “temporal,” the latter, “eternal.”

Here the word eternal must be used in the sense of “having no end,” otherwise it would be no true contrast to temporal, which means “having an end.” The seen things may endure for many thousands of years— for ages, as we speak. They may be age-long but they have an end. The unseen things abide not for ages merely, but forever. They have no end.

Here, then, we shall surely find used the true and proper word for eternal if the Greek language possesses it, and not merely a word meaning “age-lasting.” We turn up a Greek Testament, and what word do we find? Could proof be stronger that in Scripture usage *aionios* means eternal in its true and proper sense?

Some people think that eternal punishment cannot be reconciled with the fact that God is love, and therefore they refuse to believe it. Is there any force in this argument?

None whatever. The Scriptures reveal equally both facts, so that those who speak thus are really leveling their accusation of inconsistency at the Bible.

As a matter of fact, however, there is no inconsistency at all, but the very reverse. The strongest possible abhorrence is quite consistent with the strongest possible affection; we would indeed go further and say it is inseparable from it. It is impossible to regard any one with deep love and not heartily hate all that imperils that person in any way.

There is nothing, therefore, incompatible with God's love in His declared purpose to segregate all that is evil in eternity. At present good and evil seem hopelessly mixed in this world. A day is coming in which they will be finally disentangled. Good will bask in the sunshine of His favor. Evil will lie eternally beneath His frown. Thus, evil, eternally shut up in its own place, and enduring its just penalty, will no longer be able to threaten the peace and blessing of God's redeemed creation.

No one regards the isolation of smallpox patients or the still more sorrowful life-isolation of lepers as measures incompatible with benevolence amongst men. Why, then, object to God acting with similar intent in eternity?

Hell is sometimes painted in such lurid colors that minds are revolted. Is there foundation for this?

Imagination has, we fear, often run riot with this solemn subject, and people sometimes mistake Dante's "Inferno" for the hell of the Bible. This has furnished a useful handle to those who would deny the whole subject. The Bible speaks as ever in the language of reserve and restraint, yet the glimpses it gives are full of terror and it evidently is not intended that they should be otherwise.

To be incarcerated in sin's great prison house for all eternity in conscious torment will be a fearful thing, and it is the kindness of God that plainly warns us of sin's consequences.

Moreover, it is evidently God's way to have a memorial of sin's effects, even when those effects are otherwise not visible. During the millennial age, for instance, when the face of the earth will be smiling with abundant fruitfulness, and mankind will be richly blessed, there will be certain spots of which it is written, "they shall not be healed; for they shall be given to salt" (Ezek. 47:11), and also in some way "the carcasses of the men that have transgressed" against the Lord will be preserved so that men shall "go forth and look, upon" them (Isa. 66:23, 24). It will be salutary for those blessed in that delightful age to have before them reminders of sin's former havoc both in nature and amongst men.

May there not be an analogy between God's action in such matters and His action in the far greater matter of an eternal hell? Who can affirm that the solemn doom of the lost in the lake of fire may not have some such service to render throughout eternity?

Is it clear from Scripture that the souls of men are immortal? The doctrine of eternal punishment can hardly be maintained apart from that.

In Scripture the adjectives "mortal" and "immortal" are applied to man's body, and we do not find the phrase "immortal soul." Yet it is quite clear that the soul, or spiritual part of man, survives death. Our Lord said, "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul" (Matt. 10:28). He used here a word of strong force, meaning "to kill utterly or entirely." A feeble man may easily thus kill the body of another, but the soul is immortal and eludes him. The Lord added, "fear Him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell," and here He changed the word and used another, which means, "to mar or ruin, as regards the purpose for which a thing exists." It is the word used for perish in John 3:16, and for the perishing of the bottles in Matthew 9:17. It is also used in Matthew 27:20, when we read of the leaders persuading the multitude "that they should ask Barabbas and destroy Jesus." A very clear proof this, that destruction does not mean annihilation.

The whole verse teaches, first, that the soul is not mortal like the body, and, second, that in hell God intends not to annihilate, but to bring down into ruin, the whole man, both soul and body.

The soul, therefore, is immortal, for man has it in connection with spirit, receiving it by the divine in-breathing as Genesis 2:7 records. Becoming a "living soul" in this fashion, man is not as the; beasts which perish.

There are many who argue that just as death is ceasing to exist, so the lake of fire, which is the second death, must imply total cessation of existence. Is this reasoning sound?

Viewed as a piece of reasoning, it is about as feeble and fallacious as can be. Were we to reply in a reasoning vein, we should simply observe that if death is ceasing to exist then there can be no second death. You can't cease to exist in any proper sense, and yet exist so as to cease to exist in a second death! What strange things men will say in their efforts to overthrow the plain truth of God.

Yet, superficially, the statement has the appearance of being a real objection. This is derived from the giving of a false value to one of the great words of Scripture, i.e., death.

This word occurs first in Genesis 2:17, and Genesis 3 is the record of how the death sentence fell on our first parents. Its use in the Bible is constant until we reach the last chapter but one of the New Testament, where we find "a new heaven and a new earth" where "there shall be no more death," and yet at the same time "the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death." Now, right through, we affirm that death never means "ceasing to exist," but always has the force of separation: either, the separation of the creature spiritually and morally from God, in which sense men are "dead in trespasses and sins"; or the separation of soul and spirit from the body, which is death physically; or yet again the final separation of the whole man, if unrepentant and unsaved, from God and all that is good and bright and worth possessing, in the lake of fire, and that is the second death.

The first use of the word death in Genesis 2 and 3 clearly bears this out. God threatened Adam with death on the day of his disobedience. Adam disobeyed and lived on to the age of nine hundred and thirty years. Was it, then, an idle threat? Not at all. The day he sinned he died, in the first sense of the word, i.e., he became totally separated and estranged from his Maker, "dead in sins." His physical death was deferred inasmuch as the Lord brought death that day upon some other denizen or denizens of the garden and clothed the guilty sinners with their

skins. Centuries after, physical death supervened. Adam then passed out of all touch with this world, but he exists as regards God. As the Lord Himself said, "all live unto Him" (Luke 20:38).

We therefore repeat with emphasis: death, in Scripture, does not mean "ceasing to exist."

So many people, apparently true Christians, cannot accept the teaching of eternal punishment. Is it of such great moment whether they do or whether they do not?

Seeing that all the items of God's truth are not so many isolated fragments, but one whole, each item being like a stone of an arch, it matters much. Knock out one stone and you never know which will go next.

Suppose that, after all, eternal punishment is a mistake, then whichever alternative view we adopt we must at least conclude that sin is a matter much less grave than we had supposed; that its demerit, though perhaps considerable, cannot be infinite. That being so, we need not suppose that an infinite sacrifice is needed to atone for it, nor, consequently, that it must be necessary for a Person of infinite worth and value to become that sacrifice. Logically, therefore, we can abandon without difficulty the great truth of atonement by blood, and of the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. We could quite consistently and conveniently become of Unitarian persuasion.

And as a matter of fact and history, it is to Unitarianism, full-blown, that the denial of eternal punishment has always led, though not all advance to the final conclusions with giant strides.

That is why the denial of eternal punishment is a matter of such gravity.

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