

## **The Cross Road: Atonement Theology 101**

**Series: *The Meaning of Jesus; John 12: 20-26***

Historical facts about the life of Jesus are few and far between. One of the few corroborated facts is that Jesus was crucified, executed on a Roman cross, around the year 30 in the Common Era. The cross remains, in many ways, at heart of Christian faith. It represents that the brutal power of the Roman Empire was turned upside down.

What do we do with the reality of the cross in our faith today? This always important Question is particularly relevant now. Next week is Palm Sunday and Holy Week, with Good Friday. Two weeks from today is Easter. This is the season of the most important Christian festivals.

Let me ask a question. What is the meaning of “atone”? It means to make right or to reset. For what do people need to atone? Usually, we atone for mistakes, errors, and actions that injure. Sports offer many examples of people working to atone by making a good play after making a bad one.

When you make atone a noun, by adding “ment,” you have a religious word. Atonement has to do with how Jesus restored the broken relationship between Israel and Yahweh, between God and all people. There are, of course, different understandings about the nature of humanity’s brokenness and of how Jesus restored the relationship with God. Following is a brief introduction to this issue. Let’s call it: Atonement 101.

There are two different, yet compelling, explanations to understanding atonement through Jesus. The two primary issues involved are: how was his death atoning, and how self-aware was Jesus regarding his role as Messiah and the implications of his death?

Theologian N. T. Wright believes that Jesus was very much aware that his death would be the key event in the rescue of Israel from future suffering. He understood that his death would bring about the ultimate end of Israel’s exile, a final reconciliation with Yahweh, and the defeat of evil itself. He was also aware of himself fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies. When the apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians that Christ “died according to the scriptures,” he meant that Jesus was self-aware of fulfilling prophetic predictions concerning the Messiah in his life.

Wright’s believes that Jesus was the “hinge of eschatological forgiveness” in God’s cosmic timetable. It was his death that ushered in God’s new creation. Jesus’ death enabled the exodus, not only of Israel, but of all creation from bondage to corruption, decay, injustice, and greed – the “sin of the world”. It is worth remember that Jewish tradition of that time did not focus on personal sin, but rather the corporate sin of Israel in terms of her covenant relationship with Yahweh. Jesus’ death affect the systemic evil in creation.

Theologian Marcus Borg offers a compelling alternative view. He believes that the Gospel portrayal of Jesus’ death as the whole point of his life is a post-Easter interpretation of Jesus. For evidence, he points to the tremendous shock Jesus’ death caused among his followers. They clearly didn’t see it coming.

Borg does not see the ancient Hebrew prophets as offering predications of a far future Messiah that were fulfilled in Jesus. These prophetic words were tools the Gospel writers used, looking back after Easter, to interpret the meaning of Jesus’ life. Anyone’s death can have a certain atoning power, but that doesn’t make death the whole point of their lives. We must ask ourselves, “Was Jesus’ life secondary?” Were the teaching and healing secondary in importance to his death? Pre-occupation with Jesus’ death tends to minimize Jesus’ life.

Jesus' death did have an atoning power, but not as a literal sacrifice for sin. This stands in some opposition to what is often believed to be the orthodox view: that Jesus lay down his life to take the punishment God intended for us, enabling our forgiveness. Neither Wright nor Borg see it this way. In truth, this was not the original understanding either. The sacrificial image in relation to Jesus' death was an image from the Jewish temple. With regard to Jesus, his sacrificial death meant the end of the need for sacrifices.

The Gospels tell us the temple cloth was torn. There is now no more institutional control of forgiveness. Jesus' death reveals the radical nature of God's grace.

There are some choices for interpreting the nature of atonement. Wright and Borg offer two contrasting and compelling options. Both affirm the atoning power of Jesus' life and death. We really cannot know for sure how *self aware* Jesus was. My understanding is that this atoning power was present in the whole *Jesus event*. His life, teaching, healing, death, resurrection, and continuing presence are all vital to his atoning work.

Jesus inaugurated God's new creation, the new age, in the midst of a present age filled with injustice, violence, and despair. Jesus made startlingly clear that ultimate reality is characterized by what we call love, and that relationship with God is waiting for everyone. Forgiveness is free.

Why is atonement important now that we've left behind the ancient world of Temple and covenant? In today's world, forgiveness/atonement has the effect of setting us free from whatever binds us. We become free to love and free to live. The power to forgive does not lie with human institutions: temple or church. God gives it to us. Jesus shows us the incredible freedom in God. Atonement is not guilt to hold over our heads and weigh us down. It is love freely given. Forgiveness is always in play for the purpose of freeing us up and energizing us to live large, to be like Christ, to be all we can be.

What is the meaning of atonement to us today? It is a good thing to trust that the universe is disposed toward us with love. It doesn't stop there, however. Atonement does mean that God and humanity are one: at-one-ment. But there is more. Look at the early Christians and how they loved each other. That love turned the world upside down.

Atonement concerns not only relationship between God and people. It characterizes relationship between people and people. The same dynamic is at play. Remember, God's presence is in each one of us: every person, all of creation.

The biggest problem in our world today is characterized by these words: factions, distrust, hatred, resentment, and separation. Today's biblical text says, "unless a grain of wheat dies," it can't be reborn and bear fruit. Reconciling with someone after a long period of deep resentment, estrangement, and bitterness – forgiveness can feel a little bit like dying. It involves dying to self in order to bear the fruit of reborn relationship. Such forgiveness can lift a huge weight off our shoulders.

We have an example here at Crossroads Church with the need to forgive in relation to events leading to the split from our former church. There are probably still hard feelings for some that only slowly fade. It is vital to forgive. There is a danger of remaining stuck in feelings. Our ability, as a congregation, to move forward is made possible by our willingness to move toward forgiveness. We need to die to self: to forgive and reconcile in order to grow.

Another example is happening right now. We've been on some pretty tight budgets the last two years. This discipline has enabled us to purchase this wonderful building. At the same time, it's hard to run programs with virtually no budget. A couple of weeks ago, the projector died. A projector is pretty basic to the style of worship of this congregation. The work group

responsible for worship then made a mistake. They procured a new projector on behalf of the congregation before getting an okay from the congregation. The result of this wrong action has been some hard feelings and some *parking lot* conversations. The groups primarily involved have been working through the particulars. They have been able to understanding why this happened and ensured that it won't happen again. There has been confession and reconciliation. There will be a community meeting next Sunday to take action about the projector. We need to remind ourselves that, even if it feels like dying to self, forgiveness and reconciliation are essential in order to grow.

Is there someone in your life you need to forgive? Is there someone whose forgiveness you need. I invite you to hold that person in your mind and in your heart. Reconcile with them as soon as you can -- even today.

There are times when pleas for forgiveness fall on the deaf ears of the harshest judge of all – ourselves. It is vitally important that we forgive each other. In being forgiven, relationship is restored and new life is experienced. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of atonement, however, is the need to forgive ourselves.

Ultimately, the search for forgiveness involves a plea to forgive ourselves for: the stupid things we've done, failing to be good enough, not achieving at a high-enough level, or failing in relationships. There is good news. All is forgiven in God. All is forgiven in the community of the Spirit. The challenge of the cross to us is to learn to accept forgiveness. Only forgiven and forgiving self is free to step up to new life, to be able to be that person God created you to be.

Theologian Paul Tillich has written:

We cannot transform our lives, unless we allow them to be transformed by that stroke of grace. Grace strikes us when we are in great pain and restlessness. It strikes us when we walk through the dark valley of a meaningless and empty life. It strikes us when we feel that our separation is deeper than usual, because we have violated another life.... It strikes us when our disgust for our own being, our indifference, our weakness, our hostility, and our lack of direction have become intolerable to us. f. It strikes us when, year after year, the longed-for perfection in life does not appear, when the old compulsions reign within us, when despair destroys all joy and courage.... Sometimes, at that moment, a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: "You are accepted. [You are acceptable]." (*The Shaking of the Foundations*, 1961)

There are so many negative voices within us. It can be so hard to hear that voice that whispers to your soul, "You are my beloved on whom my favor rests." Christian author Henri Nouwen writes

The world is filled with voices that shout: 'You are no good, you are ugly; you are worthless; -- unless you can demonstrate the opposite'. These negative voices are so loud and so persistent that it is easy to believe them. The greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power. It is self-rejection. My dark side says: "I am no good. I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected and abandoned." (*Life of the Beloved*, 1992)

Hear the voice of the one whose love for you stretches all the way to Calvary, who whispers in your ear, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly." Break through the chains that bind you. Follow me and live.