**Biblical Theology**

Lesson 16 – A Biblical Theology of Atonement

**Garden of Eden**

1. After Adam and Eve sin and before they are kicked out of the garden, Genesis 3:21 reads, “And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.”
2. The Lord kills the first animals after sin/death enters the world and takes their skin and covers Adam and Eve’s nakedness. They had tried to cover themselves with leaves but that was insufficient. The Lord needed to cover them, and He covered them by the death of an animal.
3. This points forward to and anticipates the animal sacrifices that would come later in the Mosaic covenant. The language of “garments of skins” also is priestly in nature and linked to the priestly garments of the high priest. Exodus 28:4 says, “These are the garments that they shall make: a breast piece, an ephod,…” The priests in the tabernacle/Temple had to be properly clothed before God in order to serve Him as called. Exodus 28:42 says, “You shall make for them linen undergarments to cover their naked flesh. They shall reach from the hips to the thighs.” Leviticus 8:13 states, “And Moses brought Aaron’s sons and clothed them with coats….as the Lord commanded Moses.”
4. Genesis 3:21 also says that God “made” these skins and clothed them. He had ceased from all that He had “made” in Genesis 2. God had ceased from all of His creative activity, but now that sin/death is in the world, He begins His redemptive activity through “making.”
5. Also notice that the animals die specifically so that Adam and Eve as sinners can be clothed. There is a connection between the one that dies and those who are beneficiaries of that death. In other words, we see not only substitutionary atonement here in Genesis 3 in seed form, but we also see “definite/limited” atonement in seed form.
6. So, we have a priest being covered by God with garments and animal sacrifice because of sin.

**Old Testament After the Fall**

1. In Genesis 22, the Lord provides a ram to substitute for Isaac, Abraham’s son (Gen 22:13). Notice the connection between the ram that dies and Isaac being the beneficiary of that ram’s substitutionary death. Ishmael did not receive the benefits of that ram’s death, neither did others in Abraham’s household; just Isaac. Also notice that the Lord provided the ram just like He provided the animal skins for Adam & Eve.
2. In the Exodus, the Passover lamb’s blood was shed and its blood spread over the doorposts so that all in the household would be spared as the angel of death passed over. Again, a lamb’s death substituted for the death of the firstborn of Israel, but where there was no substitute (for Egypt), there was the death of the firstborn.
3. According to Exodus 29:38-42, 2 lambs were to be sacrificed daily to the Lord, one in the morning and one in the evening. John Owen asks, “Why would people kill good and useful animals and offer them to God except to acknowledge their own worthiness of death and need for a substitute to receive punishment in their place?”
4. For the whole burnt offering, Aaron was to place his hand on the head of the burnt offering which signified the transfer of sin and guilt to the animal which was then sacrificed (Lev. 1:4). The animal was dying in the place of the one who brought the sacrifice. In that sacrifice, the bringer of the sacrifice had his sins atoned for; him and him alone (or his household). On the Day of Atonement, Aaron killed a bull for his own sins and that of his family, then killed a goat to make atonement in the Holy Place because of the sinfulness of the people, then Aaron would place both hands on a live goat and confess over that live goat the sins of the people. Leviticus 16:21 says, “And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness…”
5. Deuteronomy 21 provides an interesting example in the case of an unsolved murder. The elders of the nearest town to where the victim was found was to take a heifer and break its neck and confess that they had no involvement or knowledge of the murder. Then they were to pray “Accept atonement, O Lord, for your people Israel, whom You have redeemed, and do not set the guilt of innocent blood in the midst of your people, so that their blood guilt be atoned for” (v. 8). The death of the heifer substitutes in the place of the people when the crime is unsolved and the criminal unknown.
6. The Messiah as the Suffering Servant was also prophesied in terms of a substitutionary sacrifice in Isaiah 52-53. “He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (53:4). “He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities…and with his wounds we are healed” (53:5). Notice the specificity of his substitution in that it is for “our” transgressions and “our” iniquities.
7. So, in the OT we have a priest wearing God-designed garments and animal sacrifices because of sin. The animal substitutes specifically for the nation of Israel and not other nations and/or the animal substitutes specifically for an individual’s sins and not another’s sins.

**New Testament**

1. Jesus identifies His work as both substitutionary and definite. He says in John 10:11, 14, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. … I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me.” He is named Jesus in Matthew 1:21 because “He will save His people from their sins.” Not all people, but His people. Not all, but His own. Christ in His priestly intercession in John 17 says, “I am not praying for the world, but for those whom You [the Father] have given Me, for they are Yours.” Now a priest only makes atonement for those for whom he intercedes. He also says in Matthew 20:28 // Mark 10:45 that He came to give His life as a “ransom for many.” Again, not all, but many. So in Jesus’ own words, His death is substitutionary as well as limited/definite with respect to persons.
2. Paul affirms this in his writings as well. He writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our [the Church] sake He [the Father] made Him [the Son] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we [the Church] might become the righteousness of God.” Here we explicitly see the substitutionary nature of Christ’s atoning work as well as the definiteness of it. In Galatians 3:13, he writes, “Christ redeemed us [the Church] from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us [the Church]…” Again, substitution and definiteness clearly connected together in the work of Christ. In Romans 5:8-9, “Christ died for us…we have now been justified by His blood, much more shall we be saved by Him from the wrath of God.” In Romans 8:32, “He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him us for us all [the whole Church]…” In Ephesians 5:2, “Walk in love as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us [the Church], a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.” Again, we see Christ’s work in terms of OT sacrifice for sins as well as substitution and definiteness. Frank Thielman writes, “Paul clearly understood the effectiveness of Jesus’ death as a solution to the problem of human sin in terms provided by the Old Testament sacrificial cult. He also seems to have understood that cult in largely propitiatory [atoning substitute] terms.”
3. Peter is not at odds with Paul on this. In 1 Peter 2:24, he writes, “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might dies to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds You have been healed.” Later in 1 Peter 3:18, he says, “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for [in place of] the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God…” Thielman again writes, “Peter believes that when Jesus ‘bore our sins’ as Isaiah’s Suffering Servant, He did so as an innocent substitute for God’s sinful people.”
4. John and Hebrews also understand Jesus’ death in these terms. 1 John 1:7 – “the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.” 1 John 2:2 – “He is the propitiation for our sins…” 1 John 3:16 – “By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us [the Church]….” Revelation 1:5 – “To Him who loves us and has freed us [Church] from our sins by His blood….” Revelation 5:9 – “You were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.” Hebrews says Christ makes intercession for His people (7:25), offered Himself up for the sins of His people (7:27), his blood purifies our conscience from dead works (9:14), has put away sin for all time by sacrificing Himself (9:26), and bore the sins of many (9:28).
5. And the clothing that God provides for His people is the clothing of Jesus Christ and His righteousness. Romans 13:14 – “Put on the Lord Jesus Christ…” 2 Cor 5:2 – “For in this tent [earthly body] we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling.” Galatians 3:27 – “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.” Christ is depicted as clothing and we take off our dirty, unclean rags of wickedness and sin and guilt, and put on Christ and His righteousness. So that as we serve God as a royal priesthood (1 Pt 2:9), we serve as priests with clothing that God has provided not through animal skins or priestly ephod but through Christ and His perfect righteousness covering us.

**New Heavens/Earth**

1. Because of the penal substitutionary atonement of Christ for His chosen people given to Him by the Father, the Church will be dressed in bright white (Rev 3:4-5, 18; 4:4; 6:11; 7:9, 13-14; 19:14) which corresponds to the bright white garments of Christ (Lk 9:29). The elect will for eternity be dressed in the clothing that God has provided through the Great High Priest who offered Himself up as the spotless Lamb for the sins of His particular people.

**Take-Aways**

1. Garry Williams writes, “Penal substitutionary atonement rightly understood entails definite atonement. Conversely, insistence on an atonement made for all without exception undermines belief in penal substitutionary atonement.” Is it any wonder that attacks on penal substitutionary atonement typically come from those outside the Reformed camp who do not hold to limited/definite atonement? The two doctrines are directly related to one another. If you hold to penal substitutionary atonement and a universal atonement (Arminian), then Jesus substituted Himself even for the sins of unbelievers who will never repent and believe. In that case, what are they doing in hell which Scripture conceives as unbelievers bearing their own punishment for their own sins? Some will answer that Jesus died for all their sins except their unbelief. Well, that doesn’t solve anything because you just limited Jesus’ atonement with respect to sin! If Jesus’ atonement doesn’t cover unbelief, then how is our former unbelief atoned for?
2. Joel Beeke writes, “This doctrine [penal substitutionary atonement] is the good news that God’s Word preaches to sinners so that they can know with certainty that they will never be punished for their sins, and thus to evoke faith, hope, praise, and responsive love to Jesus Christ.” Penal substitutionary atonement along with limited atonement gives us assurance that our sins have actually been taken care of by God in Christ Jesus. We are actually forgiven and clothed in the high priestly garments of Christ’s righteousness.
3. Frank Thielman concludes, “For those who consider the biblical witness to be the primary authority in shaping their own theological convictions, rejecting the substitutionary nature of Christ’s death is not a logical option.” Do not let any so-called believer or person who confesses to believe in Christ or some preacher ever try to convince you that the death of Jesus Christ was not penal and substitutionary in nature or that it was for all people without exception. Because as Thielman writes, “The only atoning sacrifice ultimately adequate to the task of removing the offence of human sin is one that God Himself graciously supplies.” It HAS to be penal and substitutionary in nature to actually take away our sins.
4. Against those who would argue that this understanding is “cosmic child abuse,” they conceive of God the Father as angry and Jesus the Son as loving which in essence creates a conflict within the Trinity. Cosmic child abuse treats Jesus as if He was unwilling to undergo the Father’s will and wrath and the Father has having to “force” Jesus to go do it against His will. But that is an impossibility. The wills of the Father and the Son are never at odds with one another. Jesus’ food was to do the will of the Father (John 4:34). The penal substitutionary death of Jesus is the will of both the Father AND the Son. The Father out of His great LOVE sent the Son into the world to die for those who will believe (John 3:16).
5. J. I. Packer writes, “Against the background of human hopelessness, Scripture sets forth the love, grace, mercy, pity, kindness, and compassion of God, the offended Creator, in Himself providing the atonement that our sin has made necessary. This amazing grace is the focal center of New Testament faith, hope, worship, ethics, and spiritual life; from Matthew to Revelation it shines out with breathtaking glory.” This doctrine magnifies the grace and glory of God which evokes worship, joy, and gratitude in us as His people for His wonderful and magnificent grace and glory.