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## AN EASTER TRILOGY (Part 2)

### GOOD FRIDAY: "LOVE ATONES"

This Friday, Good Friday, commemorates the day 2000 years ago when Jesus was crucified. Jesus' unconditional love for all people compelled Him to live and teach in such a way that from the earliest days of His ministry, He engendered the animosity of the religious and political leaders of Israel (as early as the second chapter in Mark's Gospel).

Animosity became hostility, hostility flamed into anger, and anger led to the pragmatic decision to "put Him to death" (Luke 22:2).

What about Jesus so enraged official Judaism? Jesus embodied the pure, plain, and furious love of God for all humanity. That sounds innocuous enough, doesn't it? I mean, what can be bad about just loving people? But then, as now, seriously loving people of all types can create tremendous problems.

Because Jesus loved people, He healed them on the Sabbath in violation of the Law. Because He loved people, He frequently dined with—in the ancient world a symbol of full acceptance and friendship—notable sinners. Nice people don't hang out with sinners. The parable of the prodigal son was given in response to the religious leaders who grumbled, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." His enemies condemned Him as "the friend of sinners." (When was the last time you, your church, or your pastor was so condemned?)

Jesus honored women, who had never been held in high esteem in the ancient world. He permitted "a woman. . . who was a sinner" to anoint Him. He welcomed their following and their ministry to Him.

Jesus befriended the despised tax-gatherers, spending the night with one (Zacchaeus) and calling another (Matthew) to be His disciple. He conversed publicly with a half-breed Samaritan, a serial divorcee with a live-in boyfriend. He told a woman caught in the act of adultery, "Neither do I condemn you."

Jesus loved the multitudes of the sick and diseased. He touched the lepers, literally the most despised and rejected people in society and metaphorically the most despised and worst of sinners. He loved tax-gatherers, prostitutes, half-

breed Samaritans, women, and Gentiles. He often made asocial and immoral people the heroes of His stories.

He embodied the unconditional love of God for all people. Pure love. Unqualified love. No agenda. No rules. No discrimination. No exceptions. No exclusions. He loves us all. John said in his Gospel that Jesus "explained" God to us (John 1:18), and in his epistle—after a lifetime of contemplation and wonder—his considered explanation of God is simply, "God is love" (I John 4:8).

Jesus embodies for us the love of God. And because He was uncompromising in living and teaching this radical nature of God's love, He was crucified.



The cross of Jesus is traditionally interpreted in terms of atonement, an effort to explain the actual dynamics of how sinful humanity can be "at one" with Holy God. (The term most often used in the New Testament is reconciliation.) The New Testament speaks with one voice to say that atonement is achieved through the cross of Christ.

Though the New Testament emphatically states it, it never systematically explains how atonement occurs. Theologians have traditionally sought to fill in the gaps in our understanding with what are called theories of atonement. Fortunately, the church fathers wisely chose the term theories because they recognized that atonement is beyond our capacity to fully comprehend or adequately explain.

The *ransom theory* of atonement is taken from Mark 10:45: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." The explanation is that Satan has taken us captive, and Jesus pays the ransom for our deliverance. The *satisfaction theory* of atonement explains how God's honor has been offended, resulting in His wrath against us, both of which are satisfied through the cross. The concept of the cross with which most of us have been raised through both our theology and hymnology is the *substitutionary theory* of atonement. Since "the wages of sin is death," Jesus became our substitute, dying in our place on the cross.



While theories of atonement may assist in our efforts to understand the meaning of the cross, they can also distract us from the simplicity of the central gospel message: the wonder of God's infinite love for all. In his own efforts to understand atonement, C. S. Lewis came to realize that all doctrines about God are always "less true" than the truths themselves because "the doctrines. . .are translations into our concepts and ideas of that which God has already expressed in a language more adequate, namely the actual incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection." (Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis*, Harper San Francisco, p. 149)

We can so dissect the story that we destroy its life. Perhaps this is why the biblical writers never gave a detailed explanation of atonement—the unexplained mystery is greater than an explanation of it.

The cross and the atonement are not about a transaction between God and Satan. God never trades with Satan. Neither are they about a transaction between the Father and the Son, whereby the suffering and death of the Son somehow pays a price or balances the books to satisfy a legally minded Father.

Atonement, being "at one" with God, is something that occurs between God and us, something that happens to us when we come to "comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth and [come] to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:18-19). When, by faith, we accept God's love for us, then we are "at one" with God—whether or not we understand, or even know about, the theories of atonement.

The cross and atonement are best understood not in legal terms of transactions and bookkeeping but in personal terms of *restoration* (God acts to restore the fellowship with us), *regeneration* (God gives new life to us), and *reconciliation* (God brings about a state of harmony with us). Paul didn't say that "God was in Christ paying the ransom price" or "God was in Christ satisfying legal transactions" or "God was in Christ as a substitute for us." What Paul wrote was, "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (II Corinthians 5:19).

**God is not an accountant, interested in legalities and balancing books. Jesus shows us that God is a lover, interested in reaching people with redeeming and transforming love.**

The cross and atonement are simply more about God's plain love for us than they are about complex theories. The entire life and message of Jesus are about God's love for us— love so

furious that Jesus refused to relent knowing full well that this love would lead to the cross.

So on this Good Friday—or at any other time—don't so overanalyze how it happens that you end up with something less true than the pure, unqualified, uncompromising, unending love that God has for you. Just know that God loves you, and enjoy His love.

*Could my tears forever flow,  
Could my zeal no languor know,  
These for sin could not atone;  
Thou must save and Thou alone:  
In my hand no price I bring,  
Simply to the cross I cling.*

Two thousand years later, love still atones.

*Grace be with you,  
Steve Johnson*

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