

Charles Spurgeon And The Awesome Power Of The Atonement

by Michael Wine

The blood of Jesus! Sin dies in its presence, death ceases to be death: heaven's gates are opened. The blood of Jesus! We shall march on conquering to conquer, so long as we trust its power!

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Over the centuries there have been preachers of the Bible that have rocked civilization. Preachers like Martin Luther and John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. These men were used by God to pierce the hearts of countless individuals with the Word of God and to bring them to belief and repentance. Looking back through church history, however, one preacher stands out as the prince of them all. Charles Spurgeon, the prince of preachers himself, the pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, whose writings are the most published of any Christian writer besides the Bible to this day, was this man. But after all of his accomplishments and successes, under the strong exterior, past all of the eloquence and flowery phases, was an ordinary man who had sins, shortcomings and failures. The key to Spurgeon, the secret of the passion he had for the gospel and the power behind his preaching lies not in the man himself but in the doctrine he believed. Specifically, Spurgeon held the doctrine of the atonement of Jesus Christ to be the center of his life and ministry. The thing that permeates all of his work is the fact that a person is redeemed by the blood of Jesus. He says in one sermon that "The doctrine of Redemption is one of the most important doctrines of the system of faith. A mistake on this point will inevitably lead to a mistake through the entire system of our belief." [Spurgeon, "Particular Redemption"] Through exploring what Spurgeon believed about this great doctrine in a number of his sermons and written works, we will discover again the power, love, majesty, wrath, grace and mercy of our Savior's atonement. And by sharing his high view of the atonement, our lives will be richly blessed with the same kind of fullness and power that drove Spurgeon. That is, the risen Lord Jesus Himself will dwell with us and enable us to reach the world with a proclamation of His majesty; He who died to set the captives free!

It Starts with Sin

Of course, to have a proper knowledge and admiration for the grace of God, one must have a deep understanding of the wretchedness of sin. Spurgeon knew this fact well. He says, " . . . we shall see that the redemption of Christ

was no little thing, if we do but measure it, first by our own sins.” [Spurgeon, “Particular Redemption”] This follows reason. To understand the magnitude of the salvation, one must understand the enormity of the thing to be saved from. To fully grasp the need for salvation, we must examine 1) the offensiveness of sin 2) the punishment sin deserves and 3) the imputation of sin onto Christ.

First, the vast offensiveness of sin must be meditated on in order to grasp the fullness of Christ’s atonement. Spurgeon says on this subject that, “One sin can ruin a soul for ever; it is not in the power of the human mind to grasp the infinity of evil that slumbereth in the bowels of one solitary sin. There is a very infinity of guilt couched in one transgression against the majesty of Heaven.” [Spurgeon, “Particular Redemption”] Here, there are two ways, Spurgeon says, that our sin is infinitely offensive. The first is that simply one sin can “ruin a soul forever.” This is an outrage indeed. To disfigure and distort a human soul, which is fashioned in God’s very image and of infinite worth, is infinitely offensive to God. The second way is more direct of an insult to the Almighty Himself. Spurgeon says, “There is a very infinity of guilt couched in one transgression against the majesty of Heaven.” So, when we sin, we not only ruin our own souls, we also spit at God and go directly against his will. Such offense to God cannot be ignored.

Second, God must punish this sin against Himself. It follows that since the offense is infinite, the punishment must also be. So, how serious is God about punishing sin? Spurgeon says,

There was never an ill word spoken, nor an ill thought conceived, nor an evil deed done, for which God will not have punishment from some one or another. He will either have satisfaction from you, or else from Christ. If you have no atonement to bring through Christ, you must for ever lie paying the debt which you never can pay, in eternal misery; for as surely as God is God, He will sooner lose His Godhead than suffer one sin to go unpunished, or one particle of rebellion unrevenged. [Spurgeon, “Particular Redemption”]

Every “particle of rebellion” must be punished. God would not be God if he did not punish sin. This is a crucial point in the doctrine of the atonement. Many will say, “God is love! He will forgive everyone!” Not so! Forgiveness is not possible without punishment for sin. The dilemma, then, is if every sin must be punished, that would seem to indicate that no one can be saved!

Thirdly, the answer to the dilemma is the heart of the atonement, namely, the substitution of Christ. Our sin, in fact, the world’s sin must be placed on Christ if anyone will be forgiven of the infinite offense of sin. This is what Spurgeon believed. This is what made his preaching and ministry so powerful in the lives of many people. One can almost hear his thunderous voice preaching the next words in one of his sermons,

Oh! then, beloved, think how great must have been the substitution of

Christ, when it satisfied God for all the sins of His people. For man's sin God demands eternal punishment; and God hath prepared a Hell into which He casts those who die impenitent. Oh! my brethren, can ye think what must have been the greatness of the atonement which was the substitution for all this agony which God would have cast upon us, if He had not poured it upon Christ. [Spurgeon, "Particular Redemption"]

The agony that the sins of the elect deserved was placed on Christ. He was punished as if he were guilty of the sin that another committed. Such grace is incalculable and indescribable! But this is only part of the answer to the question of, "how can I be forgiven of sin?" For, in order for a substitution of guilt to take place, the person on whom the guilt will be placed must be a perfect man, otherwise the sacrifice is void. However, all men have sinned! Therefore, God the Son had to become a man and die. "But turn aside and see this great sight!—an incarnate God upon the cross; a substitute atoning for mortal guilt; a sacrifice satisfying the vengeance of heaven, and delivering the rebellious sinner." [Spurgeon, "Christ Crucified," *Spurgeon's Sermons Volume 1*] Spurgeon, here, lays out this truth that Jesus was "a sacrifice satisfying the vengeance of heaven." This is because He was a perfect sacrifice. He was the "incarnate God" who bore the sin of man!

The Price Jesus Paid

Once one has contemplated the sin in his own heart, and once he has realized that Jesus took all the punishment for him, he must then meditate on the actual price Jesus Himself paid for him. Spurgeon emphasizes two elements that are involved in the price Jesus paid: 1) His physical suffering 2) His soul's distress.

First, the great magnitude of His physical suffering is enough to astonish any man. This next excerpt from Spurgeon's sermon, "Particular Redemption" is particularly poignant and describes, as only Spurgeon can, the physical agonies of Jesus.

And now they take Him, and with many a jeer and jibe they drive Him from the place, and hurry Him through the streets. Emaciated by continual fastings, and depressed with agony of spirit He stumbles beneath His cross. Daughters of Jerusalem! He faints in your streets. They raise Him up; they put His cross upon another's shoulders, and they urge Him on, perhaps with many a spear-prick, till at last He reaches the mount of doom. Rough soldiers seize Him, and hurl Him on His back; the transverse wood is laid beneath Him; His arms are stretched to reach the necessary distance; the nails are grasped; four hammers at one moment drive four nails through the tenderest parts of His body; and there He lies upon His own place of execution dying on His cross. It is not done yet. The cross is lifted by the rough soldiers. There is the socket prepared for it. It is dashed into its place: they fill up the place with earth; and there it stands. [Spurgeon, "Particular Redemption"]

This is the pain he willingly took for those He loved. Roman crucifixion is one of the most painful deaths imaginable. It is beyond imagining in its horror. All the children of God must regularly contemplate the price Jesus paid for them.

This, however, leads to the second element of Christ's sacrifice, namely, His soul's distress. It is almost within the limits of the human mind to imagine the physical duress His body went through. However, it is infinitely beyond the frail mind of man to grasp the torment of Jesus' soul in those final moments of His life. Spurgeon gives us a glimpse of this agony:

I can never express that thought better than by using those oft-repeated words: it seemed as if Hell were put into His cup; He seized it, and, "At one tremendous draught of love, He drank damnation dry." So that there was nothing left of all the pangs and miseries of Hell for His people ever to endure. I say not that He suffered the same, but He did endure an equivalent for all this, and gave God the satisfaction for all the sins of all His people, and consequently gave Him an equivalent for all their punishment. Now can ye dream, can ye guess the great redemption of our Lord Jesus Christ? [Spurgeon, "Particular Redemption"]

For all eternity Christians will be exploring the depths of the mystery of the cross. God's children will never cease wondering at "the great redemption of our Lord Jesus Christ." Spurgeon makes a crucial doctrinal point in this excerpt as well. He mentions that Christ did not "suffer the same" as the souls in hell. That is, He did not go into hell and be tormented with that damming fire. Instead, by taking the punishment of the sins of his people, Jesus "did endure an equivalent for all this, and gave God the *satisfaction* for all the sins of all his people." This is the price Jesus paid. He bore the wrath that was to be poured out on us. It is beyond mankind's ability to plumb the depths of this wondrous, horrible, majestic act.

The Power of Christ's Atonement

"Standing at the foot of the cross, we see hands, and feet, and side, all distilling crimson streams of precious blood." [Spurgeon, *Morning and Evening*] The riches of grace that can be found when looking at the cross and at Jesus hanging on it, bearing God's divine anger, are infinitely great. However, one can still ask the question, "What did Jesus' death really do for me? Spurgeon said it was 'precious.' What specifically makes it precious for me *today*?" Spurgeon's outlines in his devotional book *Morning and Evening* [April 16th entry] five ways the blood of Christ is precious.

Because of its redeeming and atoning efficacy

By it the sins of Christ's people are atoned for; they are redeemed from under the law; they are reconciled to God, made one with Him.

Spurgeon says the words that are at the very heart of the gospel, “reconciled to God!” We, who were once enemies, are now God’s children. Those who hated God with every particle of being are now forgiven by the blood of Christ.

Because of its cleansing power

‘Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow.’ Through Jesus’ blood there is not a spot left upon any believer, no wrinkle nor any such thing remains. O precious blood, which makes us clean, removing the stains of abundant iniquity, and permitting us to stand accepted in the beloved, notwithstanding the many ways in which we have rebelled against our God.

Often we can find ourselves inadvertently believing the lie that Jesus’ death paid for our past sins but not our present ones. We can become discouraged and weighed down by the seeming guilt of our sin. But the power of the blood of Jesus is not limited to our past sins only. It cleanses us from every stain. There is great comfort in the words “ . . . there is not a spot left on any believer!”

Because of its preserving power

We are safe from the destroying angel under the sprinkled blood. Remember it is *God’s seeing* the blood which is the true reason for our being spared. Here is comfort for us when the eye of faith is dim, for God’s eye is still the same.

This truth stands as a lighthouse beckoning the weary sailors of tribulation’s waters into the harbor the faithfulness of God. Though our faith is often weak, Christ’s finished work on the cross will never lose its strength. God will look at the sacrifice of Jesus and keep His grip on us. He will never let us go. “Here is comfort for us when the eye of faith is dim, for God’s eye is still the same.” Though we change, though we wander, God will always be faithful because of Jesus’ atonement.

Because of its sanctifying influence

The same blood which justifies by taking away sin, does in its after-action, quicken the new nature and lead it onward to subdue sin and to follow out the commands of God. There is no motive for holiness so great as that which streams from the veins of Jesus.

You who feel heavy with the weight of sin, have hope in this, the blood of Jesus can quicken your soul “and lead it onward to subdue sin . . . ” We need not fear our sinful flesh as though it can keep us from Christ. Though our strength is indeed too weak to conquer the old man, Christ Jesus conquered him for us, nailing him to the cross. We can walk with joy, trusting the God will give us the help, through Jesus, to conquer our sin.

Because of its overcoming power

And 'precious,' unspeakably precious, is this blood because it has an *overcoming power*. It is written, 'They overcame through the blood of the Lamb.' How could they do otherwise? He who fights with the precious blood of Jesus fights with a weapon which cannot know defeat. The blood of Jesus! Sin dies in its presence, death ceases to be death: heaven's gates are opened. The blood of Jesus! We shall march on conquering to conquer, so long as we trust its power!

Charles Haddon Spurgeon loved the truth that Jesus died for him. His life and ministry were flooded with the power he speaks of above. Notice that he mentions the secret of knowing the power of the atonement in one's life. He says, "As long as we *trust* its power!" This is the key to it all. This is the most important lesson to be learned from Spurgeon. To be sure, he had sound doctrine. He was the pastor of a flourishing church, and he preached to tens of thousands of people at once. He had an outstanding mind that could formulate arguments and come up with phrases that brought men to tears. But it would have all been nothing if he did not simply trust in the power of Jesus' blood. We Christians can follow his example. Our lives and ministries will only share the same kind of power as Spurgeon's if we believe in the awesome power of the atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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