

Substitutionary Atonement

Did Jesus Really Die For My Sins So There Is Nothing I Can Do?

We've all heard the protestant sermon "Jesus took all your sins upon Himself and died on the cross for you" and it sounds really good. Does this mean that Jesus did it all so there is nothing I can do but *accept Him as my personal Lord and Savior*? The televangelist would have you believe so. Once I have done this, I am saved, my sins are covered, and my place in heaven is assured? This would lead one to believe that once I place my faith in Jesus, my salvation is assured forever. The televangelist would have you believe this too. It may play well in Peoria and secure lots of donations to carry on the ministry and support the televangelist, but it isn't completely true.

Our faith is where it all starts but that faith must be put into practice. It is not belief in Jesus alone which makes us a Christian, but belief in God; in the Blessed Trinity. It is not only a "Jesus and me" relationship, but also a "God and His family" relationship. God the Father created us, God the Son redeemed us, and God the Holy Spirit is with us at all times to guide us and teach us -- to give us the grace we need. Even faith in God alone is not sufficient -- we've got to live out our faith in our everyday life. Our faith must affect how we deal with others. As Paul puts it so clearly:

". . . but now manifested through the prophetic writings and, according to the command of the eternal God, made known to all nations to bring about the obedience of faith."
(Romans 16:26)

We must not only have the faith, we must be *obedient* to it; we must *act* upon it. If at the end of our life on earth God judges us worthy, according to our faith and the way we have lived that faith, He will admit us to the Kingdom of Heaven. That decision is God's alone to make and it will not be made until we appear before Him for our particular judgment. No one can make that decision for Him or promise something which is not theirs to give. We have no absolute assurance of our salvation, but we do have the hope of salvation and perseverance in witness and service and Christian growth. Without Jesus' death and resurrection, His victory over sin (death), there would be no hope of salvation. His death and resurrection give us assurance that our salvation is possible. We were created to be in total communion with God but we were also given a free will so we must choose to live out the gospel messages as best we can. We cannot earn our way to heaven by our works (this is the heresy of Pelagianism which was condemned by the Council of Carthage in AD 418), but when we come to the fullness of belief in the truth of Jesus' death and resurrection, *good works* become a joy; we wish to live in total union with God. When we accept this truth of our faith, we must also accept the truth of becoming a new creation. We can no longer live as those who do not accept or believe, but we must be witnesses to our belief, day in and day out, not only by the words that come from our lips, but by every action of our body. Sin becomes repulsive to us and through Christ, we have the power to overcome sin. "It is by his actions that a person is put right with God, and not by his faith alone" (James 2:24). We can deceive others, even ourselves, but we cannot deceive God.

Did Jesus take all our sins upon Himself when He died on the cross? It is true that Jesus died for our sins (1 Corinthians 15:3). It is also true that Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross so we might die to sin and live to righteousness (1 Peter 2:24). When we read these verses without the benefit of an Old Testament understanding of what is being addressed, it certainly does appear that Jesus bore all our sins on the cross. This would make him a scapegoat; a substitute for us and our sinfulness.

There are absolutely no biblical texts which when read in proper context portray Jesus as a scapegoat or state that He supplied total satisfaction for our sins. We are required to become living sacrifices (Romans 12:1); to join our sacrifice with that of Jesus the Christ which is being offered perpetually in heaven. Jesus' death on the cross accomplished our redemption and made

our salvation possible, it opened heaven for us; a heaven which had essentially been closed to mankind since the sin of Adam and Eve.

To understand the difference between a sin offering, through which expiation of sins is gained, and a scapegoat, through which removal of all sinfulness was done, we must look at sixteenth chapter of the book of Leviticus which describes Yom Kippur, the day of atonement (at-one-ment, being made one with God), which occurs once each year in the Jewish calendar.

“Taking two male goats, and setting them before the Lord at the entrance of the meeting tent, he [Aaron, the High Priest] shall cast lots to determine which one is for the Lord and which is for Azazel [exactly who Azazel is, is unknown but this was translated in early texts as ‘the escaping goat,’ hence the English word ‘scapegoat’]. The goat that is determined by lot for the Lord, Aaron shall bring in and offer up as a sin offering. But the goat determined by lot for Azazel he shall set alive before the Lord, so that with it he may make atonement by sending it off to Azazel in the desert.” (Leviticus 16:7-10)

“Then he shall slaughter the people’s sin-offering goat, and bringing its blood inside the veil, he shall do with it as he did with the bullock’s blood, sprinkling it on the propitiatory and before it. Thus he shall make atonement for the sanctuary because of all the sinful defilements and faults of the Israelites. He shall do the same for the meeting tent, which is set up among them in the midst of their uncleanness. No one else may be in the meeting tent from the time he enters the sanctuary to make atonement until he departs. When he has made atonement for himself and his household, as well as for the whole Israelite community, he shall come out to the altar before the Lord and make atonement for it also. . . Thus he shall render it clean and holy, purged of the defilements of the Israelites. (Leviticus 16:15-19)

“When he has completed the atonement rite for the sanctuary, the meeting tent and the altar, Aaron shall bring forward the live goat. Laying both hands on its head, he shall confess over it all the sinful faults and transgressions of the Israelites and so put them on the goat’s head. He shall then have it lead into the desert by an attendant. Since the goat is to carry off their iniquities to an isolated region, it must be sent away into the desert.” (Leviticus 16:20-22)

The goat which was killed was to provide atonement for the defilements of the holy places (sanctuary, meeting tent and altar) so that further individual offerings during the year would be pleasing to God. This was not only an atonement, but also a consecration of these holy places. Jesus’ death on the cross did away with the necessity for this repeated sacrifice. “But this one offered one sacrifice for sins, and took His seat forever at the right hand of God; now He waits until His enemies are made His footstool. For by one offering He has made perfect forever those who are being consecrated.” (Hebrews 10:12-14)

The scapegoat however, was not killed. The priest imposed hands on this goat and confessed the people’s sins, thus bringing about a transmission of the sins to the goat. Carrying its evil burden, it was led off into the desert thus removing the evil from the people’s midst. This ceremony did not remove the obligation for the individual to make individual atonement for his specific sins. Since Jesus is not a scapegoat, how are our sins removed? Jesus took care of this by empowering His Apostles and those they ordained and their successors with the ability to forgive sins. “Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.” (John 20:23) How do we know that this ability was passed along to those the Apostles ordained and their successors? Because Jesus told them “As the Father has sent me, so I send you” (John 20:21). How was Jesus sent by His Father? With authority; what He did was binding. He ordained the Apostles and gave them the same authority, which included among other things, ability to forgive sins.

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross has accomplished our redemption (Matthew 20:28). No longer are souls trapped for eternity in the bosom of Abraham (*sheol / hades / purgatory*). No longer is an animal sacrifice necessary to consecrate the altar. He paid the price so we may one day enter the Kingdom of Heaven. This does not mean however that there is no need for us to recognize our individual sins and make restitution for them. Jesus' sacrifice on the cross (and re-presentation on our behalf in heaven) does not free us of our responsibility for repentance but instills within us His own spirit of sorrow and hope. God demands repentance and atonement from all sinners. Sins are not 'covered' by Jesus' blood and thus made invisible to God. Martin Luther compared saved mankind to dung heaps covered with the snow of Christ; but Jesus had another name for those who were pretty on the outside but rotten inside, he called them "whitewashed tombs." Jesus did not tell the paralytic man that his sins were covered, He said "Your sins are forgiven." In fact, Jesus' ministry can be summed up as one which taught and forgave sins. Forgiveness washes the sins away so that no stain remains. Nothing unclean will enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Revelation 21:27). But how does one obtain forgiveness for sins since Jesus no longer walks this earth forgiving sins and Hebrews 10:11-13 tells us that the Old Testament sacrifices for sins were ineffective and Jesus' one sacrifice perfected forever those who are being made holy? The answer can be found in Romans 12:1: We are to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God. Jesus sacrifice did away with the requirement for an annual day of atonement and also for our individual requirement to publicly offer an animal sacrifice throughout the year whenever we had sinned. Instead, we are to offer ourselves in an unblemished state. How do we, sinners that we are, become unblemished? On the first Easter Sunday, three days after His sacrifice on the cross, Jesus appeared to His apostles and gave them the power to forgive or retain sins; just as He had done throughout His earthly ministry (John 20:23). Forgiveness removes the stain. Since the apostles were not going to live forever, in order for this commission by Jesus to remain effective (Jesus never did anything in an interim manner) the successors of the apostles and those they appointed to represent them continue this practice.

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