

What did Jesus achieve by dying on a cross?

Crucifixion was terrible torturous agony – a cruel punishment devised for criminals. It was inflicted on Jesus Christ. He was nailed, hands and feet, to a cross.

What were his intentions? What did he expect to achieve by crucifixion?

The outcome of the atonement must be given the value it deserves. We dare not allow Christ to suffer in vain.

The sufferings and death of Christ, for the apostle Paul, were the criteria of true faith. He wrote, *'For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.'* 1 Cor 2:2

Jesus Christ, and him crucified must be the central feature and obsession of any person or group who claims to represent him.

Paul said, *'But God forbid that I should glory, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto me, and I unto the world.'* Gal 6:8

He warned of deviation. He said: *'For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect. For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us who are saved it is the power of God.'* 1 Cor 1:17-18

The Nature of Jesus

Essential to our appreciation of the atonement is a correct understanding of the nature of the one who *'endured the cross.'*

Did Jesus have our nature? Was he victim of the fall? Did he inherit from his mother that which affects us all – a nature of sin and iniquity?

We take up the question of Job, *'Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean?'* Job 14:4 - also Nathanael's enquiry *'Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?'* John 1:46

Philip said, *'Come and see.'* Let's do that – come and hear what the Bible says - and be blessed by it.

What did the Angels say?

The angel of the Lord came to some shepherds with this exciting message:

'I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.' Luke 2:10-11

'Good tidings – great joy – for all people – a Saviour – Christ the Lord.'

To the young virgin, the angel Gabriel had said, *'The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.'* Luke 1:35

'... that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.' Jesus Christ was declared 'holy' in conception. He was conceived by 'The Holy Spirit.' Could the Holy Spirit conceive something sinful? Most definitely not!

Observe the contrast of the angel's words to the conception of David who said in his confession: *'Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me.'* Psalm 51:5

Note of interest: Jesus would be called *'the Son of God.'* Even though born to her, he was never called 'the son of Mary' and he never called Mary 'Mother.'

John the Baptist

The forerunner of Jesus said: *'He it is, who coming after me is preferred before me, whose shoe's latchet I am not worthy to unloose.'* John 1:27

John then introduced Jesus with a special title: *'And looking upon Jesus as he walked, he saith, Behold the Lamb of God!'* John 1:36 cf. verse 29.

'The Lamb of God' - a beautiful picture of purity. The Passover lamb was a special lamb - *'your lamb shall be without blemish.'* Ex 12:5

Peter said, *'Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, - But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.'* 1 Peter 1:18-19

'The Holy One.' In scripture Jesus is styled *'The Holy One.'* Even the demons knew it - *'...what have we to do with thee, thou Jesus of Nazareth? art thou come to destroy us? I know thee who thou art, the Holy One of God.'* Mark 1:24

'Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.' Acts 2:27

'But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you.' Acts 3:14

'For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together...' Acts 4:27

Statements

'And ye know that he was manifested to take away our sins; and in him is no sin.' 1 John 3:5 Sin could only be removed through the one in whom there *'is no sin.'*

'Who did no sin.' 1 Peter 2:22. True to his nature, Jesus lived a life free from sin. He was sinless.

'For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.' 2 Cor 5:21

Such explicit re-enforcing statements confirm the purity of Jesus in every aspect of his being.

What did Jesus say?

In controversy with the Jews, he said: *'Which of you convinceth me of sin? And if I say the truth, why do ye not believe me?'* John 8:46

To his disciples he said: *'Hereafter I will not talk much with you: for the prince of this world cometh, and hath nothing in me.'* John 14:30

Romans 8:3-4

'For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh.' Rom 8:3-4

We need to pick up the key words:

'God sending his own Son...' Numerous texts refer to Christ coming *'into'* the world or being sent *'into'* the world – implying pre-existence – see John 3:17 – especially John 16:28 where the point is decisive. See also 1 Tim 1:15 and Heb 10:5.

'...His own Son...' God only has one Son – a sinless Son! – *'...and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.'* 1 Cor 8:6

'...in the likeness of sinful flesh...' Note the stress on the word *'likeness.'* Jesus didn't come "in" sinful flesh, but in its *'likeness.'*

'Likeness' in Rom 8:3 is resemblance – not identity. See Romans 6:5, 5:14.

In Philippians 2:7 we read of Christ who *'made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the 'likeness' of men.'* *'Likeness'* here, as in Rom 8:3, distinguishes the Lord Jesus from 'sinful' man. He was perfect man!!

The words *'in the likeness of'* were unnecessary if Christ actually came 'in' sinful flesh. Paul could simply say: *'God sent His own son in 'sinful flesh.'*

'...and for sin...' Christ died for sin – our sin!!

'For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for 'our' sins in accordance with the scriptures...' 1 Cor. 15:3 RSV cf. Gal 1:4 Rom 4:25, 1 John 2:2

Christ dying for our sins was identified by Paul as the central element of the 'gospel.' See 1 Cor 15:3, 1 Gal 1:3-9

Human ears have never heard greater news - *'Christ died for our sins.'* It isn't merely that Christ died because we are sinners. He died for our sins – he died for us. It's through the death of Christ sins are forgiven and sinners saved.

'Condemned sin in the flesh.' The text doesn't say 'Christ condemned 'sinful flesh' – it says he *'condemned sin in the flesh.'*

By Christ's condemnation of *'sin in the flesh'* believers are able to rejoice in the sentiments of verse 1 and verses 31-34: *'There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit.'*

'What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.'

How could Christ condemn sin in the flesh? A sinner can't condemn sin – sin would condemn him. A thief cannot condemn stealing – an adulterer cannot condemn adultery. Even a thought of adultery is self condemning – see Matthew 5:28

God's own Son condemned sin in the flesh by sinless nature and life and by dying for our sins.

The book of Hebrews

Hebrews has many interesting things to say about Jesus.

'But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man. For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.' Heb 2:9-10.

The reason Jesus came to this world was *'that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man – and to bring 'many sons unto glory.'*

In so doing he is styled *'the captain (author) of their salvation.'* Cf. 12:2

It's 'salvation' which excites the author of Hebrews – *'so great a salvation'* 2:2 *'eternal salvation'* 5:9.

'Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost who come unto God by him, seeing he ever lives to make intercession for them.' Heb 7:25

Consider Heb 2:11: *'For both he who sanctifies and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren.'*

Christ is the sanctifier – the one who makes men holy. He who makes men holy is inherently sinless and holy – and yet, in spite of their degraded state and his personal purity, *'he is not ashamed to call them brethren.'*

'For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham.'

Elsewhere the writer of Hebrews says of Christ: *'... who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.'* Heb 7:26

'Made perfect through suffering.' This was the suffering of temptation in the wilderness where the Son of God went hungry for 40 days (see verse 18). Prior to the temptation, at his baptism God Father spoke from heaven, *'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.'*

How much further pleased would be the Father when his Son suffered the wilderness temptation without compromise. Heb 2:16 *'...but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.'* Heb 4:15

'But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows.' Heb 1:8-9

*'Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith. **Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.** Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings.'* Heb 13:7-9 RSV

*'**Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever.**'* Heb 13:8

Atonement

What kind of atonement could a 'sin natured' Christ achieve? **Absolutely none!** He would need atonement!!

Sin nature proponents present Christ as a 'sinless sinner' – one who resisted inner sinful urges which obligated God to raise him from death. In his death they claim 'sinful flesh' was condemned.

They teach that Christ was born sinful but, by God's assistance, was able to resist temptation and become eligible for resurrection and, through that, opened a way for others to follow by being baptised.

For them, he died as a consequence of inherited sinful nature – a victim of circumstances.

Incredibly, they teach that death was necessary for his own salvation - and ours.' They present a concept of Christ being in death doomed flesh from which release can only come through death. It was stated: 'Christ's offering reveals that the flesh cannot effect its own salvation, and that the only way to life is through death.' (The Atonement p.218)

Apart from the unscriptural side of sin nature teaching, other issues need to be addressed.

How did Jesus get through childhood and adolescence without a single sin?

Sin nature teachers say 'God did it.' Why, then, can't all sin natured people receive divine assistance??? If God did it – then the sin natured Christ didn't do it!!

Robert Roberts says, 'He was not a mere man – not a mere Jew – not mere flesh. He was the flesh of Abraham in a special form' - 'He was a special man altogether.' Atonement p.174-5

Roberts says his education made all the difference and that Christ had special parentage and special education. How then can he say that Christ, 'in every respect,' was the same as we are??

Elsewhere the book, 'Atonement,' says, '...in certain particulars he was immeasurably superior to all others.'

Roberts also restricts sin to disobedience. But, Jesus said even the thought of sin makes one guilty. Matthew 5:27-28

If Christ condemned and crucified 'sinful flesh' why was it raised?? Why raise a 'filthy' thing?

'Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope: Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell, neither wilt thou suffer thy Holy One to see corruption.' Acts 2:26-27

How can condemned inherent sinful flesh 'rest in hope' and be raised to life?? Why the reference to 'thy Holy One'?

Thomas was invited, as were the other disciples, to touch and handle the flesh of the risen Lord.

Injustice

Consider the gross injustice of the suggested sin natured atonement. The teaching says that God impregnated a virgin. The offspring inherited her nature. He struggled under the same sinful impulses and urges as we do but was divinely assisted to resist and was then sent to a cross to ‘condemn sinful flesh.’

The Bible teaches that Jesus ‘*gave himself*’ – ‘*for us*’:

‘Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God. Above when he said, Sacrifice and offering and burnt offerings and offering for sin thou wouldst not, neither hadst pleasure therein; which are offered by the law; Then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He takes away the first, that he may establish the second. By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.’ Heb 10:7-10

Paul said, *‘I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.’* Gal 2:20

Please pick up those beautiful words – ‘... *the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.*’

That’s the gospel – It’s the ‘Good News’ - ‘... *the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.*’ It’s all about love and the self giving of Jesus Christ - for us – for you and for me.’

‘Who gave himself for us...’ Titus 2:14

Consider Rom 5:8: *‘But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’*

‘For God so loved the world, he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.’ John 3:16-17

How we need to ponder long and deep the words: *‘For God so loved the world...’* Never did such a small word mean so much as ‘so’!!

In the scriptures, the atonement expresses the wonderful incomprehensible love of God and the love of Christ.

‘...And to know the love of Christ, which passes knowledge...’ Eph 3:17-19

‘For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead.’ 2 Cor 5:14

Like the gospel itself which is termed ‘*the gospel of God*’ and the ‘*gospel of Christ*’ (Rom 1:1,9,16) The atonement expresses the love of God and the love of Christ – or ‘...*the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*’ Rom 8:39

‘Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another.’ 1 John 4:10-11

There's a Christadelphian booklet on the atonement entitled 'Why should a righteous man die?' Interestingly - and significantly, it doesn't once mention 'love' or refer to the love of God.

Why does a discourse on the atonement avoid any reference to the love of Christ? The cold mechanical reasoning tried to explain how a 'sin natured' Christ might achieve atonement.

Another publication of 'Logos' is entitled 'Christ's Death and Your Salvation.' The sub-title reads '- A SIMPLE EXPLANATION OF JOHN 3:16.' Incredibly, the 15 page explanation doesn't once mention love!!

How can you explain John 3:16 without even referring to the love of God???

How can anyone write about the sufferings of Christ and avoid the all embracing motive?? Jesus, himself, said, '*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*' John 15:13

Robert Roberts, in his 24 page discourse entitled, 'The Slain Lamb,' apart from a single quote from Titus 3:4 which he doesn't develop, says nothing about love!!

I ask again: How can anyone write about the sufferings of Christ and omit the divine motivation of love??

The atonement is all about God's love - *the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge.*

The voluntary nature of Christ's death

Jesus didn't have to die on the cross. In fact, he didn't have to die at all. He demonstrated this to Peter, James and John when he was gloriously transfigured before them. They saw him in resurrection glory. Note these significant words: '*And as they came down from the mountain, he charged them that they should tell no man what things they had seen, till the Son of man were risen from the dead.*' Mark 9:9

All that Jesus did for us was voluntary. It was divine love - '*the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge.*'

'That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.' Eph 3:17-19

Understanding the Atonement

For whom did Christ die?

The question is answered explicitly by the apostle Paul:

'For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.' Rom 5:6-8

'Christ died for the ungodly' – 'Christ died for us.'

Peter said: *'For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust...'* 1 Peter 3:18 --

'Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree...' 1 Peter 2:24

Jesus, himself, said, *'I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep.'* John 10:11

At the last supper our Saviour said: *'This is my body which is given for you: this do in remembrance of me. Likewise also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you.'* Luke 22:19-20

Jesus didn't say *'This is my body which is given for us.'* He excluded himself when he said, *'This is my body which is given for you.'*

Sin nature people teach that Christ needed to die for himself. They refer to Heb 9:12-13: *'...he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.'* RSV

The text says nothing about securing eternal redemption for himself. Verse 14 tells us to whom the redemption applied. Note the words in 14 *'...offered himself without blemish to God...'*

Eph 1:7 confirms it: *'In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace.'* (cf Col 1:14)

'It is Christ who died.'

I remember walking through a cemetery reading messages on grave stones. There was one which made me think. A child had died about 150 years ago. On her stone were these prominent words: ***'It is Christ who died.'***

In context the phrase expresses all we need to know about the atonement. *'It is Christ who died.'*

'Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is

he who condemns? *It is Christ who died*, yea rather, who is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. ' Rom 8:30-34

Freedom from condemnation and immunity from charges against us is because 'It is God who justifies' - '*It is Christ who died.*'

'Christ died for us.'

What does it mean 'Christ died for us.'

We need to appreciate the word 'for.' 'For' in the context of Romans 5:8 means 'instead of' – that Christ died in our place.

If I do the washing 'for' my wife, I do it 'instead of' her – I have taken her place in the laundry.

To give one's life for others is the noblest of virtues. Jesus said, '*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*' John 15:13

The principle is beautifully illustrated in the critical moment when Abraham was about to slay his son Isaac – Genesis 22:1-13

'And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.' Gen 22:13

A ram was offered 'instead' of the son. On the cross the Son of God died instead of the sinner.

David's lament for his son Absalom expressed the same thought:

'And the king was deeply moved, and went up to the chamber over the gate, and wept; and as he went, he said, "O my son Ab'salom, my son, my son Ab'salom! Would I had died instead of you, O Ab'salom, my son, my son!' 2 Sam 18:33 RSV

How willingly David would've hung by the hair, pierced by Joab's deadly darts and then be thrown into a ditch instead of Absalom.

My lovely daughter, at age 20, was killed in a car crash. Would to God it could've been me instead of her!

Paul said: 'For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh.' Rom 9:3

What others wanted to do and were unable to do - **Jesus did**. He laid down his life for his friends – yea, even his enemies. Rom 5:10

Barabbas

Perhaps the most vivid illustration of Christ dying in our stead is found in each of the four gospels when Jesus was tried by Pilate.

'Now at that feast he released unto them one prisoner, whomsoever they desired. And there was one named Barabbas, which lay bound with them that had made insurrection with him, who had committed murder in the insurrection. And the multitude crying aloud began to desire him to do as he had ever done unto them. But Pilate answered them, saying, Will ye that I release unto you the King of the Jews? For he knew that the chief priests had delivered him for envy. But the chief priests moved the people, that he should rather release Barabbas unto them. And Pilate answered and said again unto them, What will ye then that I shall do unto him whom ye call the King of the Jews? And they cried out again, Crucify him. Then Pilate said unto them, Why, what evil hath he done? And they cried out the more exceedingly, Crucify him. And so Pilate, willing to content the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified.' Mark 15:6-15

Releasing Barabbas vividly illustrates the atonement. Barabbas was a condemned man – a murderer in the insurrection but was set free because they crucified Christ instead. A good man died instead of the bad man.

A sermon about Barabbas led me to accept Christ as my personal Saviour. The preacher asked us to imagine Barabbas in the prison – and the kind of prison it might have been. Then the unexpected – unconditional freedom!

Did Barabbas ask about his release? Was it possible the attendant pointed to the cross on a hill and said, 'They crucified him instead'?

The vital truth lit up in my mind – I'm Barabbas - the sinner. I'm free because they crucified Christ instead.

That's the central truth of the atonement. The sinner is free because Christ was crucified in his place.

Objections:

Rationalistic objections have been raised against 'substitutionary' atonement.

C.C. Walker says: 'Substitution would be unjust. Why should the innocent be put to death and the guilty allowed to live?' (Atonement p.25)

Walker's objection sinks before it can float. The 'innocent' gave his life. It was *'the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.'*

In his discourse on the atonement, except for a quote from Rom 5, Walker said nothing about the love of God. Again, how could one discuss the atonement and not refer to its motive? – *'The love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'*

What Walker needed to see was the gross injustice of conceiving a sin natured being, helping him avoid sin then having him crucified!

There is nothing unjust about voluntary self giving!

This is supremely expressed by Paul in' Rom 3:24-26 *'Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.'*

Paul then goes on to say: *Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.'*

God was just towards Christ and believers when it was *'freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.'*

A comment is needed on the phrase: *'for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.'*

The Greek word 'peresis' is incorrectly translated 'remission' in the AV. RSV translates correctly:

'This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus.'

The Greek word 'peresis' is used only here in the New Testament. It means 'passing over' former sins and refers to the sins committed by those of former times – before the coming of Christ – the transgressions under the first covenant (Heb 9:15).

Walker then asks, '...if Christ died instead of us, why do we die? And why did Christ rise?

Why do we die? We are dead!! – in trespasses and sins' *'And you hath he quickened (made alive) who were dead in trespasses and sins.'* Eph 2:1

'But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus.' Eph 2:4-7

'Why did Christ rise?' asks Walker. But why should he not rise??

From the cross Jesus said, *'It is finished.'* John 19:30

In anticipation he said, *'I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.'* John 17:4

Christ the sin bearer

In any discussion on the nature of the atonement we must consider Christ as ‘sin bearer.’

‘Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree...’ 1 Peter 2:24. He who carried his cross to Calvary was further burdened by the weight of our sin which he bare in his own body.

What did it mean to *‘bear our sins in His own body.’* I discussed this once with a man who insisted that Christ bore our nature – not our sins. ‘But,’ I said, ‘The Bible says, *‘Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree...’*’

‘No,’ he insisted, ‘He bore our nature.’

I said again: ‘The Bible says, *‘Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree...’*’

He then said, ‘How can someone who lived and died two thousand years ago bear our sins today?’

What can you say to people who refuse to believe the Bible!?

The Uplifted Serpent

‘And the LORD said unto Moses, Make thee a fiery serpent, and set it upon a pole: and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looks upon it, shall live. And Moses made a serpent of brass, and put it upon a pole, and it came to pass, that if a serpent had bitten any man, when he beheld the serpent of brass, he lived.’ Num 21:8-9

‘And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.’ John 3:14-15

Jesus likened his death on the cross to the life saving replica held aloft by Moses.

Fiery serpents were fatally biting the rebellious people of God. In desperation they cried out for help. Moses followed God’s instructions and made a serpent of brass and set in on a pole. Those bitten could look at it and be instantly healed.

Note: The fiery serpents must not be confused with the subtle serpent of Genesis 3.

The serpent on the pole was completely harmless – free of poison. It is stated of our Saviour in Heb 7:26 *‘For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.’*

The brass serpent resembled the serpents of death. Of Jesus Paul wrote: *‘God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh.’*

The point we must not miss about the serpent on the pole was the instantaneous healing and the simplicity of the application – *‘... and it shall come to pass, that every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live.’*

What could be more simple than a look!! The healing was all of God?

'Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else.' Isa 45:22

Now for the truly good news: *'And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.'*

Jesus was elevated on a cross – for public display. Those who look in faith to the uplifted Saviour are instantly saved. The text says, *'That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.'*

We are then led into John 3:16: *'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.'*

Jesus on the cross dying for us is an expression of God's great love for sinners. *'That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.'*

'For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.' John 3:17-18

It's so important to consider the context of any particular verse of scripture. The previous verse says: *'And no man hath ascended up to heaven, but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man who is in heaven.'* John 3:13

We cannot fully understand the atonement without knowing that Jesus came down from heaven. That the one crucified was in fact, *'The Lord from heaven.'* 1 Cor 15:47 – *'The Lord of Glory.'* 1 Cor 2:8 – *'even the Son of Man who is in heaven.'*

Redemption - *'Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.'* Rom 3:24

Redemption is an interesting concept. To redeem is to buy back – to set free. There's a lovely story about a slave auction where a man bid highly for a certain slave. When the slave was handed to the purchaser his new owner said, 'You're free.' 'But you bought me said,' said the slave. 'You're free because of that,' said Abraham Lincoln.

Redemption implies payment of price. The Bible speaks explicitly about the price paid:

'For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.' 1 Cor 6:20

'Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men.' 1 Cor 7:23

*'But there were false prophets also among the people, even as there shall be false teachers among you, who privily shall bring in damnable heresies, **even denying the Lord who bought them**, and bring upon themselves swift destruction.'* 2 Peter 2:1

'Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.' Acts 20:28

'That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after that ye believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, Which is the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory.' Eph 1:12-14

'And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; And hast made us unto our God kings and priests: and we shall reign on the earth.' Rev 5:9-10

'Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; But with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.' 1 Peter 1:18-19

Ransom

'For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.' Mark 10:45

'For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. Who gave himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.' 1 Tim 2:5-6

Imputation

We now look at another interesting aspect of the atonement – imputation - our sin not reckoned against us.

'Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works, Saying, Blessed are they whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.' Rom 4:6-8

'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.' 2 Cor 5:19

The strong implication is that our sin was reckoned against Christ who died in our place.

The Bible stresses the principle of transfer. One of the great chapters on atonement is Isaiah 53. In it we read: *'All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned everyone to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.'*

In words ever so simple the verse begins with 'all' and concludes with 'all.' The first 'all' refers to our sin (cf Romans 3:20) the second 'all' has our sin transferred to Christ - *'and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.'*

In the financial world we can transfer money from one account to another. In the atonement transaction our debt is transferred – our sin is laid on Christ. Note the stress on the word 'our' in the previous verse: *'But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed.'* Verse 5

It is through such transference that the prophet could write: *'He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.'*

'Made Sin for us'

The statement about God's reconciling work in Christ with its non imputation of trespasses leads into the great atonement statement of 2 Cor 5:21: *'For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.'*

We need to pick up on the tenses here - *'For he hath made him to be sin for us'* (past) – *'that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.'* (Future)

He who was sinless was *'made sin for us'* that we who are sinful *'might be made the righteousness of God in him.'*

In between is the wonderful record of the one who was made sin – *'who knew no sin.'* This goes deeper than action. Elsewhere the scripture says, *'He did no sin.'* Here it says, *'who knew no sin.'* In Christ's mind and consciousness he had no knowledge of sin.

Vincent's Word Studies of the New Testament makes this comment: *'The manner in which this reference is conveyed, it is almost impossible to explain to one unfamiliar with the distinction between the Greek negative particles. The one here implies the fact of sinlessness as present to the consciousness of the person concerning whom the fact is stated.'*

What does it mean, *'For he hath made him to be sin for us'*? He wasn't made sin for himself – it was *'for us.'*

The expression *'for us'* is so important in understanding the atonement along with this text.

In 1 John 3:16 *'Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us.'*

'Who gave himself for us.' Titus 2:14

But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Rom 5:8

'It was all 'for us.' It was *'while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.'* Certainly not while he was yet a sinner.

Burn those words deep onto your mental hard drive: *'while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.'*

The whole crux of the atonement is found in four short words: *'Christ died for us.'*

God's economy

An interesting remark was made by the High Priest just prior to the trial of Jesus. Concerned at the growing popularity of Jesus he said:

'And one of them, named Caiaphas, being the high priest that same year, said unto them, Ye know nothing at all, Nor consider that it is expedient for us, that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation perish not. And this spake he not of himself: but being high priest that year, he prophesied that Jesus should die for that nation; And not for that nation only, but that also he should gather together in one the children of God that were scattered abroad.' John 11:49-52

That was God's reasoning – *'better that one should die for the people.'*

God in his love and mercy considered it better that you should live than his only Son should die. That's how much he loves you.

The soldiers

'And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him, and the malefactors, one on the right hand, and the other on the left. Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' Luke 23:33-34

'Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do.' What beautiful words! What did they mean to the callous soldiers who belted the nails into his hands and feet? How wonderfully they exemplified the words taught to his disciples, *'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.'*

'For they know not what they do.' Jesus was impaled in ignorance – knowing not they were crucifying an innocent man – a sinless man - knowing not they were crucifying the Saviour of the world – the Son of God. They knew not what they were doing.

'Which none of the princes of this world knew: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.' 1 Cor 2:8 - *'...the Lord from heaven.'* 1 Cor 15:47

'But ye denied the Holy One and the Just, and desired a murderer to be granted unto you; And killed the Prince of life, whom God hath raised from the dead; whereof we are witnesses. And his name through faith in his name hath made this man strong, whom ye see and know: yea, the faith which is by him hath given him this perfect soundness in the presence of you all. And now, brethren, I know it was through ignorance ye did it, as did also your rulers. But those things, which God before had showed by the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer, he hath so fulfilled.' Acts 3:14-18

Their ignorance was our salvation.

The Mockers

Those who mocked the crucified one unwittingly uttered the great truth of the atonement, *'He saved others, himself he could not save.'* The mockers said it. We need to believe it.

Through the cross Jesus saved others – but to save others he couldn't save himself – he endured the cross – for there was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.

'He saved others.' Let that wonderful statement indelibly imprint our minds.

The primary mission of the Lord Jesus Christ was the saving of others – the saving of sinners. *'This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.'* 1 Tim 1:15

Praise God - others were saved!!

The mockers said it – but didn't believe it – they didn't understand. The all important question is: has he saved you? Are you able to say, 'Christ is my savior and Lord – he died for me'?

'It is finished'

Jesus was able to say from the cross, *'It is finished.'*

He did, in fact utter one word - the Greek word - *'tetelestai'* – a shout of victory and achievement. The word carries the meaning of completeness and perfection.

Jesus didn't say, 'I'm finished.' He said *'It is finished!'* The atonement was complete – all had been achieved. In anticipation he said: *'I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.'* John 17:4

Passover

We don't need a Passover lamb - *'For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us.'* 1 Cor 5:7

The blood displayed on the door posts of our lives is the precious blood of Christ. It was when God saw the blood he 'passed over,' - so it is with Christ. His blood is our salvation.

Something often overlooked about the Passover was the timing of the release of the people. It co-incident with the death of the 'firstborn.'

'And he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, Rise up, and get you forth from among my people, both ye and the children of Israel; and go, serve the LORD, as ye have said.' Ex 12:31

Was it not when God's 'firstborn' was slain on a cross that we hear the words, *'Rise up, and get you forth - and go, serve the LORD.'*

Is not God's message to the sinner - *'Rise up, and get you forth - and go, serve the LORD.'*

The Blood of Christ. – ‘...the precious Blood of Christ.’

*‘Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; **But with the precious blood of Christ**, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.’* 1 Peter 1:18-19

Why is it designated *‘the precious blood of Christ’*?

Because of the one through whose veins it flowed - *‘Unto you therefore which believe he is precious.’* 1 Peter 2:7

For believers, Jesus is precious because of his special relationship with the Father, his sinless life, his saving work and all that he did for us on the cross – and his resurrection and endless life – and above all his wonderful love for sinners like you and I.

It was precious beyond value. It was blood of absolute purity. It was the blood of God. Paul said to the Ephesian leaders, *‘Take heed therefore unto yourselves....to feed the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood.’*

The blood of Christ is precious because of its redemptive value. All the silver and gold in the world could not pay for our redemption. The precious blood of Christ secured redemption for believers. *‘Unto you therefore which believe he is precious.’*

‘For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.’ 1 Cor 6:20

The blood of the Lamb is precious because of its cleansing value. *‘But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and **the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.**’* 1 John 1:7

‘Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.’ Isa 1:18

*‘And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, and the first begotten of the dead, and the prince of the kings of the earth. Unto him that loved us, **and washed us from our sins in his own blood**, And hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father; to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.’* Rev 1:5-6

Note the stress on the words, *in his own blood.’*

Saved from Wrath

'Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.' Rom 5:9-11

What a wonderful statement of the atonement - *justified by his blood - saved from wrath - reconciled to God - saved by his life - joy in God - we have now received the atonement!!!*

Hallelujah – praise our wonderful God!! Is that how you've experienced the atonement??

Note on Wrath:

We shall be *'saved from wrath,'* says the apostle. But, what do we know about the wrath of God?

The apostle gave us this clear statement:

'For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath showed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.' Rom 1:18-20

God's wrath is revealed against *'all ungodliness.'* God, in his infinitive holiness is opposed to *'all ungodliness.'*

'...and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.'

What does it mean *'who hold the truth in unrighteousness'*? All men have knowledge of the truth of God – it is *'clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead - so that they are without excuse.'*

The apostle says something further: *'Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.'* Rom 1:25

'...so that they are without excuse.' In simple terms the apostle says there is no excuse for not recognizing who God is in the things created. God's wrath is declared against unbelieving mankind.

'For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.' Rom 3:23

'... it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment.'

'Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.'

How to respond

The sufferings and death of Christ reveal the wonderful love of God in the salvation of sinners. Sin isolates us from God.

'For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.' Rom 6:23

Our response must be repentance for sin and humble acceptance of all the Jesus achieved by his death and resurrection.

In prayer we could say, 'Thank you Lord for dying for me. You died for my sin. Save me from my sin and be my Lord and Saviour.'

Remember, it's not what you can do – it's what Christ has done.

'But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us (made us alive) together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.'

Make sure you grasp these vital words: ***'For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: Not of works, lest any man should boast.'***

Being saved is the beginning of a new and exciting relationship with the risen Christ.

When we believe in the Lord Jesus Christ we are then *'in Christ'* – we belong to Christ and Christ is in us.' *'In Christ'* and *'Christ in you'* are exciting scriptural realities for believers.

'Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creation: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.' 2 Cor 5:17

Believers in Christ receive a new nature (the divine nature – see 2 Pet 1:4) which helps them overcome and develop in their living all that pleases God.

We then need to grow in Christ. Peter said in his concluding words:

'But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever.' 2 Pet 3:18