

God *as* Redeemer



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Rom. 1:18, Gen. 3:15, Rom. 16:20, 1 Pet. 1:19, Mark 10:32–45, Matt. 27:46.*

Memory Text: “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!” (*Revelation 5:12, NKJV*).

Key Thought: The Triune God is our Creator and Redeemer.

Closely related to God as Creator is His role as our Redeemer. Sin is so bad, so hostile to the created world, that only the Creator Himself could solve the problem.

“But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (*Eph. 2:13, NKJV*). It is not through works, nor through anything we could ever do, but it is through His grace, manifest at the Cross that we as sinners can be redeemed by the Lord and be “brought near” to Him. Christ bore God’s wrath so that none of us would ever, ideally, have to.

Paul also tells the church in Corinth that “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (*1 Cor. 1:18, NKJV*). The scandal of the Cross is that it appears so absurd: God, the infinite, holy Creator, becomes a sacrifice for the sake of twisted human souls, even His avowed enemies, taking upon Himself the penalty for their sins so that they wouldn’t have to face that penalty themselves! The atonement is so deep, so heavy, so profound, that we grasp only what we can. Beyond that, thinking stops, and all we can do is worship.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 21.*

At the Cross

“But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom. 5:8). What is this text saying to us?

At the cross, in the most humiliating, inconceivable manner imaginable, God triumphs over and shames the enemy. Love, justice, and compassion fuse in a singular dynamic act. God forgives sinners by paying in Himself the price of sin and absorbing into His own suffering Self the penalty of that sin. On Calvary, God reveals how extremely costly forgiveness is.

Christ didn't die in order to create love in God's heart for us. No, Jesus insists that the Father's love is the source, not the consequence, of the atonement (*John 3:16, 17*). God doesn't love us because Christ died for us; Christ died for us because God loved us. The atonement of Christ was not offered to persuade the Father to love those whom He otherwise hated. The death of Christ did not bring forth a love that was not already in existence. Rather, it was a manifestation of the love that was eternally in God's heart. Jesus never had to persuade the Father to love us. Notice how He insists on this truth in *John 3:16, 17; 16:26, 27*.

The real tragedy is that we have lost much of the knowledge of God, against whom we have sinned. We do not even feel that we have much to repent of, because we're not always sure about just how much we have offended God with our sins. We can become dull to just how bad sin really is. Modern religious sentimentality often minimizes repugnance toward sin. And because sin doesn't anger us anymore, perhaps it becomes harder to realize that sin arouses the wrath of a Holy God.

Paul is not afraid to discuss the wrath of God. How does he express it in Romans 1:18?

This strong statement sets the tone for the lengthy treatment of the universal sway of sin on which Paul continues to elaborate for the next two chapters (*through Romans 3:20*).

An astounding aspect of the gospel is the fact that God is both the victor over our sin and the victim of it. And, as a result of this dual role, our holy God can keep His covenant with sinful covenant breakers. God's love does not lead to a bland tolerance of sin and evil but to a triumphant victory over it. It is precisely because God is love that He opposes sin and evil, for these realities corrupt and destroy His beloved children. The death that God endured on the cross is the price His love pays for taking sin seriously while still loving sinners.

How seriously do you take the sin in your life? And what criteria do you use to justify your answer?

The Gospel in the Old Testament

When is the first promise of salvation given, and what does it mean?

Gen. 3:15.

The language here is striking. Adam and Eve have sinned. Now the great controversy is announced to them through the strong language of “enmity” between two opposing sides. This is a precious promise for human hearts now attracted to sin. We are also assured that this major conflict will not be eternal, for the head of the enemy will one day be crushed. In these verses, not only is the great controversy first revealed, but we also are told how it is going to end.

Paul took courage from Genesis 3:15. How does he express it in Romans 16:20? What point is he making?

In Genesis 22:1–19, Moses also narrates an amazingly graphic atonement picture. What can we learn about the future atonement of Christ from this narrative?

Note the many mentions of “father and son” and how the two go to the mountain of sacrifice together. The son carries the wood and the father the instruments of sacrifice (fire and knife). Isaac, much younger than his father, could have overpowered Abraham on the mountain of sacrifice. But, instead, we see two miracles: the father yielding his son, and the son yielding his life.

What a powerful representation of the sacrificial death of Christ on our behalf. The scene, however powerful and moving, was only a tiny foretaste of the time when—centuries later—another Father would offer His Son. This time, however, there would be no animal to die instead of the son. The Son Himself would die on the altar. The Father would truly give up His Son, and the Son would give His life.

There, on Mount Moriah, the world has been presented with a very powerful picture (but still only a picture) of the plan of salvation and what it cost to redeem fallen humanity from the ruin of sin.

Salvation in Isaiah

On the famous road to Emmaus, Jesus taught the two despairing disciples about the atonement from “Moses and all the prophets” (*Luke 24:27*). What prophetic materials might Jesus have included in His study of the atonement?

It’s very likely that Isaiah was among the prophets to whom Jesus would have referred.

Read Isaiah 53, which describes the “Suffering Servant.” Describe the details included there that help you to more fully grasp the amazing atonement of Christ.

Although so much exists in this chapter, one point stands out more than anything else, and that is the substitutionary role of the Suffering Servant. Notice all the times that He is paying the price for the sins of others. Again and again this theme appears, and what it teaches is that at the heart of salvation, of atonement, is the death of Jesus on our behalf. As sinners who have violated God’s law, we can do nothing to make ourselves right with God. All of our good works cannot bridge the gap between us and God. The only way to save us was for Jesus to pay the penalty in our stead and then offer us His perfect righteousness, which we claim by faith.

Had our works been able to make us right with God in any way, then Jesus would not have had to die for us. The fact that He did, that it took nothing less than His death in order to make atonement, should be all the proof we need that we cannot earn our salvation. It is, instead, wholly a gift of grace.

Read 1 Peter 1:19, 2:21–25. How does Peter draw on Isaiah 53 in his explanation of Christ’s atoning death on our behalf?

Isaiah 53 presents what’s perhaps the clearest theological explanation of the Cross, showing unequivocally that, whatever else the Cross represents, it represents Christ dying on our behalf, bearing in Himself the punishment that we deserve.

Using Isaiah 53 as your text, think about the final scenes of Christ’s life. As you do, keep in mind that the person depicted there is our God, our Creator, one part of the Godhead Himself. How do we get our minds around this amazing truth?

The Gospels and the Cross

The astounding miracle of Christ's incarnation, His profound teaching, and the miracles He performed are not the central focus of Christ's life. Instead, what dominates the thinking of Jesus is the giving of His life. As miraculous as His birth and ministry were, the great mission of Christ's life was His death.

In the four Gospels, we find Jesus endeavoring to prepare His disciples for His coming death. However, their devotion to Jesus, coupled with their hope for a political Messiah, prevents them from grasping what Jesus is telling them.

Read Mark 10:32–45. How did Jesus describe His coming execution? (vss. 33, 34). What was wrong with the request of James and John? (vss. 35–37). What was Jesus' pointed response? (vss. 42–45).

The evening before He died, Jesus celebrated a Passover meal with His disciples. He then gave instructions that this event should be observed until He returned again. This ordinance of Communion, instituted by the Lord Himself—and the only commemorative act He personally authorized—is not a memorial of His incarnation, nor His miracles, nor His parables, nor His preaching, but only of His death. Christ Himself wished above all else to be remembered by His death.

In fact, in the four Gospel accounts of the Messiah's life, the events surrounding and including the crucifixion carry the major emphasis. The staggering miracle of the Incarnation is mentioned only by Matthew and Luke. Only two chapters in each of their Gospels record Christ's conception and birth. Mark and John omit any comment on Christ's birth at all and begin their Gospels with Jesus as an adult.

All four Gospel writers, however, determinedly emphasize the last week of Christ's life and, of course, His death. Glance through them and notice this pointed focus on just a few days of Christ's life. The last week of Jesus' life, leading up to and including His death, takes up from one-third to almost one-half of all Gospel accounts. Each reader is "forced" to rivet attention on the great redeeming act of God.

Look at your life, your past, your mistakes, your sins. Do you honestly think anything you have done, or could do, could ever atone for them? Why, then, should the death of Jesus on your behalf be the central focus of your life? What hope would you have without it?

The Cry on the Cross

Nothing is more destructive to our grasp of the atonement of Christ than the sentimentality that sometimes passes for Christianity in our day (all in the attempt to make the gospel conform to modern thinking). However, we must ever humbly acknowledge that anything we say about God can never do God justice, especially when we consider the atonement. We must avoid the temptation to reduce Jesus' death on the cross to merely an "example of selfless love." It was certainly that, but considering our situation as sinners, it would take more than "an example of selfless love" to redeem us. It would take, instead, our God bearing in Himself the full brunt of His own wrath against sin.

On the cross, Jesus cried out, " 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' " (Matt. 27:46, NKJV). How are we to understand this? What was Jesus saying, why, and how does this amazing cry help us understand what it cost to save us from sin?

"And now the Lord of Glory was dying, a ransom for the race. . . . Upon Christ as our substitute and surety was laid the iniquity of us all. He was counted a transgressor, that He might redeem us from the condemnation of the law. . . . The Saviour could not see through the portals of the tomb. . . . He feared that sin was so offensive to God that Their separation was to be eternal. . . . It was the sense of sin, bringing the Father's wrath upon Him as man's substitute, that made the cup He drank so bitter, and broke the heart of the Son of God."—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 752, 753.

Jesus addresses this prayer to "God," instead of to the "Father" as He always had done. Christ's cries from the cross are not some exemplary display that He appears to go through in order to demonstrate that He loves us. No, this is God giving Himself over to death so that our destiny would not be determined by death. This is God Himself dying the death from which we can be spared, the death that sin would otherwise bring us all.

Three Gospels record that Jesus cried out with a loud voice from the cross as He was dying. These loud cries are even mentioned in the book of Hebrews: "who, in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death" (*Heb. 5:7, NKJV*). Jesus' "cry of dereliction" is the most piercing cry in the Bible. There is no statement in all the Gospels to rival this one from Jesus on the cross, and in that cry we get a glimpse of what the Lord Himself was willing to go through in order to bring us salvation.

Further Study: “Oh, how inefficient, how incapable I am of expressing the things which burn in my soul in reference to the mission of Christ! . . . I know not how to speak or trace with pen the large subject of the atoning sacrifice. I know not how to present subjects in the living power in which they stand before me. I tremble for fear lest I shall belittle the great plan of salvation by cheap words.”—Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, book 3, p. 115.

“The infinite mercy and love of Jesus, the sacrifice made in our behalf, call for the most serious and solemn reflection. We should dwell upon the character of our dear Redeemer and Intercessor. . . . As we thus contemplate heavenly themes, our faith and love will grow stronger, and our prayers will be more and more acceptable to God, because they will be more and more mixed with faith and love. They will be intelligent and fervent. There will be more constant confidence in Jesus, and a daily, living experience in His power to save to the uttermost all that come unto God by Him.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 89.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 In Scripture, God is portrayed both as a great Lover of sinners as well as extremely wrathful against sin. Some Christians try to pick one or the other as representing God’s nature. Why is that unnecessary? In fact, why is God’s love for sinners one of the main reasons why He is wrathful against sin?
- 2 God’s love is not like the feeble and sometimes irregular affection that we bestow on one another. What does Christ’s act as Savior teach us about divine love?
- 3 How does your understanding of God’s holiness, in contrast to your sinfulness, help you to understand better why salvation cost so much?
- 4 Dwell more on the story of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. In what other ways does it help us to understand the nature of Christ’s sacrifice on our behalf? At the same time, in what ways does it barely do justice to what it was intended to symbolize?

Summary: From the earliest pages of Genesis, the Bible points us to the death of Christ on the cross, where He would die a sinner’s death in order to redeem us, as sinners, from the eternal destruction that sin brings. Though the Bible uses different symbols and metaphors to explain Christ’s death, at the center of it all is His substitution, so graphically expressed in Isaiah 53. If we ever needed proof that works can’t save us, we have it with the death of God Himself on the cross. After all, what could fallen beings ever add to that?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Revelation 5:12*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Review the various Old and New Testament stories and symbols that emphasize the Cross as the heart of the revelation of God's nature.

Feel: Identify with the suffering Christ on the cross and the agonizing Father hidden in a veil of darkness.

Do: Share in God's suffering as part of the life we live through Christ.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: The Heart of the Gospel

A In the Garden of Eden, the promise to vanquish Satan came with an acknowledgment of the cost of this victory. What was this cost?

B What other biblical stories and verses demonstrate the suffering of God that purchased our healing?

II. Feel: By His Stripes

A Why is it so important for us to meditate on the suffering of Christ and of the Father during the crucifixion?

B Visualizing and dwelling on these pictures of the Suffering Servant have what effect on our emotions and attitudes toward God?

III. Do: Sharing in His Cup

A How do we share in the cup of Christ's suffering?

B How are we changed as we dwell on the costs that the Father and Son paid for our salvation?

► **Summary:** The agony and horror of Christ's suffering on the cross and of the Father's pain from sending His Son into this torment illustrate both the terrible cost of sin and the boundless love of God that led Him to take upon Himself the penalty for our transgressions.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: God's justice is revealed in His wrath against sin. His mercy is revealed in the lengths to which He went to make sure that we did not have to share sin's fate.

Just for Teachers: Emphasize the importance of a balanced understanding of Christ's redemptive act. The fact of our redemption is not an excuse to take sin lightly but, rather, a call to grateful obedience to, and praise of, the God who revealed His character in the mighty acts of His Son.

Cynics are often bemused by the Christian's use of the cross as a symbol, particularly when worn as jewelry or otherwise prettified or domesticated in popular Christian art. They may point out that this is much like using a stylized electric chair as a symbol or any other instrument of execution or torture. In a way, they're right. The cross was an instrument of both execution and torture. One can only wonder at the mind of the person who first conceived of killing his enemies in this way. What could possibly be more diametrically opposed to what Jesus Christ represented and wanted for His children than an instrument of death that not only killed, but killed painfully over a period of days, and enlisted the forces of nature themselves (sun, rain, et cetera) in its work?

Early Christians knew all about this. They were highly ambivalent about the use of the cross as a symbol, even though they understood Christ's sacrifice as well as or better than we do. One rarely finds anything like the modern cross or crucifix in the Christian iconography of the first few centuries. Christ is symbolized by fish or anchors but almost never by this instrument of death and torture. Even the Emperor Constantine's favored Christian symbol wasn't the cross but the Chi Rho, the first two Greek letters in the name of Christ.

But in His atoning death, Christ took the cross, which should have been a symbol of all the evil that had come upon the world as a result of sin, and made it a symbol of the opposite: ultimate good and selflessness. If He could do that for the cross, what can He do for us?

Discuss With the Class: The Cross can often become trivialized, particularly if we live in a place in which most people identify as Christians. We may see it but not actually look at it. What does the Cross really mean to us?

► STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: It is all too easy for us to glory in our redemption in Christ without fully understanding the real cost of it or what made such a redemption necessary. Emphasize that sin is not a trivial thing or a joke, such as when we refer to a piece of chocolate cake as “sinfully delicious.” Left to ourselves, we would be destroyed by sin. Our need for redemption from it caused the painful and lonely death of God’s Son.

Bible Commentary

I. Is God Angry at You? (*Review Romans 1:18 with your class.*)

The wrath of God is a difficult concept for many. If we could, many of us would banish it to the outer edges of the Old Testament. And yet, here it is near the beginning of a book (Romans) that most people associate with the love and grace of God. So, what is the wrath of God? Against what or whom is it directed? Is it really what we think of as wrath or anger, or is it just a way of referring to the natural consequences of sin?

First, we’ve all experienced human anger and angry people. Almost by definition, the experience was not positive. Perhaps the anger was justified, or perhaps it was arbitrary or unfair. In any event, anger of this sort is an emotion, a human emotion. In this sense, the wrath of God is entirely different from human wrath or anger.

The wrath described in this passage is linked with the judgment of God. Therefore, it is not the result of an impulsive flash of anger. God has judged sin, or unrighteousness, and has marked it for destruction. At the same time, this sin or unrighteousness didn’t just appear out of thin air. It is the “unrighteousness of men.” So, necessarily, while the wrath is directed against the sin itself, it is also directed against those who entertain and practice it while knowing better, “holding the truth in unrighteousness.”

Paul also uses the phrase “is revealed,” or even more to the point, “is being revealed,” in relation to God’s wrath. On one level, this refers to the natural results of sin. Sin has certain consequences in the real world that can be seen by anyone who cares to notice. The consequences also will be revealed in the final judgment of God, in which sin and unrighteousness will be destroyed.

In short, God is not angry with you. He is angry with sin. He wants you

to separate yourself from it and accept the gift of new life and righteousness that He is also revealing. There is no need for any of us to cling to sin and share its fate.

Consider This: God has revealed His wrath but also how to escape from it. Are you clinging to unrighteousness? If so, what will it take to pry you away from it?

II. “Who Has Believed Our Report?” *(Review Isaiah 53 with your class.)*

Most of us are familiar with the doctrine of justification in which Christ’s sacrifice causes His righteousness to be attributed to us. In some sense, it causes God to view us as if we had Christ’s virtues. We like this idea. But in order for that to happen, Christ had to allow Himself to bear our sinfulness. This is a little more difficult to take. Isaiah 53 begins on a note of disbelief, culminating in dismay. Rhetorically, the prophet asks, “Who has believed our report?” The answer is, very few.

Jesus’ contemporaries looked at Him on the cross and saw, at best, a victim of the worst circumstances possible. They didn’t know what to say. Perhaps they were afraid that His misfortune and wretchedness would rub off on them. Or, even, that maybe He had really done something bad to deserve it. They turned away and tried to forget about it.

Others probably looked on and saw what their religious leaders and the principalities and powers of the world wanted them to see: a criminal, a blasphemer, possibly a madman. After all, He was tried and convicted by the wisest and most influential men in the nation, selected from among each of the influential factions. When was the last time they had agreed on anything? In any case, better not to get involved, better not to even look.

Consider This: We’ve all heard the phrase “cheap grace,” and undoubtedly we’re all guilty of acting as though grace is cheap. How might meditating on the real significance of Christ’s sacrifice affect such notions?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Use the following questions to help your students to see the significance of the plan of salvation and how it arises from the very nature and character of God.

Thought Questions:

- 1 At the root of Redemption is sin. If there was no sin, there would be

no need for Redemption. Why, then, do people seem to want the joy of Redemption without the sorrow for sin?

2 What do you think of the idea, pushed by some Christian thinkers, that the plan of Redemption is *so implausible, so contrary* to established modes of merely human thought, that it must be true? The idea is, who would have made up something so implausible? Discuss.

Application Question:

1 Because good works in no way increase our salvation “score,” what role do obedience and good works play in the life of the redeemed person?

2 In our interactions with others, how often do we wait for indications that they are worthy of, or ready for, our kindness or forgiveness? Is this how God viewed us in our situation? (*See Rom. 5:8.*)

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: The story of Redemption is yet another area in which we tend to make a false distinction between an “angry” Old Testament God and “merciful” Jesus. The following activity should enable your students to start to question these false distinctions and develop a more balanced view of God.

Activity: Find passages in the Old Testament that refer to God’s mercy or that show examples of God’s forgiveness or providence toward people, even people who might have been considered outsiders. Good examples of the latter might include Rahab (*Joshua 2, 6:17–25*), Ruth, or the repentant Ninevites of the book of Jonah. Ask your students to look up and read these passages aloud from their Bibles. Also note prophecies of the coming redemption, such as Jeremiah 31:31–34. Make it clear that God the Father did not need to be flattered or cajoled into redeeming us, as the popular image might seem to indicate.