

Grace



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Exod. 25:8; Isaiah 53; Rom. 5:18, 19; 2 Cor. 3:16–18; Eph. 2:4–10; Titus 2:11–14.*

Memory Text: “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (*Romans 5:8*).

During a British conference on comparative religions, experts from around the world debated what, if any, belief was unique to the Christian faith. They began eliminating possibilities. Incarnation? Other religions had different versions of gods appearing in human form. Resurrection? Again, other religions had accounts of returns from death. The debate went on for some time until Christian writer C. S. Lewis wandered into the room. “‘What’s the rumpus about?’ he asked and heard in reply that his colleagues were discussing Christianity’s unique contribution among world religions. Lewis responded, ‘Oh, that’s easy. It’s grace.’” —Philip Yancey, *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1997), p. 45.

Last week we were confronted with the dreadful phenomenon of sin, the “secret power of lawlessness” (*2 Thess. 2:7, NIV*). In the final section we saw that through divine intervention a solution has been provided. What that intervention was, and what it accomplished for us, will be the focus of this week’s study.

The Week at a Glance: What are some of the images God uses to teach us the plan of salvation? What is atonement? How central is the concept of substitution to our understanding of the Cross?

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 16.

God Provides Salvation

The story of how Abraham’s loyalty was tested is well known. God asked him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Unaware of what God had told his father to do, and thinking that they were simply going to offer a sacrifice somewhere, Isaac asked why they had not taken an animal with them. Abraham then replied with the prophetic words that found their echo throughout the pages of the Old, as well as the New Testament: “ ‘God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering’ ” (*Gen. 22:8, NIV*).

What was the prophetic significance of Abraham’s words to his son?

Where else in the Old Testament do we find texts that point to the redemption that was to come through Christ? What are those texts, and what do they say? See, for example, *Gen. 3:15, Exod. 25:8, Isaiah 53*.

Jesus Christ is the center of the Old Testament. Indeed, the whole purpose of the earthly sanctuary service was to point to the coming of the Messiah (*see Hebrews 8, 9*). Everything prior to His entrance into the world was a mere prelude to the Cross. God waited until the right moment. Then, when “the time had fully come” (*Gal. 4:4, NIV*), Christ came to live among us.

“Through every age, through every hour, the love of God had been exercised toward the fallen race. Notwithstanding the perversity of men, the signals of mercy had been continually exhibited. And when the fullness of the time had come, the Deity was glorified by pouring upon the world a flood of healing grace that was never to be obstructed or withdrawn till the plan of salvation should be fulfilled.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 37.

Think how many long centuries had passed between the promises of the coming Messiah and His coming. What should that tell us—beings who usually live only eighty short years or so at best—about patience, about trusting in God though things seem to take so long?

Pictures of the Miracle of Grace

How do you explain to a three-year-old child what electricity is? How do you explain to those deep in the African jungles, who have never traveled more than 25 miles from where they live, what traffic lights are for and how an elevator works? How can a physicist ever hope to explain Einstein's relativity theory to a person whose education remained limited to elementary school? God faced a communication gap that went far beyond these examples of human communication barriers. The divine love demonstrated in the life and death of Jesus Christ cannot be captured fully in human words. Yet, God wanted us to have an adequate idea of what is involved in His plan of salvation. God inspired the authors of the Scriptures to use a number of different word-pictures, each of which gives us further insight into the mystery of His grace. None of these images should be used in isolation from the other perspectives. Taken together, however, they will leave us with a sense of wonder and immense gratitude.

What is one of the most prominent word-pictures God used to help us catch some profound glimpses of the mystery of grace? *Isa. 53:7, John 1:29.*

What other symbolism is used to illustrate a further dimension of the truth of the atonement? *Matt. 20:28, Acts 20:28, 1 Cor. 6:20.*

We must be careful not to use one particular symbol to the exclusion of other word-pictures. When we combine everything that is said about the atonement, we arrive at as full a picture as we finite human beings can absorb. Nevertheless, the image of a ransom, of a high price paid for us, is a powerful one. "Christ redeemed us from sin, that is, He bought us back from sin. . . . What the metaphor intends is that (a) the means of our salvation is costly and that (b) we have passed from one state to another—from the state of slavery to the state of nearness to God. A redemption means the passing over of ownership at a cost."—Edward W. H. Vick, *Let Me Assure You* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1968), p. 33.

Dwell on the implications of this idea that the Creator of the universe, the One who made all that is (*John 1:1–3*), voluntarily went to the cross as the only means of saving us from eternal ruin. Why should the reality of this truth heavily influence how we live? Think how foolish it is to let anything earthly turn us away from the Cross.

What Happened at Calvary?

There is a lot of discussion among theologians about the doctrine of atonement. Two main concepts are promoted. Some opt for an objective view of the atonement while others defend a subjective view. What does this mean? The first school of thought emphasizes that something actually occurred at a historical point in time on a hill just outside of Jerusalem, a concrete, historical event that provided the basis for our salvation. Other theologians underline the fact that our response to the demonstration of Jesus' love and self-sacrifice on the cross is the crucial point: We are changed when we contemplate a love so great! Both perspectives are true and, understood together, complement each other.

How does the Bible explain the relationship between what Christ did for us and what we as sinful beings, in fact, deserve? *Isa. 53:4, 5; Rom. 5:18, 19.*

The idea that Jesus Christ died in our place, so that we will not suffer eternal death but become partakers of the life that He offers, is usually referred to as the concept of substitution. To many this is an abhorrent idea. They do not like the legalistic language often used or the concept of divine wrath against sin. But whatever we may like or dislike, the grandiose truth is that God has dealt with the sin problem in the way He decided was suitable. Being just, He could not ignore sin; being love, He could not abandon the sinner. We should have paid the penalty of eternal death ourselves because we are the guilty ones. But Jesus was willing to take our place! That's what happened at the cross. This actual event, that of His substitution in our stead, became the basis for our redemption.

Then, as a result of what Christ has done for us, as a response to His substitution in our place, we are drawn to Him, we respond to Him, we change our attitude toward Him and other humans beings, as well. This is the complementary, subjective side to the plan of salvation (*John 12:32, Rom. 5:1*).

Think about all the bad things you have done and (perhaps) might still do. Then realize that Jesus, at the cross, suffered the punishment that you deserve for those actions. How do you feel, knowing that He suffered in your stead? What should your response be, knowing what Jesus went through on your behalf?

A Change of Heart

The unparalleled manifestation of divine compassion and grace on Calvary has changed millions of hearts. From the very moment He hung dying on the cross, people were changed by beholding the love of Christ. One of the criminals crucified with Him noticed that Jesus was someone special, with a future beyond this ignominious death (*Luke 23:39–43*). And even the Roman centurion noticed that Jesus was no criminal (*vs. 47*).

How should our lives be changed by beholding Jesus and what He has done for us? *2 Cor. 3:16–18; Heb. 12:2, 3.*

“Let the repenting sinner fix his eyes upon ‘the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world’ (John 1:29); and *by beholding, he becomes changed*. His fear is turned to joy, his doubts to hope. Gratitude springs up. The stony heart is broken. A tide of love sweeps into the soul. Christ is in him a well of water springing up unto everlasting life. When . . . we behold Him in Gethsemane, sweating great drops of blood, and on the cross dying in agony—when we see this, self will no longer clamor to be recognized. Looking unto Jesus, we shall be ashamed of our coldness, our lethargy, our self-seeking. We shall be willing to be anything or nothing, so that we may do heart service for the Master.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 439, 440; italics supplied.

How well do her words reflect your own experience with Christ? What could be holding you back from a deeper experience with Him? How much time do you spend contemplating Calvary?

Theologians propose various theories of the atonement. But when everything is said and done, there is no one theory or combination of theories that will do justice to the marvel of God’s grace (*see 1 Cor. 1:20–25*). It is good to talk together about the passages of Scripture that reveal different aspects of Jesus’ sacrifice. But what Jesus did for us should be not only a topic of debate but prayerfully contemplated and experienced. Though there’s much we can’t understand, we have been given enough so that we should marvel at what God has done for us in Christ.

Christ Our Salvation

It's easy for Christians to get sidetracked. For some, the focus of their faith is either on the Bible, or on the church, or on the traditions or doctrines of their church. While all these have their role, they can be very problematic if they turn us away from Jesus, who alone is the Source of our salvation.

As Seventh-day Adventists, we often refer to the “truth” as the focus of our faith. There is nothing wrong with that, as long as we do not reduce our concept of truth to a list of doctrines to which we intellectually ascribe. Our faith should find its center in the truth as we find it in Jesus. We believe in a Person who has revealed our God to us, who has come to redeem us, who presently is our heavenly Mediator, and who will return to take us home. This must be of primary importance to us.

What do such passages as Ephesians 2:4–10 and Titus 2:11–14 teach us about the centrality of Christ in our faith?

Ephesians 2:4–10 is an extraordinarily rich passage. It underlines several times that we are saved by grace. This grace is described as “incomparable riches” (*vs. 6, NIV*), which issue from God’s “great love for us” (*vs. 4, NIV*). This grace is *gratis*, free. It cannot be earned. Our works do not bring us eternal life. If they did, we would have reason to boast about our own goodness. It is God’s grace that will bring visible changes in our daily lives and that will enable us to do “good” works (*vs. 10*). But even these good deeds are, essentially, God’s work in us.

What magnificent description of the centrality of Jesus Christ to our faith do we find in Paul’s words as recorded in Acts 17:28? See also *Gal. 2:16–20*.

How should the doctrines we have as Adventists help us better understand what Christ has done for us? Suppose, for instance, that you believed in eternal torment in hell. How would that, or other false teachings, impact your understanding of Christ? Why then are correct doctrines so important in helping us come to know Jesus better?

Further Study: The book *Seventh-day Adventists* will almost automatically refer to when asked about the atoning work of Christ is Ellen G. White's *The Desire of Ages*. Chapters 78 and 79 (pp. 741–768) are particularly relevant in the context of this week's study. Note the statement on page 751: "As Jesus, crucified with the thieves, was placed 'in the midst,' so His cross was placed in the midst of a world lying in sin. And the words of pardon spoken to the penitent thief kindled a light that will shine to the earth's remotest bounds."

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Some people are offended by the idea that God demanded the life of His Son as a "payment" for the sins of humankind. That, though, is one of the images used by the Bible, so we must take it for what it says. What should the image tell us about the seriousness of sin and how costly our redemption was?
- 2 If there is one doctrine many contemporary people object to, it is the atonement. Many do not accept the idea that our problem should be solved by an intervention from the "outside." Should not each person accept responsibility for what he or she has done? How do you explain the need for divine intervention to such people? Also, ask these people about the problem of death. How is that problem going to be solved if not by divine intervention?
- 3 Those who are saved by grace must also show grace to those around them. How do we as individuals show that our lives are embedded in grace? How does a church model this divine grace?
- 4 Why is the "subjective" side of the Cross so important, as well? That is, how should the realization of Christ's death for us change us? What should it teach us about forgiveness, about humility, about patience, about love for the unlovable? What are some concrete and practical ways we can reveal the reality of what the Cross means to us?

Summary: Theologians have developed many theories about the atonement. Most are deficient or at least one-sided. They may be compared with pictures taken from different sides of the Himalayas. They all show the mountains but do not provide a complete picture. The miracle of grace must not be reduced to a formula to which we give intellectual assent. It is the ground of our faith. Christ died for us so that we can have eternal life. Without Him, we are lost. With Him as our Savior, our future is secure.

Ooha's Fervent Faith

by Y. S. METHUSELAH

Eight-year-old Ooha looked longingly out the door of her grandmother's small house in the village of Venkatapuram, in southeastern India. She scanned the empty plot of land across the road and then closed her eyes in prayer. Ooha, like the other new believers in her village, has a wish. No, it's more than a wish; it's a passion. She wants to worship God in a church, a real church.

When Adventist lay workers held evangelistic meetings in Ooha's village, hundreds of people attended. And when they were invited to follow Jesus, many left their other gods and accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Their faith is fervent, and their determination to be true to God's commandments is strong. Every Sabbath and often during the week they gather in homes to worship and pray, for they, like many congregations throughout India, have no church in which to worship.

The church members are farmers. They don't earn a lot. But they give what they can to buy bricks for the church that one day will stand in the empty lot. Progress is slow, and others in their village—mostly non-Christians—urge the new believers to find a stronger god, for their God must not be very powerful if He cannot provide a temple in which to worship Him. The believers understand how their neighbors think, but it stings to hear the words, "Your God must not be strong."

Ooha hears the words too. She has no money to add to the church's building fund, but she is doing her part. Ever since the missionaries told them about Jesus, Ooha has prayed for a church. Every Sabbath she fasts and prays for the church that she is sure God will provide. She refuses to miss a single Sabbath, and she plans to continue fasting and praying until the church becomes a reality and is dedicated. So on Sabbath, while other children run after morning worship, Ooha fasts and prays that God will provide a way for them to have a church in which to worship and bring their friends to meet God.



Your mission offerings have helped lead thousands of people in India to the Savior. Your Thirteenth Sabbath Offerings have helped build hundreds of churches there, as well. Thank you for sharing so that others may meet Jesus.

Ooha (left). Y. S. METHUSELAH is director of the Northwest Andhra Region in southeastern India.