



“Jesus Makes Atonement”

Luke 23:39-46
March 21, 2021

We are in Luke Chapter 23 this morning. This is our 103rd study in the Gospel of Luke. We opened this book together for the first time on November 12, 2017. As you know, we have also ventured into other portions of Scripture. Numerous series have been sliced into the preaching calendar as we have been walking steadily through the Gospel of Luke these past years.

Can you believe that it has been now just about three and a half years that we have been taking in the wonders of this book together? All along, brothers and sisters, there has been a certain gravity pulling us to the moment that is before us this morning.

There is some kind of gravitational magnetic force bringing us here because this morning we are at the crucifixion and death of Christ. We are here this morning observing the moment where Christ made atonement for His people. This is why He came into the world.

As Paul wrote in his letter to Timothy:

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. (I Timothy 1:15)

Having lived a perfect obedient life of holiness, living in the Law of the Lord to perfection, the Sinless Sacrifice was nailed to the cross, where He was dying for our sin.

The title of this morning’s message is *Jesus Makes Atonement*. That word *atonement* is vitally important. It is a very, very rich theological term pointing us to a theological reality that is awesome and precious. The issue of atonement, it is very similar in many ways to what we talked about last week with justification.

However, last week we were specifically talking about justification and the fact it is something that is very, very positive. But justification is not simply being declared not guilty, then being left in a neutral position. Last week we talked about the fact that not only are we declared not guilty, but we are also declared righteous in the sight of God on the basis of being clothed in the merit and the righteousness of Jesus who obeyed the Law of the Lord for us.

It is not like we are just left neutral in justification. It is very, very positive, and the same is true in the atonement that Jesus has provided for us. There are numerous theological realities that fall under the concept of atonement. There are two of them that I want to share with you as we get started, so that this will be the lens through which we see this historical narrative that will unfold before us here in Scripture.

Not only did Jesus take care of something negative for us in atonement, but He brought us into something very, very positive. It was not just a sacrifice for sin that was made, it was bringing us into a situation through faith in Christ of total harmony and peace and union with the Living God.

The basic meaning of the word *atonement* is that there is a provision of a sacrifice, bringing sinful human beings into the favor of the One Holy God.

This is the basic concept of atonement. Two realities that fall under atonement are propitiation and reconciliation. In the atonement we talk about the fact that Christ has propitiated our sin. This is a wonderful word. This is a word that ought to produce reverence and worship in our hearts.

By propitiation, we are talking about the satisfaction of the wrath of God by means of sufficient sacrifice.

Brothers and sisters, God is angry about sin. Wrath is one of the perfections of the holiness of God. That is a good thing! When we think about all of the manipulation and abusiveness that fills this earth, what if God was indifferent about it all?

But He is not. He is angered by sin and He is angered by our sin. So praise God that Jesus came as a sacrifice of propitiation, appeasing the righteous wrath of the Living God. That is just one aspect of the atonement that Jesus provided.

There is more to it, because Jesus did not just propitiate for us and then leave us in a neutral position. It becomes very, very, very positive because there is reconciliation.

By reconciliation, we mean the restoration of peace and harmony and intimacy by the removal of sin.

With sin being dealt with and taken away, we now have the experience of the grace and the love of God unleashed into our lives. In the word atonement, we see the whole issue of reconciliation. We are brought into AT-ONE-MENT with the Lord. There is unity and harmony involved in the beauty of what Jesus did at the cross.

I think these aspects of atonement are beautifully laid out for us in the first portion of I Peter 3:18:

¹⁸For Christ also suffered once for sins

That is propitiation. He paid a price and it was a painful price that He paid. He did it as a substitute.

¹⁸... the righteous for the unrighteous...

Why?

18...that he might bring us to God...

To bring us into God's peace. To bring us into union with Him. These are the glories of the atonement.

This morning as we by faith do our best to really be present there at the scene at Golgotha, I pray that by the Holy Spirit you will be brought near to God in a wonderful experiential way of worship.

If you have never come to faith in Christ and confessed your sin and need, I pray that what you see here in this text will stir your heart with fear of the Lord and that your fear will be relieved when you see what Jesus paid for you; that you will be brought near to God.

If you do know the Lord, I pray that you will worship and praise Him as the Spirit fills your heart all the more and that you will bring others with you. Remember that Jesus has us in this world as His ambassadors and agents of reconciliation. He has us here on a mission to serve Him among a darkened world that needs a Savior.

As we dig into this paragraph of Scripture that is at the very heart of the Gospel of Luke, I pray that we are taken to the very heart of our God as we see four miracles of atonement that took place. These are so amazing to see as we look upon the cross of our Lord.

Here is the preview. We will walk through these one at a time. We will see how at this very profound moment, there was the conversion of a soul. We will also see the darkening of the sun and that there was the rending of the veil or the curtain in the temple. Finally we will see that there was the dismissal of the human spirit of Jesus Christ.

These are awesome things that took place at the that time when Jesus was atoning for our sin. So let's dig in and see what the Lord has for us here in this text. First we will see:

1. The Conversion of a Soul (23:39-43)

We will see this as we pick up the story. We remember that Jesus had been nailed to a rugged Roman cross. Jesus was not crucified alone, was He?

He was there with two others. One was positioned at His right and the other was positioned at His left. As Jesus was nailed to the cross and hoisted up. As He was there dying, you will recall from last week that there was a chorus of scorn that was poured out over Him from human vocal cords.

We remember that both Jewish and Gentile voices were scoffing Him. The religious leaders and the Roman guards were taunting Him—Save yourself. Save yourself. Is He going to save himself. He said He was the Chosen One. He said He was the Holy One. He saved others. Will He going to save himself. Save yourself.

These were the sounds that were entering into His ears in an ongoing way on the cross. And now as we continue, we have something of a surprise as another voice joined that chorus of mockery. Even more surprising still is that we find that another voice spoke out to defend the honor of Jesus the Messiah.

So we read Luke Chapter 23 and Verse 39:

³⁹One of the criminals who were hanged railed at him, saying, “Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!” ⁴⁰But the other rebuked him, saying, “Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? ⁴¹And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”

Here we see that one of the criminals roused himself up to rail against Jesus. That is the language that is used here. He too was heaping scorn with the tone with which he was speaking to Jesus—yea, you save yourself. Save us too. Give it a go. Let’s see what you can do.

This one, he roused himself to scorn Jesus, then the other also drew strength not only physically, but also morally and he spoke out to defend the honor of the Christ that was situated between the two of them.

There is something that we must pay attention to because each of the four Gospel writers pass on this information to us; that there were two others that were crucified with Jesus. But Matthew and Mark, they both tell us that both of the criminals were scorning Jesus. Both of them were railing against Him. Both of them were mocking Him.

Now Luke passes the story on that one of them was mocking and the other was defending Jesus. What gives? What do we have here? Are the critics correct? Do we have an error here in the pages of Scripture? Is this a contradiction?

It is certainly not a contradiction! You take the accounts together and you harmonize them and they dove-tail together to let us know that this is not a contradiction, this was a conversion! Two of the authors tell us what was in fact happening early on, and Luke informs us how it turned out; how one of these men had a change of heart being next to Christ and hearing how He was responding to all that was going on.

So there was a movement of grace. Do you want to know what happened? This was not a deathbed conversion, this was a death-penalty conversion. Here we have the grace of God moving in this that man’s heart so that he experienced contrition over his own sin and he began to realize that there was something very unique about the One next to him.

What we see here is such a beautiful expression of what is captured for us in that timeless hymn of the faith, *Amazing Grace*, in its second verse. How did John Newton put it?

‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;

How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

This was an action of grace. What was the first thing that this criminal said—don't you fear God? Isn't all of this sobering you up? Aren't you hearing what we have heard from Him? Isn't what happening here daunting upon you? We are here because we deserve to be here. There is something different about this one.

And he rose up and had contrition. He said that they were there justly being put to death. We like to think of him as the thief on the cross. That is how I still affectionately remember him, but understand that that man was probably an insurrectionist. He stole people's lives.

The Romans crucified the worst of criminals. That man committed something serious, not just crimes but sins. There are some in our secularizing age who want to distinguish between crimes and sins. Believe me, it is crime in the human realm and it is sin before God.

This was daunting upon the criminal and anytime a person is being awakened to the gracious salvation that comes in Christ, it comes with them realizing that He is judge, and I am guilty. There is a price to be paid and I am in deep trouble.

Jesus came to pay the price for our sin, satisfying the justice of the Judge on High because our sins were imputed to Him. He paid the price for them. The work of the Holy Spirit is to produce contrition, and understanding of and sorrow for sin that drives us into the gracious arms of the Savior.

So we see this taking placing. 'Twas grace that taught that man's heart to fear and I pray that we all know that fear that was being experienced here because that is what leads us into salvation. But what is the next line of *Amazing Grace*?

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;

So what happened next? The criminal stopped speaking to the other criminal and began speaking to the King. Verse 42:

⁴²And he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." ⁴³And he said to him, "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Brothers and sisters, do you see atonement at work here? AT-ONE-MENT? Jesus expressed it with solemnity and authority—truly, I say to you. You, you are a guilty sinner but you will be with me where?

First with who? What is emphasized in this passage? Is it the where or the who that is first emphasized? The who is first emphasized—you will be with Me in paradise. So do you see atonement is not just propitiation? It is that and all of that, but it is reconciliation as well—you will be with Me in paradise, Jesus said.

Later that day that man's body expired. His body was left behind and his soul sprang forth in a very human, conscious experience of life in Heaven with Christ the Savior, according to the promise of the Lord. So this work of atonement was taking place, and it is lovely.

The historian William Barclay had this to say about this word *paradise*:

“One lovely thing we may note, for it will help a little. The word *paradise* comes from a Persian word which means a walled-garden. When a Persian king wished to confer a very special honor on someone especially dear to him, he made him a companion of the garden and gave him the right to walk in the royal garden with him in intimate companionship.”

Atonement. AT-ONE-MENT—brought into the very presence and very heart of the King of kings and the Lord of lords. What an awesome and beautiful picture that we have here. Heaven. It is like the Garden of Eden in that intimacy that the man and the woman knew with the LORD prior to sin.

It is a garden with colors and fragrances and structures. There are walls and architecture. It is an awesome place but the most awesome thing about it is the presence of the Living Lord Jesus Christ.

So we have these unthinkable beautiful realities expressed to us in this passage. This is one of the miracles of the atonement. Hear this: Jesus said,

I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:16)

You go into the garden and you go into the presence of the Triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit. The shed blood of Jesus Christ. Faith in Him is the one and only way in. Praise God that such a wonderful way is opened up.

After this moment of salvation the Scripture takes us from the imagery of paradise back to the place of *The Skull*, then into the temple of Jerusalem and the miracles start stacking up. We have already seen a miracle of conversion, a heart transformed.

Read what comes next with me. Luke Chapter 23 and Verses 44:

⁴⁴It was now about the sixth hour, and there was a darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last.

So we see now these miracles multiply there on that Great Day of Atonement that took place of that Good Friday on that Passover. The first miracle was the conversion of a soul, then we second we see that there was:

2. The Darkening of the Sun (23:44-45)

Christ was on the cross from the third hour until the ninth hour according to the Jewish reckoning of the day; the twenty-four hour period. So for them it was from the sixth hour to the twelfth hour. For us it is the ninth hour until the third hour.

Right smack dab in the middle of it, at high noon, the sun ceased to give its light. A profound shadow was cast upon the land. It became dark. This was not an eclipse, nor was it a dust storm. This was an act of God in human history indicating this time of propitiation that was taking place.

God was doing something awesome to help us to understand the fearsome and glorious moment that was occurring and that we have been given a record of. Darkness came over the land. Darkness! A darkness that lasted for three hours.

When we read what is here, we find that there was a complete reversal than what happened at the very dawn of creation. Genesis Chapter 1 takes us to the very beginning of world history. Perhaps those words are familiar to you.

¹In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. ²The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

Then the Lord for the first time in human history spoke forth His voice and what did He say with His authoritative Word? What is the first command that the Lord thundered forth?

³And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. ⁴And God saw that the light was good.

This was not sunlight. This was not starlight. This was not moonlight. Those lights were not created yet. This was the glory of God's Shekinah. This was glorious light. This was God's glory filling the universe He created.

Now we come to this moment. Now we come to the cross of Jesus Christ. God the Son through whom all things were created was then bearing our sins. He was bearing our sins in His body on the tree. He was paying the price and making the sacrifice of atonement.

And the same God who said let there be light, now said let there be darkness. And the lights went out. And the properties of nature that God put into this world were suspended, and it became dark by the decree of the Almighty.

We know by tracing this theme of darkness throughout the pages of Scripture that the imagery of darkness is repeated time and time and time again to indicate the fearsome judgment of the Living God.

So God was indicating by the atmospheric conditions that there was something that was awesome taking place as the transaction of redemption was occurring. It was a moment of dark judgement.

The wrath of God was being poured out upon the blameless Son of God, the Pure Precious Lamb. Wave after wave after wave after wave after wave of judgment was being released upon the Sacred Head of the Messiah.

He was here pierced for our transgressions. He was being crushed for our iniquities. The chastisement, the punishment that brings us peace, was being released upon Him. He had been made God's mark. The arrows of the Almighty were being relentlessly released into His heart and soul.

Jesus was paying the price of sin in the midst of the darkness that is used to describe moments of Old Testament judgment, and darkness that is used to describe the eternal judgment of God in Hell. The darkness covered the land as the wrath was being released, wave after wave after wave until the waves subsided and the arrows were no longer being released.

Christ realized that atonement had been provided for, cried out as recorded in John Chapter 19, *tetelestai*, which means *it is finished*. The price had been paid. The debt has been cancelled. The Savior has prevailed. Let your heart worship Him. Let your heart say, Thank you, Jesus.

Let your heart and your lives say thank your Father for what was happening there between You and Your Son, as that eternal intimacy and harmony and union was somehow fractured in such a way that even the Christ said, My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Punishment was being released and then it came to that moment where Jesus said, It is finished. Then that leads us into another miracle. This text is taking us all over the place. It began on Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, takes us up to paradise, then back to Golgotha, where there was that profound darkness.

Guess where we are going next. We here were Mount Calvary. Now we went to Mount Zion. We were at the place called *The Skull*, now we get to go to Temple Mount. We go into the very temple itself, where we see yet another miracle that took place at the time of atonement and we see:

3. The Rending of the Veil (23:45)

The rending of the veil took place as all this was happening and as the price had been paid, it says that the curtain of the temple was torn in two.

This was not the kind of curtain that you have hanging in your kitchen right now. Recently we got a super deluxe blackout curtains for our living room. This curtain was not like that either. We are talking about this veil, this curtain that was there in the very heart of the temple of Israel.

There in the temple there was a place called the *inner sanctum*. It was the holy of holies. It was the most holy place, where the presence of God was manifested in awesome and fearsome ways. This most holy place was separated from the holy place.

Don't mistake the most holy place for the holy place. The most holy place was set apart from the holy place with an awesome thick curtain. You can look up some descriptions of this curtain. Look up Josephus and his description and some things that were written in ancient times about the curtain in Herod's Temple.

It was made of tightly woven blue, purple and scarlet material and fabric. It was 30 feet wide and 60 feet tall. Some suggest that it was several inches thick, possibly even four inches thick. That curtain was there as an imposing reminder that sin hinders our accesses into the very presence of God.

Only the High Priest of Israel, only once a year on the Day of Atonement went into that place. Now it was torn in half. The Gospels of Mark and Matthew gives us the information that it was torn from top to bottom.

As easily as I can take this piece of paper and rip it in half, I picture the hand of God ripping that massive curtain in to two pieces. The *do not enter* symbol had been torn in two so as to communicate that in Christ, in the Messiah, access granted. Atonement provided the way into the very, very heart and presence of the Living God.

So, brothers and sisters in Christ, brothers and sisters washed in the Messiah, we have access. Somehow when we pray and are quiet before the Lord, we are in His very presence. When we gather as the church, we are in His very presence.

You don't need some ritual. You don't need some person. You don't need some pastor or priest to grant you access into the very presence of God except for the Great High Priest, Jesus, and that access is granted by faith.

So the wonderful instruction of Hebrews Chapter 10 sounds like this

¹⁹Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is through his flesh, ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.

Into the very presence of the Living God we go as those who are purchased and cleansed by the blood of Christ, by those clothed in His righteousness, by those who are now in the very presence of God.

Somehow even right now at this moment, it occurs to me that we as the gathered church, Jesus dwells among us. The Triune God is aware of everything and just like we sang, we are precious in His sight.

Then a final miracle that took place:

4. The Dismissal of His Spirit (23:46)

⁴⁶Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last.

So Jesus’ moment of physical death came with the reminder that He was in charge all along. In the Gospel of Matthew it says that He yielded His spirit. In the Gospel of John it says that He gave up His spirit. Here it says that He committed His spirit.

He was releasing it. He was letting it go. He had the ability to do that. I don’t have the ability to do that, neither do you. He did, and at that moment when the price was paid, He did so and He breathed His last, and the human spirit of the Living Savior, Jesus, was raised up into the very presence of the Lord.

Then from the perspective of what was visible here on earth, His heart stopped beating. His lungs no longer drew breath. His body stiffened. His tongue was stilled. Those ears were no longer hearing in the way they just had been in what was happening there. And the gleam of life that was evident in His eyes just moment earlier was gone. After He released His Spirit, the body of Jesus died.

Next week we are going to talk about the burial, and it’s glorious. As His burial was being handled, we will see the prayer of Jesus being answered. It had already started. Do you remember what Jesus prayed? Father, forgiven them for they know not what they do.

Yes, they knew that they were doing something wicked, but they didn’t know the profound depth of their wickedness. I think that is what Jesus was saying. Father, forgive them, they know not what they do. One of them had already been saved. The thief on the cross had been saved.

But guess what? As we look at the account that comes to us next, it is like the dominos start falling over, as more and more people are cut to the heart because of what they just saw. We will see that.

In the meantime, let me just remind you of this:

¹⁸For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God...(I Peter 3:18)

There on the very cross, Jesus got started. He brought somebody to God. He is still interested in bringing others to God, and He is interested in using you, my brother and my sister, in bringing others to God.

It is a wonderful season that we are in. Here we are at the cross. Easter is coming. Resurrection Sunday is coming. Brothers and sisters, we have made room. Glorious messages are going to be proclaimed. Let's fill this place up to the extent we can in two services. Let's get people watching on line.

But that Gospel doesn't only go forth from the pulpit, it goes forth from the lips of the people of God through their daily discourse. If you are saved, you are saved because somebody shared the Gospel with you. I believe somebody else is going to get saved because you share the Gospel with them.

Who is on your heart? Are you praying? Are you asking the Lord right now, Open my eyes to see who You have me to witness to today, this week. You start praying. You start inviting. You start sharing. Let's commit to do this together, because that is why the Lord has us here—to take others with us. Amen?

God is good. We proclaim Christ crucified. We proclaim Christ risen. We proclaim Christ coming again. Let His Name be praised. Let's go to the Lord.