

Atonement and the Cross of Christ

Atonement at the Cross

Lesson #10 for December 6, 2008

Scriptures: Matthew 26:37,38; 27:46; Mark 14:33,34; Luke 22:40-44; John 19:28-30. *The Desire of Ages* chapters: "Gethsemane," "Calvary," "It Is Finished."

1. The purpose of this lesson is to describe, as far as possible, what happened to Christ in Gethsemane and on Calvary and how that impacts the great controversy and my salvation.
2. The *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* begins by suggesting that sin has a "penalty" attached to it and that God considers us responsible—even accountable—for our sins. Each one of us "should" die as a penalty (Is that punishment from God? Or, is that a consequence?) for our own sins. But God did not allow a "bad penalty" to fall on us. "Instead He allowed it to fall on Jesus, and Christ's experience of that punishment will be our theme this week." (Saturday, November 29) The word *penalty* is not found in the *KJV*, *GNB*, or *NIV* referring to the Christ's death except in one place in the *NIV* where Pilate asked why they wanted to impose the death penalty. (Luke 23:22)
3. Was the death of Jesus a homicide? A suicide? Or did He die of natural causes? Many Christians believe that Jesus died as a result of the persecution, torture, and loss of blood resulting from His beatings and His crucifixion. There are very politically charged arguments even today over whether the Jews killed Jesus or whether the Romans did. In either case, most people consider Christ's death a homicide. But Jesus Himself said:

"No one takes my life away from me. I give it up of my own free will. I have the right [authority] to give it up, and I have the right to take it back. This is what my Father has commanded me to do." (John 10:18, *Good News Bible*)

These words suggest that the death of Jesus was not a homicide but a suicide. But there is yet another possibility. Jesus may have died as a direct result of the separation from God that results from sin—the natural consequence of sin.

4. Read Matthew 26:37,38; Mark 14:33,34. Clearly, Jesus understood that He was facing a tremendous struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane. No human being was there to torture Him. He had not yet been beaten or crucified. But Ellen White states that at the end of that Gethsemane experience, "He fell dying to the ground." (*DA* 693.1; compare *SJ* 105.3) Does that mean that if the angel had not arrived to strengthen Him, He would have died right there? But if He had died right there and the disciples had discovered His body sometime later, would we have ever heard His name? What assumption do you think the disciples would have made as to the cause of His death? What actually happened to Him there in the garden? The incredible thing about this whole story is that it destroyed the disciples' faith! Jesus had told them repeatedly that He would rise again the third day, but none of them believed it. More incredible yet is the fact that Judas apparently told the Sanhedrin what Jesus had said, and they believed Him! They asked for a guard to watch over His body! So what did Jesus actually die of? Did He die of sin? But we are the ones who are sinners and

we do not die! We do not die because God has us on “life support”! Do we really know what causes the death which is as a result of sin? Why was it necessary for Jesus to stay in the grave for three days? Was it because of their belief that the “spirit” hovered around for three days just to make sure that the body was dead? (Compare the story of Lazarus)

5. Back in another garden—the Garden of Eden—God had clearly stated to Adam that in the day that they should eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they would die. (Genesis 2:17) Some time later as Eve found herself standing next to that tree, Satan said, “You will not die.” (Genesis 3:4, *GNB*) So, who was right? For the next several hundred years, it seemed like Satan was right. Adam and Eve were still alive. So, should we believe Satan’s statements about God? God could have allowed Adam and Eve to “suffer” the “penalty” of their own sin right there in the Garden of Eden, and they would have died. But then, they would never have had an opportunity to learn the truth about who was lying. Both God and the Devil claimed to be telling the truth. No doubt, Satan repeatedly challenged the onlooking universe to observe the fact that He was right about the death—or the lack of death—of Adam and Eve. (How long were Adam and Eve in the garden? In some parts of the world it is taught by some large churches that the first sin was sexual intimacy!)
6. But when people did begin to die, Satan came up with another explanation. In effect, he said, “Yes, people are dying. But it is not because of their sins; it is because God is upset with them, and He is killing them!” Note that there has been an enormous amount of theology to support that idea which Satan originated! And that condition or claim has persisted for thousands of years. Thus, Satan continued his campaign to get humans to fear and hate God.
7. But God kept promising to answer the questions and clearly demonstrate the truth. The universe watched as Satan repeatedly tried to destroy the Jewish people including in Egypt by the death decree against Jewish male babies and later by the death decree in Esther’s day. Later, Satan tried to destroy Jesus Christ Himself, first as a baby through Herod’s decree, then more than once by storms on the Sea of Galilee, and also with attempted stoning by the people of Nazareth and by the people in Jerusalem, etc. God’s angels had to constantly protect Jesus. Jesus survived all those attempts on His life because He needed to demonstrate something that had never been seen in the history of the universe prior to His life and death on planet Earth.
8. God had stated repeatedly that sin separates the sinner from Him who is the only source of life; and when we are fully separated from Him, we will die. Jesus wanted to make it clear to the onlooking universe that it was sin that was killing Him. That is the reason for the “Gethsemane experience.” No human observed it at the time, and we would not have understood it if we had. We know essentially nothing about that experience in the Garden of Gethsemane. But the onlooking universe recognized exactly what Satan and his evil angels were doing to Jesus Christ in the garden. They could see clearly as God was slowly removing His presence from the human Jesus. And when He did, Satan “took over,” and Jesus “fell dying to the ground.” Try to imagine what the angels saw as both sides struggled through this experience. That was the supreme battle of the great controversy. Satan knew that if Jesus died without sinning or giving up and going back to heaven, he and all of his

angels were doomed. That was a life or death battle for him.

9. Jesus did not die because of an accumulation of multitudes of individual sins committed by His “sons and daughters.” He died to demonstrate the very essence of sin which is that it causes separation from God. It was not a penalty imposed upon Him by the Father but simply the natural result or natural consequence of being separated from Him.

Sin ----> Separation ----> Death (This would be the normal progression if God did nothing)

Sin ----> Separation --||-> Death (This is our current condition because God keeps us alive)

Sin --||-> Separation ----> Death (Christ was not a sinner but He demonstrated what happens when a person is separated from God)

10. But after having given that very clear demonstration of the results of sin to the onlooking universe, Jesus was “resuscitated” by the angel of God so that He could go to Calvary to pass through the trials and the torturing and the crucifixion so that we could see His death and comprehend in some slight way what He was going through. So why don’t Satan and his angels die? God is keeping them alive just as He keeps us alive until the great controversy is over and the truth is demonstrated. (See *RH*, December 2, 1890 par. 15 - #14 in the Lesson for December 13, 2008) Every physiologic reaction takes place because of the direct power of God. If God stopped keeping us alive, we would die very quickly. When Jesus was separated from His Father, He started to bleed from His pores.

In effect, Christ died twice. First, He died in the Garden of Gethsemane, and then He died again on the cross at Calvary. The experience in the Garden of Gethsemane was primarily for the benefit of the onlooking universe; the experience at Calvary was for our benefit. But we were so far removed from understanding what was going on at Calvary that God hid the final three hours of the torture and crucifixion of His Son in total blackness because we would not have understood it anyway. But once again, the onlooking universe saw every detail. And someday in the future in heaven, we will be able to see every detail of those two events and decide for ourselves if God did everything possible to demonstrate the truth to us.

11. Despite the close relationship that Jesus had developed with His Father throughout His human lifetime, the approaching horror of being separated from His Father “tore Him apart” to the point that it would be correct to say that He died of a “broken heart.”
12. Read carefully the chapters “Gethsemane” and “Calvary” in the book *Desire of Ages*. Notice carefully the words, Christ “could not see through the portals of the tomb.” (*DA* 753.2) He agreed to die, accepting the possibility that He would never rise again. He was afraid that the awfulness of sin would permanently separate Him from the Father. That led to His cry, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” (See Matthew 27:46) Let us be very clear that God the Father was right there beside the cross as His Son died, but the human Jesus could not perceive His presence. To Him it seemed like the Father had abandoned Him. The entire universe was focused on what was happening there on Calvary. We may be sorry when someone close to us dies or leaves, but Jesus was so close to His Father that to be separated from Him “wrung His heart.” Jesus could have used His divine power at any moment to reach out to His Father or simply to prevent His own death, but He refused to do

that. Jesus did not really have to go through any of that. Sin is so awful that Jesus feared that His separation from the Father might be eternal. (DA 685.5; DA 753.2)

Let us recognize that by drawing these conclusions, we are making the death of Christ a “God-centered event” and not a human-centered event as most of our Christian friends do. Compare the experience of Abraham and Isaac in Genesis 22. Who suffered the most in that story—the father or the son? The death of Christ is not just about me—and you, too, of course. The death of Christ is primarily about God. Can we look at these things from God’s perspective?

13. Was God’s “wrath” poured out on His Son? Romans 1:18,24,26,28 tell us that God’s wrath is simply His handing over sinners to reap the natural consequences of their own behaviors. When God hands them over and allows them to suffer the natural consequences of their behavior, they die. In Romans 4:25 we are told that Jesus was “handed over. . . for our sins.” The words “to death” are included in many English translations but those words are not present in the original Greek. The words “handed over,” however, are exactly the same as those used in Romans 1 to describe the results of God’s wrath or anger. Does that help us to understand why Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?”
14. Realizing that sin is absolutely deadly and seeing what it did to Jesus Himself, how does that impact you in your daily life? Like the disciples, are we “sleeping through” the “experience at Gethsemane”? Have we failed to realize what was—and is—going on? Have we completely incorporated into our thinking the idea that, “Sin pays its wage—death”? (Romans 6:23, GNB)
15. It was not just the human Jesus that suffered in Gethsemane and on Calvary. “The omnipotent God suffered with His Son.” (Ellen G. White in *Signs of the Times*, February 22, 1899, par. 6; *The Upward Look*, p. 223) “God Himself was crucified with Christ; for Christ was one with the Father.” (Ellen G. White in *Signs of the Times*, March 26, 1894, par. 5; *BE* August 6, 1894; *FLB* 50.4; *AG* 189.2; *5BC* 1108.5) Many Christians do not believe that the Father would be willing to come to earth and live, suffer, and die as Jesus did. But Ellen G. White says:

Had God the Father come to our world and dwelt among us, veiling His glory and humbling Himself, that humanity might look upon Him, the history that we have of the life of Christ would not have been changed in unfolding its record of His own condescending grace. In every act of Jesus, in every lesson of His instruction, we are to see and hear and recognize God. In sight, in hearing, in effect, it is the voice and movements of the Father. (*Letter* 83, 1895; *MR* 1581-The Melbourne Camp Meeting; God’s Great Gift of Jesus; *21MR* 393; *TMK* 338.4)

16. Father, Holy Spirit, and Christ experienced the “breaking apart” of their relationship as Christ Jesus died on the cross. That is an event the horror of which we cannot begin to comprehend this side of the heavenly kingdom.
17. When you are tempted to sin, do you feel the horrible dread of separation from God? Or do you feel the excitement and the thrill that Eve felt? Do we have any idea of the “awfulness”

of what sin does to us?

18. As Jesus was about to die on Calvary, He cried out, "It is finished." What is implied by those words? Read the chapter in *Desire of Ages*, "It Is Finished." The fate of the entire universe and the great controversy hung in the balance. If Satan could have caused Jesus to sin by becoming upset, or angry, or lashing back at Satan and his agents, the great controversy would have been lost. Satan would have proven that he was able to "overcome" Christ. Even if Jesus had decided that it was too much trouble and just abandoned His task and gone back to heaven, the great controversy would have been lost. But Jesus was willing to die for you and me—even if for Him it meant eternal separation from His Father. That truth is beyond our comprehension. So, why do you think God put that blackness over the events at Calvary? Many theologians have told us to "go to the cross" and look at the cross. If we had been there literally, we would not have been able to see a thing! There was total blackness for three hours. What was happening there? Was Satan being given extra time? Clearly, God did not intend for humans to see those events. But the universe was watching everything. The blackness did not prevent them from seeing what the Father was doing, or what Satan was doing, or how Jesus was dying. Remember that there was an earthquake. The Roman Centurion realized that it was no ordinary crucifixion, and he said, "Surely this was a son of God (a divine being)." (Mark 15:39, compare *Jewish New Testament, New Jerusalem Bible, Young's Literal Translation*)

A considerable portion of what we have discussed today is not in the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide*. Presumably, the authors and/or editors do not think many Adventists would understand it or believe it.

19. But the glorious and wonderful good news is that when two angels descended from the Father's presence before daybreak on Sunday morning, the first one was able to roll back the stone, and the second one called out to Jesus, "Your Father calls you." And despite the mightiest efforts of Satan and every one of His evil angels, Jesus arose in His own power and came forth as the Resurrection and the Life! (DA 779.1; 785:2,3) Jesus proved that He was not just a creature but the Creator. He had the power within Himself to give life even to His own body. He now offers to give that same life to each one of us if we are willing to listen to Him, to trust Him with our future, and to live changed lives. What more could we possibly ask for?

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Last modified: November 2, 2008

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