
The Divine Use of Limited Atonement

Often the need to hear and receive the Gospel to appropriate salvation is met with the question, “What about those who have never heard the Gospel?” We know that many have died without the hearing of the gospel. Even while we yet speak missionaries are seeking to be deployed in areas of the world to preach the Gospel. People are dying daily without a hearing of the Gospel. What of them? Is not this too God’s providence? Certainly He does not lack the ability to open the way to the place where such a one resides, or open a door out that they may find Christians such as us, that the gospel may be preached to them. The answer to such quandary is in the preponderance of Limited Atonement as Dabney notes,

“Experience proves the same. A large part of the human race were already in hell before the expiation was made. Another large part never hear of it. But "faith cometh by hearing" (Rom. 10:17), and faith is the condition of its application. Since their condition is determined intentionally by God's providence, it could not be his intention that the expiation should avail for them equally with those who hear and believe. This view is destructive, particularly of the Arminian scheme.”⁴

According to biblical history God has always governed the expanse of His saving grace. Under the economy of the Old Testament, particularly that of Moses, many Gentiles perished. Why? This is because it was not God’s appointed time for the

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salvation of the Gentiles. Today, a large majority of Jewish people die in unbelief. Again, the bible plainly teaches that God has so chosen to blind them in unbelief, and bring many Gentiles to salvation. In this there is a pitting of one people against another by God to affect a result. As it is taught in scripture, the Gentiles will provoke the Jews to jealousy and then the Jews as a nation will find salvation.⁵ God's plan is so designed as to not be compatible with having Jews and Gentiles as the objects of His love at once⁶ until His plan is concluded. He engages one by favoring the other. Therein we see the divine use for Limited Atonement.

One may ask, "Is the limit placed on the atoning work of Christ by God's intention arbitrary?" Is there purpose in God not choosing to save everyone? The answer is that God is not arbitrary in this design of redemption. There is reason and purpose behind God's choosing to pass over some people.⁷ The reason is found in our creaturely need for comparative experience. The focus of His plan and pleasure is in the benefit of the unregenerate sinner's death to the elect. It is like a blacksmith as he grinds away at a piece of metal to create a beautiful sword. Pieces of metal just as good as any of the metal that remains, falls to the floor to be later discarded. Yet the metal that he grinds away is for the enhancement of the metal that remains. The blacksmith's pleasure is not in the metal he grinds away, it is in the metal that remains. Yet he must grind away some metal for the sake of improving the metal that remains. The metal on the floor is a necessary byproduct of bringing glory to the metal that remains. So it is with the non-

elect. They are a necessary byproduct of the plan of God for His elect people.

The Human need for Limited Atonement

We discover much of what can be known about man's constitution in the very first chapters of Genesis. Our interest here is to view the comparative cognition built into man's natural constitution. Notice what God says man comes to know as a result of the fall,

“And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever” (Gen 3:22.)

Why not just “evil?” Why does God say “good and evil?” The answer is simple. They could not perceive their initial good state, because they have no other experience to compare it to. The Hebrew term used here, “to know” (da` ath Heb.)⁸ means to “become aware.” Thus in becoming aware of evil, they simultaneously have become aware of the good state from whence they have fallen. Barns comments,

“By disregarding the express injunction of his Maker with respect to this tree, he attained to the knowledge of good and

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evil in an unlawful and fatal way. He learned immediately that he himself was the guilty party, whereas, before, he was free from guilt; and thus became aware, in his own person and to his own condemnation, of good and evil, as distinct and opposite qualities... They knew good and evil; but they knew the evil to be present with them, and the good to have departed from them.”⁹

Barns recognized that our fore-parents only became fully aware of their former, free, guiltless, and good state from a fallen point of view. They are a lot like kids born with the proverbial silver spoon in their mouth. They could never appreciate the one who worked for the money as long as it is viewed as their due inheritance. Our fore-parents did not appreciate what God had worked for (created) with His own hand and then placed under their dominion (Romans 1:25.) Nor did they appreciate the instructions concerning the forbidden tree. They could not discern their good state because they lacked the experience or comparative frame of reference to do so.

We are familiar with this facet of our nature. We like our fore-parents take many things for granted, our health, abilities, family and the like. However it is interesting how a critical ailment or an acute brush with death, changes one’s perspective about life. It is said that no man lying on his death bed in his last days asks for his check book or stock portfolio. He often requests the presence of family and friends, people who have been on the back burner of his attention in life. All of a sudden, he has become

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aware of the brief span of his life and the importance of these relationships. He is striving to straighten out in a few days what he has spent many years ignoring. Why? – Because his comparative frame of reference has been impacted by his condition. Sickness causes an improved sensitivity of health. A time of sadness brings about a better appreciation of times of joy. Loneliness makes for a greater admiration for those around you. These are all results of human comparative cogitation. Humans (and angels) need contrast and comparison to develop appreciation. We actually need light to shine in uncomprehending darkness¹⁰ to better appreciate light. This is a theme throughout scripture. It was first established principally in the first verses of Genesis,

“...and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light.” (Gen 1:2-3)

Throughout the panoply of scripture God constantly uses the darkness of sin to demonstrate to man the grandeur of His light. He uses Saul, a king chosen by the people, in contrast to David, a king of His choosing.¹¹ The Law of Moses is revealed against the darkness of Egyptian culture.¹² It is exemplified in the exodus, where God displays His power on pharaoh's darkness.¹³ It is demonstrated in the defeat of Israel at Ai because of Achan's sin¹⁴ or its New Testament counterpart story of Annanias and Sapphira's chastening for their sin resulting in the church's fear of God.¹⁵ This principle is proven again when the light of Nathan's

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parable is shone in the dark instance of pointing his finger at David, saying “you are the one.”¹⁶ It is demonstrated in the dark moment of Peter’s denial, followed immediately by the cock’s crowing.¹⁷ It is seen again when the light of resurrection illuminates the darkness of Thomas’ unbelief.¹⁸ Ultimately the whole of God’s plan involves allowing man to fall in sin, that God may display to men and angels His grace, mercy, and sacrificial love,¹⁹ of which none is possible without sin. How can sacrificial love be shown where there is no price to be paid? Or mercy where there is no offense? Or grace where there is no sin? Without sin, these perfections of God remain hidden in His nature. He is nonetheless gracious, merciful, and loving, however such glory remains unseen and unknown to His creatures. The display of grace necessitates sin, and in fact the greater the sinfulness, the more magnificent God’s grace appears. Paul affirms this principle,

“The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 5:20-21 NIV)

Again Paul argues a need for darkness even amid the church,

“In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval.” (1 Corinthians 11:18-

19 NIV)

As we have stated above, humans are creatures of comparative cogitation. This idea is resident in the very existence of Hell itself. Hell will be an eternal reminder of the grace, mercy, and love God has shown toward us. Hell will literally magnify the grace of God before the eyes of the redeemed. In fact, for angels and humans alike, Heaven could not be Heaven without a Hell. It is our comparative nature that necessitates a Limited Atonement. When we look at the dark lot of the wicked, we need remember but for the grace of God, there go I. We rejoice that we will never know His wrath in Heaven. Yet Heaven alone could never reveal a complete knowledge of God. There is more to know of God and that knowledge is to be found in the existence of Hell, although Hell will never be the personal experience of a believer.

Herein is why Limited Atonement is necessary. It is for the sake of us who are the redeemed, that others are castaways. The prophet Isaiah speaks for God to Israel saying,

“For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; I give Egypt for your ransom, Cush and Seba in your stead. Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life.” (Isaiah 43:3-4 NIV)

Neither is this the first passing over of others and not granting them the proverbial second chance. Did not God pass over Satan and his minions, the fallen angels of heaven, and not even so much

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as to grant them an ounce of grace? God, in His sovereignty, without redemption, atonement, mediation, or advocacy, never even gave them a thought of mercy, but assigned them to Hell.²⁰ Yet this was an act of grace, not on behalf of the fallen angels, but toward the angels who remain unspotted, that they may know His wrath and yet not experience it.²¹ God gave the life of the fallen angels in exchange for the knowledge of the remaining angels. Given this example, it cannot be argued that it is not in the nature of God to pass over guilty creatures, not bidding to them means or opportunity of redemption for His greater purpose and good for those who are called according to His purpose.²²

In the final analysis, the elect will ultimately appreciate being in the presence of God in such a way that was not previously possible. God's immutable intention always was that man would experience evil and by contrast better appreciate the goodness from whence he fell. Redemption was always God's plan for man. The disobedience of man plays into God's strategy to rescue man bringing about his appreciation, obedience, adoration, loyalty, respect – simply put an awareness of God's glory, according to His work of predestination. This is all a part of God's plan to let man experience His immeasurable grace in such a way that he would know the greatness of His power, wisdom, and love. Yet through a limited atonement, the lot of the unregenerate magnifies that knowledge all the more.