
THE ATONEMENT IN TITUS

Titus 2:11-13: *“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his own, eager to do what is good.”*

Titus 3:4-7: *“But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we have done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.”*

In the warm and personal pastoral letter that Paul wrote to young Titus, we have two sections that are crucial to a proper understanding of the atonement. In these two sections of Scripture Paul the apostle relates Christ’s atoning work of the cross to the great past event of the incarnation (2:11) and to the future event of the return of Christ (2:13).

The way that God began to deal with human sin is the intervention into human history that we call the incarnation. To paraphrase the words of Paul, “The grace of God appeared bringing salvation.” When the infant Jesus was brought by his parents to be presented at the temple (Luke 2:28-32), Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now

dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the gentiles and for glory to you people Israel.”

It is the “grace” of God that has appeared in Jesus. And the grace of God in Jesus has appeared to bring salvation. The phrase “to all men,” does not teach that all men are automatically saved because Jesus came; it merely teaches that the incarnation was not a private or hidden thing. It was “not done in a corner” (Acts 26:26). It was a real event in history. It also teaches that the grace of God was not limited to a select few. It was not simply for the Jew. The promise of salvation in God’s pledge to Abraham was that in him “all nations” would be blessed.

Paul does not teach that all men will be saved, but salvation is offered to all. In 2:12 we see that Christians between Christ’s first and second appearing must become disciples of grace. Grace is personified as an instructor in ethics. Grace teaches us to say “No” to some things and to affirm other things. Grace can never be license to sin. To claim to have received the grace of God and still be in the habit of saying “yes” to “ungodliness and worldly passions” is simply an exercise in self-deception. In verse 14 Paul makes a direct reference to Christ’s self-sacrifice on Calvary. It reminds us of Jesus’ own words in Mark 10:45, “For even the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

The word translated as a verb “redeem” in 2:14, and a noun “ransom” in Mark 10:45 comes from the same word group in the Greek language. It refers to the price which was paid to bring about a person’s deliverance and in the active sense it means to release upon the payment of the ransom price. Jesus Christ gave himself as our substitute to redeem us out from under the threat of the law’s

wrath. The law demanded the death of every covenant breaker. Christ death in our stead allows us to escape the law's just wrath on sin.

Christ not only gave himself to redeem and release us from the tyranny of sin's dominion, but also to purify us. The objective aspect of the atonement must never be divorced from the subjective aspect. Christ accomplished redemption and the Holy Spirit applies it. If we have been washed from our sins, it is inconceivable that we should be unconcerned about future filthiness. Christ atonement is not only concerned with sin's penalty but also with sin's pollution. He redeems us and cleans us, because he intends to adopt us as his sons and daughters who will become worthy heirs in the household of faith.

In the second passage, Titus 3:4-7 we also find the language of salvation. Again, the section is introduced with a reference to the appearing of Christ as in 2:11. However, this time it is the "kindness and love of God" in parallel to the "grace of God" in 2:11. Our salvation is set forth as the work of Christ on our behalf without any credit for human works. This is made clear by the negative statement "not because of righteous things we had done" (3:5). It is by the mercy of God that we have been saved.

Verse five contains a very interesting phrase, "by the washing of rebirth." In the KJV it reads, "by the washing of regeneration." What does it mean? It may refer to water baptism. The concept of an unbaptized Christian would have been unthinkable for Paul. In the New Testament era, the reality of conversion and the symbol of immersion in the waters of baptism were not separated by a period of weeks or months as they are today in many Churches. Baptism took place on the very same day or night as conversion. The reality and symbol came so close together that they were seen as two sides of the same coin and were often spoken of as if they were the one and same event.

Most commentators see this verse as an allusion to baptism even though many disagree about the mode of the ordinance. The symbol is not magical, but it is meaningful. It is also possible that the “washing of rebirth” may refer to the cleansing aspect of the blood of Christ as in Revelation 7:14, or the privilege we have in the priesthood of all believers to draw near to God, duly qualified by blood and water as in Exodus 29:4,21; 40:30; and Leviticus 8:30. This would show continuity between the work of Christ and the Old Testament sacrificial system.

The biblical pictures of cleansing and washing also illustrates the work of the Holy Spirit and the subjective experience of salvation that is based on the objective work of Christ on the cross (Hebrews 10:22). God gives us his Holy Spirit generously. He never gives us just enough to get by. In 3:7 Paul uses a word taken from the law courts, “justified.” We are now, because of Christ’s work, in a right relationship to the law. It has no further claims on us. We are also in a new relationship to the judge. He becomes our father! He adopts us as heirs having the hope of eternal life! And as Luther once said, “If these fires do not stir you, you are colder than cold.”