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Surrey Tabernacle Pulpit.

WHAT IS THE ATONEMENT?

A SERMON

PREACHED ON SUNDAY MORNING, DECEMBER 5TH, 1869,

By MR. JAMES WELLS,

AT THE NEW SURREY TABERNACLE, WANDSWORTH STREET.

"And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement."—Romans, v. 11.

It is well for the people of God to remember that they are called not only to share in all the blessings and promises of the gospel; but that they are called also to defend the gospel; brought to know the truth, they are to stand fast in that which they know to be truth. And when they see that error is abroad, in a shape and form tending perhaps to bewilder or corrupt the minds of people, it is then for the ministers of God to come forward in the spirit of the gospel, in the spirit of love to the souls of men, especially to the brethren, and to meet those errors by showing in contrast thereto what truth is. Now we have seen these few weeks Socinianism striding over the land, and that by the instrumentality of learned men, men of very great acquirements, talents, standing, and influence; we see the atonement of Jesus Christ by these men ridiculed, and we see it done in a way that may overthrow the faith of some, as the apostle saith,—may shake the faith of others, and try the faith of others. Hence they tell us that we hold, which, of course we do not, that one Divine Person intended to torture to all eternity the human race, but that another Divine Person came forward and undertook to suffer such and such things, in order to prevent the other Divine Person tormenting these people to all eternity. Now, they say, who would receive such an absurdity as this? and we say,—who indeed? The next thing is, as they say, that is a representation of the atonement of Christ, absurd to the last degree; the next step is, of course, they set aside the atonement altogether; the next step is to get rid of the doctrine of the Trinity, for of course the atonement of Christ stands or falls with the doctrine of the Trinity. Then the next step is to assure us that many parts of the Bible are not true. Now the question is, in these circumstances, what are we to do,—take the word of these learned men, or take the word of our God to guide us.

Before I enter upon my subject, let me point out this;—we are, of course, Trinitarians, but we do not believe in three Gods; we believe in the unity of the Divine Essence,—that there is one God, yet that that God exists in three distinct Persons. And the question sometimes does arise, to whom was the offering made?—to whom did Christ offer himself? because he is God as well as man, therefore, if he offered himself to God the Father, where is Christ's deity? what offering was made to his deity? and what offering was made to the Holy Spirit as God? Here is a difficulty put to us, but it will come presently very clearly before us as we go through our subject this morning. The latter part of the verse

will be our text,—namely, “by whom we have now received the atonement;”—in a word the atonement. I will therefore try, as far as time permit, to trace out this morning *the sovereign, the legal, the unitional, and the final relations which the atonement of Christ bears to God and to man.*

First, I notice the sovereign relation which the atonement of Christ bears to God and to man. In order to make this clear, I must have just a word or two upon the fall of man. The fall of man took place by satanic falsehood, that satanic falsehood inspiring in the human mind deadly enmity against God; at the same time blinding the mind, hardening the heart, and robbing the soul of that life of holiness, righteousness, integrity, and everything that was upright and good which man had by creation. And just look at the way in which those falsehoods were brought in. First, there was a suggestion that God was not so good as the serpent, but that the serpent's doctrine was a more charitable, a more generous, a more amiable doctrine than God's doctrine. God's doctrine was, that they were to eat of all the trees of the garden, except one; but the serpent's doctrine was, they were to eat of every one; they were not even to omit that one. That looks very charitable; and you will always find that these false doctrines pretend to a great deal of holiness, and of charity, and liberality. Then next notice the woman in her simplicity;—Satan not only suggested that God was not so good as he, Satan, was, but suggested that God had not said what the woman thought he had said. “Hath God said, Ye shall not eat?” You didn't hear him say so. Well, but he said so to my husband. God said so to Adam before Eve was created, but Eve didn't hear God say so; therefore Satan goes to Eve, because she had not heard God say so. She believed it, but then she believed it from her husband, and she was pretty easily beaten out of that belief. As soon as Satan said, “Ye shall not surely die;”—you must not believe everything your husband says;—you must not think too much of him, certainly not; he may sometimes be wrong, and he has withholden you from this tree;—yea, God and your husband are no better than they should be, for God knows, and I daresay your husband does too, not only does he keep you in this bondage, but he knows that “in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods.” The work was done,—Eve and Adam fell: the fall took place, and here is the human race now inspired by Satanic falsehood, blinded to everything that is truthful, and brought into a state of spiritual death and enmity against God. “In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt die”—not physically, nor rationally, but spiritually. Therefore, saith the apostle, when he describes our state by nature, “You hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and in sins.” Now, there was a number of this fallen race that God had loved with an everlasting love; there was a number of this fallen race that God had chosen and blessed with all spiritual blessings: he never intended to torment them, he never intended to curse them, he never intended they should be lost; he never intended they should be hurt; he there and then determined they should be eternally saved. Now, what becomes of the sentiment that one Divine Person, in order to appease another Divine Person, comes forward and undergoes a certain amount of suffering? God the Father always loved the people, the Divine Three always loved the people; God never had any wrath to them. They are children of wrath by nature, in a way of demerit, but none of them ever were, ever can be, or ever will be, vessels of wrath;—they are vessels of mercy, which he himself had afore prepared. See how this divine sovereignty was manifested to the ancients. What exemplifications of this sovereignty in the love of God were the fathers. Take six of the fathers, for instance. Take Abel. Did not Abel see what a difference grace had made between him and Cain? Then, take Enoch, who was brought to know God, and walked with him. Did not Enoch see the difference?—did he not know it was grace that had made the difference between him

and an ungodly world. And then take Noah. Noah obtained grace in the eyes of the Lord: did not Noah see it was God that had made this difference? And then take Abraham. He was called and blessed: did not Abraham know that his distinction originated in the sovereign pleasure, and love and mercy of God? Then take Isaac. Did he not see Ishmael set aside, and himself constituted the child of promise? Then take Jacob. Was Jacob ignorant of what was said, "Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated"? Thus you get in these fathers a demonstration of the sovereignty of the love of God.

Now, I say, the race is thus fallen, and God loves a number of that race with an everlasting love, and is determined that they shall not be lost. Now, the great question in the council-chamber of eternity was, How shall they be forgiven? How shall they be delivered? Shall I give a law that can give them life, and so make their eternal justification be by that law that I shall give? For the apostle saith, "If there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law." Now, the great God was at liberty to do just what he pleased in this matter. Love them he did, love them he would; suffer them to be lost he would not. But the great question is, what the remedy should be?—whether he should send some law, in the infinity of his wisdom, by which death should be worked out of existence,—by which sin should be annihilated, and by which they, by a certain process, should acquire righteousness, get to heaven, and be everlastingly saved. Now, the Lord did not adopt this plan. "If there had been a law given"—the apostle does not say he could not have done it, but, "If there had been." And a thousand times I have said, and say it again, we have not to do with what God could do or could not do,—we have to do with what he does do. And I cannot forbear saying, before I enter into this matter of the atonement, that these men that set aside the divinity of Christ, the atonement of Christ, like dew drops on the lion's mane, we shake off their errors, they have no weight with us. When they tell us that some parts of the Holy Scriptures are not true, I am sure that some parts of themselves are not true, and I don't think any parts of them, I think they are altogether in error and mistaken. But what I look at is this: these very men that deny the atonement of Christ, to a man admit—there is not an exception—that some remedy is needed for human woe; there is something wrong among us; that we are sinners; that we do do wrong; that the world is not in a right state, and a remedy is needed. And what is the remedy? You know what remedies are proposed. Look at the remedies now about to be exhibited at Rome! We are told Peter's head, and Paul's head, and the chains with which Peter and Paul were bound, and what they call the holy cross,—these are to be exhibited. Why, is it possible? I rubbed my eyes when I read it, and looked about, and turned, and twisted. I said, Is it possible that there is a creature under the heavens with one grain of rationality that can believe in such infinite fooleries, such infinite impositions, such infinite rubbish? Really it is astounding, so many learned people as there are among the Catholics, that there should be a man with a grain of sense to be found to believe in such infinite rubbish. But let us come now to this atonement. You will see, then, that this atonement was by the sovereign appointment of the Most High; that this atonement is nowhere represented as a matter of necessity on God's part, but as a matter of his own good pleasure. Hence Christ is said to be appointed, Christ is said to be chosen, and "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son"—not, he was determined to torture the world, and would have done so, if another Divine Person had not stepped in and hindered him. Oh, no! they may lay such a doctrine to our charge, but we hold no such doctrine as that. We hold that the atonement of Christ is simply the offspring not merely of the love of God, but of the sovereign love of God; it was the plan that he chose, that he

ordained. You will thus perceive that the atonement of Christ bears a relation of divine sovereignty to God ; God appointed it because he would, find that out of his great love. And here we learn the sovereignty of God. If we hear the Saviour himself speak of his atonement, we shall always find it founded upon the sovereignty of God ; the sovereignty of God is indicated in all that positive form and shape in which it is spoken of ; such as, His sheep can never perish ; he lays down his life for his sheep : and he connects inseparably his death with their eternal life. This is one of the relations, then, which the atonement bears to God's sovereignty. He appointed it because he would, and as the self-existent and eternal God ; he can do just what he pleases, and it is right because he does it. His prerogatives are like himself,—infinite ; they can be bounded by no rules except those that he himself is pleased to give, and to bring himself under ; as “ when he could swear by no greater he swore by himself,” saying, “ In blessing I will bless thee.” There he brings himself under a certain rule, and would reckon himself unjust—but then that is relative justice, relative to the rule he has given—if he were to deviate therefrom. I glory in the lofty prerogatives of the Most High, that he can do just what he pleases ; for where would be the objects of his love if it were not so ? Thus, then, by the atonement of Christ I am taken from myself, I am made to cease from man, from my own works, from everything ; it all lies with God. “ Even so, Father, for so it seemed good in thy sight.”

But secondly, *the legal relationship of this atonement.* This atonement was never intended to appease God the Father's mind, nor to appease the Godhead mind of Christ, nor to appease the Holy Spirit. No such thing. God always loved, and God rests in his love. Our fall in Adam made no difference in his love, not the slightest. All the sins we have been the subject of have made no difference in his love, and all the sins we may be the subjects of make no difference in his love. Sin has torn us to pieces, but it has not moved him, hasn't reached him ; he is invulnerable, impregnable, untouchable, unreachable, immovable, unchangeable, he is the same. But here comes the question. God gives a law, and, say our sapient divines, God could not pardon without a sacrifice ; he could not withdraw that law, say our sapient divines ; he could not do so, I say. He could have withdrawn the law if he had pleased to do so. I could easily show that he has suspended many laws, and has abolished many laws, and has established many laws ; and that therefore the immutability or infallibility of the law does not rest upon God's inability to alter it. My covenant God tied down like that ? The Almighty tied down like that ? That wont do for me ; I wont have it ; you may if you like ; I shan't. A helpless God and a helpless creature would make a helpless affair of it. But here lies the stability of God's law ; he determined that the precept and the penalty of that law should be met ; that was his determination, not because he could not do otherwise, but because he would not do otherwise ; he determined that not one jot nor tittle of that law should fail ; this was the determination of the Eternal Three. Now, in what way shall the precept of that law be met, and in what way shall the penalty of that law be met ? This is the way that God hath chosen to show the greatness of his love, the eternity of his love. I am sorry that I have neither grace nor gifts to enable me to set this forth as I would ; it is a beautiful theme. Now God determined the law should not fail ; Jesus Christ therefore came under that law, and lives a life of obedience to that law. God the Father throws the excellency of his approbation into that work of Christ ; that helps to give grandeur to Christ's obedience. The Holy Spirit throws his eternal predictions into this obedience of Christ ; that helps to give grandeur to it. The Saviour throws his whole personal worth as God and man into that obedience ; so that in reality the obedience of Christ is the joint work of the Eternal Three, and so it is called the righteousness of God. Here then the precept is met by the author

of the law; here the precept is met by the perfect obedience of sinless manhood.—manhood that could not sin, because it was one with his deity; that obedience to the precept having in it all the excellency of the Eternal Three. If we could see the grandeur of this, how we should despise the thought of bringing any creature doing to help out in our justification. That's the way God determined to establish the law. And the apostle saith, "Do we make void the law? Nay, we establish the law." Now remember that all your condemnation comes from the law, every particle of it; for where there is no law there is no transgression; and all your justification, entire justification, comes from the gospel. This then is one part of the legal relation of the work of Christ; for by his atonement I would here include the whole of his mediatorial work. Here is the Lord Jesus Christ meeting the precept by his obedient life; here is God the Father throwing in his approbation of it;—"This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased;" "the Lord is well pleased for his righteousness' sake;" and here is the Holy Spirit throwing in by the prophets' prediction after prediction, prediction after prediction; and the dear Redeemer lived just as the Holy Spirit predicted he would. Thus the law is established and magnified, and a righteousness brought in running parallel with it. A grain of faith in this exempts from all sign or possibility of condemnation. Is there anything absurd in this? Is there anything wrong in this?

Then comes the penalty of the law. God was never wroth with his people, not abstractedly, only in appearance, that is all. Behind all his frowns, however those frowns may be expressed, as they are sometimes, by the term 'wrath,'—"In a little wrath I hid my face from thee,"—it was only an apparent frown, behind that frown was a smiling face and a loving heart; "In a little wrath I hid my face from thee for a moment; but with everlasting kindness will I have mercy on thee, saith the Lord, thy Redeemer." Now guilt before God, deeply felt, is a perfect hell; to feel that you are an unpardoned sinner, that your sins are your own, that the guilt is your's, that the penalty is your's, that the hell is your's, that the curse is your's; a sinner brought to feel this, he has all but a perfect hell in his conscience, he is most unhappy. Now what will God do? Will he withdraw the law? as in the old covenant he did many, many times suspend moral law, and remit the punishment. Many times he did so in the old covenant. Shall he do this pertaining to the eternal law of supremacy, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart and with all thy might, and thy neighbour as thyself;" shall he suspend this law? No, he determined not to suspend this law, not to arrest the judgment. He never did suspend that moral law. There are more moral laws than one. Men run about, don't know what they are talking about, and say, "That Wells says God suspends his moral law." God has often suspended moral laws, but not the one essential moral law of supremacy; he never suspended that, and never will; he determined not to do so. The Saviour himself knew it could not be done, because God had determined that it should not be done, yet so terrible was the penalty that he said, "If it be possible, let this cup pass from me." Now we are expressly told, then, that our sins were laid on him; we are expressly told that he was made sin, that is, representatively; that he was made a curse representatively; that he met the sword, that he put away sin. Here then is all the penalty that was due to the sin of the people for whom Christ died; Jesus Christ embodied all this, and destroyed the penalty; he suffered till there was no more suffering to endure. And do you ask to whom this offering was made? My answer is, in the language of the apostle, (and now I shall want your attention for a minute or two very carefully), "There is one God, and one Mediator between God and man." When Jesus Christ died as man, that offering was the destruction of the penalty of the law, and as death is included in that penalty, he is said to

have swallowed up death in victory, to have abolished death, and brought life and immortality to light. This was the plan that the Eternal Three devised; this was the plan that God delighted in,—both to establish the precept of the law, and that the penalty should be endured; and that according to our apprehension as rational beings of mercy and truth, of righteousness and peace, that mercy and truth should thus meet together, righteousness and peace embrace each other. So that Jesus Christ as man offered himself to the whole Deity, to God in unity; not to appease God, or to calm the Deity, but as pleasing God, “who drew the wondrous plan;” which should establish both law and gospel, one Mediator between God and man. But at the same time, while I thus speak, remember that it was the joint work of the Eternal Three, was the death of Christ. The Father put him to grief; he offered himself through the eternal Spirit; and yet he himself saith, “I lay down my life; no man taketh it from me.” Thus you get sovereignty; we could not be saved without sovereignty; secondly, you get the law established, the penalty ended, and it is written, there is no more curse.

Here is the atonement of Christ, then, in its legal aspect. God determined that his law should be met,—that law is met; God determined that the penalty should be endured,—that penalty has been endured,—not to appease God, no; God’s anger against sin arises not from any infuriated feeling in his mind, but arises from the natural antagonism between his integrity and sin’s falsehood; and the root of sin is falsehood,—that falsehood inspiring enmity. God is a God of infallible truth, of integrity, and when this falsehood is brought into collision with God, there is a deadly antagonism. And if you are a liar, and you are brought into collision with a nature that is truth itself, you are at enmity; and you are brought into collision with God’s nature. You being a liar, and hating him, your nature and his are as opposite to each other as light and darkness; and the consequence is that he must be to the sinner a consuming fire. It isn’t that he is infuriated in his mind, but it arises from the two opposite natures.

Thus, then, you will see that the atonement of Christ first is a matter of divine sovereignty to appoint it as the way; secondly, it is a matter of legal equity. Therefore Christ having met the precept, and endured the penalty, sin is gone, and gone for ever. Oh, how plainly would I tell you, if I could find language to do it, that there is not a spot, not a sin, not a fault that is left;—your inward sins, your outward sins, your past, present, future sins, are all gone as completely away legally as though they had never existed. Why, Jesus Christ has so met the law and endured the penalty that I really hardly know that the blessed God himself could use stronger language to encourage us in this matter than he hath. Hath he not said, by the apostle, “Who shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth; it is Christ that died;” yea, to show the efficacy of his death, he has even risen again, and still to show the authenticity, as it were, or legality, or rightfulness of his resurrection, he hath ascended to the right hand of God, making intercession for us, pleading for us what God appointed him to plead. He is not pleading there to try to make God love us. You know, under the Old Testament dispensation, no priest could go into the holy of holies but the priest that God had appointed; and no priest could come with an acceptable sacrifice except he came as the priest that God had chosen, and with the sacrifice God had appointed: So Jesus Christ. You are perfectly right when you sing those words,—

“For me he pleads the atoning blood,
For me the righteousness of God.”

So then we do not hold that one divine person tried to appease another; we hold that God loved the people with an everlasting love; we hold that Christ’s obedient life and atoning death are the ways God chose to show

his justice and the stability of his law, the holiness of his nature, and the eternity and greatness of his love. Then again, in the Old Testament, how clear the Scriptures are upon the blessedness of this atonement. Oh, if you can but see the Lord in this light, you will never wonder at the language of this verse,—“We joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.” What a mysterious thing that learned men—yet not mysterious either, for the Lord turneth the wisdom of men into foolishness—with the Bible in their hands, should thus represent us as holding absurdities. I do not think, in looking at the atonement of Christ as being a divinely sovereign appointment, that there is anything absurd in that; and God determining to maintain his holy law, and to establish it on behalf of his people by the obedience of his dear Son, and to get rid of the penalty by the sufferings of Christ,—this indeed may be to the Jew a stumbling-block, and to the Greek foolishness; but to us who are saved it is the wisdom of God, and the power of God, and the glory of God, and our language is, “God forbid we should glory, save in the cross of Christ.”

In order to show how determined the Lord is to make this atonement everything, and that you shall not have a single thing that you can need without it, I will quote a few words from the 23rd of Leviticus with reference to the typical atonement. Let me just run through it, and see what is said, in order that I may, if the Lord's will, deal some heavy blow upon your unbelief, and upon your doubts and fears, and encourage your hearts to believe that God loves you; I mean those of you that are brought to love Jesus, for he hath said, “If any man love me, he shall be beloved my Father.” 23rd of Leviticus;—when you come to the great day of atonement there, it was to be on the tenth day, to remind us of the end of the law, the ten commandments;—the seventh month, to remind us of the completeness of it; “and there shall be a holy convocation;” that is, a holy calling together. Do you want to know what this holy calling together is? The apostle's words will explain it. “He hath saved us”—he did that before we knew it, and before the world was; and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace given in Christ before the world was.” Again, “there shall be an offering made by fire.” Oh, it is lovely beyond all description;—to stand and see that fire descend upon the sacrifice that might have justly descended upon me; and when it descends upon the sacrifice there is an end of it. It was true in that sacrifice there was a fresh remembrance every year; but with the sacrifice of Christ there is no more remembrance, there is no more thought of sin, no more conscience of sin,—gone for ever; the fire descends, the sacrifice is accepted, and the people escape. Now the Lord said, “the man that shall not afflict his soul,”—that is, fast,—on that day, shall be cut off from the people.” The fasting on that day was to impress this upon them,—that there was nothing for them to eat without an atonement. And if you are still feeding upon the husks of false doctrine, as the Lord liveth, if you die in that state you are lost to eternity. “The man that does not fast on that day shall be cut off from among the people.” The great High Priest himself saith, “I am the bread of life. If any man eat my flesh and drink my blood, he hath eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” The man that did not abstain entirely, that had anything to eat without the atonement, was to be cut off from among the people. Now, poor sinner, what do you say to this? Why, say you, I rejoice in the thought, because I know that nothing can sustain me, nothing can do me good, apart from the atonement of Christ; everything comes by that. And if any man did any work on that day, he was to be destroyed from among the people. Oh, my hearer, if this be true mystically, what will become of the greater part of professors? How few there are that know enough of the atonement of Christ to see that it has done everything, that there

is not a single thing to do. Hence the 23rd of Leviticus closes with this thought,—that it should be a Sabbath of rest unto them. And how was the first Sabbath produced? By the completeness of the work of God. “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them,”—then came the Sabbath day. So it is, then, that he that entered into his rest,—that is, Christ,—hath ceased from his own work, as God did from his, by completing it. Here we see the equity of God in taking this holy, this eternal law, as the rule of equity; here the precept is established, the penalty endured, grace reigns. I do not wonder at the words, “All things are possible unto him that believeth;”—certainly so; because you have God on your side. Why, how many of you will sit and sing the words concerning the dying thief,—

“And there have I, though vile as he,
Washed all my sins away.”

Do you mean that? A good many sing it that do not mean it; I hope there are none of you that only mean it in part. If all your sins are washed away by him, then what has your repentance to do with washing away sin? what has your faith to do with it? what have your works to do with it? What have your duties to do with it? Repentance has nothing to do with it; repentance is a change of mind, bringing you out of an unconscious into a conscious state of your need of Christ. Faith is a reception—as our text saith, “By whom we have received the atonement.” Prayer is a longing after the blessings which are by this atonement; and our services are nothing else but expressions of gratitude to God for his unspeakable gift. Here then is the atonement in its sovereign and legal character. So, in the sacrifice of Christ, he as man,—not in a separation of the two natures, but he as man embodied the penalty in the strength of his complex person, and thereby his work was pleasing to the Eternal Three; Deity was hereby pleased, hereby delighted, because it was God’s own plan, the way of showing his love.

And now what shall I say to the other points, as your time is gone? I had three other points. Look at the *unitional* character of this atonement. Why, it is a plan, a way of showing God’s love in which he has himself become one of us. “The word was made flesh;”—we flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bone. There is not a nearer union between soul and body—I shall be scriptural if I say that—that the union between your soul and your body is not closer than the unity into which God Almighty hath taken us. Hence we read that “no man ever yet hated his own flesh, but nourisheth it and cherisheth it;” and so Christ calleth the Church his own flesh; he, as it were, the head—shall I say the soul?—and the Church the body. Oh, the closeness of the sympathy! Not a sigh can you have in your hearts but God the Father doesn’t recognise and enter into; not a sigh can you have in your heart that Christ doesn’t enter into; not a sigh can you have, or a groan in your heart, which the Holy Spirit doth not enter into. Oh, the closeness of the unity!—taking our nature that we might be partakers of the Divine nature, not to be deified, but to be heirs of God, joint heirs with the Lord Jesus Christ. Here, then, is infinite perfection, infinite sympathy. And what shall I say to the *gracious* relation of this atonement? Why, you can need no mercy, you can need no grace, you can need no pardon, you can need no supply, you can need no blessedness, that is not given with infinitely more delight than you can receive it. And this atonement, and all the blessings which are by it, stand infallibly good to eternity. Here nothing can be lost, a tide of eternal joy must roll in, pleasures must run their eternal rounds, and he who is carried away by this atonement is carried to God, to heaven, and to glory, and for all his life here into consecration to God, commending to others the mercy he has found; serving the Lord cheerfully with his whole heart and whole soul, knowing that his labour is not in vain in the Lord.