

M. C. Wilcox

"*FORGIVENESS, ATONEMENT.*"

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Although often used synonymously, there is a great difference between forgiveness and atonement. The former is relative; the latter, absolute; the one for time, the other for eternity. Forgiveness is suggestive of a present probationary state; atonement, of probation past. The last named, so far as man is concerned, depends upon the former. Both come through Christ.

All who are born into this world find themselves sinners before God, condemned by His righteous law. Rom.3:23. Even without a knowledge of God's written law, man realizes that he is a sinner. Rom. 2:15. The law was "ordained to life;" that is, if man had never transgressed its righteous principles, and had perfected a character thereby, he would have been granted life forevermore; but in the transgression of the law, that which was "ordained to life" becomes a cause of death. Rom. 7:10. The transgression of the law is sin. 1 John 3:4. "The wages of sin is death." Rom. 6:23. Eze. 18:4. Not only does death come as a due reward of sin, but sin, in and of itself, produces or terminates in death. James 1:15. Hence we see there is no hope in the law. On account of the weakness of the flesh, it holds and brings us under condemnation. Rom. 8:3; 7:9-11. But though man is condemned to death by the law, does that prove the law immoral, unjust, or defective? By no means; the inspired apostle guards it from reproach in each particular.

"Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good." It is a perfect law, the honor and stability of God's moral government rests upon its maintenance. If man is rescued, it must be by a way which recognizes and maintains the honor of God's law.

But from this seemingly hopeless state, into which man was plunged by sin, there is deliverance. God's infinite love and wisdom devised a way whereby sinners can be saved and His justice remains untarnished, His government unimpeached. "Being declared righteous, freely, by His favor, through the redemption which [is] in Christ Jesus; whom God set forth as a propitiatory-covering, through faith in His blood; for a pointing out of His righteousness, because of the passing over of the previously committed sins, in the forbearance of God; with a view to the pointing out of His righteousness in the present season, to-the-end He might be righteous Himself even when declaring righteous the [man] of faith of Jesus."-Rom. 3:24-26 (Rotherham's translation, by Bagster and Sons).

Here we have the plan of salvation in brief. All have sinned and come short-worthy of death. Christ the Creator of countless worlds, a Being above law, perfect in holiness, offers to die.

He died for His people, or those who will prove faithful (1 Thess. 5:10); He died also for the ungodly. (Rom. 5:6).

He, not being amenable to law, and having no sins for which to answer, can offer Himself a Substitute for fallen man. Upon Him were laid our sins. Isa. 53; 2 Cor. 5:21. It was a free offering, -He "gave Himself". Titus 2:14.. God not only accepted that offering, but freely gave His Son. John 3:16; Rom. 8:32 .

Through this offering forgiveness is granted on conditions. By coming to God with sincere sorrow for our sins, and the determination to do wrong no more, by faith in Christ forgiveness is granted us. God for Christ's sake forgives our sins. Eph. 4:32. The repentance, however, must be genuine, or forgiveness will not be granted. It will only be found when it is sought for with all the heart, when sin appears exceedingly sinful; every known sin is cherished no longer, and so far as possible, restoration is made. Jer 29:13; Eze. 33:14-16.

Christ's perfect righteousness covers our unrighteousness; His character is imparted to us, and our sins are "passed over". Rom. 4:7, 8. Our names are now written in the "book of life." We infer this from the fact that those thus forgiven have their names written there before their characters are proved. See Luke 10:20; Ex. 32:32; Ps. 69:28; Phil. 4:3, and others. We are now candidates for eternal life,- placed on a new probation. The sins passed over are not future sins, but "sins that are past," or "previously committed." These sins are not forever "forgotten" or "blotted out," but are "passed over" on the condition that we remain faithful. We have been freed, or liberated; it is now our duty to walk in liberty. If the pardon of Christ is still efficacious when we turn again to wickedness, it makes Christ the minister of sin; and pardon, license to do wickedly. Gal. 2:17, 18. But Eze. 33:14-16 teaches otherwise; the Lord pardons, not to excuse sin, but to make men better. He saves, not in sin, but from sin. Matt. 1:21; Titus 2:14.

Now for the proof that we are pardoned on condition; that once forgiven or justified we are not forever saved. Eze. 33:13: "When I shall say to the righteous that he shall surely live; if he trust to his own righteousness and commit iniquity, all his righteousnesses shall not be remembered; but for his iniquity that he hath committed, he shall die for it." Is not this positive? "If he trusts to his own righteousness,"-thinks a reward will be given him on account of his own good deeds, and forgets the righteousness of Christ, which comes by faith,-even this imputed righteousness, with all he has wrought by the favor of God, "shall not be remembered." For an illustration of this text, see Matt. 18:23-35.

But this must take place at the judgment; for we learn by the illustration that it is at the final reckoning; and by the text in Ezekiel, that upon it is based the final death-sentence. This proves that sins, once fully repented of and forgiven, need not a second repentance and forgiveness while we continue faithful. New manifestations of sin may and will be developed within the character of the over comer until he is perfectly cleansed. Each new manifestation, unknown to him because never having met the necessary circumstances, trials, and temptations, to develop it, causes new repentances, and by faith new forgiveness; but not a repentance of sin already forgiven. Past sinfulness forgiven, may cause a sense of humiliation, yet at the same time one of rejoicing to know that it is covered by the blood of Christ. And if the Christian continues faithful in the work of repenting, and washing in the

blood of Christ, his character will at last stand perfect, and his sins, which have been passed over because of his faithfulness, will, at the judgment, be blotted out. Acts 3:19.

This blotting out of sin constitutes the atonement.

Then will sins be removed from the faithful "as far as the east is from the west."-Ps. 103:12. Then they will be remembered no more. Isa. 43:25.

Those who have not proven faithful to God will have their names blotted out of the book of life. Rev. 3:5. The names of those only who are saved will be retained therein. Dan, 12:1; Isa. 4:3.

Forgiveness, how precious it is to the sin-laden soul! Lifted from the miry clay and horrible pit of sin to a foundation upon the Rock, Christ Jesus!

It puts a new song in the mouth of the pardoned sinner, even praise to God. No longer is he accounted an alien and rebel; no longer does the sword of justice hang suspended o'er his head; no longer does he despair under the black shadow of a righteous wrath; he is free. The Substitute has been accepted; peace has been spoken to his soul; he is reconciled to God. All the power in the kingdom of God is pledged to rescue and help him in all times of need.

He goes forth weak and trembling in himself, but strong in God, the mighty Saviour. Forgiveness reconciliation, how precious art thou between man and man, but how much more precious between the sinner and his God!

But if forgiveness is precious, what will the atonement be? Atonement! How much it comprehends! At-one-ment-at one with God. The pardoned, atoned sinner, now a saint, looks back o'er all the past. In his new joy he counts not the trials and conflicts and temptations and tribulations. His joy lies not so much in their being past, as in the liberty from sin. He is saved from sin-- forever saved. Being saved from sin, he is saved from all its consequences. No more to meet the assaults of a wily foe; no more to fall from the selfishness of a sinful heart, he is forgiven, washed, cleansed, saved forevermore. The old name will not do, he has a new name.

The old song, though happy and holy, cannot express his overfilled heart, so he joins in "the new song" that only immortals can sing. He is at-one with his Redeemer, at-one with the eternal Father. His life compasses not a span; it measures with the ceaseless cycles of a glorified, sinless eternity.

[Ed. Note: By atonement the writer has reference to the final phase of the atonement in the most holy place, i.e., the blotting out of sin. Strictly speaking his theological terminology is not accurate, though the sense and meaning is true to Adventist theology]

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