

THE ATONEMENT IN ITS WIDER ASPECT AS A VINDICATION BEFORE THE UNIVERSE OF THE CHARACTER OF GOD

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I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

A. We are ready enough to believe that we ourselves are on trial before the universe, desperately in need of vindication. *Our* honor is obviously in doubt, *our* existence involved in insecurity.

But to many it's a revolutionary thought that the character of God is on trial. How can *His* honor be in jeopardy? Why should *He* need vindication?

Perplexity follows the suggestion that God may be in the kind of difficulty that a vindication would relieve. How can the Infinite One know any limitation or frustration? Supposing that someone were foolhardy enough to oppose or to malign Him, why would He bother to give the matter a second thought? Is He not infinitely and eternally secure, the invincible Heavyweight Champion of the universe? Any opponent soon enough gets knocked out. Rebellion on the part of angels and men is simple enough to exterminate by merely wiping them out of existence; and were it not for the fact that He condescends to love fallen man, it is assumed that He would not hesitate to destroy them once He can discriminate between the incorrigible and the cooperative ones.

The issues of the plan of salvation are thus purely anthropocentric; and from our own viewpoint, exclusively egocentric. We have only ourselves and our fellow-sinners to think about. "Make certain your own soul's salvation, preach to others, and that's it!" is the general idea. God needs nothing from you. Eliphaz asks:

Can a man be profitable unto God, as he that is wise may be profitable unto himself? Is it any pleasure to the Almighty that thou art righteous? Job 22:2, 3.

There are aspects of this position that doubtless tend toward passivity or Christian *laissez faire*.

C. An opposite extreme is the idea that God is an impotent weakling sitting on an archaic throne "ruling" an empire that has ceased to exist. Driven into a corner by the successful rebellion fomented by His highest minion, He cowers helplessly while awaiting "salvation" from His erstwhile rebellious children. Not until they "vote" Him in again can He reassert the authority of His ancient majesty. There seems in the foreseeable future little likelihood of God being reinstated into sovereignty by a unanimous vote of His rebellious children. Unless something unprecedented happens, it would appear as though God has "had it." There are aspects of this view that doubtless tend toward panic and fanaticism.

D. Does the truth lie somewhere between these two extremes?

II. WHAT HAS MADE THE VINDICATION OF GOD NECESSARY?

A. A clever, intelligent enemy has arisen within the universe who has challenged Him. The following are among the charges and insinuations of accusation implicit in Lucifer's rebellion; the charges are echoed from the sinful heart of man:

1. God is basically selfish. Psalm 50:21.

[Satan] had accused God of seeking merely the exaltation of Himself in requiring submission and obedience from his creatures, and had declared that while the Creator exacted self-denial from all others, He Himself practised no self-denial and made no sacrifice. GC 502; RH, Feb. 18, 1890.

2. God's law is unjust because it requires an obedience impossible to yield. 5BC 1129, 1131; Rom. 8:7.

3. The divine government is responsible for the rebellion. GC 670, 499; Rom. 9:20.

4. Self-denial is impossible and therefore not essential for the human family. MS 50, 1900; Rom. 7:19.

5. Angels (and man) need only do what they think is right, without the restraint of law.

He [the rebel] reiterated his claim that angels needed no control, but should be left to follow their own will, which would ever guide them right. He denounced the divine statutes as a restriction of their liberty, and declared that it was his purpose to secure the abolition of law; that, freed from this restraint, the hosts of heaven might enter upon a more exalted, more glorious state of existence. . . .

Satan has continued with men the same policy which he pursued with the angels. GC 499, 500.
6. God's unjust restrictions led to man's fall in Eden. Gen. 3:5.

By the same misrepresentation of the character of God as he had practised in heaven, Satan induced man to sin. And having succeeded thus far, he declared that God's unjust restrictions had led to man's fall, as they had led to his own rebellion. GC 500.

7. The Father and the Son were the enemies of the angels, and of man, and Lucifer was their friend. 3T 328.

8. It is impossible for fallen man to obey the divine law, or to resist temptation. PP 88. "He [Satan] declares that it is impossible for us to obey its precepts." DA 24; Rom. 8:7.

9. The sins of the professed people of God are an evidence that the plan of salvation is in vain, and that God's efforts at self-vindication are futile. Isa. 43:24; Rev. 3:14-21.

If those who hide and excuse their faults could see how Satan exults over them, how he taunts Christ and holy angels with their course, they would make haste to confess. GC 489.

The reason that we carelessly indulge in sin is that we do not see Jesus. We would not lightly regard sin, did we appreciate the fact that sin wounds our Lord. YI, Feb. 10, 1898.

The scenes which took place at that meeting made the God of heaven ashamed to call those who took part in them His brethren. *Special Testimony to the RH Office*, 1896, pp. 16, 17.

Sin on the part of the messenger of God would cause Satan to rejoice. Letter 0'19 [?], 1892.

Our Lord is put to shame by those who claim to serve Him, but who misrepresent His character. DA 438, 439.

The reproach of the disciple's sin is cast upon Christ. It causes Satan to triumph, and wavering souls to stumble. DA 811.

B. God's justice and righteousness in doubt.

Why has God presumed to pass by transgression for 4000 years up to the time of the cross? The death of animals could be no payment for sin; but He has dared to forgive sinners and has even translated or resurrected some. (cf. Rom. 3:25, 26).

C. Man has become deeply involved. Sin lies in the entertainment and cherishing of the apparently plausible accusations of Satan. Fear dictates to man a sycophant submission to God, while his inner heart—often well beyond man's full consciousness—mulls over what appear to be serious wrongs and inconsistencies in the character and behavior of God. One need not travel far from a Christian college to find youth who feel that God should be restrained in His demands for consecration. What right has He to extort self-denial? Why does He presume to intrude upon a person's deepest emotional and biological urges? Why can't He be satisfied with the reasonableness of a token allegiance? Christ bore the cross only because he was essentially God, and had an advantage and power beyond us; why His insistence on our bearing it? Is it not an impossible

demand? Isn't God the greatest "kill-joy" there is, the supreme "wet-blanket"? Seriously, is He not rather like a vain Oriental monarch in his maniacal demand for us to practically crawl on our belly before Him in abject surrender? Maybe one had better ask the question only in a whisper, but—isn't God really selfish? None of us asked to be; He made us what we are, and put us on this stage of life. And yet He demands of us a painful submission which is apparently self-negation and the undoing of all that He has made us to be.

D. God is on trial. It may be an excessive anthropomorphism to say that He is on trial for His life, but it is no exaggeration to say that the issues are serious. "For our redemption, heaven itself was imperiled." COL 196. As the Infinite One and Omnipotent One, He can, of course, force submission, but only at the cost of His status as a God of love. If He can survive defeat at the hands of Lucifer, His character must be drastically altered, and the willing, loving allegiance of His subjects replaced by fearful, sycophant submission. If God should prematurely intervene in world history by the Second Advent with all its attendant eschatology, Satan has his plans all ready. The following statement speaks primarily of the first advent of Christ with its contingencies, but certain principles are implicit relative to the second:

The unfallen worlds watched with intense interest to see Jehovah arise and sweep away the inhabitants of the earth, and Satan boasted that if God did do this, he would complete his plans and secure for himself the allegiance of the unfallen

worlds. He had arguments ready by which to cast blame upon God, and to spread his rebellion to the worlds above. ST, May 21, 1912.

If, prior to an indisputable vindication of God, He intervenes in history by the translation of a group of supposedly righteous people whose righteousness is not proven to be better than that of people on Lucifer's side, and if He resurrects the dead and takes them to heaven, arbitrarily destroying the vast majority of earth's population in the process, one can be sure that Satan will make capital of God's high-handed unilateral intervention, and seek to spread disaffection throughout the universe. He will beat on the gates of heaven and shout "unfair!" until the din will be impossible for the universe to endure. If God does not produce a final, incontrovertible answer to the problem of the rebellion, disaster in one form or the other becomes inevitable. A universe serving God only from terror is the essence of sin itself permeating it everywhere. The other alternative to God's vindication would be that the universe become a vast Congo.

E. The sanctuary. During the trial, often spoken of as the "great controversy," God is to the inhabitants of this earth, at least, in a kind of exile. As King David felt obliged to vacate the throne in Jerusalem and leave for temporary exile when his son Absalom rebelled, so God sets up temporary "field headquarters" from where the warfare is directed in putting down the rebellion. The sanctuary is God's "tabernacle" or "tent" (cf. Heb. 9:2; 9:11; Rev. 13:6; 15:5; 21:3). The honor of the sanctuary is the honor of God's throne. That honor is in jeopardy until the

issues are settled finally. As the word "Pharaoh" to the ancient Egyptians connoted "government house," and the word "White House" connotes to Americans the executive branch of their government, so the "cleansing of the sanctuary" connotes the vindication of God's "house" or government in relation to the problem of sin. The sanctuary is the setting for all the activities of Christ.

What must obviously be proven clearly to the world and to the unfallen universe is as follows:

1. That God's character is not selfish, but is love itself.
2. That self-denial is essential and possible to the human family.
3. That the law of God is just and unselfish, and that it can be obeyed by man in his fallen nature in sinful flesh.
4. That man's service and worship of God need not necessarily be "motivated" by egocentric purposes which ultimately transform worship into sin and idolatry.
5. That God has resources of character to put down and to exterminate rebellion and sin, and that He is not merely the omnipotent Heavyweight Champion who at last must resort to force to gain the victory in His universe. To prove that might makes right is not enough; it must be evident that right is might.
6. That God's demand that His creatures be unselfish and obedient is reasonable.
7. That God has the perfect right, demonstrable throughout all eternity, to redeem human beings

from this sinful world, both by resurrection and by translation.

8. That His “invasion” of this world in the Second Advent is desired by the rational, intelligent, and responsible human beings living on this planet.

9. That the rebellion of sin was “uncaused,” and that His character and His government have been in no wise responsible either for the original rebellion in heaven, or for the fall of man on earth, or for the continuance and perpetuation of sin through the millenniums of human history.

10. That Satan, his angels, and the hosts of the finally impenitent human beings who have responsibly joined him in the rebellion, confess that God “deserves” (Rev. 5:12, 13, Moffatt) vindication and victory, together with the unfallen universe.

Before leaving this introduction to the topic, it is well to note that this subject of discussion in this paper is intensely practical. Many Christian youth seriously doubt that obedience to the law of God is possible for modern youth unless one becomes either a fanatic or undergoes some surgery to make him other than normal. Their parents are confused also; otherwise, they could help their youth. God needs a vindication in our own minds. The last message of mercy to the world will be basically that:

It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving

in its power. His character is to be made known. .

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Those who wait for the Bridegroom’s coming are to say to the people, “Behold your God.” COL 4:15.

III. A BIBLICAL PREVIEW OF BASIC ISSUES INVOLVED

A. The vindication of God in the Book of Job.

Though cast out of heaven, Satan apparently at first had access to the sympathy of heavenly intelligences. In some way unknown to us, he lodged a virtual accusation before God in the presence of the universe:

And the Lord said unto Satan, Whence comest thou? Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it. Job 1:7.

1. Satan challenged God. In his walking “to and fro,” he was looking for something he did not believe existed. Of all God’s professed people, none served Him from motives of disinterested piety and genuine love. All were “motivated” by a selfish concern and love of reward. All were egocentric, devoted, in the last analysis, to self. God’s toe-hold on the earth was an illusion. Take anyone that served Him, and the Adversary would proceed to prove that his very worship was hardly better than sin.

And the Lord said unto Satan, hast thou considered My servant Job? . . . Then Satan answered the Lord, and said, Doth Job serve God for nought? Verses 8, 9.

Poor Job is suddenly bereft of his calm security, and thrust rudely into the cosmic arena to fight as a gladiator for the honor of God and for His vindication. Is it possible for a man living in the weakness of sinful human flesh to be motivated by pure disinterested love?

2. Satan tries him to the utmost. Sitting in agony on his dung-heap, the sufferer knows nothing of the secret revealed in our Prologue. He is unable to distinguish between God and the Adversary. It is inevitable that righteous Job shall in consequence articulate man's charges against God, and transmute the trial of his own faithfulness into a trial of God Himself.

R. N. Carstensen graphically represents the issue Job raises:

Job is in no position to threaten the power that creates and sustains the universe. Clearly rejected by society and ready to die, emaciated and fever-ridden, he represents no overt threat to the majesty of God. At the same time, however, he attacks God at a point which the power of all the world's armies could never reach. God is held responsible for indefensible outrage. All the excuses by which, in the past, the failure of God have been placed on human shoulders are cancelled by Job's challenge. . . .

The final summons to God shows clearly how Job, resting upon the certainty of his own integrity, has resolutely drawn up his case. . . . Having silenced the friends, he is now prepared, like Jacob of old, to sit on the chest of God. Like the obstreperous bug of Walt Kelly's Pogo, who

shouts at a startled alligator in the house, "Step outside and say that!" Job challenges God to strip off the paraphernalia of his power and meet him upon the field of moral truth. . . .

From the standpoint of phenomenal power, God is on a throne; his is in no jeopardy. But from the standpoint of the immovable, transcendent realities of right and wrong, apart from which his power most ultimately must be declared demonic, heaven is under attack. A promethean giant is beating at the ramparts with a force such as one third of heaven and the black Napoleon of the primeval firestorm never mustered. (*Job: The Defense of Honor*, pp. 70, 85, 87, 88.)

B. Job's victory. Fortunately, in all this Job sinned not, nor charged God foolishly. Job 1:22. Had he taken his wife's advice and cursed God, it would have been a sad day in heaven. As it was, it is difficult not to admit that Job most certainly got God out of a rather tight spot. The vindication of God had begun.

C. Job and the atonement. But the connection between this phase of the vindication of God and the atonement is not apparent. If Job truly vindicated God, why was not the "great controversy" finished then and there? Satan lost his wager, and God won. Would the heavenly universe demand a more severe trial for anyone than poor Job had to endure?

1. If the book of Job is merely pious fiction, we have no serious problem to consider. Job would in that case emerge simply as a prophecy of Christ. We would have no occasion to wonder how a

human being before the time of the cross could vindicate God in such a way without a clear understanding of the atonement of Christ. It would be considered impossible.

2. But if the book of Job records actual history, we have a serious problem to solve. How could Job vindicate God unless he had faith in Jesus Christ? How else would he be enabled to endure? Tillich has said that it is impossible for a human being to endure naked despair for more than a moment. Did Job endure what Christ endured?

3. It is obvious that in Job's day the hope of a vindication and reward in a future life was very dim. It was commonly understood among the worshippers of Jehovah that a man was rewarded for good or evil in this life. That was that. Sheol was a pretty shadowy place, and no one thought seriously of expecting restitution there. One or two times Job emerges briefly from the shadows into the clear upper sunlight of hope in a resurrection and ultimate vindication in a better world, but he again descends into the shadowy concepts common for his day. But what saved Job from utterly disintegrating under the trial he endured was that fleeting glimpse of hope. Job was not the Saviour. In his most desperate hours, he could not suppress an inner conviction that somehow he was not alone. There was somewhere a "daysman," a vindicator, a witness in heaven, who would stand for him and make matters right. "I know that my vindicator liveth." Job 19:25. Job had a conviction of righteousness that can be his only through the

ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the mediation of a Saviour. His patience depended ultimately on the patience of Another, and did not spring from his own inner innate virtue. However bitter the cup was that Job drank from, he did not drink it to its depths, nor was it as bitter as Christ tasted.

IV. THE ATONEMENT OF CHRIST A VINDICATION OF GOD

A. Relation between Job's trial and Christ's. Christ was not afflicted with boils or leprosy. He did not lose a family or hear a wife say, "Curse God and die." He suffered no sudden, forced deprivation of wealth. But He was tempted more than Job could possibly have been. As he hung upon His cross, it was not for Him to say, "I know that My Redeemer liveth!" Rather, it was His to bear the nakedness and of pure distilled despair. No conviction of righteousness triumphantly upheld Him as was Job's privilege. Job was "made the righteousness of God" even in his darkest moments, and rejoiced in the conviction of innocence which was imputed to him from the Innocent One. But Christ was "made to be sin," and both in appearance and in actuality, was numbered with the transgressors. 2 Cor. 5:21; Isa. 53:12. The bitter cup He drained was the second death, the pain and guilt of naked sin, which He was "made to be" on our account, and which was imputed to Him. Job drank no such cup, but rather was sustained by the fruits of Christ's atonement. "The light that lighteth every man" shone in his soul.

B. Christ vindicated God by enduring the darkness of the second death. Had He not

endured that darkness, he would have been sustained by hope, and thus His sacrifice would not have been complete. It is only when this truth is comprehended that a complete atonement becomes possible to contemplate.

1. Limit the scope of Christ's battle with naked, unrelieved anxiety and despair, and of necessity one must limit His obedience and surrender to the judgment of God on sin, and make it less than perfect.

2. In that case, one must also limit the scope of His victory over sin itself. The basic issue in the vindication of God was the adequacy and effectiveness of His plan for dealing with the sin problem in human flesh. If Christ should fail to conquer sin there, Satan could press his claim that it is impossible for fallen men ever to gain or even appreciate the victory. Two aspects of the problem deserve close consideration:

(a) If the flesh of Christ was in any way different from the flesh of the sinners whom He came to save, his victory would be a mere sham. Satan could trumpet all over the universe the fact that not only was the sin problem insuperable, but God Himself had pointed it up by attempting a fake solution.

(b) If the struggle with sin that Christ had to endure stopped short of the actual strength of sin—the underlying substratum of anxiety that constitutes the bondage of the “fear of death” (Heb. 2:14), that is, the second death, no real deliverance from sin would be effective for sinners. There would always remain a residue of anxiety and self-concern

in man's soul that would intrude in his highest moments and contaminate his devotion to God. Thus the atonement would forever be incomplete. Sin would merely be sublimated, disguised, and transferred to more subtly concealed levels. By misrepresenting the atonement in orthodox theology, and by misrepresenting the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, the Adversary has hoped to accomplish that very objective.

C. But the vindication of God was accomplished. Christ gained the victory over sin in its full strength. The vindication was implicit in the condemnation of sin.

What the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh. Rom. 8:3.

1. The “flesh” of man was the home of sin, the lair of the beast. Its condemnation in any other place would have been an illusion. Sin was the mighty tyrant, the new “heavyweight champion” of the universe. (How many youth still believe that sin is champion in human flesh! “God, You're alright so long as You stay in Your corner behind Your stained-glass windows! But in the context of modern life with the allurements of age-old temptation in human flesh, something has You licked!”)

2. The issue was not to prove how terrible sin was—that everyone could see when “the fullness of the time was come.” The issue was to “condemn” the power of sin, to break its strength forever, to annihilate the basis of its existence. That

condemnation would do no good now in Adam's unfallen flesh. Merely to prove that Adam's sin was inexcusable would not solve the problem of fallen man's bondage to the power of sin.

(a) In our flesh, Christ slew the "enmity" caused by sin (Eph. 2:15), because His flesh was our flesh. Thus He proved Satan's charges false, and accomplished the vindication of God. He proved the truth of God's judgment on sin, willingly enduring that judgment in perfect harmony with His Father.

(b) This victory met all the demands of a perfect atonement. We are called now to "receive the atonement" (2 Cor. 5:20). Christ suffers only once (Heb. 9:26). Mankind was reconciled to God by the death of His Son (Rom. 5:10). The race was purchased and given into Christ's hands (3T 371, 372). The resurrection of Christ became the demonstration of the sacrifice as a perfect atonement (Rom. 4:25).

(c) The perfection of the atoning sacrifice is linked in the following statement to the shame and despair of Christ's suffering "without the gate" in excommunication and disfellowshipment, both by God's people and by the Father Himself:

Our great high Priest completed the sacrificial offering of Himself when He suffered without the gate. Then a perfect atonement was made for the sins of the people. MS 128, 1897.

(d) In what way was the sacrifice of Christ an atonement for the unfallen universe?

To the angels and the unfallen worlds the cry, "It is finished", had a deep significance. It was for them as well as for us that the great work

of redemption had been accomplished. They with us share the fruits of Christ's victory.

Not until the death of Christ was the character of Satan clearly revealed to the angels or to the unfallen worlds. DA 758.

(e) The sacrifice on the cross forever uprooted the last vestige of sympathy any of the heavenly intelligences might have felt for the fallen Adversary:

The hour is come that the Son of man should be glorified. . . . Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. John 12:23, 31.

Now is the Son of man glorified, and God is glorified in Him. John 13:31.

Father, the hour is come; glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son man also glorify Thee. John 17:1.

At the time when sin had become a science, when the hostility of man was most violent against Heaven, when rebellion struck its roots deep into the human heart, when vice was consecrated to a part of religion, when Satan exulted in the idea that he had led man to such a state of evil that God would destroy the world, Jesus was sent into the world. The unfallen worlds watched with intense interest to see Jehovah arise and sweep away the inhabitants of the earth; . . . but at this crisis, instead of destroying the world, God sent His Son to save it. ST, May 21, 1912.

Christ left His position in the heavenly courts, and came to this earth to live the life of human beings. This sacrifice He made in order to show

that Satan's charge against God is false—that it is possible for man to obey the laws of God's kingdom. 5BC 1129, 1131.

The holy angels were horror-stricken that one who had been of their number could fall so low as to be capable of such cruelty. Every sentiment of sympathy or pity which they had ever felt for Satan in his exile, was quenched in their hearts. That his envy should be exercised in such a revenge upon an innocent person was enough to strip him of his assumed robe of celestial light, and to reveal the hideous deformity beneath; but to manifest such malignity toward the divine Son of God, who had, with unprecedented self-denial, and love for the creatures formed in His image, come from heaven and assumed their fallen nature, was such a heinous crime against heaven that it caused the angels to shudder with horror, and severed forever the last tie of sympathy existing between Satan and the heavenly world. 3SP 183.

When Christ cried out, "It is finished," all heaven triumphed. The controversy between Christ and Satan in regard to the execution of the plan of salvation was ended. The spirit of Satan and his works had taken deep root in the affections of the children of men. For Satan to have some into power would have been death to the world. The implacable hatred he felt toward the Son of God was revealed in his manner of treating Him while He was in the world. Christ's betrayal, trial, and crucifixion were all planned by the fallen foe. His hatred, carried out in the death of the Son of

God, placed Satan where his true diabolical character was revealed to all created intelligences that had not fallen through sin. 3SP 184; 5BC 1150.

The redemption price was paid, and Satan fell like lightning from heaven. 5BC 1150.

The victory gained at His [Christ's] death on Calvary broke forever the accusing power of Satan over the universe and silenced his charges that self-denial was impossible with God and therefore not essential to the human family. MS 50, 1900.