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CHRIST'S SUBSTITUTIONARY DEATH

**Christ's death in our place
is at the very heart of His justice
—and love.**

From early on, biblical faith testifies the necessity of substitutionary death for the salvation of sinners. Seventh-day Adventists affirm that Christ's death on the cross was an atoning sacrifice for sin that had the character of penal substitution. His substitutionary death pays the just penalty for sin in our behalf and provides forgiveness on the basis of divine grace.

Of course, the idea of an atonement that is made *for us* through Jesus Christ presupposes that the re-

lationship between God and humankind is disrupted through sin. Reconciliation is not needed if the relationship is intact. The necessity for Christ's substitutionary death is rooted in our alienation from God.

To overcome this estrangement, Jesus became one of us and died for us. According to the apostle Paul, Christ Jesus, "although He existed in

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Christ's life-giving death was the very purpose of His coming into the world (John 12:27). It certainly is no accident that to redeem humanity Jesus died on a Friday, the very day of the biblical week when God created the human race. Though our creation was effortless for God, our salvation cost Him great pain and even His beloved Son.

the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. . . . He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8).¹ But what is the meaning of His death?

Jesus did not die from accident, illness, or old age. He purposefully died for sinners in order to save them. Jesus came into our world: "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, *and to give His life a ransom for many*" (Matt. 20:28, italics supplied).

In John 2:4 at the wedding at Cana, Jesus said to His mother: "My hour has not yet come." In 8:20, "no one seized Him, because His hour had not yet come." In John 12:23, however, while having His impending death clearly before Him, Jesus said: "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." In verse 27, Jesus utters these words: "What

shall I say, "Father, save Me from this hour"? But for this purpose I came to this hour." The context in which Jesus speaks these words is clearly His soon approaching death, for "He was saying this to indicate the kind of death by which He was to die" (vs. 33). Jesus was fully aware that His death was His purpose for being born.

Though all of us are born to live, Jesus was born to die. We were not redeemed with perishable things, from our futile way of life which we inherited from our forefathers "but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:19).

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At the beginning of the Gospel of John, Jesus is depicted as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). The Greek word for “Lamb” here is also used in Isaiah 53 for the suffering servant of the Lord, who takes our iniquities upon Himself. Jesus died a substitutionary death for us, taking upon Himself the sin and guilt we deserve. No other passage from the entire Old Testament is alluded to by New Testament writers more often than Isaiah 53. It is as if they wanted to emphasize precisely this substitutionary aspect of the death of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ saw Himself as this substitute. In John 15:13 he said: “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.” In His high-priestly prayer at the end of His life, Jesus described His death in language that indicates that He saw himself in a sacrifice for us: “For their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they themselves also may be sanctified in truth” (John 17:19). The Greek word for *consecrate* is common in sacrificial contexts, where a priest and a sacrifice is prepared and thus very appropriate for Christ.²

Perhaps no other passage brings out the substitutionary character of Jesus’ death clearer than 1 Timothy 2:5, 6: “There is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.”

The English word *ransom* stands for the Greek word that normally describes the thought of deliverance from some sort of bondage in exchange for the payment or compensation or the offering of a substitute.ⁱⁱⁱ There is a price to be paid for sin. The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). That’s why the price had to be paid by someone who is not guilty but able to give life.

Forgive Simply Out of Love?

But why can’t God forgive the same way He asks us to forgive? Why doesn’t God practice what He expects from us: to forgive one another out of love?

These questions betray a superficial understanding of the problem of sin. The comparison between our forgiveness and God’s misses the important fact that we are private individuals and other people’s sins are personal injuries to self and others. God, however, is not a private individual; nor is sin just a personal injury. God is the Creator of the universe and the giver of the law we break. In fact, His law is an expression of His character (Rom. 7:12), which is love (1 John 4:8). Love is basic to God’s law and government of the universe because it is the only principle on the basis of which intelligent beings with free choice can co-exist without destroying one another. Love includes justice/fairness as well as mercy. If God is to extend

mercy through forgiveness, He must find a way to do it with full justice, or He would damage love, which would be disastrous.⁴

Sin is completely incompatible with God's holiness, which includes His moral character of love (1 Thess. 3:12, 13). God and sin cannot coexist because sin is "unlove" and He is love. Our sin has evoked God's just wrath, and sin separates us from God, who is the Giver and Sustainer of all life. Sin, therefore, leads to death (Rom. 6:23). Our sin is more than a debt. It is a crime against the only true and living God, who is perfectly holy. Because God loves us, He gives us the opportunity to be saved from the just penalty through the sacrifice of His Son (John 3:16). By bearing our penalty, Christ makes it possible for God to be just when He justifies those who believe (Rom. 3:26). In this way, God is able to forgive us without compromising the justice part of His love."

The substitutionary nature of Christ's sacrifice is clearly shown in that He bore our sins as our Priest and then died for those sins (1 Peter 2:24). Without a substitutionary sacrifice, the judicial penalty awaits those whose sins are not covered by the blood of Christ. Deep within every human being is a conviction that good ought to be rewarded and sin ought to be punished. And the transgression of the Law deserves a punishment if the Law of God is still valid. For this reason, there must be a

substitute for us sinners to pay the penalty we deserve. We are hopelessly lost and unable to redeem ourselves.

The issue is not why God should simply forgive sinners out of love. The real question is much deeper: How does God find it possible to forgive us at all?

Forgiveness is one of God's most profound problems, for which there is only one solution: the substitutionary death of Christ, who lived a sinless life. With His death, He fulfilled the work His Father in heaven had assigned Him (John 4:34) so that God "reconciled us to Himself through Christ" because "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:18, 19).

The Idea of Shedding Blood

Jesus' substitutionary death on the Cross is not cosmic child abuse, as some construe it; nor is it a pagan idea. But "God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). In Galatians 2:20, Paul writes that Jesus "'loved me and gave Himself up for me.'"

The biblical idea of Christ's substitutionary death can be understood only within a Trinitarian concept of God. Only then is the biblical message coherent. The death of Jesus on the cross is not His idea alone, as if to satisfy His ill-tempered Father. Instead, the God-Father so loved us

as to send his Son, Himself God, to bear and take away our sins.

The persons of the Triune God freely commit themselves to redeem human sinners. Jesus voluntarily gave His life for us. He says: "The good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11) and then continues: "I lay down My life. . . . No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative" (vss. 17, 18). Yet "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19).

Understood in the light of God's Trinitarian love, the substitutionary death of Christ is something entirely different from a violent pagan idea that reflects a revengeful deity, as some surmise. In stark contrast to all human-initiated actions of satisfaction and propitiation, in which humans come to God with a gift of appeasement, the living God of biblical revelation comes to humanity in self-giving love to overcome the divine-human alienation.^{vi} God is not only the initiator but also the primary actor in the process of substitutionary atonement. God not only tells us how to be saved; He Himself provides the only possible and acceptable sacrifice: His Son Jesus Christ.

"We must not, then, speak of God punishing Jesus or of Jesus persuading God, for to do so is to set them over against each other as if they

acted independently of each other or were even in conflict with each other. We must never make Christ the object of God's punishment or God the object of Christ's persuasion, for both God and Christ were subjects not objects, taking the initiative together to save sinners."^{vii}

Christ's substitutionary death is not incompatible with an authentic biblical understanding of the character of God. In fact, it is the supreme revelation of God's holy love and justice. It kindles our deepest love and elicits genuine gratitude, culminating in our adoration of the Triune God and leading to our praise for His salvation through Jesus Christ alone. □

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¹ Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from the *New American Standard Bible*.

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⁴ Roy Gane, *Altar Call* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Diadem, 1999), pp. 110, 269, 270.

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⁶ Thomas C. Oden, *The Word of Life: Systematic Theology: Volume Two* (Peabody, Mass.: Prince Press of Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), p. 352.

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