

An idyllic, beautiful setting surrounds a rambling country estate in rural England. It's 1935, and this pastoral setting provides the backdrop for the initial scene that plays out in *Atonement*. During the brief respite between the first and second World Wars, Cecilia Tallis, a rich young lady in her early twenties whose family owns the estate discovers she loves, and is loved by Robbie, a young man whose mother is the housekeeper at the Tallis home.

As the love story begins, we are also introduced to Briony, Cecilia's younger sister. Briony is an aspiring writer who is, in her coming of age 13-year-old way, envious of the courtship enjoyed by Cecilia and Robbie.

Three cousins visit the Tallis family during the summer, and during their stay, two of them run away. Briony happens to witness her oldest cousin being raped as the family searches for the lost children on the extensive grounds of the estate. Unable to clearly identify the perpetrator, Briony decides that Robbie must have been the rapist. Her cousin agrees to Briony's claim, and their contrived false charges convince the police to imprison Robbie. Cecilia alone believes in the fact of Robbie's innocence.

Atonement was an

award-winning movie released in 2007. Its screenplay was based on a 2001 novel of the same name, written by Ian McEwan and proclaimed by *Time* magazine and the British *Observer* newspaper as one of the 100 best novels ever written. The moral dilemma presented by the novel, and the movie that followed it, is the problem of sin and guilt—and the desire to compensate for the pain and heartache we leave in our wake.

Following Briony's false accusation of rape, Robbie spends three years in prison, finally being released on the condition that he will join the army and serve in World War 2. *Atonement* follows the lives of Cecilia, Robbie and Briony and how the trumped-up allegation is never adequately resolved and plays havoc with their lives.

Briony is plagued with the guilt of her fabrication. She gives up her hope of attending university and instead becomes a nurse. Briony willingly volunteers for the most difficult work (physi-

cally and emotionally)—thinking that somehow such self-imposed, penitential punishment will atone for her sin of depriving Robbie and Cecilia of happiness.

The two young lovers die during the war. Robbie dies on the beaches of Dunkirk, and Cecilia loses her life as a result of a direct hit on a London underground tube station (subway) where she takes refuge during a bombing raid. Tragically, they never marry.

In the final section of the story, titled "London 1999" we meet Briony, who is now a successful novelist in her seventies. We learn that Briony is dying and that she is still haunted by her guilt, still attempting to atone for her sin. As her final attempt to set the record

straight, she is writing, it seems, the very story we have just read (or watched)—*Atonement*. Briony determines, as she faces her own mortality, that the truth must be told, and that in some small way, perhaps that truth will help set right the wrongs of her past.

It's perhaps one of the most profound questions we humans can ever ponder. Like Briony, given the fact of our complicity in so much hurt and pain, what does it take for us to find peace, healing and forgiveness? How can the Cross of Christ atone for the ugliness of our lives and make it right?

The Ways and Means of Atonement

Under the old covenant God gave the Hebrews a day, called the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 23:26-32, when the sins of the past year would be atoned for via an elaborate ritual described throughout the 16th chap-



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ter of Leviticus. On the Day of Atonement (contemporary Jews call this day *Yom Kippur*) the High Priest was allowed access to the Most Holy Place, entering this sacred place by pushing aside a curtain that separated it from the rest of the tabernacle (also called the Tent of Meeting). Access to the Most Holy Place was only granted on this one day a year, the Day of Atonement. The Day of Atonement included a ceremony involving two goats, one banished to the wilderness and the other sacrificed as a sin offering (a sin bearer, if you like).

This is but one of the many old covenant types and symbols that prefigured the Cross of Christ, the

the Godhead's vengeful quest for justice (often only attributed to God the Father) was placated through the death of God the Son. The Cross of Christ was necessary, according to such a perspective, because God the Father needed to be satisfied.

The earliest Christian theologians explained the Cross of Christ as being rooted in the Old Testament story of the Passover lamb—the foundational event of the Jewish relationship with God—their *salvation by ransom*. The ransom story is all about being released from the grip of evil or slavery by a greater power. Within Christendom the ransom story came to mean, over time, a ransom paid by God to

a religious executioner whose bloodlust had to be satisfied. Anselm's theory of the Cross of Christ was of God's Son who was sacrificed to satisfy God the Father—a *theory of satisfaction*.

The Protestant Reformers introduced a new emphasis for the Cross of Christ—the idea of the wrath of God. For the Reformers, Jesus on the Cross becomes a substitute or representative for all humans (*penal substitution*). The Reformers built on the idea of God's honor being offended and then added another layer—that humans deserved God's wrath because of their sin, and thus, Jesus absorbed the wrath of God so that humans could be "saved." The Cross of Christ became a matter of *Jesus absorbing God's wrath so that humans could be saved*.

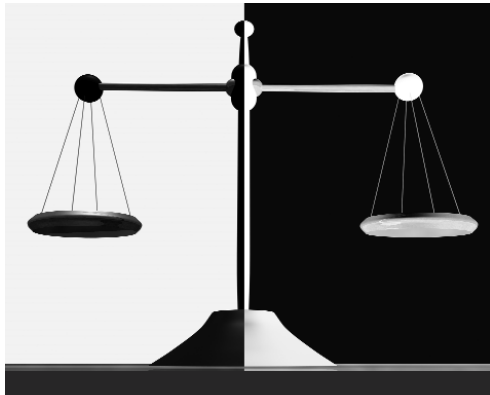
Did Jesus Have to "Come Down Here" to Satisfy the Father's Wrath?

Christ-less religion has posited many views regarding the motive of the Cross of Christ, most of which are based on a human idea of God's wrath being his fundamental emotional disposition. According to this warped idea, God's indignant divine predisposition was eventually appeased by the bloodletting of the Cross. According to such a theological interpretation of the atonement of Christ, when the word "wrath" is linked with God it is to be understood somewhat like a parent (only a heavenly one) who finally loses their patience with a young child.

The general idea many Christians have is that the Cross was necessary to keep God (the mad Dad) from going ballistic. So, according to such a viewpoint, God's wrath meant that justice had to be done. Jesus had to "come down here" and be a blood sacrifice to "satisfy" God.

It's true that the Bible speaks of God's wrath, but not in terms of a divine temper tantrum. The Bible speaks of God's wrath as being his unwillingness to accept whatever is contrary to his character.

But the God who gets fed up and just can't put up with humans anymore is a popular notion, easily accepted by humans, because we experience so many examples of people who do lose their tempers. Some can remember times when they, as children living at home,



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the devil so that he would release his human hostages. It could be understood that some who believed this theory perceived the devil as having greater power than God.

Thus the Cross of Christ, by this *classical theory of ransom*, was a matter of God sending his Son to break the grip of Satan, just as Moses had been used by God to break the grip of the Pharaoh over the Hebrews.

Following the ransom theory of the Cross came Anselm's study on atonement. Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury (1033-1109), wrote "Why God Became Human." Anselm's theory was based on the foundation of how God's holiness could be reconciled, or *satisfied*, given human sinfulness. Anselm believed that God's honor was wounded by Adam and Eve's sin. God had to punish the first humans and find a way for his honor to be restored.

Humans had to find a way to repay God, but humans of course are not capable of doing so. Therefore, God had to send his Son to become a human, so that God the Son could be both finite and infinite, human and divine. As a human, Jesus could shed his blood to satisfy the honor of God the Father.

In this model, God the Father was represented like an inquisitorial judge,

atoning work of the Lamb of God who took away the sins of the world (John 1:29). The moment Jesus died on his Cross "the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matthew 27:51). The book of Hebrews dogmatically insists that such repetitious religious observances (specifically mentioning the old covenant Day of Atonement), involving the need for humans to annually seek forgiveness and atonement, ended at the Cross of Christ, being fulfilled "once for all" by the shedding of the blood of Jesus, God in the flesh (Hebrews 9:12, 26).

The word *atonement* has thus been used, for the almost 2,000 years of Christianity, to explain the death of Christ which opens the way for a restoration and reconciliation between humanity and God. However, the emphasis and motivation behind the atoning work of Christ has often been seen through a legalistic lens as the forensic remedy for law-breaking humans who offend a law-giving God.

For centuries a predominant view within Christendom has been, and continues to be in many circles, that

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finally exasperated their parents (who were generally patient but there were times when they were pushed over the edge). They erupted. That helps us, it seems, to understand this God of wrath—this God of the Day of Atonement—this God who must be appeased.

Then, as we attempt to further understand God (aided by religious professionals) we think of the novels and movies that feature a good cop and a bad cop. The bad cop is rough and tough. That cop is like the God of the Old Testament, we reason. This is the bloodthirsty God who demands blood so that justice can be done.

Then there's the good cop, the one who walks down the hall to get us a cup of coffee as we sweat it out in the interrogation room, the one who promises to put a good word in for us—that's Jesus, we reason. Jesus, who will go to bat for us, even if he has to appease his own partner, or heavenly Father, by shedding his own blood in our place. *Good cop, bad cop.* Christ-less religion has effectively pitted the compassionate Jesus against his partner—the hardened, crusty, calloused and vindictive Father.

Religious legalism that has infected Christendom attributes human ideas of law and order and retributive justice ("an eye for an eye") to Christ's work of atonement on his Cross. The Cross is then seen through a forensic filter, often leading to the erroneous conclusion that Jesus had to die to vindicate God's law. The Cross, says legalism, was necessary because God was unhappy with humanity—so to keep God happy Jesus had to die. Christ-less religion concludes that Jesus had to die to restore God's honor, to satisfy God. Turning the Cross of Christ into a divine court of vengeance is a fatally flawed notion that corrupts the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What Religious Legalism Says Had to Be Done Because God Was Upset

Legalism's performance-based religion often sees humans as still being in some kind of adversarial role *vis a vis* our relationship with God. Religion attempts to

convince us that in spite of the Cross of Christ, God is still unhappy with us—he is agitated and incensed, and we must do something to calm him, to please and appease him. So the Cross is necessary, as a country and western song might intone, because "somebody done somebody wrong."

The forensic model of atonement assumes the following:

1) A state of happiness existed. The Garden of Eden was an idyllic place where animals had an entirely different nature than they do now and Adam and Eve ran around without clothing—how good could it get?

2) Then came a really bad day when Adam and Eve messed up. They ate that apple. God wasn't happy because Adam and Eve chose tree number one instead of tree number two. God wasn't happy, and *when God ain't happy, ain't nobody happy.* Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden. Things got tough for them—life stopped being a day at the beach, or in the garden to be more precise.

3) God was upset—his pet project, the Garden of Eden, had been messed up by Adam and Eve. Now God the Father had to scramble. His nice neat plan had been botched and bungled by Adam and Eve, so God called an emergency Triune family meeting—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. "What can we do? Adam and Eve's choice means that humans can do whatever they want to do. Sin and evil will predominate. Wars, violence and bloodshed. So there's going to have to be blood to pay for it—you know, the whole eye for an eye thing. Jesus, you're going to have to go down there and fix it." God the Father pauses, and then continues, "My moral law has been offended, and those humans will never, in a million years, be able to pay for the mess they have made. Jesus, it looks like you have to pay. That's the only way for

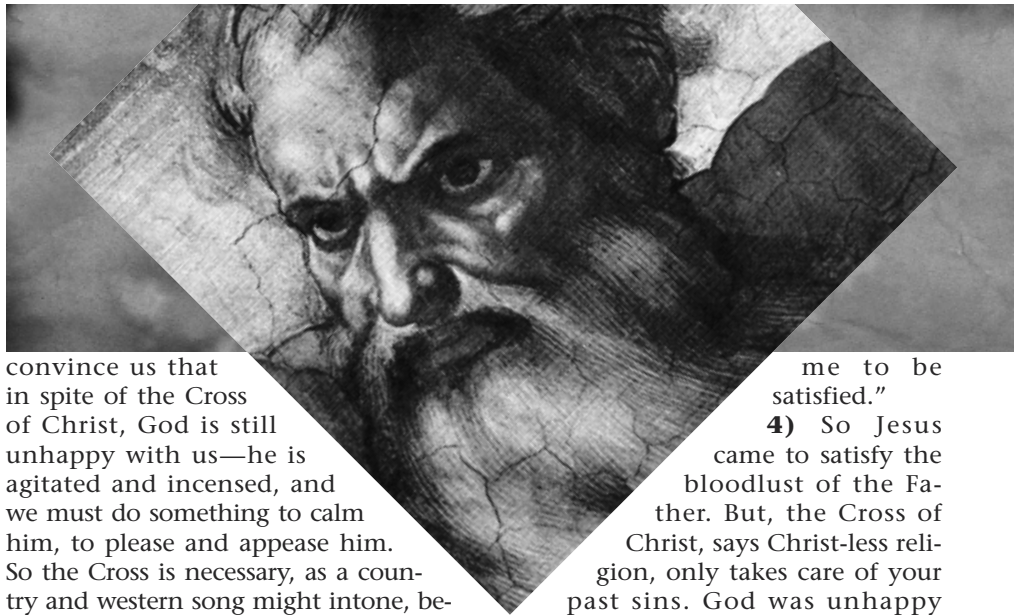
me to be satisfied."

4) So Jesus came to satisfy the bloodlust of the Father. But, the Cross of Christ, says Christ-less religion, only takes care of your past sins. God was unhappy with you, but when you accept the atoning work of Christ God applies that to your account—now your sin-debt is paid in full. BUT, from now on, you're on your own. You need to work and work and work and do and do and do to stay one step ahead of the grim reaper of God and his wrath. Unless you can satisfy him, please and appease him, you are still in a world of hurt (read: *eternal torture in hell*).

Now you might be reading this and you might be getting close to losing it yourself. You might be saying, "Your four point characterization is not exactly what Protestant or Catholic theologians have taught." Guilty as charged. It is not my purpose to wade through the endless nuances of theological suppositions that may provide some official, albeit minor, modification to what I have just presented. That's not the point.

The point is not what the official teaching, buried deep in some theological tome might be—the point is—what do many Christians believe? When the rubber hits the road, what do Christians believe—what fears do they have—what misconceptions of God do they have? And perhaps the bigger question, knowing that the masses have such misconceptions, why has the religious industry allowed such misconceptions to continue, and beyond that, encouraged them?

Religious trade unions have perpetrated this illusion of a vindictive God because earthly religious organizations have replaced God, rather than representing him. In effect, members of religious trade unions are manipulated into paying their dues (with



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their time and treasures) to religious professionals, dues-paying which in turn meets the psychological needs of human religious gods and their desire for appeasement. Pop theology has encouraged the concept of an angry God because such a concept serves the purposes of big-business religion.

Religion has effectively divided in order to conquer and control humanity. The attempt, on the part of performance-based religion, to separate the Father's punitive vengeance from the Son's compassionate intercession is an absolute denial of the biblically taught, triune nature of the Godhead.

Since religious legalism is fond of the law-and-order paradigm, let us ask about the motive and perpetrator for this enormous misunderstanding of the one true God. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, as we attempt to find the truth and identify the perpetrator, may I suggest close scrutiny of the religious industry?

An Embrace of Love

What really happened at the Cross of Christ is an embrace offered, at great cost, by the triune God of the Bible. The one God, in the person of Jesus, embraced us. God is personal, he isn't a theory, and his totality is not perfectly summarized by the grim and stark surroundings of a heavenly courtroom. God is for us, he isn't "out to get us."

While there may be legal illustrations that help explain the Cross of Christ, the primary motive and meaning of the Cross is God's reuniting, God's reconciliation and recommitting with humanity. The Cross of Christ is an embrace, not a satisfaction of a God of vengeful wrath. *The Cross of Christ is God's embrace of humanity*, the divine intersection of time and eternity, the nexus of his love—love come down from heaven in the person of Jesus.

What was the motive of the Cross of Christ? The motive was love—an inspiring act of love like no other. Payback, revenge and getting satisfaction

had nothing to do with it. The God of authentic, grace-based, Christ-centered Christianity is a God who is a fellow sufferer. The one God of the Bible is not some distant, detached divine potentate who demands that his honor be restored, and that his wrath be satisfied. In Jesus, God became a full participant in humanity. He did not come to have his honor vindicated. He did not come to satisfy his thirst for justice. He came because he loved us.

The one true God of the Bible is a God who seeks our love, not his satisfaction. He did not come to us, in the person of Jesus, in order to convince us that his holiness and justice needed to be appeased. He did not come to us with theological arguments and logical propositions that would help us to understand why he needed to be pacified and soothed.

The God of the Bible is a God of love, who, while he can be accurately explained and comprehended in theological propositions, is not confined to musty theology books in a far corner of a seminary library. Our God is the God of a loving embrace, not a stern, harsh executioner whose wrath can only be satisfied through the death of his own Son. He comes to us, in person, because of his love.

The idea of a God who must be appeased owes its existence and continuing popularity to primitive paganism more than it does to the New Testament. The gods who would eventually send rain only after a still-beating heart was ripped out of a virgin are far closer, in motivation, to a God who must be satisfied, than the God of love of your Bible. The Cross of Christ was an act of God's love, a love that flowed out of the fullness of his grace.

A Priceless Love

The Cross is evidence of the astounding, unsurpassable love of God. No greater love can be imagined, experienced or known than the Cross of Christ.

God is not interested in getting sat-

isfaction or revenge.

The Cross of Christ is most of all about God's amazing grace. God is a God of judgment and justice, but divine justice is not at war with divine grace. God's justice is what God deems to be righteous and appropriate. God's justice is accomplished out of and because of his love. The wrath God poured out on the Cross was not the Father's wrath being poured out on his Son. The wrath poured out on the Cross was more about God's unwillingness to accept our bad decisions, because the consequences of our wrong-headed human choices are in opposition to God's own character.

God's wrath (spoken of in the Bible) is all about his response to sin and evil. God is decidedly unhappy with sin. God does not co-exist with evil.

But, to resort to the oft-used cliché, let's make sure we "separate the sin from the sinner." God loves the whole world (John 3:16)—which includes people who don't go to your church, or any church for that matter. However, God hates and detests evil because of the misery and pain that it invariably brings.

The new covenant, given to us through the blood of Christ, is all about God's love for the world. Our guilt and shame are atoned for by an act of love like no other. We are reconciled to God because of his love. God doesn't need to be satisfied, like some bloodthirsty monster, because his laws have been violated. *Love is the means, motive and method of Jesus' death on the Cross.*

The Cross of Christ is all about God's personal and intimate embrace of you and me, in spite of our past, in spite of what we have done. The Cross of Christ is about God's love, not our performance. The Cross of Christ is about the incredible expense that God went to in order to love us, not about the lengths to which he went to restore his honor and receive divine satisfaction. □

Adapted—originally printed in the March/April 2009 issue of Plain Truth.