

The Atonement of Jesus Christ

Written by Eric Shuster
 Founder and Executive Director of the Foundation for Christian Studies



The great sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ is often simply referred to as “the crucifixion.” True Christian doctrine refers to the suffering of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, combined with his crucifixion on Calvary, as the Atonement. Jesus offered himself up as a sacrifice for our sins. He paid for our sins and overcame death through his incomprehensible suffering—the suffering of God in human flesh. The Atonement “...is the most important event that has ever occurred in the history of mankind” (Gospel Principles, 71).

The Atonement as the Mission of Jesus Christ

The Atonement was the primary reason Jesus came to the earth. Without the Atonement of Christ we could not have a hope of salvation and would be eternally burdened with physical death (separation of the body and spirit) and spiritual death (separation from God), both brought about by the fall of Adam.

The Atonement is something we could not do for ourselves because of the weaknesses brought on by sin and mortality. As the only begotten son of God and the only sinless person to ever live on the earth, only Jesus Christ could perform the great Atonement. Jesus told his disciples: “I lay down my life, that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (John 10:17–18). It is difficult to fathom the love

that our Heavenly Father has for all of us in giving up his only begotten son (John 3:16), and the love of Jesus in willingly suffering on our behalf.

The Atonement Brings Forgiveness & Empowerment

The Atonement brings forgiveness into our lives and gives strength to those who believe in its enabling powers. David A. Bednar of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles spoke of the enabling power of the Atonement: “...the enabling and strengthening aspect of the Atonement helps us to see and to do and to become good in ways that we could never recognize or accomplish with our limited mortal capacity” (David A. Bednar, “In the Strength of the Lord,” Ensign, Nov 2004, 76). The principle of the enabling power of the Atonement is a fresh one in Christianity. Most Christians are familiar with the “forgiving power of the Atonement,” but spend little time in pondering the enabling power—something all of us will benefit from should we choose to mediate on this powerful doctrinal principle.

Understanding the Events of the Atonement

Christ as the perfect sacrifice died for the sins of the world so that all mankind may be saved. It is important that all Christians recognize all of the events of the Atonement in order to clearly understand the boundless nature of the most complete act of love that will ever be exercised for all eternity. By understanding the events of the Garden of Gethsemane and at Calvary one can better comprehend the infinite nature of the Atonement. Christ’s agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, the beatings and humiliations that followed, and finally the Crucifixion, are horrors at the human level. There are no words adequate to describe these horrors at the level of God in the form of a man.

Crucifixion was Historically Common

We can read biblical accounts of crucifixion dating back to the time of the Egyptians (Genesis 40:19) and the time of Esther. Historical records document that crucifixion was practiced among the Assyrians, Scythians, Indians, Germans, Greeks and Romans. Alexander the Great was said to have had two thousand Tyrians crucified as a consequence of their resistance following the conquest of Tyre. The physical pain of being crucified is thought to have been horrific, where often the crucified suffer death by suffocation.

While thousands have experienced the brutality of physical crucifixion, only one man has ever taken upon himself the sins of the world as Jesus Christ did in the Garden of Gethsemane. The agony of this ultimate act of selfless love is described in Luke 22:42-44, where Christ's sweat is described "...as great drops of blood." The anguish of Christ before taking upon him the sins of the world, and the resultant pain and suffering, are clearly described in scripture.

Jesus' Crucifixion Sealed the Atonement

The Atonement wasn't complete until the Crucifixion, where Christ carried the sins of the world to the cross into the final sacrifice. The Crucifixion is the capstone of the Atonement, not in and of itself the Atonement. The sacrifice of the Father in giving up his only begotten son, the unspotted lamb, was not complete until Jesus Christ suffered death on the cross at Calvary.

The Events of the Infinite Atonement are often misunderstood

It is common for Christians to place undue focus on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and not enough on His suffering in the garden of Gethsemane. While no one can overestimate the suffering of Jesus Christ, an innocent man, at the hands of the Romans in being beaten and crucified, all Christians must realize that thousands of individuals have suffered crucifixion throughout history.

This historical fact does not minimize the suffering of Christ, but it does bring attention to the fact that only one man has ever, and ever will, take upon him the sins of the world and suffer to the point of his sweat becomes as drops of blood. It therefore stands to reason that the greatest suffering endured by Christ was in the garden of Gethsemane, followed by further unfathomable suffering in being beaten and crucified.

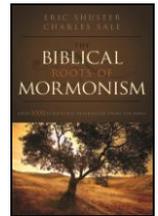
Once these truths of the infinite Atonement of Christ are understood the Christian will be fully awakened to a deeper spiritual understanding of the endless sacrifice of Jesus Christ and Heavenly Father. We can then take completely into our hearts the Atonement of our Savior and recognize at a personal level the love He has for us.

Conclusion

We are able to enjoy the eternal benefits that result from the Atonement through our faith in Jesus Christ. This faith leads to repentance, baptism, confirmation, and keeping the Lord's commandments. In doing so we can become true Disciples of Jesus Christ, receive power to endure, be cleansed from our sins, and return to live with our Heavenly Father to enjoy eternal life.

About The Sword Series™

The Sword Series™ is a collection of Christian theological essays that are freely distributed for the education and enjoyment of all. These essays later inspired the book *The Biblical Roots of Mormonism* by Eric Shuster (2010). The views expressed in the Sword Series™ are those of Eric Shuster based upon his study and understanding of the scriptures under the influence of the Holy Ghost. All formatted content in this paper is the property of Eric Shuster and may be distributed freely. Any modification of the content of this paper without the express written consent of Eric Shuster is prohibited. Copyright 2008 ©



About the Foundation for Christian Studies

The Foundation for Christian Studies is a non-profit organization dedicated to the study, teaching, and practice of Christianity with an emphasis on the doctrines and principles of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism).