

BIBLICAL SOTERIOLOGY: An Overview and Defense of the Reformed Doctrines of Salvation

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Limited Atonement, part 4

ARGUMENTS SUPPORTING THE DOCTRINE OF LIMITED ATONEMENT

II. INTENDED RESULTS OF THE ATONEMENT (continued)

- C. Covenant Renewal — Grace, mercy, forgiveness, justification, and all other benefits of the atonement are blessings of God’s covenant with his people. The atonement was the basis for a new covenant under Christ’s representation, as the fulfillment and renewal of the old covenant administered under Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David.**

“Behold, days are coming,’ declares the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,’ declares the Lord. ‘But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ declares the Lord, ‘I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,’ declares the Lord, ‘for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more’” (Jer. 31:31-34).

Through Jeremiah, God promised that he would make a new covenant with Israel. In Hebrew, the word for “new” is *chadash*, which also means “renewed.” In fact, the “new” covenant that God promised here contained no “new” elements. Rather, it simply repeated elements which already existed in the covenant God had made with the fathers of the houses of Israel and Judah. Specifically, the elements of the “new” covenant would be:

- 1) God would put his law within the people of the houses of Judah and Israel, he would write it on their hearts.
- 2) God would be their God and they would be his people.
- 3) The people would all know God.
- 4) God would graciously and mercifully forgive their sin.

It is sometimes argued that the real “new” (as opposed to “renewed”) element here was that the new covenant could not be broken. However, the text does not say this at all. Rather, it emphasizes the fact that Judah and Israel had broken God’s covenant, creating the need for the covenant to be renewed. Moreover, the “new” covenant can still be broken (Heb. 10:26-31).

Jeremiah’s prophecy was intended to persuade those left in Judah, and especially Jerusalem, not to follow in the covenant-breaking ways of Israel and those of Judah who had been taken into exile (see for example Jer. 7:1-15). It was also intended to offer hope of the restoration of the kingdom after the exile (see for example Jer. 29:1-15; 30:1-3). This restoration was to occur at the end of the seventy years of exile (Jer. 29:1), and it was during this time of restoration (Jer. 31:1) that the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:31-34 was to be fulfilled.

This was not a new promise or prophecy. Rather, Jeremiah’s promise of covenant renewal and restoration to the land drew heavily upon Moses’ earlier prophecy that God would renew his covenant with his people after he had exiled them from the land:

“So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind in all nations where the Lord your God has banished you, and you return to the Lord your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, then the Lord your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. And the Lord your God will

bring you into the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it; and He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers. Moreover the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, in order that you may live. And the Lord your God will inflict all these curses on your enemies and on those who hate you, who persecuted you. And you shall again obey the Lord, and observe all His commandments which I command you today. Then the Lord your God will prosper you abundantly in all the work of your hand, in the offspring of your body and in the offspring of your cattle and in the produce of your ground, for the Lord will again rejoice over you for good, just as He rejoiced over your fathers; if you obey the Lord your God to keep His commandments and His statutes which are written in this book of the law, if you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and soul” (Deut. 30:1-10).

Covenant renewal and restoration to the land after exile had always been important themes in Israel’s life and relationship to God, themes which Jeremiah repeated.

The things Jeremiah said would be true of the “new” covenant were all true during the “old” covenant era:

- 1) The people had God’s law in their hearts (Deut. 6:6; 30:6; Ps. 40:8; 119:34).
- 2) God was their God and they were his people (Exod. 6:7; 7:16; 9:1,13; 10:3; Lev. 26:12-13; Deut. 7:6) — even when they had broken the covenant (Deut. 9:1-29; Hos. 4:12).
- 3) People knew the Lord (Judg. 2:10; Jer. 22:15-16; 24:5-7; Hos. 6:1-3). In fact, this promise repeated that of Jeremiah 24:5-7 which stated that those Judahites who were in exile in Jeremiah’s time were the ones whom God would cause to know him. This was not a factual knowledge, but rather righteous behavior (Jer. 22:15-16).

- 4) God graciously and mercifully forgave his people's sin (see for example Exod. 34:7; Lev. 4:20,26,31,35; 5:10,13,16,18; 6:7; 19:22; Num. 14:19; 15:25-28; 30:5,8,12; Deut. 21:8; 1 Kgs. 8:28-53).

Commonly, it is argued that while these things may have been true of the people of God under the "old" covenant, they were not true universally of all the people of God. With this it is asserted that in the "new" covenant these things are true of all the people of God. This conclusion is drawn from the aforementioned mistaken assumption that the new covenant cannot be broken, and from the language of Jeremiah 31:34 which seems to say that everyone in the "new" covenant will be forgiven.

In fact, in context Jeremiah 31:34 does not speak of what will happen to everyone who is in covenant with God, however much these verses might appear to say exactly that when removed from their context. Rather, they speak of the blessings that will come to those who keep covenant by obeying God. In the immediately preceding verses, which speak of the same restoration of the kingdom and covenant renewal (Jer. 31:27-30), it is clear that at least some will not receive these blessings, but "will die" for their "own iniquity" (Jer. 31:30).

The hyperbolic language of Jeremiah 31:34 is intended to emphasize how wonderful and extensive the restoration will be, but not under any and all circumstances. Instead, it speaks of the blessings that will come if the people obey God and keep covenant. As a matter of history, the people began to return to the land in 538 B.C., and thus began the restoration. Unfortunately, they did not keep covenant, and the restoration did not ultimately succeed at that time. The blessings promised here were not realized by many. The restoration remained unaccomplished until Christ's first advent when Christ began to accomplish the restoration of the kingdom.

"The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David . . . and to Jesse was born David the king . . . and to Jacob was born Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ. . . . Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows. When His mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit. And Joseph her husband, being a righteous man, and not wanting to disgrace her, desired to put her away secretly. But when he had considered

this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife; for that which has been conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bear a Son; and you shall call His name Jesus, for it is He who will save His people from their sins.’ . . . And Joseph arose from his sleep, and did as the angel of the Lord commanded him, and took her as his wife, and kept her a virgin until she gave birth to a Son; and he called His name Jesus” (Matt. 1:1,6,16,18-21,24-25).

In this long introduction to Matthew’s gospel, Matthew established that Jesus was indeed the son of King David, having a legitimate claim to David’s throne. He did this by:

- 1) stating Jesus’ descent from David in the title of the gospel;
- 2) specifically mentioning that David was king;
- 3) demonstrating that Joseph was a legitimate heir of David;
- 4) noting that the angel addressed Joseph as “son of David”;
- 5) and demonstrating Joseph’s adoption of Jesus.

By virtue of the fact that Jesus was a legitimate heir of David (compare 2 Tim. 2:8; Rev. 22:16), he was also heir to all the promises of the Davidic covenant. This includes not only the blessings that were promised to the entire nation (2 Sam. 7:8,10-11; Pss. 89; 132), but also the more restricted blessing of David’s throne and kingdom (2 Sam. 7:8-16; Pss. 89; 132).

Throughout his gospel Matthew reinforced that Jesus was the heir to this covenant by recording the use of “Son of David” as a messianic title in reference to Christ (Matt. 9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31), especially in the Triumphal Entry when Jesus was heralded as king by the people at large (21:9,15). As heir to the Davidic covenant, Jesus continued and renewed the Davidic covenant by meeting its requirements (obedience in his death) and receiving its blessings (Acts 13:34; Rev. 3:7).

Under the Davidic covenant, the restoration of the kingdom that Israel came to expect was to be a reconstitution of the Davidic kingdom in particular, with a Davidic heir as king. In fact, it was the Davidic king

who was to bring to Israel the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant blessings (Luke 1:68-75).

“Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:17-19).

Jesus came to fulfill the Law, which contains the stipulations or rules of the covenant as administered under Moses. Further, he declared that status in the kingdom would be influenced by one’s keeping and teaching these Mosaic covenant stipulations. In short, by his own words Christ did not come to abolish but to fulfill — he came in accordance with the Mosaic covenant, and he came to meet the requirements of the Mosaic covenant. According to the terms of the Mosaic covenant, keeping the terms of the covenant (obeying the Law) entitled one to receive the blessings of the covenant (see for example Lev. 26:3-13; Deut. 30:15-20), including the restoration of the kingdom (Deut. 30:1-10; Acts 1:6-7) and the inheritance of the Abrahamic covenant blessings (Deut. 30:20).

“And while they were eating, Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is My body.’ And He took a cup and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is to be shed on behalf of many for forgiveness of sins’” (Matt. 26:26-28; compare Mark 14:22-24).

Jesus declared that his blood was the blood of the covenant. Matthew and Mark did not record that his blood was the blood of the “new” covenant, though Luke and Paul did. The significance of this is that Matthew’s and Mark’s accounts do not distinguish the “new” covenant from the “old,” speaking instead of “the” covenant. This indicates that there is only one covenant, that Jesus’ blood was shed in accordance with the covenant, and that his blood secured the covenant blessing of forgiveness.

“And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood’” (Luke 22:20; compare 1 Cor. 11:25).

Unlike Matthew and Mark, Luke recorded that Jesus’ equated his blood with the covenant. Jesus did not mean that his blood was the actual covenant, but he spoke metaphorically. The significance of the phrase “new covenant” is that it recalls Jeremiah 31:31, indicating that Jesus’ death was pivotal to the restoration of the kingdom after the long exile. This comes out very clearly in Jesus’ later words during that same meal:

“Just as My Father has granted Me a kingdom, I grant you that you may eat and drink at My table in My kingdom” (Luke 22:29-30).

Jesus is the king of the restored kingdom, and his death secured the restoration of the kingdom and its blessings.

“Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned — for until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:12-19).

While Paul does not use the word “covenant” in this passage, he clearly indicates that Jesus succeeded where Adam failed, and that Jesus’

success counteracted Adam's failure. Those who were condemned because of Adam's sin were forgiven because of Jesus' obedience. According to Hosea 6:7, Adam's transgression constituted covenant breaking: "like Adam they have transgressed the covenant."¹ Note that this verse also equates the covenant as it existed in the days of Hosea (after Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David) with the covenant as it existed with Adam. From Romans and Hosea, it seems most natural to understand that one covenant existed in various administrations, and that Christ repaired the damage Adam did by renewing the covenant Adam broke.

From the context immediately preceding Romans 5:12-19 it is clear that Jesus' act of obedience which renewed covenant was his death:

"For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation" (Rom. 5:6-11).

"And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the nations shall be blessed in you'" (Gal. 3:8).

¹Some translators argue that the Hebrew word *adam* should be translated "mankind" or "men" in this verse (e.g. NRSV), but this translation makes little sense in the context of Hosea 6. If "mankind" is correct, then the verse compares a subset of humanity to the whole of humanity, much like saying "German shepherds are like dogs." While it may be argued that this indicates the corruption of all mankind, it still makes for a rather awkward comparison, as if God expected men to behave as something other than men, and as if "men" were some sort of derogatory term.

Here Paul paraphrased Genesis 22:18, in which God swore to Abraham that he would bless all the nations of the earth in Abraham. Paul indicated that this promise included justification, making justification a covenant blessing.

“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us — for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’ — in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. Brethren, I speak in terms of human relations: even though it is only a man's covenant, yet when it has been ratified, no one sets it aside or adds conditions to it. Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as referring to many, but rather to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ. What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise” (Gal. 3:13-17).

The “blessing of Abraham” here is justification (Gal. 3:8,11). Because justification is a covenant blessing and is obtained only in Christ by faith, the covenant administered under Abraham was the same covenant administered under Christ. Paul affirms this when he says that the covenant promises made to Abraham in Genesis 22:16-18 were also made to Christ. The promises made in the covenant with Abraham were at the same time made to Christ — God did not make identical promises to Christ, but included Christ as a party to the Abrahamic covenant. Further, because Christ’s death (becoming a curse by hanging on a tree) was required for the justification of believers, and justification was a blessing of the Abrahamic covenant, Christ’s death was implicitly included in the Abrahamic covenant as the means of obtaining the blessings.

“For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.” (Gal. 3:26-29).

Being in Christ makes believers heirs to the promises of the Abrahamic covenant, such as justification (Gal. 3:8). The covenant under Christ fulfills the promises of the earlier covenant administration under Abraham.

“For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created by Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything. For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fulness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven” (Col. 1:16-20).

While this passage does not mention “covenant,” it is important because of the things Christ’s death is said to accomplish. Specifically, Christ’s death reconciles “all things” to God, which in this context seems to indicate the entire creation. This parallels the covenant with Noah in that the Noahic covenant was made with and promised blessings to not only man, but also the animals (Gen. 9:10-17). Paul’s statement here demonstrates that Christ’s death secured the blessings of that covenant, but in even greater measure than was previously expected (reconciliation to God as opposed to simple protection from physical, catastrophic, global death) (compare Rom. 8:19-21).

“For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, ‘I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply you.’ And thus, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise. For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute. In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 6:13-20).

God made a promise to Abraham (blessing and multiplication), and that promise remained a promise to the author and his audience (“we may have strong encouragement”) who were heirs of Abraham. Moreover, Jesus is the high priest of the heirs of the Abrahamic promises (Heb. 6:17-20), according to the order of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:6,9-10; 6:20ff.) who was high priest to God during the Abrahamic

administration of the covenant (Heb. 7:4). Jesus' high priesthood is an intercessory role (Heb. 7:25) which secures salvation as he enters the heavenly tabernacle (Heb. 5:9-10; 6:19-20; 8:2; 9:11) with the sacrificial blood of his own death (Heb. 9:12). Thus, Jesus' high priesthood is part and parcel with his work of atonement, and his atonement and high priesthood fulfill the Abrahamic covenant, securing its blessings for Christians.

“But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. For finding fault with them, He says, ‘Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in My covenant, and I did not care for them, says the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen, and everyone his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.’ When He said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear” (Heb. 8:6-13).

This passage is probably at the root of the misinterpretations of Jeremiah 31:31-34 mentioned previously. Here, the author quotes these verses from Jeremiah, and adds the commentary that:

- 1) Christ mediates a better covenant than the one that existed when Jeremiah was ministering;
- 2) Christ's covenant is enacted on better promises;
- 3) the first covenant was not faultless; and
- 4) the first covenant was obsolete, growing old, and ready to disappear.

The author of Hebrews was teaching that the Mosaic administration of the covenant was not sufficient to accomplish the incredible promises the prophets had made about the future restoration of the kingdom. Instead, a better administration of the covenant was required in which the shadows provided in the Mosaic administration would be fulfilled with heavenly realities. Properly understood, this commentary helps to understanding the argument in this portion of Hebrews.

- 1) Christ's covenant is better than the Mosaic covenant because his covenant provides a better priest (Heb. 7:11,23-28; 8:5-6), his sacrifice actually saves (Heb. 7:11,18-19,25), and Jesus himself is the guarantee of the covenant (Heb. 7:22). Christ's covenant exceeds the prior covenant by meeting the first covenant's requirements in better ways — it affirms, incorporates and surpasses the first covenant.

In speaking this way, the author of Hebrews did not deny the continuity of the covenants — after all, he said that Jesus mediates the Abrahamic covenant (6:13-20) — but rather adopted the Bible's tendency to speak of multiple, distinct covenants so as to emphasize the discontinuities of the different administrations.

- 2) The better promises are not better blessings. They are the promises installing Christ as the better mediator (Heb. 7:21-22).
- 3) The fault in the first covenant was not with the covenant itself, but with "them" (Heb. 8:8). In Greek "them" is masculine, while "ministry," "covenant," and "promises" are all feminine, making it very unlikely that "them" refers to these collectively. It seems much more reasonable to conclude that "them" refers to the masculine "houses" of Israel and Judah and/or to the people in them generically. As the quote from Jeremiah goes on to say, these people/houses broke God's covenant — clearly a matter of fault. Moreover, to say that God found fault with the covenant he instituted is to say that God found fault with his own work, making the fault God's own — an impossibility.

- 4) The first covenant was obsolete, growing old, and ready to disappear when Jeremiah spoke his prophecy hundreds of years before Christ (before the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C.). These descriptions did not make the first covenant irrelevant or worthless, or God would not have continued to use it to mediate his relationship with his people for so many centuries. Rather, these terms pointed to the superiority of the greater covenant that was to be expected in the future, or rather to the greater administration, fulfillment and renewing of the first covenant. Even under the old covenant, the hope was that the restoration of the kingdom would exceed the glory of the first kingdom and that it would continue in a blessed state forever (Isa. 51:22; 62:8; Ezek. 36:12; Joel 2:19; Mic. 4:3; Nah. 1:15; Zeph. 3:11).

From the time of Jeremiah's prophecy (and even before, with other prophecies of kingdom restoration), God offered to restore the kingdom from exile. Restoration, however, always depended upon the covenant obedience of the people. If the people obeyed God's covenant, he would bless them by restoring the kingdom. For this reason, the Mosaic administration was "obsolete," "growing old," and "ready to disappear." The scene was ripe for restoration, awaiting only the obedience of God's people.

It is important to note that in Hebrews "first covenant" continually refers to the Mosaic administration, while "new covenant" and "second" refer to the covenant which Jesus mediates — namely the Abrahamic covenant (Heb. 6:13-20), which existed prior to the Mosaic covenant. It is "new" and "second" because Jesus' *administration* of the covenant follows and surpasses Moses' *administration*, not because it is a subsequent covenant.

In all other respects, the author of Hebrews simply quoted Jeremiah 31:31-34 and applied it as he understood it (see the foregoing explanation of Jeremiah 31:31-34). He did not quote it to prove that the

“new covenant” was a distinct covenant from the “first” covenant, or to prove that the “new covenant” could not be broken. Rather, he quoted this text because he was teaching about Christ (Heb. 5:11), and this was a terrific text for demonstrating the character of the restored kingdom that Christ inaugurated. Also, the prophecy issued by Jeremiah should have alerted the Jews to the fact that a new covenant mediator and administration would be necessary in order to bring about the prophecy’s fulfillment — the ultimate focus was on the mediator himself:

“Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man” (Heb. 8:1).