

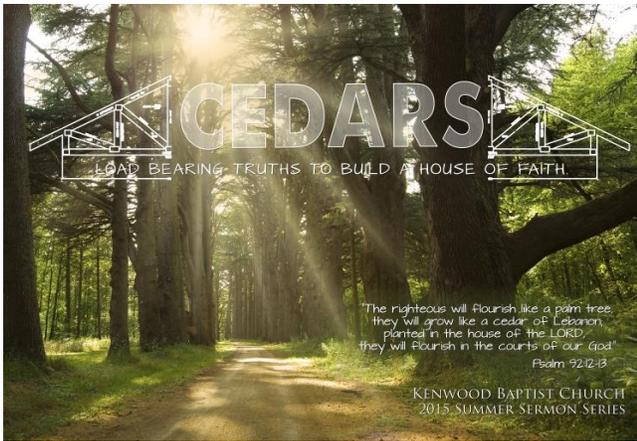
***Cedars: Load-Bearing Truths to Build a House of Faith***  
***“What is the Atonement?”***

1 John 4:9-10

Cedars Sermon Series  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Pastor David Palmer  
July 12, 2015

**TEXT:** 1 John 4:9-10

We continue this morning in our summer series on the *Cedars of Lebanon: Load-Bearing Truths to Build a House of Faith*. The Scripture reading is very short and yet very significant in the full



council of Scripture. We have been journeying this summer through key doctrines of Christian faith. We started with “What is the Bible?” It is the Word of God, and the implied truth there is that we go to God's Word to find the truth. We then asked: “Who is God? Who is the God Who reveals Himself to us in Scripture?” He is unique and matchless in His character. We asked: “Who is humanity?” We are created in God's likeness as image-bearers

to reflect Him as we behold His glory. We are uniquely fashioned in His image and likeness. We asked next: “What is sin?” What is wrong with humanity? Only Christian faith has an explanation for the paradox of human existence. We have both great beauty and great degradation. We are unique in what God has created us to be able to do, see, respond to, and yet we are marred by sin, and the image of God is distorted in us. We asked last Sunday: “Who is Jesus Christ?” In other words, can anyone help us? We answered that Jesus is the Redeemer, the Son of God sent into the world.

This morning, we come to very holy ground at the base of the cross to ask ourselves about the mission of Christ. We ask: “What is the atonement?” What is the work of Christ, that work of Christ that is signaled and identified by the cross of Christ? The question implicit within the atonement of Christ is: What repairs the world's wrongs? We all recognize, whether you get your news from the newspaper, magazine, or your daily blog reader, that something is terribly wrong with the world. Even if you have made a fast from taking in the news, and your experience in this world is only your social interactions with other people, you will soon discover that something is terribly wrong with the world. Even if you say, “I've had it with human society. I'm moving out into the wilderness and building a log cabin. I'll chop my own

wood, search for my own coal, and live alone,” soon, in the silence of that cabin, you would discover within yourself that something is terribly wrong with the world. Whenever you reach this conclusion, the Scripture, and uniquely Christian faith, has the answer to what is wrong with this world. Is there a solution to be found? The Bible's answer is that the solution to what is terribly wrong with the world is the atonement of Jesus Christ, that it is through the cross of Christ that the love of God is supremely manifested and that the solution for the world is to be found. This towering truth lies within these short verses. 1 John 4:9 says:

*“This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world that we might live through Him.”*

God's love is manifested, it is not held back in reserve. It is displayed by a sending forth, issuing from the counsel and will and love of God the Father, that His love is manifested by the commissioning and the sending of His one and only Son into the world. In this verse, we get a clue as to His mission, that the sending of the Son results in life: that we might live through Him. Implied within that is that we are dead without Him. This becomes very clear in the next verse. In 1 John 4:10, John tells us very explicitly:

*“This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”*

If you want to know what love is, this is it. It is not that we have loved God. Instead, it is that God has loved us, that He has taken the initiative, that He has loved us, and that He has sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. What does it mean that Christ is an atoning sacrifice? When we look at other versions or translations of the Bible, we discover that this last phrase of 1 John 4:10, though it is a single word in the original text, it is translated in a number of different ways and suggests the significance and complexity of the idea here before us. For example, in the ESV version, 1 John 4:10 says:

*“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”*

Many of you say that *propitiation* is not a word you use often. I hope that when you leave this morning, you will say, “I love that word.” He is the propitiation for our sins; He is the one who absorbs and diverts the wrath of God against us by calling it down upon Himself, as we'll see. Other translations, such as the RSV, render this last phrase:

*“ . . . sent His Son to be the expiation for our sins.”*

You might ask yourself, “What is the difference between propitiation and expiation? Neither of those words means anything to me.” Well, they should, and they must. *Propitiation* is to absorb the wrath of God; *propitiation* is to be an offering by which the wrath of God is poured out upon a substitute. *Expiation* means an offering is given where sin is covered over and taken away or cleansed. Other translations, like the New International Reader's Version, make this a

little simpler. For those of us who are weak in Latin, they say:

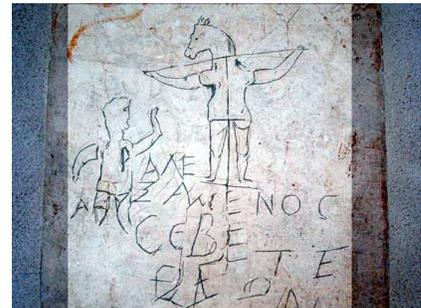
*“What is love? It is not that we loved God. It is that He loved us and sent His Son to give His life to pay for our sins.”*

He paid the bill; He paid the ransom. While that is comprehensible and easy to grasp, the only difficulty with that translation is that it renders the work of Christ in an economic metaphor, that He paid the price; He paid the debt; He paid the bill. While that is true, that actually isn't the imagery that John is using. John is using the imagery of a sacrifice. The New Living Translation says:

*“ . . . sent His Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.”*

The Bible says that the atonement of Christ is the sending forth of the Son that we might live through Him because we face danger without this sacrifice, and that this sacrifice is effective at producing reconciliation. To make atonement is to restore offended parties, parties who have been separated from one another.

The atonement of Christ has received various objections throughout history. This central symbol of Christian faith, the cross, has been scorned, mocked, rejected, repudiated, and ignored. These objections have been seen throughout the centuries. An early example that the cross of Christ, the atonement, can be mocked is in this early piece of graffiti. People who make graffiti think it looks really cool, but graffiti is a social signal, and so is this piece of graffiti. It is one of the earliest images that we have of Christian faith. It is from a second century piece of graffiti; the artist did not put his name on it. It is a mocking picture found near the Palatine Hill in Rome. The Greek inscription near the bottom says: “This



is Alexamenos worshiping his God. Look at his God. Isn't that silly? Isn't that ridiculous?” Alexamenos has his hand up in worship and praise, and who is he worshiping? He is worshiping a man impaled on a cross, an emblem of shame, and the man on the cross in this piece of graffiti has the head of an ass. Ridiculous! Who would believe such a thing? The Romans often mocked Jews and said they worshiped a donkey in the middle of the temple, and this was transferred over to Christians. The center of Christian faith, according to this young graffiti artist, is an absolute joke, that anyone would worship someone crucified. Christianity can be mocked; the atoning work of Christ can be mocked; it can be scorned.

On an opposite end of the social spectrum, mocking can come from a sophisticated Oxford professor, like Sir Alfred Ayer who wrote an article recently stating that Christianity was the worst kind of religion. Why? He wrote:

*“Because it rests on the allied doctrines of original sin and vicarious atonement, which*

are intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous.”

It is a very sophisticated way of mocking the atoning work of Christ.

The atonement of Christ is explicitly denied by some religions. The Quran states explicitly in five different passages:

“No soul can bear another's burden.”

The Quran goes on to deny the need for the atoning work of Christ and to deny the fact. The Quran states:

“The Jews uttered a monstrous falsehood when they declared we have put to death the Messiah Jesus the son of Mary, the apostle of Allah, for they did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did.”

Muslims believe that Jesus was substituted at the last moment by someone who looked like Him, and the atoning work of Christ is explicitly denied. Sometimes Christians deny the atonement of Christ and the centrality of the cross by sentimentalizing the love of God and saying platitudes like: “Oh, we are all God's children. God just loves everyone,” missing the core reality of the testimony of Scripture, that the love of God is supremely manifested in the self-giving dying of the Son.

Many modern people in our city and in cities around the world simply ignore the cross of Christ. They imagine that we can be good without it. They imagine that we can offer forgiveness and what's the big deal? A young woman recently said, “No one's death is necessary for us to forgive each other. Why does God make such a fuss about forgiving us and declare it impossible without His Son's sacrifice for sin? This just sounds like a primitive superstition and modern people have long since discarded it.” Against these mocking, scorning, denying, reinterpreting, or ignoring gestures, the scriptural testimony is that the atoning work of Christ is absolutely central. As the great medieval theologian Anselm said:

“If anybody imagines that God can simply forgive us we have not yet considered the seriousness of sin or the majesty of God.”

*“This is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”* Atonement means that Jesus is the sin-bearer. Atonement means that Jesus' death on the cross is a substitute for sinners like you and like me. Atonement means that Jesus carries our sin, that He absorbs the wrath of God on the cross. As Hebrews 9:26 says:

*“But He has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself.”*

Hebrews 9:27-28 says:

*“Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many.”*

The sacrifice of Christ takes away the wrath of God. This is *propitiation*: † His sacrifice covers our sin. *Expiation*: He is the atoning sacrifice for us. In Isaiah 53:12, the Lord says of the Servant:

*“Therefore I will give Him a portion among the great, and He will divide the spoils with the strong, because He poured out His life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”*

1 Peter 2:24 quotes this text:

*“He himself bore our sins’ in His body on the cross. . .”*

He carried our sins in His body on the cross. In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul says:

*“God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

Our text last Sunday ended in Colossians 1:19-20, that said that God was pleased to reconcile us to Himself. How did He do that? He did that by making peace through Christ’s blood on the cross. The next verse, Colossians 1:21, says that once we were alienated, separated from God, removed from His favor, removed from relationship with Him and that blessing, and we were even called His enemies. We were enemies to God because of our sinfulness, but now He has reconciled us. He has made us to be one. He is reunited us. How does God accomplish this great reconciliation? It is not through a peace treaty; it is not through overlooking sin. Peace between God and man is made by Christ's physical body in His dying, that through His death He presents us holy in God's sight. This is the reason that Christ is worshiped for all eternity. The atoning work of Christ is the central theme of everlasting praise in Revelation 5:9:

*“You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because You were slain, and with Your blood You purchased for God members of every tribe and language and people and nation.”*

Why is the atonement necessary? Why is the sacrifice of Christ necessary? Why is blood atonement required for salvation? This is what we must explore.

Leviticus 17:11 says:

*“For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.”*

God has given to His people from of old a system of sacrifice to persuade His people that the wages of sin is in fact death, that the wrath of God against sin is real, and that the provision that God makes for atonement is that the wrath of God is poured out on His substitutionary offering, and that offering is slain, and that blood is applied on the altar. God's people were

given this teaching and practiced this for centuries leading up to the great final sacrifice of Jesus Himself. The climax of Israel's liturgical year is the Day of Atonement, and it is on the Day of Atonement that the sin of the nation is addressed annually, prefiguring the work of Christ on the cross. In the Greek translation of Leviticus, the Day of Atonement is described with the same terminology that John uses in 1 John 4:10. John would have us see Jesus as the "Day of Atonement." He is both the offering and the place where God's mercy is carried out and offered to sinful humanity.

The Day of Atonement is treated with great depth in Leviticus 16. The ceremony is described in which the high priest offers an offering for the sin of the nation. At the climax of the ceremony, two goats are selected, and each of these goats gives us a picture of the reality of how God deals with sin and reconciles us to Himself. One of the goats is called the scapegoat, and the sin of the nation is symbolically laid upon the scapegoat. The goat is banished into the wilderness as God removes the sin from His people. The other goat is offered as an offering, as Aaron, the great high priest who carries the sin of the nation, slaughters this animal, and approaches God's throne of glory. He waves incense into the Holy of Holies so thick that he cannot see. He comes to the throne of God, unto the mercy seat, which is called the same term that John uses for Jesus in 1 John 4:10: He is our mercy seat; He is our offering; He is the One who will provide blood atonement with His own shed blood. Aaron comes as high priest into the Holy of Holies with this offering and applies the blood to purify, cleanse, and cover our sins, and the wrath of God against sin is satisfied for yet another year. God gave His people this instruction, and they held this system in trust for the great day when the ultimate sacrifice would appear, Jesus the Son of God. Jesus comes, and He offers himself willingly, freely, by the manifest love of God. This is love, we read, not that we have loved God, for in fact, we have not, but that He has loved us and sent His Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sin. Jesus, on the cross, bears the sin of the world. You will recall that as Jesus was on that cross from noon to 3 PM, darkness fell over the land as the wrath of God was poured out against sin. Jesus, in the Garden of Gethsemane, held the cup of God's righteous wrath and fury against sin, and He staggered. He said, "Father, if there is any other way to reconcile God and man but My drinking this cup, may it be, but not My will but Yours." This is the way for the wrath of God to be averted against sinners. It is satisfied and poured out on the Son. Galatians 3:13 says:

*"Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us."*

Romans 3:25 tells us:

*"God put [Christ] forward as a propitiation by His blood."*

John Piper wrote a wonderful little book called *Fifty Reasons Why Jesus Came to Die*. He simply looked through the whole New Testament to see why Jesus died. The first reason he gives is

that Jesus died to absorb the wrath of God. Piper says:

“If God were not *just*, there would be no *demand* for his Son to suffer and die. And if God were not *loving*, there would be no *willingness* for his Son to suffer and die. But God is both just and loving. Therefore his love is willing to meet the demands of his justice. God’s law demanded, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:5). But we have all loved other things more. This is what sin is—dishonoring God by preferring other things over him, and acting on those preferences. Therefore, the Bible says, ‘All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God’ (Romans 3:23). We glorify what we enjoy most. And it isn’t God.

“Therefore sin is not small, because it is not against a small Sovereign. The seriousness of an insult rises with the dignity of the one insulted. The Creator of the universe is infinitely worthy of respect and admiration and loyalty. Therefore, failure to love him is not trivial—it is treason. It defames God and destroys human happiness.

“Since God is just, he does not sweep these crimes under the rug of the universe. He feels a holy wrath against them. They deserve to be punished, and he has made this clear: ‘For the wages of sin is death’ (Romans 6:23). ‘The soul who sins shall die’ (Ezekiel 18:4).”

There is a holy curse, a righteous wrath and indignation against sin, yours, mine, the sin of the world. Not to punish would be unjust, the demeaning of God endorsed, and a lie would reign at the center of reality. God pronounces, therefore, a curse on everyone who does not abide by these things. Yet, the love of God does not rest with the curse that hangs over sin, over sinful humanity.

The love of God is not content to show wrath, no matter how holy it is. God, in His love, sends forth His son to absorb the wrath, to bear the curse. This is the meaning of *propitiation*: to absorb the wrath. It refers to the removal of the wrath by the providing of a substitute. The substitute is provided by God Himself. You and I are not able to provide an offering for our sinfulness, and this substitute does not just cancel the wrath, He absorbs it. He absorbs the wrath of God and diverts it from you and me. God's wrath is spent on the Son. Let us not trifle with God or trivialize His love. We will never stand in awe of being loved by God until we reckon with the seriousness of our sin, until we reckon with the justice of His wrath. When we awaken to our unworthiness, we look at the suffering and the death of Christ and say: “In this is love. This is love, not my love for God, God's love for me: God's love for me by the sending of His Son into the world as the sin-bearing, wrath-absorbing Lamb of God, the atoning sacrifice for my sin.” David Wells says:

“Humanity is alienated from God by sin and God is alienated from man by wrath. It is in the substitutionary death of Christ that sin is overcome and wrath averted, so that God

can look on humanity without displeasure and man can look on God without fear. Sin is expiated and God is propitiated.”

God can look on you with His favor for His wrath is spent and exhausted, and man can look up to God without fear of judgment. Sin is expiated, it is covered over, removed, cleansed, and purified, and God's wrath is propitiated. When you grasp this, or rather are grasped by it, several things will happen to you. One is that you will just burst into praise. Christian hymns are fulfilled with celebration of the cross of Christ, of the wrath-absorbing death of Christ. Listen to Charles Wesley's words: *And Can It Be That I Should Gain?* Can it be! Astonishment that I should gain an interest! This is not the interest of your checking account, which is pennies; this is not the miniscule interest of a low interest rate CD; this is not the eight percent you hope to get from a diversified portfolio over time. This is the interest that you gain from the Savior's blood. This is the advantage that you acquire. Wesley says:

“Died he for me? who caused his pain!  
For me? who him to death pursued?  
Amazing love! How can it be  
that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

He left his Father's throne above  
(so free, so infinite his grace!),  
emptied himself of all but love,  
and bled for Adam's helpless race.”

Stuart Townsend burst into song when he contemplated the atonement of Christ, and he wrote:

“How deep the Father’s love for us,  
How vast beyond all measure,  
That He should give His only Son  
To make a wretch His treasure.”

How does the giving of the Son make a wretch His treasure? It happens as the lyrics unfold:

“How great the pain of searing loss -  
The Father turns His face away,  
As wounds which mar the Chosen One  
Bring many sons to glory.

Behold the man upon a cross,  
My sin upon His shoulders;  
Ashamed, I hear my mocking voice  
Call out among the scoffers.

It was my sin that held Him there  
Until it was accomplished;  
His dying breath has brought me life -  
I know that it is finished.”

Stuart Kennedy was moved to song he then wrote:

“In Christ alone! who took on flesh  
Fullness of God in helpless babe!  
This gift of love and righteousness  
Scorned by the ones he came to save:  
Till on that cross as Jesus died,  
The wrath of God was satisfied -  
For every sin on Him was laid;  
Here in the death of Christ I live.”

Four things will happen to you when you consider the atonement of Christ.

Number one: You will burst into poetry and song. I love to watch people when they first fall in love. Even the most un-poetic stumble to craft a few verses, maybe even a limerick or a piece of haiku. Their heart is moved. How much more, then, with the love of God in Christ are we moved to respondent praise and worship and express that!

Number two: When we consider the atonement of Christ, we humble ourselves at the cross. John Stott says:

“We have to humble ourselves at the foot of the cross, confess that we have sinned and deserve nothing at his hand but judgment, thank him that he loved us and died for us, and receive from him a full and free forgiveness. Against this self-humbling our ingrained prided rebels. We resent that we cannot earn or even contribute to our own salvation.

“We can stand before the cross only with a bowed head and a broken spirit. And there we remain until the Lord Jesus speaks to our hearts his word of pardon and acceptance, and we, gripped by his love and full of thanksgiving, go out into the world to live our lives in his service.”

Number three: We make no apology for the uniqueness of Christianity. The uniqueness of Christianity is scorned and mocked today. It has been for centuries, millennia, even. But, we make no apology for the unique claims, the exclusivity of Christianity, because of the uniqueness of the accomplishment of the cross of Christ. Samuel Zwemer, missionary for forty years among Muslims, wrote:

“The missionary among Moslems to whom the Cross of Christ is a stumbling block and the atonement foolishness is driven daily to deeper meditation on this mystery of

redemption and to a stronger conviction that here is the very heart of our message and our mission. All the wealth and glory of the gospel centers here. The cross is the pivot as well as the center of New Testament thought. It is the exclusive mark of the Christian faith. Although the offence of the cross remains, its magnetic power is irresistible.”

We make no apology for the cross, because it is only here that God and humanity are reconciled.

Number four: We must express to one another, and in our life together, a love that flows out of people who have received the love of God. Christians should be characterized and known and have a reputation for the lavish extension of grace and forgiveness to one another. It should stun people. It's the default setting of the fallen human heart to grip a grunge with tenacity and to derive pleasure in holding on to my rage or my malcontent over what you have done to me. In our fallenness, we love to assume the role of the offended one because it shields and guards us from our proper place as a maximum offender. When we come to the cross, we find that we are not the offended party. When we come to the cross of Christ, we realize that we join all of sinful humanity in being a great crowd of offenders, and at the cross of Christ, we discover, to our astonishment, that we receive forgiveness, and that the wrath of God, the fury of God against sin, has been absorbed and taken by Christ. 1 John 4:9-10 is bracketed by the challenge to love one another.

In 1 John 4:7, he says:

*“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.”*

In other words, you can't really love people if you don't know God, because your love will be distorted. It will be a love that comes from the heart of fallen humanity, a love that works, distorts, and seeks its own. Then John tells us this is the love of God: the sending of the Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. He rounds the thought out with 1 John 4:11 where he begins:

*“Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.”*

We are obligated to love one another.

This morning, I call on you, in light of the answer to the question “What is the atonement?” The atonement is the sin-bearing, wrath-absorbing work of Christ on the cross, and I challenge you to burst into poetry, to humble yourself at the cross and be filled with thanksgiving and dedicated service. I challenge you to make no apologies for the exclusivity of Christianity, for the uniqueness of Christ shines forth. Lastly, open your hand, all who have received the grace of God in the atoning work of Christ, and may we be a community, individuals, and families, that stun those around us by the lavishness of our forgiveness and love for one another. We love out

of that inexhaustible love that has been poured out for us in the one and only Son who is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Amen.