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Christ Our Savior

People many times make things much more complicated than they need to be. Our modern culture screams complexity over simplicity. The screams are sourced in our fifty daily e-mails that need filtering and from our extensive searches on the Internet in which we seek “convenient” information. The invention of the wheel was meant to simplify life and yet we hear the ruckus of complication from the millions of additional cars on our roads. Sliced bread was a convenience and yet today we encounter the complexity of choosing one out of thirty varieties of bread at the grocery store. It’s no wonder that choosing Christ as Savior is so complex in our modern era. But should it be? Like technology, the wheel, and even sliced bread, Christ is supposed to be a simple solution to a complicated dilemma. Let’s look closely at the necessity for Christ and simply see how Jesus qualifies as being the Savior we need.

The nature of man and his final destiny

“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

I’m a fan of baseball. I’m going to use an analogy of baseball throughout this article. Realize that analogies tend to break down at one point or another. My intent is not to say that humanity’s spiritual state is exactly like the game of baseball. However, if I’m given license to draw comparison between our spiritual state and baseball, I believe I may better illustrate my position.

Did you know that in the history of the major leagues there are only seventeen pitchers who have ever thrown a perfect game? That’s only seventeen pitchers to ever allow no base runners

over the course of an entire nine-inning game, with the pitcher pitching the complete game. That doesn't mean that there have been seventeen perfect people in baseball. The pitchers were perfect at what they did on a given day, but consistently they were imperfect. The same can be said for any one of us. We may have our good moments, but eventually we will pollute our goodness with bad thoughts and behavior thereby proving our imperfect state of being.

There is one being who is perfect. That is God. In our church we responsively recite "All the time!" to the leader's claim of "God Is good!" We believe that the God who is responsible for all of creation is consistently perfect.

God cannot exist in relationship with imperfection. Imagine that God is on a baseball team for whom I am pitching. Maybe He is playing in center field. Because He is perfect, He's having a perfect game. He's batting a thousand. He's caught every ball hit to Him and He's thrown every one out at first base. It's the ninth inning. There are two outs and the count is full with three balls and two strikes. I wind up to pitch, I release the ball and it just misses the strike zone by a fraction of an inch. The batter is walked and my perfect game is squandered. The problem in this analogy is that God, being perfect, could never be on my team under these circumstances because it would mean that someone perfect would experience an imperfect game. Imperfection would pollute perfection. God cannot experience imperfection if He is going to maintain His perfection.

God cannot exist in relationship with man who is imperfect. The first man and woman created by God were perfect, as would be any material that a perfect God creates. Adam and Eve were set apart from the rest of God's creation in that they are described as being created in God's image (Genesis 1:27). Man was not created for the same purpose as the rest of creation. Man was not created on the same level as the animals. Man was created in the image of God. "Man is

made for personal and endless fellowship with God, involving rational understanding (Gen. 1:28ff), moral obedience (2:16–17), religious communion (3:3). He is given dominion over the animals and charged to subdue the earth, that is, to consecrate it to the spiritual service of God and man” (Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, 548). Adam and Eve were perfect in every way. Part of their perfection was their ability to choose to continue to live in perfect fellowship with God. God gave mankind the ability to choose for himself. Unfortunately, Adam and Eve ultimately chose what was not perfect when they disobeyed God and thereby polluted the goodness of mankind with sin. God gave them freedom to do whatever they had a mind to do as long as they did not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, they chose to eat from that tree and thereby broke their relationship with God of their own volition. They had fallen out of relationship with Him. They committed the original sin.

The nature of any person in broken relationship with God is that of ultimate corruption or wickedness. That doesn’t mean that man can do no good. It means that the good that man does will never compensate for the bad that has polluted his existence. What is imperfect can never be made perfect on it’s own initiative because of the simple fact that it is imperfect. Therefore, what is imperfect is no better off than that which is totally void of any perfection. The game with only the minutest of flaws still falls in the same category as all other games no matter how well or poorly they were played—they will never be considered perfect.

God’s perfection cannot allow imperfection to exist with Him without consequence. My seminary professor wrote in one of his books about the consequence of sin, “Many acts in this finite life have consequences which extend far beyond the mere moment of their being committed. A momentary lapse of concentration by a driver can lead to lifelong paralysis; a brief departure from one’s moral standards can lead to pregnancy; a finite (although lifelong) rejection

of Christ will lead to eternal separation from Him” (Dixon, 159). The simple consequence for imperfection is the eternal separation from that which is perfect. This consequence enables perfection to continue without pollution. To be eternally separated from God means to be eternally separated from His character, which is good, loving, just, protective, and merciful. God separates us at our death from His presence and we experience an eternal existence in hell, which is a place void of God’s character qualities. The final destination of a person who is in broken relationship with God is hell (Revelation 20:15).

In order to consider the need for a savior we must realize our state of separation from God. You may be wondering, “Why are you harping on the negative, on our imperfection?” C.S. Lewis, the great philosophical writer of the twentieth century, explains our need to recognize the dilemma we are in because of sin. He wrote, “When you have realized that our position is nearly desperate you’ll begin to understand what the Christians are talking about. They offer an explanation of how we got into our present state of both hating goodness and loving it. All I’m doing is to get people to face the facts—to understand the questions which Christianity claims to answer. And they’re very terrifying facts. Of course, I quite agree that the Christian religion is, in the long run, a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it doesn’t begin in comfort; it begins in the dismay I’ve been describing, and it’s just no good trying to go on to that comfort without first going through that dismay” (27–28) So it is imperative to comprehend our state of sin and its consequences if we are ever to realize our need for a savior.

The plan and purpose of the atonement

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand

unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:25–26)

Can you imagine the disappointment for countless baseball pitchers if their life's goal were to pitch a perfect game? We're talking well over ten thousand athletes in the past one hundred years never accomplishing their life's pursuit. However, most pitchers realize that it is out of their control to achieve a perfect game. There are seventeen other players and at least one umpire that need to cooperate with the pitcher in order for a perfect game to be recorded in the books.

Likewise, attainment of personal perfection is out of our control. We must rely on some other source to turn our eternal destiny around toward a relationship with God rather than separation from Him. In order to get a perfect life recorded in the book, we must rely on the perfect God to accomplish it.

The activity that transports our eternal destiny from separation to relationship is atonement. Atonement is the procedure that makes us right with God. It's the action that makes our forgiveness possible. Some scholars understand the word to mean a turning away of God's wrath (propitiation). Others say it expresses the covering of sin (expiation). Still others claim it is best understood as the "mercy seat," since it is translated this way in the Greek translation of the Old Testament. However your Bible translation interprets this, it is important for us to understand the truth of atonement is God's wrath being turned away, *by God*, from its original recipient. Understand these two important elements: 1) God's wrath is turned away, and 2) God is the active agent who turns away His wrath.

I remember what it was like before I was in relationship with God, before God's atonement took effect in my life. I was under the impression that I needed to get some things straightened out prior to coming to God. I was a "filthy no good sinner". I remember thinking if I was going

to come before God I wanted to be a “clean no good sinner”. I tried being good, but the harder I tried the more I realized what a failure I was. I learned that if I try to do good outside of following God’s plan, my attempts were as filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).

A pitcher may naively think that if he works on the fundamentals hard enough he will be in position to experience the perfect game. But unless they come to the point where they realize that it’s not up to them to make it happen, they will never experience contentment in the game.

Perfection is not the responsibility of the imperfect person to acquire. Unless people come to the point where they realize they cannot earn “the right” to be with God, they will never experience the opportunity for atonement. I believe there are many people who are living under this false understanding of working hard to achieve spiritual contentment. And it is simply not possible—people have complicated something that was meant to be very simple. Our being good does not determine our being made right with God. God’s action in atonement is what makes us right before Him.

Our destiny does not have to be hell if we will allow God’s simple plan of atonement to affect our imperfect lives. We are imperfect—there is nothing we can do to amend for the sins we have committed. However, “God is good! All the time!”—and part of being good all the time is being merciful. God has a plan that enables a person to escape from eternal separation in hell. He has this plan because He knows that we are hopeless left to our own. The plan of atonement works through substitution—eternal atonement substituted for eternal penalty—turning away of God’s wrath. According to God’s plan our destiny can be heaven—eternal relationship with Him—rather than hell.

In a perfect game of baseball you need two different teams. One team is required to do everything fundamentally right and one team will fall short of perfection. Can you imagine if

there was a team that never made an error at any time? Every pitcher would want to be on that team because it would afford them the opportunity to experience the perfect game. The fact of the matter is, that perfect team would probably cover up the imperfections of the pitcher. That's the simple truth of God's plan for us. There are two different individuals that make our atonement possible. The first individual is obvious, the imperfect (you and me). The second should be obvious as well if we are not complicating things, the One who is perfect. For God's plan to work we need the sinner (any person descended from Adam), and the sinless (a person descended from God). *"Just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous"* (Romans 5:19). Once these two individuals are present the substitution can commence.

In order to experience the righteousness of Jesus Christ a substitution of colossal proportion needs to take place. Jesus Christ was and will always remain the only perfect person with whom we can experience a substitution that will turn-around our eternal destiny. *"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"* (2nd Corinthians 5:21). Through Christ's perfect sacrifice we can substitute our imperfection for His righteousness as we believe that His sacrifice was adequate for our atonement. It is important for an individual to realize that this substitution that brings atonement takes place on a spiritual dimension rather than a physical. The physical world is still under the curse of Adam and Eve because of God's punishment for disobedience—*"you will surely die"* (Genesis 2:17). However, the greater enjoyment is life eternal with God rather than a life eternally separated from Him. *But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness* (Romans 8:10).

The purpose of God's plan is to provide every person the gracious and just opportunity to

choose God's eternal love rather than His eternal punishment. Many people have said, "It is not fair that we must suffer the consequences of Adam and Eve's actions." However, justice void of mercy would have meant the immediate end of humanity as a response to Adam and Eve's choice to break relationship with God. But since God is perfect and He foreknew the people who were to come after Adam and Eve, He demonstrated justice with grace as He "*left the sins committed beforehand unpunished*" (Romans 3:25). What could be fairer from man's perspective than to have an opportunity to change the course of our personal destiny?

Andy Stanley writes regarding the fairness of sins consequences. "Is Christianity fair? It is certainly not fair to God. Christians believe that God sent his son to die for your sins and mine. Fairness would demand that we die for our own sins. But the good news is that God opted for grace and mercy over fairness" (86).

Is it fair that some pitchers have the privilege playing for championship teams and thereby better opportunities of the perfect game than others who are made to look bad because of the play of their teammates? You may be thinking my analogy is beginning to break down, and they always do at some point. But, if you were a pitcher, wouldn't you want to be afforded the opportunity to play for the best team if that were possible? Wouldn't that be more just in your mind than to have to play for the bottom-dwelling team? Atonement provides for all of us the same opportunity. We are all given the same choice as was given Adam and Eve. Question is, "What are we going to choose?" Our destiny does not have to be hell.

The means and results of justification

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe... and [they who believe] are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus

(Romans 3:22, 24).

Jesus Christ is the sinless man descended from God. He was not born of a man and a woman. He was conceived supernaturally by God through the virgin Mary. Where humanity inherits their sin from generation to generation through the first man Adam, Jesus has remained sinless through the supernatural virgin birth. Jesus remained sinless throughout His life and chose to sacrifice His life as a substitute for every person (John 3:16). Through His death Jesus accepted the consequence of our sins as the means by which every person would have the opportunity to experience eternal forgiveness, once again being made right with God (justification). God accepted the sacrifice of His Son as atonement because it met the payment of perfection for a return to perfection.

The resurrection is proof of the acceptance of Christ's sacrifice as God's act of atonement. *"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive"* (1st Corinthians 15:17–22). Through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Christ humanity can again be made right with God.

Once again human beings find themselves facing the choice that will determine their eternal destiny. If they choose to accept the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, they will once again find relationship with God. They will be making the right choice thereby returning to the place Adam and Eve rejected—a right standing relationship with God. If they don't choose the sacrifice of Christ, they will have sealed their destiny—eternal separation from God in hell.

In the movie “Major League,” Pedro Cerrano, played by Dennis Haysbert, was unable to hit a curve ball. Throughout the movie he tried to appease Jobu—the voodoo god of the bat—through sacrifice so that he could hit the curve. Whether we are trying to be good or whether we are involved in ritual sacrifice, the attempt is the same, people are trying to appease the god(s). At a glance, one might think the Bible is filled with such attempts to appease God through sacrifice. However, the Old Testament sacrificial system was never meant to be understood that way. The nature of sacrifice (substitution) in the Old Testament was that God would give the people the lambs, goats, and birds for sacrifice to make atonement for the people. The sacrifices were not meant to appease God but to cause the people to recognize their need for God.

The New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. There is a reason that the sacrifices of the Old Testament are not carried over to the religious instruction of the New. Christ died as the sacrifice for the sins of all who accept Him through faith. The sacrifice of Christ as our remedy fits the nature of our predicament. Romans 8:32 says, “[God] who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all...” God gave us the sacrifice for atonement, not so we could satisfy Him, but so that He could act and satisfy our greatest need—that of turning away His wrath, covering our sins, and experiencing forgiveness.

There was a time I tried to clean myself up in order to be presentable to God. I came to a point of crisis in my life where I knew that if I continued down this path of trying to be good but failing, I would either: 1) die because of the sin I was involved in and go to Hell or 2) God would abandon me and turn me over to my sin for good. I was at a point where I was committing sins I thought I never would commit. I was trying to do good but doing worse than I ever imagined. It was at this crisis point that I decided to take God at His word and believe what He said. It was then that I believed and confessed to Him, “I am a sinner. I know you’ve said, ‘*While we were*

still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" (Romans 5:8). That was my justification—allowing God, through my faith in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, to act on my behalf so that the only perfect being could make what was imperfect once again perfect. At this point I experienced relationship with God.

Justification demonstrates God's gracious character. Atonement is God's gift to humanity rather than humanity's dilemma to solve. This demonstrates that justification is by God's grace, freely given as mentioned in Romans 3:24. Albert B. Simpson, founder of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, sums up justification's grace by saying, "God has provided all the resources, even the grace, repentance and faith, if we will take them. If we lack anything, God will put His arms around us and lift us up to Him, breathing His faith into us, and carrying us Himself until we are able to walk. Salvation is brought to every sinner. If we are lost it is because we have neglected and defied God's love" (22). This understanding removes life's eternal destiny's pressures from a person, freeing them to enter into and live the simple life. The simple life is freedom. It is freedom from guilt, fear, and punishment. It is a freedom to consistently live a contented life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23).

What will your decision be? Will you be different from Adam and Eve and will you choose the simple life of freedom? Or, will you continue to complicate life, only to end eternally separated from God and all His qualities of goodness? Will you choose Jesus Christ as your Savior?

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