

The Heart of Christmas

Isaiah 6:6-7

When I was a kid I loved riddles. I still do to some extent, just don't have as much free time as I used to have. My favorite, and you can remember these, I don't know if they are still out, are these little contraptions of metal. The metal would be all folded up and there was always an objective... something like separate the ring from the horseshoe or something. And you sit there for hours pulling this thing every which a way and at some point, pretty regularly, I'd give up. I wouldn't blame myself, I'd blame the toy, it doesn't come apart. The welder messed up.

It was this problem that seemed like it was incapable of being solved. You probably know the joy and surprise when you finally do figure it out, and the whole thing makes perfect sense. You can't believe you didn't see it earlier. And now instead of being the most difficult puzzle, it becomes super easy.

This morning we are going to look at a problem of much grander proportions that seems to have no answer.

This advent we have been meditating on the narrative here in Isaiah 6. Each week we've focused on a different point. We first looked at God, then man, and today we are going to look at Christ, and here we meet the heart of the gospel, and therefore the heart of Christmas.

Christmas is a solution to a problem. God's holiness and man's sinfulness. If we are not careful, Christmas does not get situated in this problem. We get lost in decorations, festivities, giving and receiving gifts, and can fail to appreciate what the true heart of Christmas is all about. So we will look at our big problem of sin, then we will look at God's solution in Christ, seeing it climax in His cross. We can't separate the baby in the cradle from the bloodshed of calvary.

1. Man's great problem: Sin

6:1 In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. 3 And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" 4 And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. 5 And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" 6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

His right view of God has led him to a right view of himself—to acknowledge that he has fallen short of God's glory. But it goes farther than that... it's a right understanding of what's going to happen to him? Woe is me! Not a word we use very often, but he's pronouncing judgement on himself.

In case there is any missing what Isaiah's problem is (lost doesn't mean he took a wrong turn, unclean doesn't mean he forgot to bathe) these all point to sin, and the Scriptures inform us in v.7 **your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.**"

There's guilt and sin. The presence of sin produces guilt. Real, objective, judgement inducing guilt.

So he says, I'm done. It's over for me. And what messed it up? Sin messed it up. It wasn't his score on Hebrew, or that he didn't make the Israeli football team, it wasn't just that Isaiah's human and God's divine Sin is the thing that has brought Isaiah down.

But this is not just Isaiah's problem. This is humanity's problem. Sin is what fractured everything about this world. Everything was perfect in the garden at the beginning of creation. Sin is what kicked Adam and Eve out of the garden, out of the presence of God in the wilderness. God will judge all sin.

“The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD is avenging and wrathful; the LORD takes vengeance on his adversaries and keeps wrath for his enemies. . . His wrath is poured out like fire, and the rocks are broken into pieces by him. . . with an overflowing flood he will make a complete end of the adversaries, and will pursue his enemies into darkness.”

Does that sound like the God you know? Maybe some of us are thinking, well that's the God of the OT, that's not Jesus.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?” Matthew 3

“Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.” John 3:36
And 11 times Jesus describes a place called Hell as a eternal fire, darkness, and where the worm never dies.

And how about this image of the cute little baby Jesus...

“When the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels 8 in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. 9 They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might, 10 when he comes on that day to be glorified in his saints.” 2 Thes. 1:7-10

That's a long way away from the Jesus of our culture... and the Jesus that often gets celebrated at Christmas.

We may cringe at the thought of God punishing sin, but it's foundational to His character and justice. And like Isaiah, when we rightly see God in his holiness (not our own moral yard stick), we realize that holiness must destroy that which is not holy, or else God would cease to be God. And what we see is the evil He must punish is ourselves. We are the ones He burns against because we are His enemies, we've broken His law, we've glorified ourselves and and run after idols instead of glorifying Him. We, like Isaiah, stand on the brink of a judgement we cannot escape.

There's not a bigger problem in the universe. Our problem is not how to make better grades, how to get a better job, how to cure cancer or eradicate poverty, how to parent or to manage finances, how to win friends and influence people, how to get a political party in control... it's none of those things, as noble of pursuits as they can be, no, our great problem is that we are on the wrong side of holiness and we will be judged eternally for it.

The themes cannot be placed in any greater juxtaposition: the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. This is the great problem in the universe and it is this problem that is being solved in Christmas.

And thankfully, God has a solution: Christ.

2. God's Great answer: Christ

“6 Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. 7 And he touched my mouth and said: “Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.”

Instead of judgement happening a seraphim flies over to Isaiah with a hot coal and touches his lips with it, declaring, your guilt is taken away, and your sinned atoned for.

Atonement for sin takes place. Atonement, a strange word, but the best way to understand it is At-One-Ment. It gets to the idea that there was a break in fellowship between God and man, and atonement is the mechanism that brings those two parties to be reconciled back into fellowship.

Now how could a coal touching Isaiah take away his sin and bring him back into fellowship with a Holy God? Well it can't. A hot rock touching his lips does not have the power to change his heart. What's happening here is figurative. The coal is figurative of Christ. The altar figurative of the cross.

Angels arrive on the scene to announce the birth of Jesus to "save His people from their sins."

Seeing the atoning coal as the death of Christ, that which removes guilt and sin from Isaiah, we are going to look at from three different angles, God's justice, God's love, and God's grace.

A. Behold God's Justice in the Atonement

The first way we see God's justice in the atonement is that we see that He does in fact punish evil.

If we were the jury, we'd be watching this, and we'd be agreeing, telling the judge, Yes, it is right for you to execute justice upon this man. But what happens, the hammer does not fall. Isaiah walks away. We would cry injustice! Somebody needs to get that judge out of the seat.

We hate injustice. I knew a guy while I was in Savannah that went out to make a craigslist deal. It was a setup. He was shot over a dozen times. I'm very good friends with his extended family, and I remember the pain as the trial went on and not enough evidence could surface to indict the murderer. So, off he goes. It's not right. I don't care who you are, the need for justice runs deep within us, and we might disagree on how we define evil, but we all insist evil must be punished. It's one thing for a judge to not have enough evidence, it's another thing when the judge has all the evidence and he still lets the criminal go free. That judge is corrupt and unfit for his position.

We've already talked about how there is a final judgement for all sinners. But what about the people of God to whom God promises blessing forever. That puts God's justice in serious question. The scriptures tell us in Romans 3...

"23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, 24 and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, 25 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Romans 3:23-26

It was in divine forbearance that he passed over sins. He does not sweep sin under the rug and pretend that it doesn't exist. He was withholding punishment so that he could place it on His son. All accusations that God is not just must be silenced. God is perfectly just and He declares that in His Son's sacrifice His justice is perfectly satisfied.

The appropriate punishment for our sin was given to Christ. God's holy justice remains in tact. His holy character is upheld. Therefore we see the confirmation that all sin in the world will be punished. It falls in two places, for believers it falls on Christ, and for unbelievers, who do not place their faith in Jesus, it falls on them for eternity.

The second way we see God's justice in the atonement is that because Christ has suffered our punishment, we are now made innocent before Him. V. 26, God becomes the just and the justifier of those who place their faith in Jesus. This means our faith in Christ's punishment for us cleanses us of our guilt. We are justified—just if we had never sinned. This too is God's justice on display. God does not punish twice. If He is satisfied in His

punishment of Christ, it would be cruel and unjust for Him to pour out any more judgement. The punishment fits the crime.

That's why Christians cannot walk around feeling condemned. That's a lie and accuses God of injustice. That's why Paul boldly proclaims in Romans 8:1, there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ.

Satisfaction through Substitution: Jesus Christ dies for sinners in the place of sinners to satisfy God's justice

Now is this biblical? Is Romans 3 an isolated text, are we putting too much weight on this idea? And there are plenty of scholars and tragically even churches that would say let's stop making such a big deal about sin, and wrath, and sacrifice of Jesus. Or let's just talk about Jesus on the cross as an example and as a martyr. But this talk about Jesus in the place of sinners, come on.

“21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Cor. 5:18-21

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.” 1 Peter 2:23

“13 And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, 14 by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross.” Col 2:13-14

“But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. 2 He is the propitiation for our sins” 1 John 2:1-2

We have here the wrath absorbing, justice satisfying sacrifice of Christ clearly articulated in the NT, but in fact it's idea is on every page of the scriptures, New and Old, from the shedding of blood to make coverings for Adam and Eve in the garden, to the entirety of the sacrificial system of the Jews, to John the Baptists declaration, behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, to the songs and praise in revelation.

If we remove the idea of atonement for sin, the holiness of God, the wrath of God, the justice of God, then we have emptied Christianity and the cross of it's meaning. Christmas no longer makes any sense. And we as a people have no hope for salvation. It is important to get this right, for we are at the heart of the Christian faith, so it's no surprise that such a doctrine comes under fire and a constant need for affirmation and defense.

God is a just God, and His justice is on full display in the cross of Christ. There can be no mistake, God punishes evil.

B. Behold God's Love in the atonement

God as judge is great, but that keeps Him at a cold distance relationship. It's mechanical. It's by the book. Justice is either served or not served. The object is justice, not so much people. But in the atonement we see not only God's sense of justice, but we see His amazing, personal, love.

The first way we see His love is the way a man pursues a bride.

“25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, 26 that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, 27 so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. . . Eph. 5:25-27

Jesus has set his affection upon His bride and loves her so much that He will do anything to help her. It says He gave himself up for her... to present her holy and without blemish. Giving Himself up means He gave His life for her. The divine Son loved His bride so much that He gave up every right and every comfort in order to serve her through a sacrificial death. There is nothing mechanical about this pursuit. It's full of deep, real, everlasting love.

Here we see that Jesus didn't just die because of us (which is true), he died for us. He willingly laid down his life, no one took it from him. There's no reluctance. No half-way wanting to save us. He's bought in with his blood with no mixture of regret. Listen to how the apostle Paul relates this intimate truth...

“the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” Gal. 2:20

It's okay to think about yourself. We prize the glory of God so much that sometimes we don't appropriate the love of God to ourselves like we should. It's just glory out there, God's justice, Jesus dying to satisfy God and give glory to God, without feeling the burning love that Jesus has for us. The beautiful thing is for Jesus, glorifying God and loving us are not at odds with each other. He certainly didn't think about us “above all” that would be to take the truth too far, but we don't take it far enough, to imagine He didn't think about us at all is to err on the other side. God's heart burns for you, to do good to you forever.

The second way we see God's love for us in the atonement is seeing God as our Father who adopts us into His family through the sacrifice of Christ. This is one of the primary themes of the NT that through Jesus we have God as Father. JI Packer even says, “If I were asked to sum up the NT message in 3 words, I would say “adoption through propitiation,” “and I don't expect to ever find a richer or more pregnant summary than that.” I love his confidence there.

Being declared innocent is one thing, being brought into the family of God quite another. **“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are.” 1 John**

God as father, Jesus our brother, we are heirs with God. From slaves to sons.

John Calvin sums up the incarnation this way, “The Son of God became the Son of Man in order that the sons of man might become sons of God.” -John Calvin

God's heart is a heart of love. His holiness burns with righteousness, but it also burns with love. I think John Stott sums it up very well, “Divine love triumphed over divine wrath by divine self-sacrifice.” God, though His justice would have been upheld, His love would have been put into question. In the sacrifice of Christ we see God's justice and love come together. His holy burning wrath and His holy burning love, together in the Son.

“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.” 1 John 2:10

Love seeks the highest good in the beloved. If God has given us Christ how we not also with Him give us everything else. Love goes to whatever length it has to love the beloved. We need to see and feel the extent of God's love for us in Christ's sacrifice.

C. Behold God's Grace in the atonement

If God's love is the degree of suffering He was willing to undergo for us and the magnitude of His blessing, so His grace is the measure by which that love is un merited and undeserved.

“6 For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— 8 but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. . . 10 For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.

We have to see Christ dying for us when we were at our worst or we will not understand the gospel. It is a great stumbling block for us. We want so badly to have something in us that caused Jesus to come for us. That

would make the salvation equation Jesus plus something (whatever I have) = salvation. But Jesus plus anything is no salvation at all. It's Jesus or it's nothing.

He died for us not on the backside of our repentance, not once we started coming to church service and when we finally made it through the year bible plan, not when we got cleaned up, he died for us when we were sinners, enemies, that is we at the heart level were opposed to Him. This is not so much a hostage situation, as it is God rescuing the warlord and transforming His heart.

There is nothing in Isaiah that is deserving of atonement. He, like us, deserves judgement. Instead of divine wrath, we get divine love.

We need to see here that this is God's sovereign initiative. Salvation was not our idea, and there's nothing that we could do to cause Christ to come.

The literal reading of our Isaiah passage, in speaking of the angel, is "he caused the coal to touch my lips." This is huge. Salvation is caused by God on His own accord. He was completely free to not give us Jesus, and would have been perfectly just to do so. That's the vision of Isaiah seeing God's supremacy, high and lifted up. He's totally free, incapable of being placed into debt or coerced in any way. It is all of grace that He would be mindful of us, much less not give us the wrath we deserve but the infinite love that we don't deserve.

See how Paul connects these themes...

"In love 5 he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. 7 In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, 8 which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight," Eph. 1:5-7

Before this world was spinning and the first human took a breath, God purposed in His sovereign will that you would be brought into his family. How? by the blood of Christ. Why? to the praise of His glorious grace. God is wanting to glorify Himself, that is holiness is manifested. That's why the seraphim cry holy holy holy are you God, let the whole earth be filled with your glory.

"The apex of the glory of God is the grace of God. If the glory of God is Mount Everest, the grace of God is the peak." God's wrath is glorious, but His wrath serves to ultimately highlight and point to the beauty of God's grace (Rom. 9).

The character of God that we will be praising for eternity with the most passion and joy, will be His grace. We will forever look upon another who was punished with what we deserved. Jesus scars.

It is not a cheap grace, it is a deep, sacrificial, substituting grace. The atonement, and salvation itself, is from grace to grace. Christ in the place of sinful man that sinful man may be made righteous through Christ and praise the glory of His grace.

John Stott summarizes it this way..."The concept of substitution may be said, then to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting Himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting Himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives that belong to God alone; God accepts penalties that belong to man alone." -Stott

Christmas is about grace. Grace shown and displayed in the babyhood of Jesus, but more so, grace fulfilled and accomplished for us on the cross. Holy justice satisfied. Holy love. To the praise of His glorious grace.

In chapter 6 Isaiah sees the the glory of Christ's exaltation on a heavenly throne, I'd like to close with another vision he had, of the glory of Christ's exaltation on a wooden cross. Perhaps no clearer picture of what Christmas is all about in the Old Testament...

"Behold, my servant shall act wisely;
he shall be high and lifted up,
and shall be exalted.

As many were astonished at you—
his appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance,
and his form beyond that of the children of mankind—

so shall he sprinkle many nations.
Kings shall shut their mouths because of him,
for that which has not been told them they see,
and that which they have not heard they understand.

Who has believed what he has heard from us?
And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant,
and like a root out of dry ground;
he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,
and no beauty that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief;
and as one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted,
yet he opened not his mouth;
like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,
and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent,
so he opened not his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away;
and as for his generation, who considered
that he was cut off out of the land of the living,
stricken for the transgression of my people?
And they made his grave with the wicked
and with a rich man in his death,
although he had done no violence,

and there was no deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
because he poured out his soul to death
and was numbered with the transgressors;
yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors.