

demption. Calvin, therefore, views all of Christ's obedience together as a single offering to God for our sins, while giving pre-eminence to his death.

As a result of Christ's total obedience, Calvin sees two blessings resulting for us: deliverance from the curse (forgiveness), and mortification of our sinful nature (sanctification). It is to be noted that Calvin does not divide up the active and passive obedience so that one part of it, the passive part, might do away with the guilt of our sins, and another part, the active part, put positive righteousness to our account. Rather, the total indivisible obedience results in the indivisible double gift of forgiveness and cleansing (or, justification and sanctification). Another way to say this is that the exchange of righteousness and sin between us and Christ is itself indivisible.

Calvin puts it this way (Institutes, Bk II, Chap XVI, sec 5):

Now someone asks How has Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God, and acquired righteousness to render God favorable and kindly toward us? To this we can in general reply that he has achieved this for us by the **whole course of his obedience** ^[active and passive obedience]. This is proved by Paul's testimony: "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience we are made righteous" [Rom 5:19]. In another passage, to be sure, Paul extends the oasis of the pardon that frees us from the curse of the law to the whole life of Christ: "But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, subject to the law, to redeem those who were under the law" [Gal 4:4-5]. Thus in his very baptism, also, he asserted that he fulfilled a part of righteousness in obediently carrying out his Father's commandment [Matt 3:15]. In short, from the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us ^[active obedience].

Yet to define the way of salvation more exactly, Scripture ascribes this as peculiar and proper to Christ's death ^[passive obedience]. He declares that "he gave his life to redeem many" [Matt 20:28]. Paul teaches that "Christ died for our sins" [Rom 4:25]. John the Baptist proclaimed that he came "to take away the sins of the world," for he was "the Lamb of God" [John 1:29]. In another passage Paul teaches that "we are freely justified through the redemption which is in Christ, because he was put forward as a reconciler in his blood" [Rom 3:24-5]. Likewise: "We are ... justified by his blood ... and reconciled ... through his death." [Rom 5:9-10] Again: "For our sake he who knew no sin was made sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." [2 Cor 5:21]. ... Yet the remainder of the obedience that he manifested in his life is not excluded. Paul embraces it all from beginning to end ^[active and passive obedience]. "He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, ... and was obedient to the Father unto death, even death on a cross" [Phil 2:7-8]. And truly, even in death itself his willing obedience is the important thing because a sacrifice not offered voluntarily would not have furthered righteousness ^[even his passive obedience was active]. Therefore, when the Lord testified that he "laid down his life for his sheep" [John 10:15], he aptly added, "No one takes it from me" [John 10:18]. In this sense Isaiah says, "Like a sheep that before its shearer was dumb" [Isa 53:7; Acts 8:32]. And the Gospel history relates that he went forth and met the soldiers [John 18:4], and that before Pilate he did not defend himself, but stood to submit to judgment [Matt 27: 12, 14]. Not, indeed, without a struggle; for he had taken upon himself our weaknesses, and in this way the obedience that he had shown to his Father had to be tested! And here was no common evidence of his incomparable love toward us: to wrestle with terrible fear, and amid those cruel torments to cast off all concern for himself that he might provide for us. And we must hold fast to this: that no proper sacrifice to God could have been offered unless Christ, disregarding his own feelings, subjected and yielded himself wholly to his Father's will. ... But because trembling consciences find repose

only in sacrifice and cleansing by which sins are expiated, we are duly directed thither; and for us the substance of life is set in the death of Christ.

This last comment indicates Calvin's purpose in all this -- to show that Christ's obedience was a true sacrifice and cleansing for sin, which would take all the guilt, punishment and power of sin away. No lesser doctrine can satisfy the conscience, for we would be left to "make up the difference" between Christ's gift and what the Father really required from us.¹

Calvin goes on to tell the story of Christ before Pilate. It is clear in the telling that Pontius Pilate is a kind of figure of God himself. From this courtroom scene Calvin draws evidence for Christ's taking our punishment, though he was not guilty. Calvin's intent is clear. The righteous Christ, actually and truly substituted for ungodly sinners in his death, actually taking their punishment, though he was not guilty. His condemnation and death was not simply to show divine sympathy for us -- though he did do this. Nor was his condemnation and death to merely have a good moral influence upon us, though it does. Nor was Christ's death only to show God's displeasure with sin, in that he would punish his own Son in order to maintain the righteousness of his government. Neither was Christ's death best described as triumph over the devil and all powers of evil, although it certainly is. No. Christ's death, though it was all these things, was more. He endured all the divine punishment that was due to us, in order that we might know the love of God in him. And, we can be comforted that the evil continually evident to us in our own sins, and which by its filth and repetition must disappoint us increasingly every day for our whole lives,² has been dealt with before God by a real satisfaction. The death of God the Son has power greater than all our sin. Calvin:

To take away our condemnation, it was not enough for him to suffer any kind of death: to make satisfaction for our redemption a form of death had to be chosen in which he might free us[,] both by transferring our condemnation to himself and by taking our guilt upon himself.³ If he had been murdered by thieves or slain in an insurrection by a raging mob, in such a death there would have been no evidence of satisfaction. But when he was arraigned before the judgment seat as a criminal, accused and pressed by testimony, and condemned by the mouth of the judge to die -- we know by these proofs that he took the role of a guilty man and evildoer. Here we must note two things that had been foretold by the oracles of the prophets, and which greatly comfort and confirm our faith. When we hear that Christ was led from the judge's seat to death, and hanged between thieves, we possess the fulfillment of the prophecy to which the Evangelist referred: "He was reckoned among the transgressors" [Mark 15:28; Isa 53:12]. Why so? Surely that he might die in the place of the sinner, not of the righteous or innocent man. For he suffered death not because of innocence but because of sin. On the other hand, when we

¹ If Christ did not truly propitiate the Father's wrath against your sins, how do you know that God will never hold any of them against you? But, the Christ who died to take the entire punishment for your sins is a real deliverer!

² The sense of the sinfulness of sin increases, not lessens, with progress in the Christian life. Real progress may mean less sin, we pray, but it certainly means an ever greater sense of the sinfulness of sin. This must be matched by an ever greater sense of the power of Christ's atonement, or there will be no peace.

³ Our "condemnation" is the judicial sentence against us. The death sentence which has already been passed against us (in Adam), is reversed. The "guilt" is the moral state of having been found guilty. When both these are reversed, not only is the death sentence reversed, but so is the preceding guilty verdict. Your sins? In Christ, legally and morally, it is exactly as if you had never done them!

hear that he was acquitted by the same lips that condemned him (for Pilate was more than once compelled to give public testimony to his innocence [Matt 27:23]), there should come to mind the utterance of another prophet: that he repaid what he did not steal [Ps 69:4]. Thus we shall behold the person of a sinner an evildoer represented in Christ, yet from his shining innocence it will at the same time be obvious that he was burdened with another's sin rather than his own. He therefore suffered under Pontius Pilate, and by the governor's official sentence was reckoned among criminals. Yet not so -- for he was declared righteous by his judge at the same time, when Pilate affirmed that he "found no cause for complaint in him" [John 18:38]. This is our acquittal: the guilt that held us liable for punishment has been transferred to the head of the Son of God [Isa 53:12]. We must, above all, remember this substitution, lest we tremble and remain anxious throughout life -- as if God's righteous vengeance, which the Son of God has taken upon himself, still hung over us.

Calvin comments that there is no real feeling of assurance apart from Christ's death under the punishment for our sins. He really means: Those who can feel satisfied with an atonement of lesser value than Christ's substitution for our punishment have too light a knowledge of their own sinfulness, and have not sufficiently pondered the Judgment Seat of God. No other doctrine of atonement but that which gives full "satisfaction" to the wrath of God against our sins, can give our consciences peace before God.

In his exposition taken from the Creed Calvin goes on to buttress his case that the death of Christ on the cross propitiates (satisfies) God's wrath. Calvin, Chap XI, sec 6:

The form of Christ's death also embodies a singular mystery. The cross was accursed, not only in human opinion but by decree of God's law [Deut 21:23]. Hence, when Christ is hanged upon the cross, he makes himself subject to the curse. It had to happen in this way in order that the whole curse -- which on account of our sins awaited us, or rather lay upon us -- might be lifted from us, while it was transferred to him.

Calvin goes on to describe the Hebrew word for sin offerings in the Law, and how that word is used by the prophet Isaiah, in Chapter 53, to describe the sacrifice of Christ. He then continues:

The Son of God, utterly clean of all fault, nevertheless took upon himself the shame and reproach of our iniquities, and in return clothed us with his purity. It seems that Paul meant the same thing when he says of sin, "He condemned sin in his flesh" [Rom 8:3]. The Father destroyed the force of sin when the curse of sin was transferred to Christ's flesh. Here, then, is the meaning of this saying: Christ was offered to the Father in death as an expiatory sacrifice, that when he discharged all satisfaction through his sacrifice we might cease to be afraid of God's wrath.⁴ Now it is clear what the prophet's utterance means: "The Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all" [Isa 53:6]. That is, he who was about to cleanse the filth of those iniquities was covered with them by transferred imputation. ... Yet we must not understand that he fell under a curse that overwhelmed him; rather -- in taking the curse upon himself -- he crushed, broke, and scattered its whole force.⁵ Hence faith apprehends an acquittal in the condemnation of Christ, a blessing in his curse. Paul with good reason, therefore, magnificently proclaims the triumph that Christ obtained for himself on the cross, as if the cross, which was full of shame, had been

⁴ Only if Christ has taken our punishment, can we be sure that we will not face God's wrath! No lesser doctrine of atonement will do.

⁵ Hence, he means, it cannot come against us!

changed into a triumphal chariot! For he says that “Christ nailed to the cross the written bond which stood against us ... and disarmed the principalities ... and made a public example of them” [Col 2:14-15]. ... But that these things may take root firmly and deeply in our hearts, let us keep sacrifice and cleansing constantly in mind. For we could not believe with assurance that Christ is our redemption, ransom, and propitiation unless he had been a sacrificial victim. ... Christ’s shed blood served, not only as a satisfaction, but also as a laver to wash away our corruption [Eph 5:26; Titus 3:5; Rev 1:5].⁶

Calvin now begins to argue that Christ not only delivered us from the legal bondage of guilt and condemnation, but also broke the active power of sin within us (Chap XVI, sec 7):

... [Christ’s] purpose was “That through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” [Heb 2:14-15]. This is the first fruit that his death brought to us.

The second effect of Christ’s death upon us is this: by our participation in it, his death mortifies our earthly members so that they may no longer perform their functions; and it kills the old man in us that he may not flourish and bear fruit.⁷ Christ’s burial has the same effect: we ourselves as partakers in it are buried with him to sin. The apostle teaches that “we have been united with Christ in the likeness of his death” [Rom 6:5] and “buried with him ... in the death” of sin [Rom 6:4]; that “by his cross the world has been crucified to us, and we to the world” [Gal 2:19; 6:14]; that we have died together with him [Col 3:3]. By these statements Paul not only exhorts us to exhibit an example of Christ’s death but declares that there inheres in it an efficacy which ought to be manifest in all Christians, unless they intend to render his death useless and unfruitful.⁸

Therefore, in Christ’s death and burial a twofold blessing is set forth for us to enjoy: liberation from the death to which we had been bound, and mortification of our flesh.

Calvin is here teaching that our sanctification not only should follow in our Christian lives as a fruit of the grace of God, but that this sanctification is actually finished for us and fully provided for in the atonement itself. It is guaranteed. It will be applied by the Holy Spirit. It will be consummated in the resurrection.

⁶ Calvin mentions the “double grace,” as he so often does, repeatedly, throughout the Institutes. The indivisible “double grace,” **not** two separable and individual graces, is 1) cancellation of the debt of sin, and imputation of righteousness, and 2) moral cleansing, through the gift of the Holy Spirit. This will be explained in more detail in Book III, Chapter 1.

⁷ Our call to crucify and mortify our flesh is rooted in the finished work of Christ, who has already by his death mortified our flesh, the active power of sin within us. Though the warfare is terrible, we are called to certain victory! We will never be happy in our sins again, forever and ever.

⁸ Calvin speaks of willful apostasy among those who have professed Christianity.