

## **The Saving Work of Christ, IV**

Concerning the quiz question 37, what would I say about there being healing in the atonement? It depends on how you define your terms. He is reacting to and correctly critiquing theology that is, it looks to me, confusing the not yet with the already. But in the ultimate sense, I would say there was healing in the atonement—that all the people of God will ultimately be healed, will be raised and made whole. The reason for that is the death and resurrection of Christ. There is no other reason, so in that sense, he is right and yet perhaps his answer is not complete. He is answering the immediate problem, which is confusion of the future with the present.

The answer to question 28 about the cosmic powers being reconciled by Christ can be found on page 196 of John Stott's *The Cross of Christ*. I am interested in the passages of Paul. If his only passage is Colossians 2:15, I have no trouble; I would not call that to be reconciled at all. I would call that squashed—squashing his post. By the way, the Romans 8 passage is good in this way. I do not think I would use the word “reconciliation,” but rather the phrase, “the liberation of the creation,” or “the redemption of the creation.” Christ's work is cosmic in that it will be the cause of the curse being removed from the creation. In that sense, there is redemption, not exactly in the same sense that we are forgiven, but there is redemption of removal of the curse and that is because of the work of Christ. The problem comes out of Colossians 1:20: “Christ reconciled to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” Taken in conjunction with verse 16 where “all things created” involves angels, I am not sure whether all things in verse 20 includes angels or not. It does say things “in heaven.” Could that not be the redeemed who have gone on to their reward? And is it saying that even the heavenly things in the sense of Hebrews, the sanctuary being cleansed—that kind of imagery of heaven—being heaven only because of the presence of Christ? So I need a better text to show some notion of the reconciliation of angels. There is a problem with those Pauline texts; it is not a problem in my mind of angels, but it is a problem that those passages in themselves could be used to teach universalism. They could be taken to mean that everybody is saved. They should not be, if you take all of Paul's information into account, let alone all of the Bible's information into account. So if there is some confusion on that point, I think it is a confusing point. I am not sure if the Bible raises the problem as much as the theologians. It is not insignificant if theologians raise it, but it is much more significant in my mind if it is a problem within the Bible or hinted at in the Bible itself.

We have some ground to cover. We have been talking about the biblical themes of Christ's saving work. His death is a mighty victory. I might say that His death and resurrection constitute a mighty victory. He is the second Adam, who, by His obedience, overturned Adam's disobedience. His death is presented in legal terms, in priestly terms. His death is an example. His death is revelatory, not chiefly, but secondarily. His death ratifies the new covenant. I am just going to refer to some Scriptures in passing. At the last Passover meal with His disciples, Jesus said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” It is Christ's death that ratifies the new covenant predicted by the Old Testament prophets and seen in Ezekiel 36-37 and Jeremiah 31. Hebrews 8 provides commentary on this idea. Christ's death is the basis for justification, as we saw in our study of Romans 3. It negatively constitutes the basis of justification in that Christ propitiates God's wrath, that is, He takes our condemnation in chapter 5 of Romans. His death, positively, is the basis for justification and that is spoken of as His one act of righteousness. So it is His death on the cross in terms of merit, in terms of righteousness, that avails for us in God's sight. His death accomplishes redemption, freeing the captives, reconciliation, making peace between God and us and us and God, and many more things as well. Along with these biblical pictures or themes, we want to look at events. At times, students have confused these two things. Friends, keep the pictures and the events distinct in your mind. There is some overlap, but pictures are legal, priestly, and so forth. Events

are becoming a man, living his life, dying, rising, and returning to the Father. Those are events. Can you distinguish between pictures, themes, and events? It seems clear to me, but has not always seemed so to my poor students. The cross of Christ is central to salvation. I had two major goals in teaching the doctrine of Christ's saving work. The first is to expand your view of Christ's work by helping you see other themes and pictures in addition to the common evangelical ones of Christ saving us by making a sacrifice and by paying the penalty for our sins. We have tried to accomplish that already. Second, I want you to see the cross in the center, but not alone. That way we can talk about Christ's saving work including other events. The Cross is preceded by our Lord's incarnation and sinless life. It is followed by His resurrection, ascension, and session—that means sitting down at God's right hand and ongoing intercession. The final outworking of Jesus' saving work is still to come in His second coming. We have got seven events. Am I parceling up the work of salvation between these seven, so one-seventh is accomplished here and there? The cross is central, but according to 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 in Paul's summary of the Gospel, the cross is inseparable from the resurrection. So we should not even talk about one of those without the other.

But let us start at the beginning—the Incarnation. Christ became a man in order to be our Savior. We have seen this a number of times from Hebrews 2:14: “Since the children”—it means, of Abraham—“are the children of God”—probably a reference to the people of God, the elect—“have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death, he might destroy him who holds the power of death”—that is the devil—“and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For this reason, he had to be made like his brothers in every way in order that he might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in service to God and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.” Both in 14 and again in 17, it speaks of His becoming a human being in order to save us. Am I teaching that the Incarnation in itself saves? No. It is the precondition for reconciliation. It is the prerequisite for atonement to be made. Anselm was right: God became a man to become our savior. Athanasius, in his famous treatise on the Incarnation of the Word, already in the fourth century taught the same thing. Christ's divine and human natures are essential for our salvation. Hebrews 1 teaches that He is divine: “He is as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.” He is the divine Son. They are servants and creatures of God. “The angels worship him.” When we study the deity of Christ, we work with that chapter in some detail.

For now, I will just say this: Christ's divine nature is essential for our salvation because only God can save us. If He were not God He could not rescue us, so God became a human being. The fact that He is God enables Him to save us. Is His humanity necessary for our salvation? Yes. If only God can save, only the God-man can save us. His human nature establishes a bond, or a commonality, with us. That is, the victory was wrought by a man, though not merely a man. Our enemies were overthrown by a human being though he is the God-man. The fact that He is God enabled Him to overthrow our enemies, but the fact that He is the God-man enabled Him to vanquish our enemies for us. One of us beat our enemies. It is the second Adam, with an emphasis on His humanity, who obeyed where Adam disobeyed. I am not stripping Him of His dignity—you know that—I am just equally affirming His human nature. The penalty for sin was paid by a human being, not a mere human being indeed. God could not die on the cross, but God became a man precisely so He could die on the cross. I will just say it one more way: the priest and the sacrifice were God and man in one person.

Remember that one of three great mysteries of the Christian faith is how Jesus could be God and man at the same time. It is not nonsense. If God wants to become a human being, He can. He made human beings in His image in the first place. But it goes beyond my ability to fully comprehend the psyche of Jesus, for example. The Bible is not given to us that we might probe into those matters. So in that sense, His incarnation saves in that it sets the stage for salvation. Secondly, His earthly life saves. Galatians 4:4

says that He was “born of a woman, born under law” that He might redeem those under the law. He was born with the obligation to keep the law and His parents kept it for Him when He was too young to keep it for Himself. They had Him circumcised and so forth. Second Corinthians 5:21 says it well, which is the text that Martin Luther appealed to when he spoke of “the happy exchange.” I hardly know of a better way to present the Gospel than this. It is a happy exchange for us. It is not a happy exchange for the Son of God. What is the exchange? The text says, “God made him who knew no sin [...]” That is the Son of God. The NIV says, “who had no sin,” but the word is “knew.” Knew has more of a progressive sense to me. It speaks of Him and implies He positively obeyed the law, successfully obeyed the law, His whole life. “God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us.” Our sins go to him that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. This one verse contains two of the Bible’s imputations. Imputation is a first-century banking or commercial term. It involves the reckoning of something to someone or something else, as in the reckoning of a debt to your bank account or the reckoning of a credit to your account. The Bible has three imputations. First, in Romans 5:12 and following, God reckoned Adam’s sin to the human race. Second, in 2 Corinthians 5:21, our sins are reckoned to the Son of God. Third, His righteousness is made over to our spiritual bank account to everyone who believes in Him. “God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us that we”—we who have that serious debit—“might become the righteousness of God in him.” This is the happy exchange. Luther said it well. Not happy for the Son of God, but very happy indeed for us.

This implies His lifelong obedience to the law. Many verses speak of this. Matthew 5:17 says, “I have not come to abolish them”—the law—“but to fulfill them.” Hebrews 5 and elsewhere speaks of Christ being made perfect by learning obedience to the things He suffered. Does His earthly life save apart from the cross? No, nothing saves apart from the cross. Does His earthly life qualify Him to die on the cross? Yes. In that sense the distinction between His active and passive obedience is a good one, although the terminology is dated. He obeyed the law lifelong, which is His so-called active obedience. Hoekema described it as “law-keeping obedience.” Jesus obeyed the law in taking the penalty of the law on the cross. Passive obedience is obedience in His passion, not passivity. Hoekema calls that “His suffering obedience.” Both His law-keeping obedience and His suffering obedience are saving only because the sinless life was followed by the making of atonement. The fact that His crucifixion saves is by this time a truism—we have heard all the passages and looked them up already. Galatians 3 says, “He redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.” Colossians 2 says, “He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross.” His resurrection saved in conjunction with the cross. If He had remained in the grave, He really would not have the power to save. And that is why in 1 Corinthians 15, when Paul summarizes the Gospel, he does it like this: “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” The resurrection is an essential part of the Gospel message and so we see it in many places.

Remember I told you before that we artificially separate the person and work of Christ, but the Scripture keeps these things together, so we have to continually put them back together. Colossians 1:18 says, “He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from the dead.” The beginning means that He is the source of the new creation even as God was the source of the creation, the physical creation, spoken of in Genesis 1:1. Christ is the source. He is the beginning. He is the source of life for the people of God. How is it so? Because he is the firstborn from among the dead. As the one who was dead and now lives forever more, He gives life to His people. Specifically this life-giving function is underscored in 1 Peter 1:3: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” The

Father is our father in regeneration. If you seek out the source of our paternity, it is the Father, no doubt. If you ask, who actually makes us alive, or who quickens us in time and space, John 3 answers that it is the Holy Spirit. He is the agent. He is the one who applies the new birth. If you ask, where does the power come from that brings us from death to life? It is through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. It is nothing less than Jesus' resurrection that we appropriate as the Holy Spirit even gives us the faith to believe. The resurrection saves. It is the basis for the new life that we receive. The resurrection saves, inseparable from the crucifixion of Christ.

Calvin had it right. In the *Institutes*, Book two, when talking about the Cross, he says that the Scriptures use a figure of speech called synecdoche in speaking of Christ's saving work in that it mentions either His death or His resurrection. When it mentions the one by virtue of synecdoche, a part for the whole, we are to understand the other. When it mentions His death, we understand His death and resurrection. When it mentions His resurrection, we are to understand His death and resurrection. We are to be always holding the two together. Calvin is wise and we would be wise to have him as our teacher in that regard. That is why the Bible could say that the life of Christ, the resurrected life, is important for our salvation. It could say He saved us by His death—it says that in countless places. The Scripture could also say He saves us by His life. Hebrews 7 portrays Christ as a high priest in the order, not of Aaron or Levi, but of this mysterious figure Melchizedek. This mysterious figure pops in and out of the Genesis narrative and is referred to again only in Psalm 110, a Messianic psalm in the Old Testament, and here in Hebrews 5 and 7 where the writer to the Hebrews portrays Christ as a high priest in this order of Melchizedek.

In verse 16, the writer says that Jesus has become a priest, not on the basis of a regulation as to His ancestry as did the Aaronic priests, but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared in Psalm 110: “You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.” Hebrews 7:23 is important: “Now there had been many of those priests since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lived forever, he had a permanent priesthood.” Here is the priestly and sacrificial theme. Here is an overlap between the sacrificial theme and the event of our Lord's resurrection. Not only is His cross painted in sacrificial terms, but His resurrection has to do with His priesthood too. Because He lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood (verse 25). Therefore He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him, because He always lives to intercede for them. “Completely” means forever and in any other way you can conceive of salvation. It presents His saving work as utterly sufficient to meet all of our needs. Think of it; when God shows us our sins and we put our faith in His Son and His Son alone, we sinners can know that we are forgiven. We can enjoy peace with God and eternal life here and now—eternal life that pertains to the age to come, to be sure. We can enjoy it now and know we are forgiven. Why? Because we are good enough? We are decidedly not good enough and only in recognizing our sins do we make the first step toward God's Kingdom, which is recognizing Jesus is good enough. Yes, He is perfect and His sacrifice is perfect. It is sufficient. It is efficacious. It is utterly effective because He rose from the grave and exercises a permanent priesthood. Therefore He is able to save completely—notice—because He always lives to intercede for them. His intercession saved not apart from the cross, but as an ongoing application of the cross. Listen, there is a man at God's right hand and when Satan attacks you and rightfully accuses you of sins: “There she goes again, another sinful thought. God, please damn her.” One stands up for us and shows His wounds (I know this is somewhat figurative, but the picture is good). The Son of God says, “Atonement has been made” and the accuser's accusations, although they are correct in a sense, are silenced because our Savior is there, praying for us, always presenting His sacrifice, always keeping us safe. We ought to please God. We ought to desire to be good people, but only out of gratitude for what He has done. We can never add one iota to Christ's saving work. As a matter of fact, it is an insult to think so. You mean I can just utterly rest in what He did for me? Would that lead me to inactivity? No, that would lead you to giving your all to Him who purchased you with His blood. God knew what He was doing. He knew how

to break down the strongholds of our hearts and that is by loving us like that. Some of us can hardly accept a love like that because we have not known it in our upbringing and we may not know it in our marriages or in our friendships. Every friend is going to let us down. What the Bible is teaching in both Testaments is that the people of God have been loved with an everlasting love. We can let ourselves go because of that everlasting love girding us up; we can actually make significant progress in all of our relationships. We are never going to be perfect husbands, wives, children, or parents in this world, but by God's grace, we can be pretty good ones: to His glory, by the power of His Holy Spirit applying the death and resurrection of Christ to us again and again. There is no other antidote for sin and there never will be, so do not try to add to your salvation. Rather, out of gratitude for grace, enjoy it and glorify God. Share with neighbors and friends and fellow workers and even family members the good news of Jesus who saves sinners. His life is important for our salvation. The Bible could say that it saves us only because He died, but He who died is no longer dead. He is alive forevermore. So we glorify Him—here comes the irony—by glorying in His cross, but never apart from the empty tomb. His ascension and session are saving as applications of His cross work. Of course, this is what Acts gets all excited about. You will almost read in vain in the book of Acts to try to find something like, “And Jesus died for our sins.” It is much more His resurrection and so forth that are emphasized because the Jewish hearers needed to hear that the One who is crucified is alive. In Acts 5:30-31, Peter says, “You had killed him by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior”—watch this—“that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.” He occupies an exalted place and only by virtue of His becoming a man, living a sinless life, dying on the cross, rising again, and now returning to the Father and sitting at that place of honor and authority, does He have the prerogatives of giving as gifts repentance and forgiveness.

He delights to give those gifts. He gives them freely from that position. In that sense, Hebrews 1 likewise presents Him as coroneted, co-regent with the Father, who by virtue of His having made purification of our sins is able to save at God's right hand. So in that godly sense, in union with all the rest, not abstracted and ripped out, but in conjunction with the rest, His ascension and session save. They save because they translate Him from the sphere of humiliation to the state of exaltation where He pours the Holy Spirit out on the apostles and in one day they (Peter is the spokesman but it is a group activity) have more converts than Jesus did in his three-and-a-half years of public ministry. To whom do they give the glory for that? It is in the name of Jesus, as are the healings and the messages. Acts 1 should be read like this: “In my former treatise, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to teach and to do until He was taken up to do and to teach.” The implication is, as Howard Marshall shows in his book *Luke, Historian and Theologian*, “Now I am writing to you about the things Jesus continues to do and to teach from His position in heaven by the Holy Spirit through His apostles.”

The major actor in the Book of Acts is Christ, but just now from heaven instead of earth. When you think about it, it is a better position for Him to spread His work. His intercession saves. We saw it in Hebrews 7. We can also see it in Romans 8. Here is a marvelous thing: Paul contemplates our salvation and he praises God for the safety we have in Christ. We are safe. We cannot be lost after God has saved us. He uses four arguments for that. First is God's eternal plan, seen in verses 28 to 30. Second is God's very divine nature, seen in verses 31 and 32. Third is His deity, and fourth is His being Almighty—God's justice is our concern—verses 33 and 34. Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? The devil, demons, and our enemies will. That is not the meaning. The meaning is who will bring a charge and make it stick? Our case has already gone before a judge. It is not just any judge, but it is God, the Supreme Judge of the universe. It is God who justifies. The Supreme Judge has acquitted us. Will Satan condemn us? There is no way that he will. Here is the same thing, but said in a negative sense: Who is he that condemns? John 5 says that the Father has entrusted all judgment to the Son. Who is He that condemns? The Son of God. Is He going to condemn the people of God? Certainly not. Who

is He that condemns? Christ Jesus who died, more than that, who was raised to life, is at the right hand of God. Will He judge us? Yes. Will He condemn us? No. He is also interceding for us. The Judge of all the earth has died and risen again on our behalf and now he intercedes at God's right hand to keep us saved. Are you not glad when you meet the Judge that you are going to meet Him as your Savior? We are going to answer for our sins, but we are not going to be damned for our sins.

It sounds warped, but the best way I can illustrate this is to picture somebody you deeply love. It has got to be an older, respected person, like your father, grandfather, grandmother, or mother—a beloved person who loves you more than any other human being in the world. I use this imagery to try to help my friends, who if they are honest, say they dread the Second Coming. This is because of the notion held by the average person and the average adults in Sunday school class, obtained from the way we are teaching rewards and punishments, to be afraid of it. They honestly are afraid. They are being honest, not hypocrites. They are acknowledging that they are sinners and they think of the notion of Christ's coming and being embarrassed at His coming and having to confess our sins. First Peter 1 says that grace is going to be revealed to us. We hope for the grace that is going to be revealed when He comes again. Think of the person who loves you the most on earth, a mere human being, but an authority figure. You are living your life, you are away from this person, and you remember a terrible thing you did against this beloved one. What is your first instinct? To hide and never see him or her again? No, it is not. It is to get to that phone or on that plane. You want to get to that one who you know loves you unconditionally. You just want to say, "I am so sorry; would you forgive me?" You know what he or she is going to do. That person is going to hug you, but you do not like that idea of your hurting him or her, of doing something against this one. With God it is the same way. We will confess our sins, but we will want to confess our sins, and the One to whom we will confess loves us more than we can imagine. I am not suggesting this that we might go and sin freely. I am suggesting this as one way of looking at the Second Coming.

There is another way. We are going to give account. That ought to motivate us to live in the fear of God, but it is "the fear of honor," as John Murray said, not the fear of terror. This is seen in 1 John 4. God's love has put that fear away from us. We are not afraid of Him damning us. We are not afraid of our beloved person saying, "Now you have done it. You are out of the family. You no longer have the family name." They would not do that. Now maybe your family would; the illustration breaks down in that regard. This beloved, or this great father, would never do it. We all can imagine human beings like this. I am not trying to project human beings upward, for that is dangerous, but I am trying to illustrate. First Peter 1:13 says, "Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed." The hymn *Amazing Grace* is right: "Tis grace has brought us safe thus far and grace will bring us home." Now this could be abused. My teaching could be taken to promote vices. Please do not do that. I am just trying to defuse a problem of Bible-believing Christians who are afraid of the Second Coming of Christ. Something is wrong with the way we are teaching these things. Yes, we are answerable. Yes, we will confess our sins. But we will want to confess our sins and it will no more make us want to run from Him, the lover of our soul, than we would want to run from our dear mother who loves us more than anybody on earth and who raised us and stuck with us. If we knew something was wrong, I would want to go get it right with Mom. I love her because she loves me. With that type of a picture we can perhaps get a little glimpse of God's greater love for us. In any case, who is He that condemns? It is Christ Jesus who will condemn the wicked. Although we are wicked and deserve judgment, we will not get it if we have run to Christ for refuge because He has died and been raised and has ascended to God's right hand and now He intercedes for us. Do you understand how in this bigger context His intercession is part of His saving work? These are events or things He does.

How does the teaching that I have just referred to—the teaching of God and the Trinity keeping His people safe—fit into Christians backsliding and ceasing to believe? It is a complicated matter and I will admit to you that there are hard passages. There are apostasy passages that many churches have neglected but ought not to neglect. In brief, the Bible knows of partial faith, of false faith, and of less-than-saving faith. I find it in the fourth Gospel, for example, in John chapters 2, 4, 6, 8, and 12. Most of the faith in John's Gospel is genuine faith, but this other theme is there, this counterfeit business in order to alert us that these matters are complicated. Furthermore, I would agree with Augustine. I am coming from a particular Augustinian-Calvinist tradition now and you could disagree with me and I would respect that. I try to persuade based upon the Bible. If I cannot persuade you, I respect you completely, whether I can or cannot. But I am trying to persuade; I think God's truth deserves that. My understanding is that true believers can fall away, but to use Augustine's adverbs, never totally and finally. I thus understand that Judas was never regenerated. He looked good. He fooled the other disciples. As to whether he fooled himself, I do not know, but he never fooled Christ. In John 6 it says, "From the beginning Jesus knew who would betray him," and Judas gives himself away perhaps in chapter 12. Now this is reading between the lines. It is inspired editorial work. It is looking back after the fact. But he who opposed the waste of this precious ointment was a thief. John 12:6 says, "He did not say this because he cared about the poor but because he was a thief; as keeper of the money bag, he used to help himself to what was put into it." A Christian could steal, but a Christian could not be a chronic thief the way Judas was.

I teach a whole course on perseverance and apostasy here at Covenant. I have done a series of five articles. The sixth is due to come out in the next issue of our seminary journal, *Presbyterion*. You might want to read some of those. One surveys the literature. Then one is on the fact that God keeps us. One is on the fact that true believers keep on keeping on—we persevere. One is on assurance of salvation and where that comes from. The fifth article is on apostasy and what those passages are intended to teach. The last one, just due to come out, is a systemic summary of all these four things: preservation, perseverance, assurance, and apostasy, with pastoral applications to counselees and parishioners and so forth that we are trying to help.

The return of Christ is the epitome, the final outworking, of His saving work. I am trying to broaden your view of Christ's saving work. The cross is in the middle, but the cross is not alone. We will be given grace, as seen in 1 Peter 1:13, on that day only because Jesus loved us and gave Himself for us. In that regard, it is the Second Coming of Christ that is the final application of redemption. I have already read 1 Peter 1:13 so let me do this last passage, the highly controversial matter of limited and unlimited atonement. Since it is controversial, I use the best person I could find from the opposite viewpoint of mine. In this case, Millard Erickson, with whom I agree on over ninety percent of Christian theology (but I use him in the interest of fairness) does a very nice job of presenting both sides. I will use his arguments and try to answer them that we might have some balance on the matter. Hebrews 9:27 says, "Just as human beings are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin"—He already did that the first time—"but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for Him." The salvation He brings was accomplished at the cross and that is the very seat of salvation. Christ's saving work includes all these events: His incarnation, His sinless Life, His Death, His resurrection, His ascension and session—I am doing that as one—His intercession, and then ultimately His return. Is not He a wonderful Savior? May the Lord use these teachings to enhance our worship and to motivate us to serve Him. What else can we do but to share the good news?