

# Study Guide and Commentary

## ACIM Text, Section 3.I

### Atonement without Sacrifice

**In my opinion**, this section is one of the most important sections in the Text concerning the relationship of the Course to traditional Christian doctrine (the other important section is T-6.I). Therefore, I ask you to excuse me for writing a longer commentary than usual. I attach more importance to this, perhaps, than many people would, because of my extensive background in fundamentalist Christianity, whose most fundamental “fundamental” this section unflinchingly refutes.

Section 3.I flatly contradicts the orthodox Christian teaching that Jesus Christ died in place of all mankind, taking the punishment for their sins upon himself. The New Testament clearly presents this teaching, so we have to acknowledge that *A Course in Miracles* contradicts the Bible on this point. For instance, compare these quotations, the first three from the Bible, the last from the Course:

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures. (1 Corinthians 15:3, NIV)

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24, NIV)

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. (Romans 5:6-10, NRSV)

[Jesus speaking]: I was not “punished” because *you* were bad. The wholly benign lesson the Atonement teaches is lost if it is tainted with this kind of distortion in any form. (T-3.I.2:10–11)

In the Course, Jesus is quite overtly *correcting* what he feels to be a gravely mistaken teaching by the apostles (the authors of the Bible statements, according to tradition, were Paul and Peter). In a later section in which Jesus again reinterprets the crucifixion, he says, “The Apostles often misunderstood it” (T-6.I.14:2). Their misunderstanding was recorded in the Bible and literally became scripture for millions of Christians since.

Christians who still hold to the traditional teaching as revealed truth are quite correct when they consider the Course to be teaching heresy; from their standpoint, it is. *Heresy* is nothing more than “an opinion or a doctrine at variance with established religious beliefs,” according to the American Heritage Dictionary. The teaching of the Course is quite clearly and *intentionally* at variance with established religious beliefs that it considers to be unfortunate mistakes. One such unfortunate mistake is the teaching that Christ died for our sins. This section, and T-6.I, address

slightly different aspects of that mistaken understanding, and give a different interpretation of the crucifixion that shows God as a God of Love rather than a god of vengeance.

## Paragraph 1

1. <sup>1</sup>A further point must be perfectly clear before any residual fear still associated with miracles can disappear [Ur: becomes entirely groundless]. <sup>2</sup>The crucifixion did not [not] establish the Atonement; the resurrection did. <sup>3</sup>Many [Ur: very] sincere Christians have misunderstood this. <sup>4</sup>No one who is free of the belief in scarcity [scarcity-fallacy] could possibly [possibly] make this mistake. <sup>5</sup>If the crucifixion is seen from an upside-down point of view, it [certainly] does appear as if [Ur: as if] God permitted and even encouraged one of His Sons to suffer because he was good. [Ur: Many very devoted ministers preach this every day.] <sup>6</sup>This particularly unfortunate interpretation, which arose out of projection [Ur: the combined misprojection of a large number of my own would-be followers], has led many people to be bitterly afraid of God. <sup>7</sup>Such anti-religious concepts enter into many religions [Ur: This particularly anti-religious concept happens to enter into many religions, and this is neither by chance nor coincidence.] <sup>8</sup>Yet the real Christian should pause and ask, "How could this be?" <sup>9</sup>Is it likely that God Himself would be capable of the kind of thinking which His Own words have clearly stated is unworthy of His Son [Ur: of man]?

### • Study Question •

1. *Have you ever encountered the idea that God actively encourages good people to suffer? That somehow, suffering in itself is a meritorious act? If so, have you ever felt somewhat afraid of a God that would encourage this kind of thing, or that He might select you for "testing"? Can you think of some ways in which this kind of thinking has invaded your consciousness?*



I think it is important to understand the traditional Christian teaching about the crucifixion to appreciate fully the passionate tone of the discussion in this chapter. Orthodox Christian theology teaches that Jesus' death on the cross was a sacrifice for sin; this is called the doctrine of *substitutionary atonement*. Our Atonement was purchased at the cost of Jesus's blood and suffering. "Christ died for our sins" (I Corinthians 15:3), the Bible teaches. "Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" (I Peter 3:18, NIV). The typical understanding of such passages is that, in some mysterious way, the sins of all humankind for all time were "imparted" to Jesus. Because he was (in this view) not simply a man but God in human form, his infinite being was able to absorb the sum total of all guilt. His death was then the just punishment for *our* sin, thus satisfying the (supposed) demands of God's justice. Because our sin was imparted to Jesus, his righteousness has been imparted to us. "We were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Romans 5:10, NIV). "Who his own self bore our sins in his own body on the tree" (I Peter 2:24, NIV).

Probably the clearest single summary of this teaching in the Bible comes in the book of Romans. I think it speaks for itself:

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. 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 right now, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

(Romans 3:23–26, NIV)

The idea is that God by His nature *must* be just, and therefore *must* punish sin; however He is also loving. By punishing Jesus for our sins, He set us free, thereby satisfying both His justice and His love. Atonement is squarely based on, and earned by, the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. But as Paul Alan Laughlin writes in *Remedial Christianity*:

But when it came to the sticky question of just how one person's execution—however unjust or agonizing—could possibly be effectual and salutary for successive generations of people [to say nothing of past generations who supposedly were also included], Paul was at best sketchy and suggestive...

One important result of Paul's ambiguity about the mechanics of Christ's redemption—that is, how it accomplished humanity's salvation—is a succession of theories of atonement, which were produced, promulgated, and debated throughout the Middle Ages and later eras, and which, for the most part, coexist in Christian thought in modern times despite their logical incompatibility with one another. (*Remedial Christianity*, p. 179)

This is the teaching that the Course sets out to refute in this section. Notice that it is still dealing with ridding us from “fear...associated with miracles” (1:1), a major theme of the preceding chapter. Our understanding of the Atonement must be purged of any connection to sacrifice and suffering before we can be completely free of fear concerning miracles. Jesus' succinct statement in 1:2 tells us that the resurrection, rather than the crucifixion, established the Atonement. He will explain his statement further in 7:6f, but for now what is clear is that the Atonement has no real connection to the *death* of Jesus.

This has been misunderstood by “many [very] sincere Christians” (1:3) and “many very devoted ministers.” Jesus does not put down those who have held this mistaken belief; he calls them “sincere” and “devoted.” Yet he goes on to say that anyone who makes this mistake *must* still be caught in the belief in scarcity (1:4), a word last used in T-1.IV.3:3. There it was associated with “darkness” and the general idea that we had lost the completeness we had in God's original creation. If we believe in scarcity, we will operate on the principle of “giving to get.” We will think that we must give up something to have something else, which is the idea that underlies sacrifice. And Jesus dying for us is clearly a form of sacrifice. To put it in plain words: The belief that Jesus died for our sins stems from the ego's thought system of sacrifice and lack.

The Course uses strong words. Look at the words he uses to characterize it in this paragraph alone:

- a mistake

- an upside-down point of view
- a particularly unfortunate interpretation, which arose out of projection
- an “anti-religious concept

Later, in 3:8, Jesus calls it “utterly impossible.” It really is *not possible* to retain a belief in the doctrine of substitutionary atonement and be true to the Course.

The idea that God would allow His “only begotten Son” to suffer such a horrible death—not only allow it but *encourage* or *command* that he so die!—has understandably led people to mistrust God. If He would do that to His #1 Son, He is *very* likely to ask *me* to suffer in some way, too! Marianne Williamson jokes about how, when she felt that God was calling her to serve Him, she was afraid that, “I would have to wear gray for the rest of my life, and go to Africa or something.” We have learned to equate doing God’s Will with suffering and sacrifice. I recall asking a girl in Bible college what she planned for her future, and she replied, “I’m really not certain. All I know is that it involves suffering and sacrifice.” I thought she sounded *so spiritual!*

The very idea that God wants to punish sin is nothing but our projection (1:6; see also 3:8). As we saw in the previous section, God has nothing to do with judgment. *We* are the ones who believe we deserve punishment. *We* are the ones who think justice *means* punishment. And we have projected that belief onto God. This kind of thinking, this approval of suffering and sacrifice, has polluted Christianity and has crept into many other religions as well.

The Course is saying that we have to get rid of this kind of thinking. Small wonder we are afraid of getting involved with miracle-working. Miracle workers end up being crucified! Jesus says that “the real Christian” will question the reasonableness of this entire line of thinking (1:8–9). He encourages the kind of questions that might get you thrown out of Sunday School: Why would God insist that we should be peace-makers and forgive our brothers, and then turn around and demand a blood sacrifice from His “only begotten Son”? It would be unworthy of any of us to encourage someone else to suffer on our behalf, or to bear the punishment for our mistakes. We know that, and yet we persist in thinking that *God* asked *Jesus* to suffer in our place. Does that make any sense? Of course not.

## Paragraph 2

2. <sup>1</sup>The best defense, as always, is not [*not*] to attack another’s position, but rather to protect the truth. <sup>2</sup>It is unwise to accept any concept [Ur: It is not necessary to consider anything acceptable] if you have to invert a whole frame of reference in order to justify it. <sup>3</sup>This procedure is painful in its minor applications and genuinely tragic on a wider scale [Ur: a mass basis]. <sup>4</sup>Persecution frequently results in an attempt to “justify” [Ur: Persecution is a frequent result, justifying] the terrible misperception that God Himself persecuted His Own Son on behalf of salvation. <sup>5</sup>The very words are meaningless. <sup>6</sup>It has [*always*] been particularly difficult to overcome this because, although the error itself is no harder to correct than any other, many have been unwilling to give it up in view of its prominent value as a defense [Ur: prominent escape value]. <sup>7</sup>In milder

forms a parent says, "This hurts me more than it hurts you," and feels exonerated in beating a child. <sup>8</sup>Can you believe our Father really [Ur: *really*] thinks this way? <sup>9</sup>It is so essential that all such thinking be dispelled that we must be [Ur: *very*] sure that nothing of this kind remains in your mind. <sup>10</sup>I was not [*not*] "punished" because *you* were bad. <sup>11</sup>The wholly benign lesson the Atonement teaches is [*wholly*] lost if it is tainted with this kind of distortion in any [*any*] form.

• Study Question •

2. *The idea that God punishes sin to correct it shows up in our lives in the way we behave. What two such ways, one major, one seemingly minor, are mentioned in this paragraph? (See 2:3–6; 2:7–8.)*

Punishment of sin is really a form of the idea that the best way to defend against evil is to attack it. Jesus says this is not so; the best defense is "to protect the truth" (2:1), or to love rather than to attack. Attack is attack; calling it "punishment" or "justice" does not negate that. To justify attack on sin we have to "invert a whole frame of reference" (2:2), which seems to refer to inverting the concept of a loving God and making Him vengeful. He goes on to give two examples, one of "its minor applications" that is nonetheless "painful," and one "on a wider scale" that is "genuinely tragic" (2:3).

The wider-scale one is *religious persecution*. One interpretation could be that, based on the idea that the best defense is attack, religions will often persecute those who do not accept their teachings. We have examples of this in the Inquisition and wars that are fought in the name of God. Another interpretation might be that when *we* are persecuted we tend to think it makes us more worthy because we are suffering like Jesus did. We twist Jesus' words, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Matthew 5:11, NIV), and make them mean something like, "The more I suffer, the holier I am."

The idea of God persecuting Jesus (that is, his being punished for our sins) is a tough one for us to give up because it seems to justify our attacking behaviors (2:6). God punished sin, so therefore we are being loving when we beat our children (2:7), or we are being loving when we use attacking methods to make people accept "salvation" as we understand it. History is littered with examples of this insanity.

We need to ask ourselves the questions raised here. *Can* we believe that God thinks like a parent who beats a child, saying, "This hurts me more than it hurts you?" Of course not!

Every last thread of this kind of thinking needs to be eradicated from our minds (2:9). I can't get over how insistent Jesus is on this point. Read this line again, with emphasis indicated by me:

<sup>9</sup>It is *so essential* that *all* such thinking be dispelled that we must be *very sure* that *nothing of this kind* remains in your mind.

If we exempt some of our thoughts along this line they will “taint” the rest of our thinking, and the true meaning of the Atonement will be *completely* lost to us (2:10). Therefore, we need to pay attention as Jesus leads us through the next six paragraphs, helping us to ferret out any lingering belief in these false concepts. You may feel that you don't need this section because you were never a Roman Catholic or a fundamentalist Christian; you never believed that your salvation required the death of God the Son on the Cross. However, read on anyhow. You may find that, since Western civilization has been heavily influenced by historical Christian thinking, you may have absorbed more of this influence than you thought.

To give you an idea of just how powerful this message of the Text is, let me share a story related to Robert Perry by Curt Morrow, a Course teacher in Texas who died several years ago. Curt had been a Baptist minister from a long line of Baptist ministers. He eventually left that ministry and embarked on a spiritual search, which led him first to Joel Goldsmith's works and finally to the Course. When he first came across the Course, he started reading the Text. I believe he was aware of who supposedly had written the Course. But when he reached this line, “I was not punished because *you* were bad,” he had a sudden recognition that this really was Jesus himself speaking in these pages. The recognition was overwhelming. From that line on, until “The Message of the Crucifixion” in Chapter 6, he said it was “read and wipe”—he had to sit with a box of tissues while he read. He knew this was his master speaking to him. He felt something within himself being healed as the Course overturned the traditional picture of Jesus that Curt had learned in his Baptist upbringing. When he finished “The Message of the Crucifixion,” his old view had been wiped away along with his tears, and something new had established itself in him. From then on until he died, he devoted his life to studying and teaching the Course.

### Paragraph 3

3. <sup>1</sup>The statement “Vengeance is Mine, sayeth the Lord” is [Ur: strictly a karmic viewpoint. It is a real] a misperception [of truth] by which one assigns his own “evil” past to God. <sup>2</sup>The “evil [conscience] from the] past has nothing to do with God. <sup>3</sup>He did not create it and He does not maintain it. <sup>4</sup>God does not [not] believe in retribution [Ur: in karmic retribution at all]. <sup>5</sup>His Mind does not create that way. <sup>6</sup>He does not hold your “evil” deeds against you. <sup>7</sup>Is it likely that He would hold them against me? <sup>8</sup>Be very sure that you recognize how utterly impossible this assumption is, and how entirely [entirely] it arises from projection. <sup>9</sup>This kind of error is responsible for a host of related errors, including the belief that God rejected Adam and forced him out of the Garden of Eden. <sup>10</sup>It is also why you may believe from time to time that I am misdirecting you [in the Course]. <sup>11</sup>I have made every effort to use words that are almost [almost] impossible to distort, but it is always possible to twist symbols around if you wish [Ur: but man is very inventive when it comes to twisting symbols around].

• Study Question •

3. (a) *What is the main error that this paragraph tries to correct in our minds? (b) In what ways are you still holding on to the idea it tries to correct?*

When I first read the Course, I had a very hard time with statements like sentence 1, because I had accepted the Bible completely, and this sentence takes a quotation from the Bible and calls it a “misperception.” Jesus here manages to offend Judaism and Christianity at the same time, because the line comes from the books of Moses (Deuteronomy 32:35) and is quoted, with approval, by the Apostle Paul in Romans 12:9. Part of my mind still wants to argue that the interpretation being refuted here—that God is vengeful—is not necessarily the only possible interpretation. To me, Paul gives the saying a much more peaceful meaning, saying that if I heap kindness on my enemy, *that* will torment him. There is no question, however, that many of the writers in the Bible *did* believe unequivocally that God was vengeful. For instance, the prophet Nahum wrote: “The LORD is a jealous and avenging God; the LORD takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The LORD takes vengeance on his foes and maintains his wrath against his enemies” (Nahum 1:2).

Even most Bible-believing Christians feel uncomfortable with the God of vengeance pictured in the Old Testament, who nearly wiped out the human race in the Flood, rained fire and brimstone on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, and actually *commanded* the Hebrews to execute genocide on the pagan inhabitants of the promised land. That picture of God emerged from the very low state of tribal consciousness shared by the human race about three thousand years ago. It depicts, not God’s reality, but humanity’s experience and conception of God. It was God viewed through the lens of a primitive mind-set.

The relevance here is that the doctrine of Atonement by way of sacrifice presumes a vengeful God Who *must* punish sin; that picture of God is a projection. We have been vengeful; now, becoming “holy,” we are going to leave vengeance up to God. We’ve passed the dirty job on to Him (3:2). We have been sinful, so we think God will punish us because He believes in retribution. He does not (3:4)! God does not hold our “evil” deeds against us (3:6). Consider how you feel in reading that. Is there at least some sense of relief? If so, then you must have been harboring some belief that God *does* hold our “evil” deeds against us.

If He does not hold them against us, how likely is it that He would punish Jesus because of them? Not very! (3:7–8). It’s more than *unlikely*—it is “utterly impossible.”

The idea that God is vengeful—that He in some way holds our “sins” against us—is the root idea for “a host of related errors” (3:9). He names only two specifically: the religious error that God rejected Adam and drove him out of the Garden of Eden (a widely taught interpretation of the Genesis story); and the personal error that Jesus (or the Holy Spirit, or God) is sometimes misdirecting us. God never rejected Adam or anyone; we weren’t driven out, we *left*. And God never misguides us. I think the idea here is that because we believe God may be angry, or may want to punish us, He will deliberately lead us into painful and harmful situations. We blame our misfortunes on Him, instead of rec-

ognizing them as the inevitable consequence of our mistaken choices. We think, “God! Why are you doing this to me? What did I do to deserve this?”

More specifically, we may think that sometimes the very words of the Course are leading us astray. Helen apparently did believe that “from time to time” (3:10). So Jesus speaks these words, which say volumes about the Course itself: “I have made every effort to use words that are almost impossible to distort” (3:11). There is no question here that Jesus claims to be choosing the very words of the Course, not simply the formless concepts that take shape and form in the vocabulary of the scribe. This is one of the reasons I feel it is meaningful to pay such close attention to exactly how things are worded, and why I feel confident that none of the words were chosen lightly. If we misunderstand the words of the Course, it is not because they are hard to understand; it is because we *want* to misunderstand them, and therefore we find ways to “twist symbols around” (3:11).

## Paragraph 4

4. <sup>1</sup>Sacrifice is a notion totally unknown to God. <sup>2</sup>It arises solely from fear [Ur: of the Records], and frightened people can [Ur: are apt to] be vicious. <sup>3</sup>Sacrificing [Ur: others] in any way is a [Ur: clear-cut] violation of my injunction that you should be merciful even as your Father in Heaven is merciful. <sup>4</sup>It has been hard for many Christians to realize that this [Ur: commandment (or assignment) also] applies to themselves. [Ur: Though Christians generally (but by no means universally) recognize the contradiction involved in victimizing others, they are less adept at ensuring their own inability to victimize themselves. Although this appears to be a much more benign error from the viewpoint of society, it is nevertheless inherently dangerous because once a two-edged defense is used, its direction cannot be self-controlled.] <sup>5</sup>Good teachers never terrorize their students. <sup>6</sup>To terrorize is to attack, and this results in rejection of what the teacher offers. <sup>7</sup>The result is learning failure.

### • Study Question •

4. *We've been talking about how the sacrifice of the life of Jesus in the crucifixion is not the basis of the Atonement. How does the fact that God knows nothing of sacrifice apply to being merciful to yourself? Can you think of some ways in which you have not been merciful to yourself?*



The idea that sacrifice is “totally unknown to God” (4:1) is certainly a liberating idea for me, as it is for most people who come out of traditional Christian or Jewish backgrounds. (Although Judaism does not view the death of Jesus as a sacrifice, it does share a basic belief in sacrifice as a way of “appeasing” God.) Our devotion to God hardly seems real to most of us if we have never sacrificed anything for God’s sake; sacrifice is the “proof” that we really mean business. But all that is the projection of our own minds. It is how *we* think God thinks. He knows nothing of sacrifice. As Workbook Lesson 343 says, “I am not asked to make a sacrifice to find the mercy and the peace of God.”



Fear—there's that culprit again!—is at the root of thoughts of sacrifice (4:2). And fear can make us vicious, even towards ourselves. Why are we driven to sacrifice? Because we are afraid of what God will do if we don't do it. We are trying to "make good" in the belief that we have somehow "made bad." We believe in "sin" in ourselves, and we think that sacrifice will help make up for the wrong we have done.

Sentence 3, "my injunction," refers to Jesus' saying in Luke 6:36. This is another unmistakable indicator that the same Jesus who spoke in Palestine nearly 2000 years ago is the one now speaking to us in this Course. He told us to be as merciful as God. When we indulge in sacrifice we are being unmerciful to ourselves, and that goes against his injunction to be merciful. Mercy is not just for others; it is also for ourselves (4:4).

Buddhism teaches a particular form of meditation called "metta" meditation, that focuses on offering peace, freedom from suffering, and mercy to others, very much like Workbook Lesson 108. I remember the first time I participated in such a meditation. The person guiding us had us focus first on other individuals in the room, then on friends and family not present, then on the community, and finally on the entire world. He had us visualizing ourselves as if we saw the earth from space, and we opened our heart and enfolded the entire planet with our love and mercy. It was very moving. But then, he told us: "Look down now on that planet once again, and see your own self sitting here in this room. And now, offer that same mercy to *yourself*. Say to that self, sitting in this room, 'May you be at peace. May you be free from suffering. May you quickly find your way home.'"

As I attempted to follow those directions I dissolved into tears. I realized how hard I had been with myself, how harsh, how unforgiving, how relentlessly demanding. And my heart opened with mercy for myself. I recommend the experience to all of you who read this!

Good teachers, Jesus tells us, don't terrorize their students, because it leads to learning failure. As he presents himself in the Course, Jesus epitomizes such a good teacher. His point is that demanding sacrifice from one's pupils is not an effective teaching technique.

## Paragraphs 5 & 6

5. <sup>1</sup>I have been correctly referred to as "the lamb of God who taketh away the sins of the world," but those who represent the lamb as blood-stained [Ur: (an all too widespread conceptual error)] do not understand the meaning of the symbol. <sup>2</sup>Correctly understood, it is a very simple symbol that speaks of [Ur: depicts] my innocence. <sup>3</sup>The lion and the lamb lying down together symbolize that strength and innocence are not in conflict, but naturally live in peace. <sup>4</sup>"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God" is another way of saying the same thing. [Ur: Only the innocent *can* see God.] <sup>5</sup>A pure mind knows the truth and this is its strength. [Ur: It cannot attack the body, because it knows *exactly* what the body *is*. This is what "a sane mind in a sane body" really means. A sane mind is *not* out for blood.] <sup>6</sup>It does not confuse destruction with innocence because it associates innocence with strength, not with weakness.

6. <sup>1</sup>Innocence is incapable of sacrificing anything, because the innocent mind has everything and strives only to protect its wholeness. <sup>2</sup>[Ur: This is why] It cannot project. <sup>3</sup>It can only honor other minds, because honor is the natural greeting of the truly loved to others who are like them. <sup>4</sup>The lamb “taketh away the sins of the world” [Ur: only] in the sense that the state of innocence, or grace, is one in which the meaning of the Atonement is perfectly apparent. <sup>5</sup>The Atonement is entirely unambiguous. [Ur: God Himself is not symbolic; He is fact. The Atonement, too, is totally without symbolism.] <sup>6</sup>It is perfectly clear because it exists in light. <sup>7</sup>Only the [Ur: man's] attempts to shroud it in darkness have made it inaccessible to those who do not choose to see [Ur: inaccessible to the unwilling, and ambiguous to the partly willing].

• Study Question •

5. *In traditional Christian teaching, the symbol of “the lamb of God” is interpreted as meaning that Jesus was a sacrificial, “bloodstained” lamb, like the lambs used as animal sacrifices in the Old Testament. Indeed, this is the interpretation given the symbol in the Bible. The book of Revelation speaks often of the “Lamb, looking as if it had been slain” (Revelation 5:6, NIV); elsewhere the New Testament says: “Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed” (I Corinthians 5:7, NIV). How does Jesus reinterpret the symbol of the lamb in these two paragraphs?*



Sentence 5:1: The quotation is from the words spoken by John the Baptist as he identified Jesus to his followers (John 1:29). Jesus tells us that the symbol speaks of innocence, not sacrifice (1:1–4). It seems as if he is anticipating counter-arguments: “Not sacrifice? But weren’t you called ‘the lamb of God?’”—and replying to them. In yet another reference to the Bible in this reference-laden section, he points to that other meaning of “lamb,” in the reference to the lion and lamb lying down together, based on Isaiah 11:6. Actually, that verse speaks of the lion with a calf and the lamb with a wolf, but the somewhat distorted image of the lion with the lamb has entered into our folklore, so that is what is referenced here. The lamb means innocence. Calling Jesus the lamb of God means he represents the pure, innocent mind, which knows only truth and does not see evil; in this way, the lamb “takes away” sin by overlooking it. The strength of the innocent mind is that it looks past sin to the Atonement. “It can only honor other minds” (6:3). This mind is “truly love” and knows it, and can offer nothing but love to other minds like itself. It takes away sin in that it cannot sacrifice and cannot project.

When Jesus says that the Atonement is “entirely unambiguous” (6:5) and “perfectly clear” (6:6), he is emphasizing its non-dualistic nature. It is unmixed. It is “wholly benign” (2:11), wholly healing, wholly loving; there is no sacrifice hidden in it, no demand for loss of any kind. It has no dark side; “it exists in light” (6:6).

The mention of “attempts to shroud it in darkness” (6:7) reminds me of T-1.IV.1–2, where the Text speaks of our attempt to hide our holiness in darkness. What makes the Atonement hard to understand, or fearful to us? Ultimately, it is our own choice not to

see. The Atonement seems obscure and shrouded in sacrifice and blood because we have chosen to hide its real meaning.

Lest that seem too harsh, let us remember that Jesus speaks of those who misunderstood the Atonement as “sincere Christians” (1:3). Perhaps we have chosen to hide its true meaning, but we have done so out of fear, confusion and madness. If being told we have *chosen* to hide the real meaning of Atonement raises a chill of guilt within our hearts, let us remember that this is exactly the situation for which the Atonement was created. Hiding the meaning of the Atonement has not placed us out of its reach.

## Paragraph 7

7. <sup>1</sup>The Atonement itself radiates nothing but truth. <sup>2</sup>It therefore epitomizes harmlessness and sheds only blessing. <sup>3</sup>It could not do this if it arose from anything but perfect innocence. <sup>4</sup>Innocence is wisdom because it is unaware of evil, [Ur: **which does not exist**] and evil does not exist. <sup>5</sup>It is, however, perfectly aware of everything that is true. <sup>6</sup>The resurrection demonstrated that nothing [Ur: **nothing**] can destroy truth. <sup>7</sup>Good can withstand any [Ur: **any**] form of evil, as light abolishes [Ur: **all**] forms of darkness. <sup>8</sup>The Atonement [meaning, the resurrection] is therefore the perfect lesson. <sup>9</sup>It is the final demonstration that all the other lessons I taught are true. <sup>10</sup>If you can accept this one generalization now, there will be no need to learn from many smaller lessons. <sup>11</sup>You are released from all errors if you believe this. [Ur: **The deductive approach to teaching accepts the generalization which is applicable to all single instances, rather than building up the generalization after analyzing numerous single instances separately. If you can accept the one generalization now, there will be no need to learn from many smaller lessons.**]

### • Study Question •

6. *The resurrection, not the crucifixion, established the Atonement (1:1). What did the resurrection demonstrate (7:6–7), and how does that establish the Atonement?*



The theme of the total benevolence of Atonement continues: It radiates nothing but truth (7:1). It is the perfect example of harmlessness; it offers us nothing but blessing (7:2). This can only be so if the Atonement arises from perfect innocence. If sacrifice and punishment for guilt were part of it, it could not be wholly harmless; it would not offer pure blessing. Jesus seems truly intent on ridding us of every last vestige of belief in sacrifice!

The Atonement is an assertion of perfect innocence, rather than a perfect punishment for sin. What a travesty we have made of Atonement! The mind that accepts Atonement knows its own innocence, and therefore is wise, unaware of evil, and perfectly aware of truth (7:4–5). We might think that being unaware of evil is dangerous, but if, in truth, evil does not exist (7:4), to be aware of evil would be delusion or insanity.

The traditional view of Atonement is painfully aware of evil; evil is so awful that it requires the death of God's Son. The Course's understanding is that evil has no more sub-

stance than darkness, which vanishes the instant light appears (7:7). The resurrection was that light; it “demonstrated that nothing can destroy truth” (7:6). That *is* the message of the Atonement. The resurrection validated everything Jesus had ever taught (7:9).

Sentences 10 and 11 are intriguing, since they hold the promise of a sort of shortcut. Accepting “one generalization” will release us “from all errors” and eliminate the “need to learn from many smaller lessons.” What is the “one generalization” he is asking us to believe? I think it is the overall message of Atonement that the resurrection demonstrated: “Nothing can destroy the truth. Good can withstand any form of evil.” The whole push of the Course is to get us to accept the Atonement; why should this paragraph be anything different? If we can accept the idea that nothing can destroy truth, all the smaller lessons are contained in that one lesson.

We do need, I think, to consider what this discussion implies about the historical factuality of Jesus’ resurrection. Did Jesus literally rise from the dead and reappear in bodily form? If he did not, the argument here loses much—if not all—of its power. In *Absence from Felicity* (pages 398–399), there is a special message given to Helen in answer to the question, “Was there a physical resurrection?” In it, Jesus says his body simply disappeared after it was entombed. However, he says he *did* reappear in a human body afterwards, to speak to his disciples. He says he came to tell them that the mind that manifested one body could manifest another. So apparently he appeared in a body to his followers, but *not in the same body*. The body that died did not get up and walk out of the tomb. But the life that was Jesus did reappear physically, thus demonstrating that nothing can destroy truth. In that special message, Jesus reiterates what he has said here about the message of the resurrection: “Illusions are illusions. Truth is true. Illusions vanish. Only truth remains” (*Absence from Felicity*, page 399).

## Paragraph 8

8. <sup>1</sup>The innocence of God is the true state of the mind of His Son. <sup>2</sup>In this state your mind knows God [Ur: man’s mind *does* see God], for God is not symbolic; He is Fact. <sup>3</sup>Knowing His Son as he is [Ur: and because he {the Son} sees Him {God} as He Is], you realize that [Ur: he knows that] the Atonement, not sacrifice, is the only appropriate gift for God’s altar, where nothing except perfection [Ur: truly] belongs. <sup>4</sup>The understanding of the innocent is truth. <sup>5</sup>That is why their altars are truly radiant.

### • Study Question •

7. *Take your hand at turning this entire paragraph into a personal affirmation of truth, beginning with, “The innocence of God is the true state of my mind.” Then, having written it out, spend five minutes or more meditating on it, or simply repeating it slowly to yourself.*

The section ends with a short paragraph that affirms the truth about each one of us, in the light of the Atonement. With its references to “God’s altar” (8:3,5), it recalls the teaching of T-2.III, “The Altar of God,” where we learned to place the Atonement at the

center of our altar to release the inner light, resulting in the extension of miracles to those around us. The same images of altar and radiance are associated here.

The true state of mind of God's Son—this includes you and me and everyone—is “the innocence of God” (8:1). Not just innocence, but *God's* innocence: perfect, complete, unassailable innocence. Nothing can destroy the truth, and the truth about you is that your mind possesses the innocence of God Himself. That is what the resurrection has demonstrated. All that we imagine we have done has had no effect whatsoever on the purity of our minds. That is what acceptance of the Atonement brings into our awareness.

Behind its illusion of ignorance and doubt, your mind knows God (8:2). The statement about God not being symbolic but Fact, I think, means that this “knowing” is not mere perception or a mental arrangement of words *about* God (which are only symbols that represent God or some aspect of God) but direct apprehension by means of union. You share God's innocence because you are part of God's Being. How else *could* you share His innocence? Therefore, being part of God, you know God. This is true of your mind *now*, no matter how much it appears to be untrue. The Course is bringing this knowing back into our awareness by correcting all false perception, such as any perception of guilt. When we have achieved true perception, seeing only what is true, nothing will remain to impede knowledge, which therefore will return again to full awareness.

We know God, and we know God's Son as he is—innocent. Knowing that, we realize that there is no reason for sacrifice on the altar of our heart; the Atonement is the only appropriate gift. “Nothing can destroy the truth.” “Only truth is true.” “God's Son is innocent.” These are the words of Atonement we lay on the altar in our minds. These are the words that release our inner radiance (8:5).

## Answer Key

1. The idea shows up in many forms. Some examples: “This sickness must be meant to teach me a lesson.” “No pain, no gain.” “She has suffered so much! She deserves to be happy.” “My love for you is proved by how much I have suffered on your behalf.”
2. Persecution is a manifestation of the idea that evildoers must be punished. In milder form, it shows up in the practice of beating children to make them behave.
3. (a) The idea that God believes in retribution or vengeance; that He holds our sins against us.  
(b) One idea mentioned in the paragraph is that we suspect, at times, that Jesus (or the Holy Spirit) is misdirecting us (intending to hurt us). Some other ways I can think of include: Thinking sickness and other misfortunes are a punishment from God; fearing to come to Him when we think we have sinned; expecting to be excluded from grace based on our behavior; and hiding our ego thoughts from the Holy Spirit. Your list may vary.
4. Any kind of sacrifice is a violation of being merciful, since when I sacrifice I am being unmerciful to myself. The ways in which we each are unmerciful to ourselves

vary with individual experience, but “beating yourself up” for some wrong thought or deed is perhaps the most common.

5. The lamb is a symbol of innocence. The lamb of God takes away sin in the sense that the state of innocence is one in which Atonement is apparent. Innocence is the opposite of guilt.
6. The resurrection demonstrated that nothing can destroy the truth, or that good can withstand any form of evil. Atonement rests on that fact, not on payment for sin through the crucifixion. By overcoming death with life, the resurrection shows that “sin” did not corrupt God’s creation, God’s Son is still innocent, and no payment for sin is necessary. Therefore, the Atonement teaches us that, “The innocence of God is the true state of the mind of His Son” (8:1).
7. The innocence of God is the true state of my mind. In this state of innocence, my mind knows God, Who is not a symbol but a Fact. I know God’s Son as he is—innocent—and therefore I realize that the Atonement, not sacrifice, is the only appropriate gift for God’s altar. Nothing except perfection belongs upon that inner altar of my mind. Since I am innocent, my understanding is truth. That is why the altar of my heart is truly radiant.