

There are such things as unintended consequences. Some of them are good. The 3M company researchers were experimenting to find a super strong adhesive. Instead they ended up with Post-it Notes. Many unintended consequences, however, turn out to be bad. Explorers found the “New World” but brought with them invasive species that ravaged the native population. The St. Lawrence Seaway brought oceangoing ships all the way to Chicago but also introduced invasive species into the Great Lakes. These evils were not intentional. But, the sacrifice of Jesus for sin was.

The “I” stands for ***Intentional Atonement*** (Traditionally ***Limited Atonement***). Jesus died intentionally on the cross to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). He died for those whom the Father had given him, and in that act he accomplished their complete atonement.

Jesus died as God’s appointed sacrifice for sin nearly two thousand years ago. What does that mean for us today? He accomplished the atonement on the cross. Atonement means to make satisfaction or reparation for a wrong, to make payment. Some people divide the word this way: “at-one-ment,” intending to say that we become “at one” with God once again. That is not quite right, as it describes reconciliation with God, not atonement. Reconciliation with God must follow the act of atonement or payment for our sins. And that is exactly what Jesus did on the cross.

The Bible teaches that Jesus’ death – his atoning work on the cross was intentional. The apostle John quotes Jesus: “All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day” (John 6:37-40).

For whom did Jesus die? He died for the ones God had given him. Anyone whom God gives to Jesus will come to Jesus and receive eternal life. In John 10 Jesus calls himself the good shepherd: “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me – just as the Father knows me and I know the Father – and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14-15).

For whom does Jesus lay down his life? For everyone? No, he lays down his life for the sheep that the Father has given him. Jesus continues: “I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd” (John 10:16).

Who are these other sheep? The initial sheep of God (people of God) were the Israelites, the Jewish people. Jesus is speaking to them and saying that he has other sheep. The Jews divided all people into two groups – Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles). Jesus says that Gentiles too will believe in him and be brought into the sheepfold, and there will be one flock and one shepherd. Recall from chapter 2 that the Jews had misunderstood their election. They felt that they were God’s chosen people and all others were not. Jesus tells them that they are wrong. Jews and Gentiles, all people, are among his sheep: “The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life – only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father” (John 10:17-18).

Jesus’ atonement on the cross was intentional. He shed his blood on purpose. The purpose was to provide atonement for all his sheep out of all peoples of the earth, both Jew and Gentile.

Note that the shepherd was also the sacrifice – the sacrificial lamb without blemish described in the Old Testament (ex. 12:5, Isa. 53) and fulfilled in the New Testament (Rom. 3:25, 1 Pet. 1:19). John the baptizer saw Jesus approaching and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). Jesus’ intentional, sacrificial death is the only atonement for our sins.

That is why Jesus could say, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6).

Some people find this “exclusiveness” of Jesus as the only path to God offensive. Why would Jesus make this claim? Think about it for a moment. The problem as the Bible defines it is that sin separates us from God.

Sin is the barrier between us and God. In order to be reunited with God, atonement must be made. But who is worthy to pay the price? Who is without sin? The only person in the universe without sin is God. However, God is a spiritual person (John 4:24), not a human person, and, therefore, cannot shed his blood – “and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” (Heb. 9:22). This “impossible possibility” is a broken lifeline trying to bring us to God.

What is needed is a human being who can pay the price of sin. Unfortunately, there are no people who are not fallen – who are without sin, without blemish. Thus, we have another “impossible possibility”; another broken lifeline.

What is the way out of this dilemma? God provided the Way – Jesus who is God in the flesh, God incarnate, God with us (Immanuel). Jesus is the only sinless human ever to live. Hebrews 4:15 says: “we have [a high priest] who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet he did not sin.” Jesus could atone for our sin only by becoming fully human, yet without blemish. Only the sinless one could blast through the barrier of sin between people and God the Father.

Jesus’ claim as the only way to the Father is not a matter of exclusiveness. It is a matter of qualification. Only Jesus qualifies. Only God-in-the-flesh, the person without sin, the Lamb without blemish, could intentionally shed his own blood for us. And, that is exactly what he did. Jesus’ claim to be the only way to God is not prideful or exclusionary. It is an announcement of good news. There is a way to be reconciled to God in an otherwise hopeless situation. Our hope is in Jesus, the only one who qualifies as “the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 2:2).

Jesus is our intentional mediator. The apostle Paul wrote: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people” (1 Tim. 2:5-6).

Some people see the crucifixion of the only sinless man on the cross as a great tragedy. Christians see it as great triumph. Jesus went to the cross on purpose. In advance he told the twelve disciples, “We are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written by the prophets about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. He will be delivered over to the Gentiles. They will mock him, insult him and spit on him; they will flog him and kill him. On the third day he will rise again” (Luke 18:31-33). Jesus’ self-sacrifice was full of purpose – that he might save his people from their sin.

The intentionality of Jesus’ atonement is also evident in his prayers for his sheep. His “high-priestly” prayer is recorded in John 17: “Father ... you granted [your Son] authority over all people that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him ... I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word ... I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours” (John 17:1-2, 6, 9).

These words are spoken about the disciples. But Jesus also prays for believers today: “My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:20-21).

What an amazing thing to be included among those out of the world for whom Jesus died and for whom he continues to pray!

In his first epistle the apostle John writes to “you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13). Addressing believers, John gives insight into how it happened: “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10).

For whom did Jesus die? For whom did he make atonement on the cross? Some people think that Jesus died for all people, but his intention is frustrated by people who do not believe. Could the purpose of the Almighty God ever be frustrated by mere humans? No. It is true that the sacrifice of Jesus is sufficient for the sins of the whole world, but the sacrifice is effectively applied only to those whom God has chosen, and for whom Jesus intentionally died. Some people think that Jesus set out to save everyone, but that people can reject that offered salvation. If so, Jesus did not accomplish the atonement he wanted to accomplish, for Jesus himself said, “I have brought you [the Father] glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do” (John 17:4).

The atonement was accomplished by Jesus on the cross. He said, “it is finished” (John 19:30). The atonement is applied by the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them” (John 6:44). It is the work of the Holy Spirit to draw believers to Christ. We’ll find out more about this in the next chapter.