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*Since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us . . . fix our eyes on Jesus, . . . who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. — Hebrews 12:1, 2, NIV.*

## “Thoughts . . . Too Deep for Tears”

### Digest

Jennings B. Reid, *Jesus: God’s Emptiness, God’s Fullness: The Christology of St. Paul* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990).<sup>1</sup>

*Editorial Note:* The treatise on *Jesus: God’s Emptiness, God’s Fullness: The Christology of St. Paul*, by chaplain, pastor and scholar Jennings B. Reid, strikingly compares the “vital relationship between the divine fullness and the human emptiness of Christ to the incarnation, the atonement, and the church.”<sup>2</sup> In the following excerpts Reid examines the relevance of God’s paradoxical fullness/emptiness with respect to the atonement.

“AS WE COME NOW to consider the atonement, we enter into the holy of holies of the Christian faith. Here, deep calls unto deep. Here, ‘Thoughts that do lie too deep for tears’ grip us. In contemplating the atonement, one’s most fitting response is first a hushed silence.

“But after the hushed silence, . . . it is also fitting that we . . . try to understand as best we may this greatest and mightiest act of God’s love.

“Atone comes from the Middle English word *atonen*, meaning to be ‘at-one’ — in harmony, reconciled. Atonement, therefore, is the state of being reconciled, but in common usage it refers most frequently to the means by which the reconciliation has taken place. It is best understood broadly to include both the means and the state of reconciliation.

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## Fullness and Emptiness

“The concepts of *pleroma* (fullness) and *kenosis* (self-emptying) throw light on the meaning of the atonement. . . . The first makes the sacrifice of the atonement absolute in nature, and the second brings the sacrifice down to our level where it is offered from within humanity Godward. . . . [Thus:]

“(1) . . . [T]he atonement must be complete and absolute. In contrast to a sacrifice which may be partial and transitory, or individualistic, the sacrifice for mankind must be absolute and adequate for all.

“ . . . [I]n the mind of Paul, there is never the slightest doubt of the ultimate nature of Christ’s sacrifice. . . . In contrast to the false teachers at Colossae who apparently were saying that Christ’s redemption from sin was partial and inadequate, Paul said that on the contrary it was full and complete and represented

nothing less than the ‘fullness of God’ in his self-giving. There was never the slightest doubt in Paul’s mind of the absolute nature of Christ’s sacrifice. Therefore the sacrifice had the nature of being final, ‘once for all’ (Rom 6:10; cf. Heb 7:27; 9:12; 10:10; 1 Pet 3:18).

“ . . . [S]inful men seeking relief from a sense of guilt will always come back asking for more than the example of a good and great man. They will need, and demand, an atonement that is absolute and ultimate. This they will find in St. Paul’s Christ ‘in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell’ (Col 1:19), ‘who gave himself for our sins’ (Gal 1:4; 1 Cor 15:3).

“(2) . . . [T]he atonement had to take place from within humanity. The ‘kenosis narrative’ in Philippians declares that this is precisely what happened. While the atonement was all God’s act of grace and by his own initiative, as he did for us what we could never do for ourselves, nevertheless it was not an act of God per se, but of the God-man. The offering, while from God, was also to him, from within our humanity. Nor was the manhood merely instrumental, but integral to the procedure. . . .

“Paul never tires of emphasizing the historic nature of the atonement. All of the Adam comparisons are based on the fact that Christ, as the ‘second Adam,’ took upon himself the flesh of the ‘first Adam,’ and reversed the sinful process. As was true with the Old Testament sacrificial system, that man, the offender, made an offering to God, though it was a provision of God in man’s behalf; so when the supreme sacrifice was made, it was from the human side Godward. It was ‘in the form of a servant . . . in the likeness of men’ that the sacrifice was offered.

“The writer to the Hebrews makes it a point of strong emphasis that it was from within our humanity that Christ made his sacrifice:

‘Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature. . . . For surely it is not with angels that he is concerned

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but with the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people (2:14-17).’

“In like manner, Paul never loses sight of the human side of the sacrifice. It was ‘Jesus Christ, descended from David according to the flesh’ (Rom 1:3), ‘whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith’ (Rom 3:24-25). . . .<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

“Thus, any true apprehension and appreciation of the atonement combine the two requisites: its absoluteness and its movement from human need Godward.”<sup>4</sup>

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## Endnotes

1. Jennings B. Reid, *Jesus: God’s Emptiness, God’s Fullness: The Christology of St. Paul*, is available from Barnes & Noble at [www.barnesandnoble.com/w/jesus-jennings-b-reid/1115209224](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/jesus-jennings-b-reid/1115209224).
2. Jennings B. Reid, *Jesus: God’s Emptiness, God’s Fullness: The Christology of St. Paul* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), overview.
3. The term “expiation” used here (Hebrews 2:17; Romans 3:25) appears in other translations as “atonement,” “forgive,” “mercy seat,” “propitiation,” “reconciliation,” etc. These terms are derived from the Greek words *hilaskomai* and *hilasterion*. These Greek words, in turn, are translations of the Hebrew *kapparah*, which means “the mercy seat.” The mercy seat “formed the cover of the Ark of the Covenant in the Holy of Holies of the Temple.” “. . . [*Kapar/kapparah*] has the root sense of ‘cover’ or ‘wipe clean.’ These two root meanings both express what God does when he accepts expiation for sin: he covers the sin from his sight and/or wipes or washes it away.” For Paul, Yeshua himself is the *kapparah* for sins. See David H. Stern, *Jewish New Testament Commentary: A Companion Volume to the Jewish New Testament* (Jerusalem: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1992), pp. 349 [Romans 3:25], 669 [Hebrews 2:17].
4. Reid, *Jesus: God’s Emptiness, God’s Fullness*, pp. 83-112.

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