

◆ JESUS CHRIST ◆
The Divine Son of God

JESUS: OUR REDEEMER



Power to break hearts and to constrain sinners to live for Jesus is in the story of Jesus' atonement. How could there be a more important subject?

The word "atone"¹ means to make amends, to make matters right, or to bring satisfaction to a wronged person, with the result that the two estranged people are then "at one." Moses attempted to "set at one" (Acts 7:26; ASV) two fighting men. The word "atonement" is literally "*at one ment*"; it means agreement, concord, reconciliation.

The Greek word² responsible for the only appearance of the word "atonement" in the KJV of the New Testament (Romans 5:11) literally means an exchange of equivalent values, as of coins. Fair exchange results in an adjustment of differences, a reconciliation, an atonement.

The Hebrew word³ translated "atonement" literally means "a covering." It describes the pitch which Noah put on the ark. It describes Jacob's gift sent to pacify Esau: "I will appease him [cover his face] with the present that goes before me" (Genesis 32:20). The word has come to mean "a covering for sin, satisfaction, propitiation, atonement."

The word "sin" comes from Greek words⁴ meaning "to miss the mark" (as in shooting an arrow), that is, to err and be guilty before Deity. Since God cannot tolerate sin (Deuteronomy 32:3, 4; Habakkuk 1:13; John 8:21), He had to expel sinners from Eden. Alienation of man from his Maker was the result of sin. Since sin cannot enter heaven (John 8:21, 24; Revelation

21:27), the most critical problem of the universe was a reconciliation, a satisfaction, an atonement by which sinners may be restored to God's favor now and ultimately to His presence in heaven.

REDEMPTION IS NECESSARY

It was not merely Adam and Eve who sinned against God. Every other person who has the right use of his mind and who grows to know right from wrong has missed the mark of righteousness ("all unrighteousness is sin"; 1 John 5:17). All have fallen short of God's standard (Romans 3:23). No human but Jesus could challenge without response, "Which one of you convicts Me of sin?" (John 8:46).

In spite of man's advancements, this three-thousand-year-old question still requires a negative answer: "Who can say, 'I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin'?" (Proverbs 20:9). No one other than Jesus can make such a claim. The uni-

versality of sin shows that the doctrine of a limited atonement falls short of the truth. Only a universal atonement can be effective against universal sin. If God does not show partiality (Acts 10:34), and if He loves all His creatures, then His plan of atonement for sin must include all men.

REDEMPTION IS PERSONAL

Sin is not inherited, nor is it transferable. Every sinner has been "drawn away and enticed by his own lust" (James 1:14).⁵ For this reason, no matter how broad is Jesus' atonement for sin,

“. . . our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, . . . gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds" (Titus 2:13, 14).

it is effective only as each individual responds personally to the provisions of that atonement. If sin is individualistic, so also is the force of the atonement. If sin is personal, then the reconciliation must also be personal. Atonement is futile, then, without a personal response. Parental response for their offspring is impossible, and for a friend to be baptized in another's stead⁶ is impossible. "Each one of us will give an account of himself to God" (Romans 14:12).

REDEMPTION IS IN CHRIST ALONE

The wages of sin are death and banishment from the presence of the Lord. God could not be a sure and righteous Being (Deuteronomy 32:1–4) if He overlooked man's iniquity and took him to heaven in spite of his sins. Still, God has always loved man and yearned for his salvation (Ezekiel 33:11; John 3:16). How could God remain just and at the same time justify sinners? (See Romans 3:25b, 26.) This was heaven's problem.

Keeping Patriarchal Laws Was Insufficient

God's laws ordered animal sacrifices and prohibited the shedding of human blood or the eating of any blood. Such laws were essential to keep the patriarchs on the road to heaven. If such observances could have atoned for sin, heaven's problem would have been solved—but they could not.

Keeping Mosaical Laws Was Insufficient

A curse was upon anyone who despised Moses' law (Deuteronomy 27:26; Hebrews 10:26, 27) and failed to keep it. Even those who observed it blamelessly (Luke 1:6; Philippians 3:6) still had sins marked against them, for it was impossible for the blood of animals to take away sin (Hebrews 10:4). "If a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law" (Galatians 3:21).

Believing and Obeying God and Christ Is Insufficient

A great act of faith is exemplified in the eighty-five-year-old Abram, who believed that God would make his seed as numerous as the stars (Genesis 15:6). This act of faith in Abram is praised and set forth as an example to us in the

New Testament (Romans 4:16–24; Galatians 3:16–29). If the work of believing (see John 6:29) and obeying could atone for sin, heaven's problem would have been solved. An obedient faith (Romans 1:5) which works by love (Galatians 5:6) is essential for anyone to go to heaven (Revelation 2:10), but nothing that any human being can do will actually make him righteous. As important as is strict obedience to God's Word, human obedience was not the solution to heaven's problem.

Performing Good Deeds Is Insufficient

Good deeds are precious and necessary in God's eyes (Matthew 25:31–46), but they cannot atone for man's sins. The father who drove a nail in the door every time his son disobeyed, then removed a nail every time he obeyed, still had an ugly sight: a door with holes. Obedience is necessary, but it will not offset disobedience. An adulteress is still in her guilt, though she may be a good neighbor to those in need. A thief is still guilty even if he gives money to the poor. The man who prays much to make up for his much cursing is using the wrong approach. Salvation of sinners cannot be achieved by a debit-and-credit method. That is not the solution to heaven's (and the world's) greatest problem.

Transferring Righteousness Is Impossible

Some have thought that the solution God designed for man's hopeless, condemned condition was a transfer of Christ's righteousness to human beings. If this were possible, Christ need never have left heaven, for He was righteous before He came to the earth.

Though Christ is our source of righteousness (Jeremiah 23:6; 1 Corinthians 1:30), and though we are made righteous in Him (2 Corinthians 5:21), there is no transfer of a state of righteousness from one person to another. We cannot be declared righteous without Christ's atonement, but neither the Scriptures nor reason suggests that Jesus' state of being righteous has been applied to us.

Righteousness, the quality of being right, is a condition which exists by God's declaration of the fact, not by imputing someone else's condition on the sinner. If a transfer of righteousness from one person to another were conceivable, surely God would have thought of it in order to

spare His Son. Just as Adam's sin is not inherited, Christ's righteousness is not transferrable. Something else had to be heaven's solution.

Sending Christ as a Substitute Was the Only Solution

In heaven's council, before the world began (see 1 Peter 1:20; Revelation 13:8), animal sacrifices in any age were declared insufficient to take away man's sins. God's only Son volunteered to become flesh in order that He might die a sacrificial, substitutionary death (Hebrews 10:1–10). "Behold, I have come . . . to do Your will," He told His Father (v. 7). The Father explained that there would be no compulsion and that, should He change His mind after He arrived on the earth, He would not have to go through with the horrible ordeal. The Father's promise to His Son was remembered by Jesus when He was on the earth (John 10:17, 18).

Jesus was human like the rest of us. We can relate to His dread of the cross and see why He had to be "determined" to make Himself go to the city where He was to perish (Luke 9:51; 13:33). We can understand why Jesus called Peter "Satan" when Peter argued that He must not die and thus tempted Him to avoid death (Matthew 16:21–23). We can sympathize with His dread of the cross when His soul was troubled. Nevertheless, we rejoice that instead of saying, "Father, save Me from this hour," Jesus disciplined Himself to say, "But for this purpose I came to this hour" (John 12:27).

In the sore trial of Gethsemane, Jesus well knew that He could withdraw from having to die. He knew that He could call legions of angels to deliver Him (see Matthew 26:53), but He would not willingly refuse the cross. He deeply desired to avoid the misery and shame of the cross. He prayed fervently, with perspiration like drops of blood, to be spared. If the Father could think of some other way to atone for the sins of the world, Jesus wanted His suffering on Calvary to pass from Him.

Even in the depth of the riches of His wisdom, the all-wise God knew of no other plan that would suffice. Any other plan would compromise heaven's purity and the Father's standard of justice. The only way God could remain just and yet justify sinners was for Him to see the travail of Jesus' soul with the sins of the world

heaped upon Him. Only then could the Father feel honorable in releasing sinners from guilt (Romans 3:23–26). On Calvary, lovingkindness and truth met together, while righteousness and peace kissed each other (see Psalm 85:10).

CONCLUSION

How blessed we are! As God unfolded His plan of redemption, angels, prophets, and righteous men desired to see what would happen. Until the appointed time, no eye saw, no ear heard, and no heart imagined the grief and the majesty of the atonement system. No one could know the glory to come. Now, however, that which was once a mystery has been revealed. Both angels and men are able to see the manifold wisdom of God as they gaze upon the group of sinners called out, by the atoning death of Jesus, to be a church of purified souls! Every part of religion, new and old, is related to the cross. Nothing was forgotten when God completed His plan. Nothing was omitted when God's messenger determined to know nothing but Jesus and Him crucified (see 1 Corinthians 2:2).

Thrilling and heart-stirring are the love that prompted God's plan, the wisdom that conceived it, and the courage that effected it. His grace provided a divine covering for sins. Sad, lamentable, and pitiable is the mind of a man who is ignorant of his own sinfulness and who spurns as foolishness the glory of the atonement system.

¹"Atone" is derived from the Middle English word "attone," "attoon," "aton," meaning "at one, agreed."

²*Katallage*.

³*Kippurim*.

⁴*Hata'* and *hamartano*.

⁵God made man with two natures: (1) He has an inward man, following the law of his mind (Romans 7:23, 24) which delights in the law of God and which of itself by nature can decide in moral matters what is right (Luke 12:57; Romans 2:14; 1 Corinthians 11:14). (2) He has an outward man of flesh (Romans 7:25) which has no more religion than the beasts and knows nothing but to indulge itself. It is not subject to the law of God (Romans 8:7) and cannot be, for flesh has no reason. It should not be expected that any moral goodness could dwell in the flesh (Romans 7:8), or moral badness either. Left to itself, by nature, the flesh will seek self-indulgence (Ephesians 2:3). The fleshly part of man is not sinful in itself. It is not immoral, but amoral; it does not know what morals are. Given the lead, its direction is immorality, but it was not made impregnated with sin. All that God made was very good.

Our parents bring us into a world of sin (Psalm 51:5). Our parents may bring us into a land where the English language is spoken, but we have to learn the language.

Likewise, a person learns sin (see Acts 2:8). Psalm 51:5 is vivid poetical language, as is Psalm 58:3. Literally, we do not speak as soon as we are born, nor that soon go astray; the fact is that we are not born astray. As we learn right from wrong, we go astray. Then our sins, not Adam's, separate us from God (Isaiah 59:1, 2). Our fathers' eating sour grapes will not set our teeth on edge (Ezekiel 18:2, 3). We may endure the effects of many misdeeds of our fathers (Exodus 20:5), but never will we bear the guilt (Deuteronomy 24:16). We were whole and perfect when we were created till sin was found in us (Ezekiel 28:15). The

Lord forms the spirit in each of us, and He does not start us out as sinners (Zechariah 12:1). He starts us in a way that, according to Jesus, fits us for heaven. (See Matthew 19:14.) Romans 5:12 is not discussing those without the use of their minds or those who do not know their right hand from their left hand; rather, it is discussing those who have themselves sinned (Romans 3:9).

⁶My opinion is that 1 Corinthians 15:29, in view of the whole of the New Testament teaching, and in view of its context, is best interpreted as being "baptized for [the sake of the resurrection of] the dead."

Law and Mercy

About 500 B.C., King Zaleucus, in the Greek district of Locris, had a problem similar to God's. His law had decreed loss of eyes for adultery. However, when his own son was guilty, the king was torn between upholding the law and being merciful to his son. He solved his problem by causing one of his son's eyes to be removed and one of his own. In this way, he maintained the righteousness of law and at the same time left his son able to see.

No Other Way

Darius the Mede, reigning over the Medo-Persian Empire, had issued an unchangeable edict that prayer must be offered only to himself for thirty days, on penalty of being cast among lions (Daniel 6). When he realized that an honest and good man, Daniel, had been conspired against by those who had prompted the king to issue the law, Darius was sorely troubled. He loved Daniel, and he labored till sunset trying to find some way to spare Daniel from the lions' den. The king could think of no satisfactory substitute. The dignity of law had to be maintained; Daniel had to be cast among the wild animals.

Similarly, God the Father surely desired to deliver His Son from having to undergo the shame and pain of the cross. If there had been some other way to maintain justice and yet save sinners, He would have answered His Son's prayer for deliverance favorably. As Darius had no alternative, neither did God the Father. While God delivered Daniel from death, He had to let Jesus die.

Atonement

The most solemn day among the Hebrews was the tenth day of the seven month, the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur.¹ It was the only fast day prescribed in Moses' law. The people were commanded, "You shall humble your souls" (Leviticus 23:27). It was a Sabbath of Sabbaths, with both work and eating coming to a halt. On that day the high priest sprinkled animals' blood on, and seven times before, a slab of gold called the *kapporeth*, the covering, of the ark of the covenant housed in the Holy of Holies. In a similar way, Jesus entered into the Holy of Holies—heaven itself—with His own blood, and applied its atoning power to the mercy seat.²

¹The tenth day of the seventh month (Tizri) was called *yom hakippurim*, the day of the coverings. In common Hebrew it was called *yom kippur*.

²The Hebrew word translated "mercy seat," *kapporeth*, means a covering, while the Greek word *hilasterion* (Hebrews 9:5) means a holder of friendship, a place of satisfaction.