

► Aspects of Atonement

By Ben Godwin



Of the 81 references to atonement in the Bible, only one is found in the New Testament—Ro. 5:11 (and this lone reference, from the Greek word *katallage*, should most likely be rendered “reconciliation”). But while atonement is clearly an Old Testament concept, it’s exciting to discover how Jesus fulfilled it and improved it, producing what Hebrews 7:22 calls the “better Testament.”

Most of the references to atonement are translated from the Hebrew word *kaphar* which basically means “to cover.” Thus, an atonement was a temporary covering for sin that had to be periodically re-applied. D. L. Moody stated, “I must die or get someone to die for me...that is where the atonement of Christ comes in.” Some of the various atonements God required of the children of Israel were: the burnt offering—Lev. 1:2-4, the peace offering—Lev. 3:1-16, the sin offering—Lev. 4:20-21 and the trespass (guilt) offering—Lev. 5:5-6.

Other meanings of *kaphar* include: *to appease, pacify, cleanse, disannul, purge, pardon, put off, reconcile*. God instituted these various atonements to cover Israel’s sins, thereby appeasing His anger and enabling Him to look favorably upon them. Since God’s holy nature demands justice, the bloody sacrifices of the Old Will served as substitutes for the judgment people deserved. God established a precedent in the Garden of Eden by using a slain animal to make Adam and Eve coats of skin to cover their sin-revealed nakedness (Gen. 3:21). Abel wisely followed this example, sacrificed a lamb, and was accepted by God. Cain tried to approach God on his own terms and was rejected (See Gen. 4:1-5). This precedent—“*Without the shedding of blood there is no remission [of sins]*” (Heb. 9:22)—is continued throughout Scripture as a testimony that the only way sinful man can be accepted by a holy God is with a blood sacrifice. Herein lies the need for atonement.

The various meanings of the Hebrew word *kaphar* reveal the multi-faceted aspects of atonement:

- **To cover**—God cannot look upon (condone or approve of) iniquity. (Hab. 1:13) Adam and Eve tried to cover their nakedness with fig leaves, just as man today tries to cover his sin with false religions and doctrines. God used a slain animal and made them coats of skin. The blood of that animal was, in effect, the first atonement. This and every subsequent atonement provided a temporary covering for sin enabling God to look upon His people with favor.
- **Appease/pacify**—God has a low tolerance level for sin. (Gen. 6:3, 5-7; 15:16; 18:20-21, Rev. 18:5) Once that level is surpassed, divine justice demands retribution. The Old Testament atonements temporarily soothed God’s anger. Now, however, only the vicarious suffering of Christ satisfies the demands of God’s justice. When Jesus became “*the propitiation for our sins*” (1 Jn. 2:2), the entire population of the world was atoned for. However, everyone must appropriate Christ’s atonement by faith on an individual basis in order for it to be effective. Those who reject Christ’s atonement will be caught in the path of God’s unmitigated wrath, which He will ultimately pour out on this prodigal planet and fallen human race.
- **Cleanse/disannul/pardon/purge/put off**—These terms imply that atonement is part of the sin-removing process. In fact, atonement could be considered a prelude to forgiveness since there must be a blood sacrifice for remission to occur. So the atonement (blood covering) facilitates having our sins *cleansed* (washed), *disannulled* (cancelled, voided from the record), *pardoned* (forgotten), *purged* (removed), and *put off* (forever taken away from us).
- **Reconcile**—To *atone* also means to make “AT ONE.” It comes from the Early Modern English term *at onement* meaning, “*harmony, reconciliation.*” Thus, atonement is the means by which we are reconciled (made at one) with God. By Christ’s atoning sacrifice we are restored to a right, harmonious relationship with God. (2 Cor. 5:17-21)

Although atonements were typically animal sacrifices, it's worth noting the following instances in which they took other forms:

- **Money**—Exodus 30:12-16. God instructed Moses when taking a census of Israel to have every male over twenty years of age give a ransom of a half a shekel (approximately 32 cents) for his soul. This was mandatory to prevent a plague from spreading among them. This symbolic, perhaps annual, ordinance conveys the truth that to be “numbered” among God’s people, we must be ransomed from sin’s plaguing effects. The rich and poor alike were required to pay the same amount speaking of the fact that “the ransom price” is the same for every individual—nothing but the blood of Jesus. This “atonement money” was used for the upkeep of the tabernacle. Even so, the price paid for our ransom is vital to preserving and maintaining the church—God’s living, eternal tabernacle.
- **Intercession**—Exodus 32:30-32. In the aftermath of the idolatrous golden-calf incident, God decided to utterly destroy Israel in His fury. (Ex. 32:10) When Moses pointed out how the heathen would perceive a God who would destroy His own people after delivering them from Egypt, God reconsidered. (Ex. 32:14) Before returning to Mt. Sinai to intercede for Israel, Moses explained to the people, “...*Peradventure I shall make an **atonement** for your sin.*” Moses prayed so intensely, asking God to either forgive Israel or blot his own name out the book of life, that it pacified (atoned) God’s anger.
- **Incense**—Numbers 16:44-50. When Korah, Dathan and Abiram challenged the authority of Moses and Aaron, they were swallowed alive by the earth and God determined again to destroy Israel. After consuming 250 non-priests who burned incense, God sent a deadly plague among the people. To counteract it, Moses commanded Aaron to fill a censer with fire and burn incense among the camp “...*And [Aaron] put on incense, and made an **atonement** for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed.*” Once again God’s anger was appeased by an atonement.
- **Purging sin**—Numbers 25:1-15. Israel committed whoredom with the daughters of Moab and idolatry with their god, Baalpeor. While Moses and the congregation wept in intercession before the tabernacle, Zimri, a Simeonite prince, blatantly walked through the camp with a Midianite woman, Cozbi, to his tent to indulge in sensual sin. Phinehas, Aaron’s grandson, took a javelin, followed them into the tent, killed them both and stayed a plague that had already claimed 24,000 lives. God rewarded Phinehas with a covenant of peace and an everlasting priesthood “...*Because he was zealous for his God, and made **atonement** for the children of Israel.*” (Num. 25:13)
- **Spoils of War**—Numbers 31:48-54. When Israel defeated the Midianites, they gave offerings of the spoils of war totaling 16,750 shekels of gold (over 650 pounds). As they presented it to Moses and Eleazar the priest, they called it “*An oblation for the Lord...to make an **atonement** for our souls before the Lord.*”
- **Restitution**—2 Sam. 21:1-7. After three years of severe famine, David inquired of the Lord why Israel was being punished. God cited King Saul’s violation of a treaty with the Gibeonites whom he slew without provocation. To rectify the grievance, David sent this message, “*What shall I do for you? And wherewith shall I make the **atonement**...?*” The Gibeonites requested that seven of Saul’s descendants be given to them for execution. David consented and the famine was lifted.

► **The Anti-type of Atonement**

God instituted **the Day of Atonement** to limit access to the Holy of Holies and thus prevent fatal priesthood errors from re-occurring (Lev. 10:1-3; 16:1-2, 34). This annual ordinance was observed on the 10th day of the 7th month (Tisri on the Jewish calendar). The highly symbolic events of the Day of Atonement typify Christ’s atoning work on the cross:

- Aaron, the High Priest, wore a linen outfit instead of the spectacular garments he normally donned. (Ex. 28:4-43, Lev. 16:4) Linen, a plain, simple cloth, speaks of approaching God's presence with simplicity and humility. (2 Chr. 7:14, Ja. 4:6-10) This linen was probably white, symbolic of righteousness. (Rev. 19:8)
- Next, Aaron offered a bullock to atone for himself and his house (Lev. 16:6)—something Jesus, our great High Priest, didn't need to do since He was sinless. (Heb. 7:26-28)
- Two goats were then presented before the Lord. Aaron cast lots to determine which goat would die as a sin offering and which goat would live *"To make an atonement...and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness."* (Lev. 16:7-10) The Urim and Thummim, also translated *"the sacred lots"* (Ex. 28:30), were apparently two precious stones used by the High Priest to ascertain God's will in this and other matters. Both of the goats pre-figured Christ. The slain goat represents how Jesus, as our substitute, paid the penalty of our sin (death) and satisfied the demands of justice. The scapegoat represents how Jesus bore our sins and separated them from us *"As far as the East is from the West."* (Ps. 103:12) The term scapegoat comes from the Hebrew word *azazel* which appropriately means *"the goat of departure."*
- As Aaron entered the Holy of Holies, he took a censer full of coals and had *"His hands full of sweet incense"* to burn so the smoke would cover the mercy seat. (Lev. 16:12-13) The incense *"beaten small"* represents how we should approach the presence of God with a broken, contrite heart (Ps. 51:17). The smoking incense speaks of worship and prayer ascending to God's throne (Ps. 141:2, Rev. 5:8).
- After this, the blood of both the bull and the slain goat was taken behind the veil and sprinkled once upon and seven times before the mercy seat. (Lev. 16:14-15) The mercy seat was the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark contained, among other items, the tablets of stone inscribed with the Ten Commandments. Consequently, as God hovered over the mercy seat to commune with Aaron, He didn't see His people through the broken law. Instead, He viewed them through the sprinkled blood.
- No one else was permitted in the tabernacle while Aaron went *"To make an atonement in the holy place."* (Lev. 16:17) This emphasizes that Christ alone is our mediator with God. (1 Tim. 2:5) No other man can do for us what Jesus did when He atoned for our sins.
- Finally, Aaron laid his hands on the head of the scapegoat and confessed over it the corporate sins of Israel. A double transfer took place—the sins of Israel were transferred to the goat; the purity of the goat was transferred to Israel. This is typical of how Jesus was *"Made to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."* (2 Cor. 5:21) Our guilt was transferred to Him; His innocence was imparted to us! Once this was accomplished, a "fit man" led the scapegoat outside the camp of Israel where it *"[Bore] upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited."* (Lev. 16:21- 22) The Holy Spirit is the "fit man" who guided Jesus to His divine destiny at Calvary outside Jerusalem where He *"[Bore] our sins in His body on the tree."* (See Is. 53:4-5, 12, Heb. 13:12-13, 1 Pt. 2:24)



All of the various atonements of the Old Testament were types and shadows of the New Covenant provisions we now enjoy. Jesus is the anti-type (the fulfillment of what those types prefigured) of atonement. Now it is no longer necessary to offer bullocks, goats, rams, sheep, pigeons and turtledoves. In fact, to do so would be a complete waste of time because, *"It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins."* (Heb. 10:4) The Psalmist David, a man ahead of his time, recognized this and proclaimed to God, *"For Thou desirest not sacrifices; else I would give it; Thou delightest not in burnt offering."* (Ps. 51:16) The writer of Hebrews echoes these sentiments, *"In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin Thou hast had no pleasure."* (Heb. 10:6) Instead of relying on frequently offered animal sacrifices to cover our sins, we are now *"Sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**...For by **one** offering he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified."* (Heb. 10:10, 14)

The sacrifices and atonements of Judaism are therefore rendered obsolete and ineffective since Jesus fulfilled them all when God “*Sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*” (1 Jn. 4:10) No wonder Paul wrote, “*Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus; Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God.*” (Ro. 3:24-25) As beneficiaries of the New Covenant, the finished work of Calvary is all the atonement we’ll ever need!

📖 ► Advancing Atonement

Jesus fulfilled the Day of Atonement by becoming “*The propitiation for our sins.*” (1 Jn. 2:2) Propitiation is translated from the Greek word *hilasterion* meaning “*an atoning victim, or mercy seat.*” Jesus made personal atonement for our sins and became our blood-sprinkled mercy seat. He not only fulfilled the Law, He advanced atonement by providing a perpetual covering for sin—the permanent application of His blood. While atonement temporarily covered sin, the human heart remained unchanged. The New (and improved) Testament offers the believer the remission (removal) of sins and the new birth which imparts a new, divine nature. (Mt. 26:28, Jn. 3:3-8, 2 Cor. 5:17, 2 Pt. 1:4)



The author of Hebrews uses the adjective “*better*” 13 times to describe the superiority of the New Testament. (1:4; 6:9; 7:7; 7:19; 7:22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16; 11:35; 11:40; 12:24) Obviously, Jesus drastically improved the inferior, ritualistic, ceremony-laden Law of Moses. Since no one could fully live up to it, the Mosaic code, to a great degree, produced curses and condemnation. Jesus advanced the concept of atonement from a temporary covering for sin (that had to be re-applied since men repeatedly violated God’s law) to a once-and-for-all atoning sacrifice on the cross (which provides the permanent removal of sin once it is repented of and forgiven). Atonements enabled God to tolerate mankind, but did little to effectively address, much less correct, the sin problem. Men’s hearts remained unchanged—as vile as they were prior to the atonement’s application. So atonements were the equivalent of placing a Band-Aid on cancer. While they temporarily improved the external appearance, beneath the surface the inherently sinful nature of man still festered. Putting a fresh coat of paint on a rotten board may enhance its appearance, but the rotteness remains. Herein lies the inferiority of the Old Will.

God’s law loomed above fallen man as an unattainable goal until Jesus came and reformed the whole system. (Heb. 9:9-10) Instead of a temporary covering for sin, He provides the permanent remission of sins. (Mt. 26:28) Instead of the law written on tables of stone, God said, “*I will put My laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts.*” (Heb. 8:10, See 2 Cor. 3:3) Jesus, through the new birth, subdues the carnal nature and imparts the divine nature, “*Which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness.*” (Eph. 4:24) Now we don’t merely have a slaughtered animal’s blood as a sin-covering. Quite the contrary, our sins have been eradicated by the eternally vital blood of Christ. This divine blood not only covers us, but flows through our spirit continually. (Jn. 6:53-55) No wonder Hebrews 9:13-14 proclaims, “*For if the blood of bulls and goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.*” Considering the glorious benefits of the New Covenant, how supremely blessed we are to live on this side of the cross.