

Defining the Atonement

The Atonement has become a term with many theological implications. It is not just merely a biblical word with a single idea, but has become a term which describes *“the whole scope of Christ’s saving work.”* It is a word describing the salvific or redemptive results arising from Jesus death. Atonement puts forth the idea of reconciliation between God and mankind, and this accomplished solely by the work of God in Christ’s sacrifice. Many have used the description of “at-one-ment” to describe the result of atonement brought about between God and mankind. It therefore has emphasis on the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. It is an English word used by translators in both an Old and New Testaments. The two Old Testament Hebrew words commonly translated as *“atonement,”* [kippur 3725], and [kaphar 3722] carry with them the idea of *“expiation”* (to remove offense or guilt) or to *“cover over.”*

- 3725 – **kippur** – ; expiation, -atonement.
- 3722 – **kaphar** - ; to cover, to expiate or condone, to placate or cancel:-- appease, make (an atonement, cleanse, disannul, forgive, be merciful, pacify, pardon, purge (away), put off, (make) reconcile(-liation).

The New Testament word normally translated as *“propitiation”* is the Greek [hilasterion 2435] and also carries with it the idea of *“expiation”* (to remove offense or guilt) or to *“cover over.”* In fact, the Greek term actually holds a more personal meaning to the means of expiation, namely that of *“an atoning victim”* or the actual sacrifice of atonement.

- 2435 – **hilasterion** - ; an expiatory (place or thing), an atoning victim, or (specially) the lid of the Ark (in the Temple):--mercy seat, propitiation.

In summary of the use of the biblical words, we can say that although the meaning of the words themselves is rather clear, the idea or concept of the atonement has taken on a theological meaning used to refer to the *“the whole scope of Christ’s saving work.”* In this scope of meaning, there are words which are frequently used to describe the nature, quality and character of the atonement. This is because Christ’s work is so profound, that the Bible uses many terms to describe it. These would be but are not limited to words like;

- **Substitutionary** – in the place of, *“Christ died in our place.”*
- **Vicarious** – in our place, for us, substitution implied personally, *“Christ died for us.”*
- **Propitiatory** – appeasement or satisfaction of God’s wrath toward sin, *“Christ satisfied God’s divine justice and paid the actual debt of our sin.”*
- **Expiatory** – the remove of guilt, *“Christ cancelled out or released us from the debt of sin.”*
- **Justification** – a legal declaration of righteousness, *“Christ justified us before God’s court on the basis of His own merit.”*
- **Sacrifice** – the personal cost to Christ was death in our place, *“Christ was the actual victim of divine justice, he was the sacrifice that died for us.”*
- **Reconciliation** – the restoration of relationship of mankind to God, *“Christ reconciled us to God and repaired the alienation we once had with Him.”*
- **Redemption** - to buy back, to pay the redemption price, *“Christ paid the price demanded by divine justice for our sins.”*
- **Salvific** – of salvation or according to salvation, saving quality, *“Christ saved us.”*

All of these terms deal with and relate to the alienation that has taken place between God and man because of sin. *Sin has brought about the desperate need of mankind to be reconciled to God, lest they be destroyed forever away from the presence of God.* The Bible plainly sets forth the doctrine that man as a sinner is guilty of breaking the law of God, of violating His righteousness. God has, therefore, judicially delivered man over to his own will so that

corruption has entered in, whereby he has lost all desire to serve God.

Romans 5:12 - 12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and **death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned** NASB

This means that man has no ability to save himself, for he does not realize his need nor has he the righteousness to provide atonement for his sin.

1 Corinthians 2:14 - 14 But **a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them**, because they are spiritually appraised. NASB

The atonement is what God has done to reconcile us, and to deal with God's alienation *from us* on account of our sin. God, by taking away sin, removes the ground of this alienation, and peace with God is the effect.

Romans 6:23 - 23 **For the wages of sin is death**, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. NASB

God was not obligated to save us, redeem us or do anything on our behalf. He was the offended party, and we were and are worthy of eternal wrath because of sin. ***But God because of His great love and mercy, freely chose to redeem us from that which we could not redeem ourselves.***

Grace is favor that God gives, that is unmerited by the recipient, and God is in no way obligated to give it but is free to do as He pleases.

Ephesians 2:4-5 - 4 **But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us**, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), NASB

It must be understood that this saving work of God in the atonement is in fact wholly God's work. The Scripture plainly declares that God reconciled us to Himself, it was His doing.

2 Corinthians 5:18 - 18 Now **all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ**, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, NASB

People cannot save themselves from the desperate plight of sin, because this would cost them the ultimate payment of eternal separation from God. Therefore, if God does not act to save us, we will be hopelessly lost. ***The atonement is what God has done to save us.*** It is the historical events and objective facts of the actual sacrifice that God made on our behalf. The sacrifice of Jesus was the payment of our sin debt and did in fact redeem us and purify us by the removal of our guilt.

Titus 2:14 - 14 who gave Himself for us, **that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession**, zealous for good deeds. NASB

We were, by this atonement sanctified or cleansed from the corruption of sin so that we could be received into the holy presence of the infinitely pure God of Heaven.

Hebrews 10:10, 14 - 10 By this will **we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all**..... 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. NASB

Now then let us marvel together at the great things God has done! Let us see the desperate plight from which we have been snatched by the life and death of God Himself! What amazing love is this, that God would come and die in our place.

1 John 4:10 - 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that **He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins**. NASB

It is this amazing love of God that has motivated Him to such actions! And by these things He has in fact worked all of these great works of salvation and reconciliation for us. Consider how Scripture describes these things. They are very profound!

Romans 5:8-10 - 8 But **God demonstrates His own love toward us**, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died **for us**. 9 Much more then, having now **been justified by His blood**, we shall be **saved from the wrath of God** through Him. 10 For if while **we were enemies, we were reconciled to God** through the death of His Son, much more, **having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life**. NASB

Let us respond in an appropriate manner with thanksgiving and praise! Let us rejoice in what God has done for us through Christ Jesus, and give Him the glory due Him!

The Necessity of the Atonement

When we speak about the “*necessity*” of the atonement, it is important to realize that there is more than one issue at hand. *First, mankind has a great “need” to be saved because of sin, and he has an utter inability to save himself.* If God does not act to save mankind from this desperate plight, mankind would be hopelessly lost and destined to perish. This is because of the Holiness of God. God cannot allow sin to go unpunished, His justice will not allow it. If He did He would not be truly just or righteous. But He is in fact righteous, and His nature demands the just satisfaction of the consequences for sin.

Deuteronomy 27:26 - 26 **'Cursed is he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.'**

And all the people shall say, 'Amen.' NASB

Romans 1:18-20 - 18 For **the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men**, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, **so that they are without excuse.** NASB

Sin is a violation of the very nature of God which is expressed in the Law of God. By this Law, the whole world has become aware of its desperate plight before God and is now accountable to God.

Romans 3:19-20 - 19 Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, **that every mouth may be closed, and all the world may become accountable to God**; 20 because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; **for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin.** NASB

This is the reason why God gave the Law. It was to make it painfully obvious to us that we have violated God's nature continually, and this has brought death upon us and brought about our great need to be saved from the wrath of God.

Romans 7:12-13 - 12 So then, **the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.** 13 Therefore did that which is good become *a cause of death* for me? May it never be! Rather it was sin, in order that it might be shown to be sin by effecting my death through that which is good, that **through the commandment sin might become utterly sinful.** NASB

The Law also teaches us that God's standard of righteousness is unattainable for sinners. *This purpose of the Law is to show us our great need for justification before God's holiness.*

Because we are in such a desperate plight, the Law leads us to the obvious conclusion, that we need a Savior.

Galatians 3:19-22 - 19 **Why the Law then?** It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the agency of a mediator, **until the seed should come** to whom the promise had been made. 20 Now a mediator is not for one *party only*; whereas God is *only* one. 21 Is the Law then contrary to the promises of God? May it never be! For **if a law had been given which was able to impart life, then righteousness would indeed have been based on law.** 22 But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. NASB

Therefore when we see our utter inability to measure up to or keep the Law of God, we are driven to a hopeless and desperate state in ourselves to meet God's demands of righteousness.

This then teaches us that we must look outside of ourselves to Christ Jesus to be saved.

Galatians 3:23-24 - 23 But before faith came, we were kept in custody under the law, being shut up to the faith which was later to be revealed. 24 Therefore **the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith.** NASB

Therefore is absolutely necessary that mankind have a way to become justified before God. This now is why the atonement is necessary for mankind to be justified before God. Without it mankind is guilty under God's law and hopelessly awaiting His fearful judgment which His nature demands. God cannot be violated by sin without reacting to it according to His nature. Consider how John Murray has expressed this.... “*Sin is the contradiction of God and He must react against it with holy indignation. This is to say that sin MUST meet with divine judgment. It is this inviolable sanctity of God's law, the immutable dictate of holiness and the unflinching*

demand of justice, that makes mandatory the conclusion that salvation from sin without expiation and propitiation is inconceivable. It is this principle that explains the sacrifice of the Lord of glory, the agony of Gethsemane, and the abandonment of the accursed tree. It is this principle that under girds the great truth that God is just and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus. For in the work of Christ the dictates of holiness and the demands of justice have been fully vindicated. God set Him forth to be a propitiation to declare His righteousness.”

These ideas illustrate another aspect of the “*necessity*” of the atonement. ***Secondly, if God decides to save mankind, there becomes a “need” for the means by which God will do it.*** Because mankind cannot provide a way for himself to be justified before God, having violated Gods Law and become accountable to him, God must now act to save mankind, or they will perish. Now concerning this matter, there are two views about the necessity of the atonement.

- **Hypothetical Necessity** – This view was held by good men in the church such as Augustine, Aquinas, and even Calvin for many centuries. It is the idea that God has no necessity to save mankind by means of the vicarious substitution of Christ, but could have used other means to bring about atonement. But God in His wisdom chose to use the means of the atonement of Christ, to save mankind because it was the way in which the greatest number of advantages concur and in which grace is most marvelously exhibited. In other words, the Cross was not absolutely necessary to be the means of salvation, but the means that God chose to use by His own sovereign decree.
- **Absolute Necessity** – This view is the classic protestant view held by such men as Turretin, RL Dabney, Berkhof, Murray and both A.A. and Charles Hodge. In this view, the atonement is seen as necessary because God had purposed by His free and sovereign grace to save mankind in His decree, and because of His perfect nature, vicarious sacrifice was the only means by which it could be brought about. Murray states, “*while it was not inherently necessary for God to save, yet, since salvation had been purposed, it was necessary to secure this salvation through a satisfaction that could be rendered only substitutionary sacrifice and blood-bought redemption.*”

Concerning these two views of the necessity of the atonement one might ask, why does it matter? The answer to this question is of paramount importance, as to see the infinite value of the Cross of our blessed Savior. Why did Christ die? Was it absolutely necessary? Could some other person have achieved this great salvation? Might we have been saved some other way, or was this just a “*hypothetical*” set of circumstances that God chose to use of which He had many choices? On these questions we shall look to the Scripture. It is rather clear in the text of Scripture that the atonement of Christ was in fact the only means by which salvation could be obtained. In Hebrews chapter 2 we see that in order for Christ to “*make propitiation*” or satisfaction for divine justice, and also to be merciful to mankind, “***He had to be made like His brethren in all things.***”

Hebrews 2:17 - 17 Therefore, **He had to be made like His brethren in all things**, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. NASB

More than this, because of the infinite perfections of God, we needed a high priest that was undefiled and without blemish so that He could die for the sins of others and not His own sins.

Hebrews 7:26-27 - 26 For **it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens;** 27 who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the *sins* of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. NASB

Also, we needed an undefiled high priest who could enter the tabernacle in heaven, and sprinkle the mercy seat there, in the presence of the Holy God, once for all.

Hebrews 9:23-24 - 23 Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but **the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these**. 23 For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, **but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us;** NASB

The sacrifice of Christ was absolutely necessary because it is impossible for the blood of goats and bulls to take away sins.

Hebrews 10:4-7 - For **it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins**. 5 Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, "SACRIFICE AND OFFERING THOU HAST NOT DESIRED, **BUT A BODY THOU HAST PREPARED FOR ME; 6 IN WHOLE BURNT OFFERINGS AND sacrifices FOR SIN THOU HAST TAKEN NO PLEASURE**. 7 "THEN I SAID, 'BEHOLD, I HAVE COME (IN THE ROLL OF THE BOOK IT IS WRITTEN OF ME) TO DO THY WILL, O GOD.'" NASB

Because of God's inviolable holiness and perfection, in order to be accepted by Him a person must be holy and righteous. Because all mankind have sinned, they cannot therefore be accepted by God without a justification **brought about by God Himself**. He must be "*the justifier*," and this justification must be of such quality that it actually provides and infinitely perfect righteousness for the person being justified. This can only be provided by a vicarious substitute, since mankind can in no way become this. This is why the redemption in Christ is absolutely necessary.

Romans 3:25-26 - 25 whom **God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood** through faith. *This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;* 26 for **the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness** at the present time, **that He might be just and the justifier** of the one who has faith in Jesus. NASB

Further, this atonement is absolutely necessary to be the supreme display of the love of God and the costly value of it. It is the greatest demonstration of the love of God and this love could not have been displayed apart from the infinitely valuable price of the death of His perfect Son.

1 John 4:10 - 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that **He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins**. NASB

If there could have been *any* other way than the sacrifice of Jesus to save sinners, surely God would have answered Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane!

Mark 14:35-36 - 35 And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell to the ground, and *began* to pray **that if it were possible, the hour might pass Him by**. 36 And He was saying, "Abba! Father! All things are possible for Thee; **remove this cup from Me**; yet not what I will, but what Thou wilt." NASB

Of all of the reasons why it is absolutely necessary that Christ's Cross be the only means of propitiation for sinners, it is because God, in His infinite wisdom and omniscience, has set forth in the divine decree that it should be so. In other words, God has decreed that salvation be wrought by this means, and this makes it absolutely necessary because God does not deliberate in moments of time in His consideration of decrees, but rather in perfect omniscience decrees that which is perfect in one simple and *eternal* act.

1 Peter 1:20 - 20 For **He was foreknown before the foundation of the world**, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you NASB

Praise God, the sacrifice of Christ is sufficient to meet all of these demands of God's holiness, and the Cross does provide for us a righteousness before God.

Hebrews 9:13-14 - 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 **how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God**, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? NASB

The demands of divine justice have been satisfied by Christ, and sin has been put away.

Hebrews 9:26 - 26 Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now **once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself**. NASB

Let us therefore see and affirm that it was absolutely necessary for Jesus to die in our place, and for us, and this to be a propitiation for our sins. In light of this, let us consider the infinite value of His death, and may His blood be to us what it truly is, "*precious blood!*"

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