

It's Covered

Dr. Luke describes the final days and hours of Jesus in a succinct manner. Before His betrayal in the garden of Gethsemane, by one of His very own disciples, Jesus gathers the twelve together to celebrate the Passover and to give new meaning and significance to the bread and cup that they share. Jesus is the final perfect passover lamb that takes away the sin of the world. Luke 22:14-20 details the institution of the Lord's Supper. The bread represents Jesus' body which is given for us and the cup represents the blood which was poured out for us. The Lord is leaving this powerful picture as a "remembrance" for His followers (Lk 22:19; see also 1 Cor 11:23-26). It is to be a regular reminder of the atoning work Jesus would accomplish at the cross for those He came to save.

C.H. Spurgeon once described the atoning power of Jesus' blood this way:

See how red your guilt is. Mark the scarlet stain. If you were to wash your soul in the Atlantic Ocean, you might incarnadine every wave that washes all its shores, and yet the crimson spots of your transgression would still remain. But plunge into the "fountain filled with blood, drawn from Immanuel's veins," and in an instant you are whiter than snow. Every speck, spot, and stain of sin is gone, and gone forever.

In their book, *Sing!*, Keith and Kristyn Getty assert that "One of the ways the Word of Jesus can dwell in us richly is for us to sing it to one another... Fundamentally, we're to sing about God, revealed in Christ and supremely in His suffering and His glory, since that is what the Word of God is all about (Luke 24:26-27)." In the words of their well-known song "In Christ Alone", listeners encounter the biblical themes of propitiation, sanctification, and substitutionary atonement. Reaching a little further back, Isaac Watts penned a beautiful hymn in 1709 entitled "Jesus My Great High Priest", focusing on the perfect priesthood and eternal sacrifice of Jesus. In verse one, the writer composed these words that communicate these wonderfully powerful truths:

Jesus, my great High Priest, Offered His blood and died; My guilty conscience seeks no sacrifice beside; His powerful blood did once atone, And now it pleads before the Throne.

The truths, poetically penned and musically accompanied, likely had their origin in the reading of Hebrews 9-10, as the artists' hearts were stirred to worship on account of Jesus' priestly sacrifice. In turn, the case that the author of Hebrews has built to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus comes to a crescendo in those same

two chapters, as he invites his audience to imagine the activities of the earthly tabernacle and wholly embrace Jesus as the fulfillment of all of the sacrificial activity on the Day of Atonement.

After a lengthy exposition that results in a mountain of evidence supporting the superiority of Jesus over angels, Moses, the patriarchs, the Levitical priesthood, and so on, the author leads his readers into the tabernacle, in order to give them an eyewitness account of the power of Christ's atonement. He has already communicated that, as Christians, they possess a better priesthood (Heb 7:1-28) and a better covenant (Heb 8:1-13). Now he aims to show that they have a better sacrifice (Heb 9:1-10:18) anchored in the efficacy of Christ's atonement. He does not want his readers to miss the personal significance that Jesus' better sacrifice carries for each one of them, so he takes his audience on a virtual tour of the earthly tabernacle, giving special attention to the description of the Holy Place, to which only the priests had access, and the Most Holy Place, which only the high priest had permission to enter once a year on the Day of Atonement. This description is to remind them that under the old covenant, access to God was limited to one day a year and through one mediator, the high priest.

It is important to note that, in its broadest sense, the meaning of atonement can be defined as "reparation for an offense or injury" or "to cover someone's debt." The Jewish audience of Hebrews was certainly familiar with the concept, as it was witness to the bloody sin offerings that accompanied events like Passover and the Day of Atonement. Moreover, the author of Hebrews warned his readers numerous times of the danger of drifting back into their former, impotent religious practices which included animal sacrifices. The awareness of the importance of atonement was undoubtedly a part of their old covenant practices and, consequently, anchored in the text of the Old Testament. Therefore, the text is intertwined with Old Testament quotes that point to the inadequacy of the old covenant and its sacrificial system and the superiority of the new covenant and its power to truly forgive and remove sins. The author stresses that the old covenant had legitimacy solely because of the blood that was shed and sprinkled for the purpose of purification, by quoting Exodus 24:8. God "commanded" a substitutionary death identified by the shedding of blood. Author and professor Thomas Schreiner writes: "... to be forgiven of sin, as the Day of Atonement indicates, blood had to be spilt. A death had to occur." The innocent took the punishment for the guilty and became the propitiation for sin, temporarily appeasing God's wrath and accomplishing reconciliation. The context reveals that Jesus' priestly work is better,

because His sacrifice was offered “once for all ... not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal salvation” (Heb 9:12). The text also points out the quality of Jesus’ sacrifice by quoting Psalm 40:6-8. The Father asked the Son to offer up His body and Jesus obeyed the Father’s will. While animal sacrifices were provisional, mandated, and ineffective in saving, Jesus’ self-offering was eternal, obedient, and successful in sanctifying. The efficacy of Jesus’ sacrifice to accomplish sanctification and obedience, while providing propitiation is further underscored in Hebrews 10:16-17, as the author quotes Jeremiah 31:33-34. The new covenant established in Jesus’ substitutionary death removes sin and writes God’s law on the hearts of His people (Heb 10:16). It causes God’s wrath to pass over the guilt of many, crash upon the Innocent One, and causes sins to be remembered no more (Heb 10:17). With so great a salvation made available through the better Priest and His better sacrifice, the author ends chapter 10 with a somber warning. Coupling Deuteronomy 32:35-36 and Habakkuk 2:3, the author warns his readers not to neglect so great a salvation bought with the precious blood of Jesus. The death and victorious life of Jesus make commitment to the gospel a matter of life and death for the audience of Hebrews! God will severely “judge his people” (Heb 10:30) for throwing away their “confidence, which has a great reward” (Heb 10:35). In contrast, and with great encouragement, the author reminds them through the words of Habakkuk, that God’s promised rest is certain and unending compared to their time of earthly exile.

In chapters 9 and 10, the writer of Hebrews breaks into his final theological climax. He systematically demonstrates Jesus’ better sacrifice by showing that it leads believers into the very presence of God, completely and finally deals with humanity’s sin, and gives hope and confidence that promised rest is certain. Working our fingers to the bone can never atone for what we have done. So, Jesus accomplished salvation and offers forgiveness for free!

Hebrews 9:11-14 (NIV) - *“But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but **he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.** The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself*

unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"