

Atonement

By Dennis Cornish

The Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms defines what atonement is and breaks it down into two English words, "at" and "one". It is the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, which effects salvation as the reestablishment of the relationship between God and sinners. This sacrificial act is what enables our reconciliation with God, and the word reconciliation comes from the Latin, "*reconciliatio*", which is a "bringing together again". It is the key image of our salvation that was brought about by Jesus through His death and resurrection.

The Apostle Paul emphasized the importance to Christians of Jesus' atoning work through His crucifixion by declaring that he was determined to know nothing save Christ and Him crucified. The doctrine of the Atonement is central to all Christian theology.

The concept of the need for atonement reaches back to and is found throughout the Old Testament where we read of all the laws, their requirements, and the resultant sacrifices that had to be made for the sins of God's people against their infinitely holy Creator.

The best way to view them is in light of the fact that the entirety of the sacrificial system prefigures and points to the coming of Christ and the necessity for the atonement of sin for our reconciliation with God who cannot even look upon sin. The Old Testament sacrifices and their ongoing repetition demonstrate man's inability to meet the demands of a holy God and the inefficacy of the blood of bulls and goats. We have no gift valuable enough, no work righteous enough to atone for our own sin. It highlights our need for a Savior and His effectual atonement, effectual in that when He died, He told us in no uncertain terms, "*It is finished*". This is also known as the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, and it is the very heart of grace. You may have also heard the term "propitiation" which is a theological term for making atonement for sin by making an acceptable sacrifice. Christ was our propitiation, turning aside the wrath of God by taking our sin upon Himself, fully satisfying the demands of a holy God. With Jesus' sacrifice, God is satisfied with the price that has been paid for our sin and our moral obligation has been paid in full. In Galatians 3 Paul makes this aspect of the

atonement clear when he says: *"Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us..."* Jesus Himself said, *"I lay down My life for My sheep"* (John 10:15). No one took His life, He laid it down, and this was all a part of our triune God's plan from all eternity. Jesus died on behalf of our sin; He did not die for Himself, but for us. He took our place when He fulfilled the role of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. God has always, and will always, be in control, He is Sovereign. All that being said, we must remember that atonement is conditioned upon our meeting the criteria of accepting Christ as our Savior in true faith and belief, living our life in obedience to all that He would have from us, while yet living in a fallen world with our own imperfections. By the grace of God, we are saved.

The Biblical teaching that the Suffering Servant must atone for the sins of His people fits into a broader theological and Biblical context that establishes the need for His atonement, describes what it accomplishes, and explains the Lord's intent in it. To help us get a better understanding of the atonement and its context, we need to continually look closely at what Scripture says about the atonement, praying to God for wisdom, discernment, and comprehension. Something of the necessity of the atonement can be gleaned from etymology, for example, the Latin word we translate as "cross" is the root term behind the English word, "crux" and "crucial", both of which are used to refer to that which is essential. Christianity is a faith solidly grounded in the cross, for without the crucifixion and the resurrection, we have no gospel (1 Cor. 15:1–4). It is a Christian imperative that the crucifixion, (the Messiah's atoning death), is a non-negotiable fact because at its core, it is essential to the Christian faith, and this idea is found throughout the Bible (Gen. 3:15; Matt. 16:21; Rev. 5). The principal message of Scripture is the kingdom of God that has been put in place and consummated by and in Christ Jesus. The entire Bible points towards and explains the significance of the cross. As Pastor Nate has told us in his sermons, despite the centrality of the cross and the atonement, the preaching of the cross is neglected in many churches today. In the wider culture, it could be said that most people believe in "justification by death," or in other words, the idea that all people are going to heaven unless they are really, really bad (like Adolf Hitler, remembering all the while, we are all closer to being like Hitler than we are being like Christ), and their false premise that we all get to heaven by simply dying (the

position of the Universalist Church). The neglect of the cross in the church and the popular world view of life in eternity, indicate that too many people lack an understanding of the absolute necessity of the atonement in God's plan. We forget that it is fundamental to the character of God's holiness, that He requires the sacrifice of death as a payment for sin. It is precisely because of the Lord's holiness and the immense level of betrayal, which we label as sin, that atonement is required for us to be reconciled to God. God is righteous and His justice is perfect. Our Heavenly Father condemned sin in the flesh of His Son because it was the only way He could rescue us without compromising His holy righteousness and the justice that He requires (Rom. 3:21–26; 8:3).

We find healing in the Atonement and the gospel proclaims it is the only way to obtain forgiveness, redemption, a right standing with God, and an eternal life abiding in Him.

Regarding the Ministry of Reconciliation, 2 Corinthians 5:17-19 tells us:

"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation."

Praise God that this is so for those who are called ---