

Atonement and the Cross of Christ

God's Nature: The Basis of Atonement

Lesson #1 for October 4, 2008

Scriptures: Genesis 21:33; Psalms 24:1,2; 90:2; 100:3; 118:1-4; Isaiah 40:25; 57:15; Romans 5:8; 8:37-39; Hebrews 4:13; 1 Timothy 6:16; 1 John 3:20.

1. During this quarter we are going to focus on “the atonement.” What does the atonement mean to you? Could you describe the atonement in simple, basic English without using any theological jargon?
2. Our world has been almost universally “given over” to sin. (Romans 3:23; Ecclesiastes 7:20; 1 Kings 8:46) God claims that every person born on this earth is His child. He loves every one of us, and He wants each one of us to be saved. If God loves us and claims us as His children, what needs to happen for us to be saved?
3. The God who made us, loves us; and He wants us to come home to live with Him forever. (Psalms 24:1,2; 100:3; 118:1-4)
4. God will do everything He can—short of violating our freedom—to save us. His goal is to restore the harmony that once existed in heaven, and He wants as many of His children as possible to share in that harmony. That harmony is sometimes called “at-one-ment” or “atonement.”
5. What is the biblical meaning of “atonement”? There are many theological terms that have a variety of meanings. Consider the following from the *SDA Bible Dictionary*:

Atonement. [Hebrew: *kippurîm*, “a covering,” literally, “coverings,” from the verb *kaphar*, “to cover,” “to make atonement”; Greek: *katallage*, “reconciliation.”] A term appearing in the OT, usually in connection with various sacrifices and services of the ceremonial system. The term appears in the NT but once and only in the KJV (Rom 5:11 [compare this verse in more modern translations]), where it describes the state of reconciliation the sinner attains through the sacrifice and priestly ministry of Christ. **The English word “atonement” originally meant “at-one-meant,” that is, a state of being “at one,” or in agreement. Accordingly, “atonement” denoted harmony of relationship, and when there had been estrangement this harmony would be the result of a process of reconciliation. Understood in terms of its original meaning, “atonement” properly denotes a state of reconciliation that terminated a state of estrangement, and was thus reasonably close in meaning to the Biblical terms it was used to translate.**

However, the word “atonement” has acquired the special, technical theological meaning of “propitiation” or “expiation,” and when so used implies that the sacrifice of Christ on the cross constituted reparation to an offended God. *This concept reflects the pagan idea of propitiating an offended deity in order to avert his anger and vengeance, and assumes that God must be reconciled to us.* Thus, today, the word “atonement” does not properly convey either its own original meaning—the state of being “at one”—or the sense of the Hebrew and Greek terms thus

translated.

As noted, the root ideas of *kaphar* and *kippurîm*, the Hebrew words translated “to make atonement” and “atonement,” are “to cover” and “covering.” When using these words in connection with the ceremonial system, the Bible writer assumes that the persons or things for which a “covering” is made—the persons or things “covered”—were common, “unclean,” or sinful in the sight of a righteous God, and thus not acceptable to Him. By reason of sin in general, and at times because of specific sins in particular, men are assumed to be in a state of estrangement from God. But the Bible writers present God as anxious that there shall be a reconciliation and show that He has provided the means by which it may be accomplished. **No change is necessary on His part in order to effect the reconciliation, but man in his natural state is a sinner who does not even desire to be reconciled, and a change is therefore necessary on his part. It is the sinner who must be “covered,” or reconciled to God, not God with respect to the sinner.**

The ritual system provided an objective illustration of how men may become reconciled to God. The blood of the sacrificial animals provided the objective covering (Lev 17:11), but this blood could not, in and of itself, actually cover the sinner (Heb 10:1,4,6,8,11). Only as by faith he saw in it a type of the blood of Christ and accepted the promise of divine grace thus represented was he actually “covered” and so reconciled to God (Hebrews 10:10,12,14-18). Forgiveness of sin and acceptance with God always accompanied the “covering” thus provided (Lev 4:20; Num 15:25; etc.). God was satisfied with the sincerity of purpose of the person or persons on whose behalf the “covering” was made, and entertained no further claims against them so long as they remained in accord with Him.

A few illustrations of the use of the word “atonement” in the OT will suffice to clarify its meaning. The sanctuary and its equipment were made out of common materials, and it was necessary to “cover,” or “make an atonement” for them, before they could be put to holy use (Exodus 29:36,37; 30:10; Lev 8:15; etc.). Aaron and his sons were common people, and they likewise had to be “covered” when set apart for the priesthood (Ex 29:35; Lev 8:34). A blood covering was also prescribed for the sins of the entire congregation (Lev 4:20; Num 15:25), for those of individuals (Lev 4:27-35; Num 15:28), and for various forms of ritual uncleanness (Lev 12:7,8; 14:18,20,53; 15:28). At the close of the annual round of ceremonial services, on a special “day of atonement” (Lev 16:21-28; Heb 10:1-3), a final “covering” for the accumulated uncleanness of the year was made for Aaron and his sons, the priests (Lev. 16:6,11,24), for the sanctuary and its furnishings (Lev. 16:16-20, 33,34), and for the people of Israel (Lev. 16:30,34). This typified the final and complete removal of sin from God’s universe.

In the NT, where the word “atonement” occurs only once (Rom 5:11) and that only in the *KJV*, the experience represented by *kaphar* and *kippurîm* is probably most closely described in the word “reconciliation.” The true “covering” has been provided by the precious blood of our Saviour, and reconciliation with God is possible through faith in Him (Rom 5:8-11; 2 Cor 5:17-19). (*SDA Bible Dictionary* - Article on Atonement)

6. **What is the implication of the idea of “covering” from the Old Testament? Does it suggest that our sins are “covered over” but that they are still there? Does that imply that our sins are no longer “visible” to God the Father? Are we still sinners “inside”?**
7. What did the children of Israel think happened to something or someone that was “covered” by the blood of the sacrifices? Does putting blood on something “cleanse” it? What would that mean? In ancient Israel, didn’t contact with blood or dead animals make one ritually “unclean”? (Leviticus 12:1-8; 15:16-30) Do we understand the “mechanism” of how that happened?
8. The “Day of Atonement” is called in Hebrew “*yom kippur*” - literally “the day of the lid.” *Yom Kippur* was the most important day in the religious year. Why would they call it “the day of the lid”? Why do we call it the “Day of Atonement”? What happened on that special day? Where was that special “lid” located? What else was in the Most Holy Place? God’s presence was above the “lid” of the “ark” or “box,” and the tables of stone with the ten commandments were under the lid.
9. The Day of Atonement is traditionally associated with the visit of the high priest to the most holy place where he sprinkled blood:

¹¹ When Aaron sacrifices the bull as the sin offering for himself and his family, ¹²he shall take a fire pan full of burning coals from the altar and two handfuls of fine incense and bring them into the Most Holy Place. ¹³There in the LORD’s presence he shall put the incense on the fire, and the smoke of the incense will hide the lid of the Covenant Box so that he will not see it and die. ¹⁴He shall take some of the bull’s blood and with his finger sprinkle it on the front of the lid and then sprinkle some of it seven times in front of the Covenant Box. (Leviticus 16:11-14, *GNB*)

Read what happened during the rest of the “Day of Atonement” in Leviticus 16:15-28.

10. It appears that the lid of the covenant box (or ark) was considered to be very holy, perhaps representing the presence of God Himself. Elsewhere, it is suggested that the presence of Yahweh was hovering above the “lid” of the covenant box. (Leviticus 16:2,13)
11. Clearly, that was a very symbolic gesture. What was it supposed to mean? Did the children of Israel go home on the evening of the Day of Atonement convinced that something of great importance had happened? The whole process of the “Day of Atonement” assumed that sins could be removed from someone and carried around. It also assumed that when the whole process was over, the sins would “get lost” somewhere in the wilderness when the scapegoat died or was eaten by wild animals.
12. In the New Testament, the only occurrence of the word “atonement” (in the *King James Version*) is found in Romans 5:11. As noted above, it is a translation of the word *katallage* which is the usual word for “reconciliation.” *Katallage* occurs many times in the New Testament and there is no adequate explanation for why it is translated as “atonement” only once in the Bible—in Romans 5:11.
13. Is there any connection between the Old Testament idea of “covering” and the New Testament idea of “reconciliation”?
14. Do either of those ideas represent your idea of salvation?
15. The Old English had the phrase “to one” people, that is, “to bring together” or “to reconcile” people who had been at odds. The process of bringing people together like that came to be known as “at-one-ment” or “atonement.”

16. In much later times, as we noted from the *SDA Bible Dictionary*, this word began to take on a “pagan” notion of appeasing an offended “god.” Does our God need to be appeased? The usual theological word for such an appeasement is “propitiation.” Why is that word used in the *King James Version* of Romans 3:25,26? Can you understand those verses in the *KJV*? Why do those verses talk about “God’s righteousness” three times?

17. This brings us to a discussion of the death of Jesus. Was the death of Jesus necessary to change God in some way? Did it change God’s attitude toward us? Or does it change us—if we let it? Did it change our legal standing before God? Someone felt so strongly about that issue that s/he independently changed the text of the *SDA Bible Commentary* in Romans and in Corinthians!

18. Did God ever suggest that He would not forgive us unless “Someone” “paid the price” for our sins? What would it “cost” to “pay for” our sins? Is the death of Jesus the only “price” acceptable? Why?

19. Remember Boso’s (also known as Bozo) question? Does his question sound like “justice”? Or does it sound like “justification”?

“What man would not be judged worthy of condemnation if he condemned the innocent in order to free the guilty?...For if he could not save sinners except by condemning the just, where is his omnipotence? But if he could, but would not, how are we to defend his wisdom and justice?” (*Cur Deus Homo?* - Anselm, 1033-1109)

20. Unfortunately, Anselm and the reformers who came much later did not give much thought to what all of that said about God. Their only question was, “What must I do to be saved?”

21. The Protestant Reformation was built on the idea that a legal transaction had to take place for God to “justly forgive” and “justify” sinners. Justification was and is considered to be the only requirement for salvation; so, this is a very important and crucial question.

22. So, does it really matter what we think about God? (Compare Romans 3:4)

We are not to think of God only as a judge, and to forget him as our loving Father. Nothing can do our souls greater harm than this; for our whole spiritual life will be molded by our conceptions of God’s character. *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 5, 1887 (*RH* 126:1:2); *Our High Calling* 176; *That I May Know Him* 262

23. Are we giving adequate attention to what we think about God and the implications of our understanding of the plan of salvation and what that says about God?

24. Mankind has lived for so many generations in fear of God. Is that why He has not been “able” to come back sooner?

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