

Atonement: Its Meaning and True Character

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The atoning character of the death of Christ is of transcendent importance.

No truth contained in Holy Scripture has suffered more from those who handle the Word of God deceitfully. We shall do well, therefore, to devote a chapter to it.

The word *atonement* is found only in the Old Testament. Its one occurrence in the New is a mistranslation. We refer to Romans 5: 11, where the margin of a reference Bible shows *reconciliation* as the alternative reading, and this latter is, without any question, the right translation.

In the Old Testament it is frequently used, and it is an interesting and significant fact that the Hebrew word for it — *kaphar* — is one which has as its root meaning *to cover*. This at once links it on with the whole burden of Scripture testimony that sinful man is exposed by his guilt to wrath and condemnation, and therefore needs that which will *cover* him in the sight of a holy God. The significance of this will, however, become plainer as we proceed.

Directly Adam fell and sin came into the world it became manifest that a guilty sinner needs covering. The sewing of the fig-leaf aprons and the hiding behind the trees of the garden proclaimed it as being the instinctive feeling of the guilty pair. Even more loudly did God's own action proclaim it when He made "coats of skins and clothed them" (Gen. 3: 21). *skins*, notice, which meant that death fell upon some animals that the sinful pair might be covered. Abel's faith seized this first revelation of the Divine way of covering a sinner, and hence in chapter 4 we read of his offering a firstling of his flock when drawing near to God. Covered by the death of that offering, "he obtained witness that he was righteous" (Heb. 11: 4).

Travelling down the course of time we reach the flood; and here again the need of a covering when God's judgment is poured forth was very evident. In the ark Noah and his family were covered. Gopher wood was all around them, and not a crack was left, for the instructions were to "pitch it within and without with pitch" (Gen. 6: 14). Significantly enough the very word used in the Hebrew for "pitch" is one closely related to the word for "covering" or "atonement." The covering in Noah's case was *complete*. Yet even so he did not recommence his career on the cleansed earth apart from sacrifices of blood (see Gen. 8: 20).

Subsequent to Noah the patriarchal age was reached, and we find these men building their altars

to the Lord and offering sacrifices as the basis of their relationship with Him. Judging by the record in Genesis it appears, however, that as time went on the energy of their faith declined and such sacrifices became less and less frequent. Abraham was far more active in this matter than any of the others. They had no definite command from God as to it, but they evidently acted in the light of Noah's great sacrifice of the seventh of the clean beasts and clean fowls — those odd ones over and above the three couples — provided for in the Divine instructions.

Still following the course of time, we reach the era of Israel's servitude in Egypt, and during this period of eclipse we have no record of any sacrifices at all. Directly, however, the Lord commissioned Moses to deliver them the word was, "Let us go . . . that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God" (Ex. 3: 18), and this led up to the sacrifice which stands out pre-eminently in the Old Testament — that of the lamb on the original Passover night as recorded in Exodus 12. Here again, clearly, the firstborn of Israel were *covered* when the stroke of judgment fell upon the firstborn of Egypt.

From this point the Divine scheme of atonement by blood came fully into the light — as fully, that is, as it is found in Old Testament scripture. Brought out of Egypt and in the wilderness the law was given to Israel, and sacrifices of blood were the chief corner-stone of the whole legal system then instituted. As the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews puts it, "Almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission" (Heb. 9: 22).

The use of the word *almost* in the verse just quoted would lead us to expect a few exceptions to the general rule. One such exception was found in the law concerning the taking of a census in Israel, as given to us in Exodus 30: 11-16. Here, instead of the shedding of blood, the offering by every man of a small silver coin was commanded. Read this passage carefully for it affords very helpful evidence as to the true meaning of atonement.

If a man was to be numbered amongst the children of Israel, and in that way be acknowledged by God as one of His people, he could only be so on the ground of there having been made an atonement for his soul — that is, as a sinner his soul must be covered ere it came under the Divine eye. The half-shekel of silver was the coin appointed as the "atonement money." Rich and poor alike had to offer it, for all alike were sinners with no difference between them, and it was not a question of the intrinsic value of the coin.

Had that been the point then incalculable wealth would not have been sufficient, and Moses would have had to ask with Micah, "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousands of rivers of oil?" The small silver coin was just a *token* and nothing more.

But, a token of *what*? A token representing the animals that otherwise had died in their stead, and therefore a token of the fact that every man of Israel was A MAN OF FORFEITED LIFE, and consequently he must be ransomed, that is, bought back from the servitude to sin into which he had fallen, before he could be numbered.

But perhaps these two points need a little amplification. Turn, then, to 1 Peter 1: 18: "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold . . ." — the inference being that their fathers had been so redeemed. But when had they been? The answer evidently is — Their redemption was *always* purchased thus. If a pious Israelite desired to be right with his God then must he always be expending silver and gold in the purchase of sacrificial animals which brought him by death that measure of redemption which he knew. Now at the census time God did not require, as we might have surmised, the death of sacrificial animals on an immense and national scale. Rather He cut down His requirements to a minimum, if we may so say, and only demanded this small silver coin from each man as a token that sacrifice was needful.

But the atonement itself: what was the nature and character thereof? This, too, is made very clear in the law of the census. The half-shekel which each was to give is called "the atonement money." Its object is twice stated in the words "to make an atonement for your souls," and once it is put in these words: "Then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul unto the Lord."

Pay attention to this. False theories of atonement abound, and every one of them aims at emptying the word of its proper meaning and filling it with a meaning more pleasing to the tastes of fallen human nature, but foreign to Scripture.

Our passage gives us clearly its Scriptural meaning and usage. That which makes *atonement*, or *covering*, for the soul is that which *ransoms* the soul. But why this necessity of ransom? Because the soul is *forfeit* owing to sin. And what is the nature of the forfeit which lies upon the soul because of sin? The extreme forfeit of DEATH. That which ransoms the soul, by lifting the forfeit that lies upon it, is therefore the only thing that makes atonement.

And what will lift the forfeit of death? This is the supreme question. The death sentence stands alone in its gravity and weight. We have never heard of the death sentence having any alternative equivalent. There is no alternative to it in the eyes of law, because it has no equivalent. Nothing but DEATH can meet the *death* sentence. In other words, nothing but the yielding up of life can meet the case of the one whose life is forfeit. The shedding or pouring out of the life-blood is the pledge and guarantee of life being yielded up. Hence the fact that the doctrine of the blood runs like a scarlet thread through Scripture until it reaches its climax in the Cross as recorded in John 19: 34. Here we reach historically "the precious blood of Christ."

The meaning of atonement and its true character were thus developed in Old Testament scripture; and yet when we turn to such a New Testament scripture as Hebrews 10: 1-3 we are fully assured that there was no *intrinsic* value in any of the offerings of which the Old Testament speaks, for at best they were but types, shadows of the antitype, the substance. They had a value just as any promissory note payable so many months after date, or other form of paper currency has value, in view of its being ultimately realizable in hard cash. The actual worth of that promissory note for £1000 viewed as a piece of paper with ink traced upon it may be well under one penny. Its potential value at due date is exactly £1000. So with the sacrifices of old: their intrinsic value was trifling, and their value lay in their being pledges of the coming of that great sacrifice of the ages which was accomplished at the Cross.

The atoning death of our Lord Jesus Christ lies right at the heart of everything. Its value is as infinite and incalculable as is the glory of His essential deity. The preciousness of His blood can only be estimated by the dignity and purity of Him who shed it. We were tainted by sin, and being defiled beyond remedy had forfeited our lives. He was God, and having become Man, proved Himself even as Man to be holy, harmless, undefiled, One upon whom death had no claim. And then He of the unforfeited life, He who both as God and as Man had every title to live, being Himself the very Fount and Origin of life, laid down that life for us of the forfeited lives. Here is the miracle of miracles indeed!

"And oh! what heavenly wonders dwell
In the atoning blood.
By this are sinners saved from hell,
And rebels brought to God."

Two other observations we would make. The first is: how poor and paltry are all those false

theories as to atonement when compared with the truth as we have it in Scripture. What sublime heights of Divine love are seen in the Cross of Christ! How supreme and conclusive the vindication and display of God's righteousness there!

Proud men, who have no wish to own themselves under the forfeit of death, may ridicule God's Word and denounce atonement by vicarious suffering and death as wrong, but they have nothing to put in its place that does not violently infringe all that is righteous and holy and true. They remain satisfied with their own schemes only because they obstinately close their eyes to the true facts of the situation. Once admit the facts of man's utter ruin and God's essential righteousness and truth, and no solution is possible but that of the vicarious sufferings, the atoning death, of Christ. In His Cross, and there alone, every Divine attribute was harmonized as regards its dealings with sin. All was brought to equipoise and rest. There it was that "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other" (Ps. 85: 10). And because these seemingly opposite attributes of God have met harmoniously in the Cross, they meet with equal harmony in the experience of the ransomed sinner, and will yet meet harmoniously in a redeemed earth in the millennial age.

Lastly we would say, remember that the word atonement does not exhaust the meaning and fulness of Christ's death. It is, as we have said, an Old Testament word. When we come to the New Testament we find a great expansion of this fundamental truth. Indeed, we must remember in regard to every Divine reality or fact that no one word, or one side of the matter, fully sets it forth. Divine things are too big to be grasped in one embrace by finite minds.

"Vicarious atonement" is a phrase often used, and to it many modern theologians raise great objection. Just what is the meaning of it?

A "vicar" is a substitute or representative — the Pope claims to be Christ's *Vicar* on earth, for instance — and hence the adjective vicarious simply means substitutionary. By vicarious atonement we simply mean an atonement wrought by One who stands in the room and stead of those for whom He suffers. *Their* sins are expiated in *His* blood.

Those who object to vicarious atonement generally prefer to treat the word as if it were at-one-ment. Is there any real basis for this alteration?

None whatever. In the first place the meaning of a word is to be decided not by its derivation but by its use; and the use of the word in Scripture is with the meaning of making satisfaction for sin by enduring the penalty, and therefore *expiating*, and not with the meaning of *reconciling*. For instance, the word *prevent*, according to its derivation, would mean to *come before* or *anticipate*. When the Authorized Version was made in 1604 A.D. its use agreed with its derivation, and hence the translators inserted it in Matthew 17: 25 and 1 Thessalonians 4: 15. Today it is never used in its derived sense but always as meaning to *hinder*. If we always insist on taking words according to their derivation we shall have some strange misunderstandings before we are done!

Secondly, there is the fact, to which we have before alluded, that the word atonement is the translation of the Hebrew word, *kaphar*, which means to cover. The translators of the Bible nearly always chose *atonement* as their rendering of the word, just a few times using other words such as *reconcile*, *pacify*, *purge*, etc. The using of the word *at-one-ment* every time would not have altered the fact that God originally spoke of *covering* what was sinful by sacrifice, and that *that is* His meaning. The worst of it is that the men who mislead, by thus juggling with the spelling of *atonement*, are not usually men who are in ignorance of these simple facts.

Can you explain at all why the word "atonement" does not occur in the New Testament?

The only suggestion we have to offer is that the Old Testament deals with truth in a general fashion with more or less shadowy outline, whilst in the New we have it in far more clearly defined shape and fulness of detail. Atonement is a word which gives us the truth of the Gospel in its general outline. The New Testament furnishes us with propitiation, justification, and other terms which give us the truth with greater precision, and it is therefore simply full of what atonement signifies, though the actual word does not occur.

Nothing has been said as to the perfect life of our Lord. What part did that play in the work of atonement?

No part at all, save in an indirect way. He "bare our sins in His own body on *the tree*" (1 Peter 2: 24). Atonement was made on the tree and there alone.

Again we read: "The Son of Man came . . . to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20: 28). "His life," someone may exclaim, "see it says 'His *life* a ransom for many.'" True but that is not all it says. He "*came . . . to give His life.*" It was the giving of His life — the yielding of it up in death — that affected the ransom. The perfection and spotlessness of His life made the offering up of it so acceptable to God, and thus was one of His great qualifications for the sacrificial work. He was indeed the Lamb "without blemish."

It has been commonly taught that the death of Christ puts away our evil, but that His life of perfect law-keeping is reckoned to our account and forms the positive righteousness in which we stand. Is this doctrine of "the imputed righteousness of Christ" scriptural?

It is not. The very term "righteousness of Christ" is not found in Scripture. "Righteousness of God" we do read of, and also that righteousness is imputed to the believer in Christ dead and risen, just as it was imputed to Abraham of old (see Rom. 4).

Do we cast, then, any doubt on the righteous life of our Lord? Nay, on the contrary we affirm that His obedience and devotedness as set forth in that matchless passage in Philippians 2 far exceeded any righteousness demanded by the Law of Moses. But we also affirm that the teaching of Scripture as to the believer's relations with the law is not that Christ kept the law *for us*, but that He "redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse *for us*" (Gal. 3: 13), and in so doing He redeemed us from "under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons" (Gal 4: 5)

We had broken the law, and Christ bore its curse for us that we might never bear it. But to say He kept the law for us — which would lead to our saying He did so, that we might never keep it!! — *that* emphatically is not scriptural. The truth is that we are redeemed from the law itself as much as from its curse, and as now sons of God we have Christ Himself as our rule and standard and not the law.

Nor is it the teaching of Scripture that a certain amount of Christ's law-keeping is credited to us before God, but that cleared by Christ's atoning death we now are before God in the life and standing and favour of the risen Saviour. We are "in Christ Jesus" "accepted in the Beloved" — a vastly higher thing.

The only passage that might seem to support the idea of Christ's imputed righteousness is Romans 5: 12-19. But here the whole contrast lies between Adam's one act of sin and disobedience and Christ's

one act of righteousness and obedience — clearly His *death*, though we would not exclude from our thoughts His whole career of righteousness and obedience which culminated in His death.

A very important question is this: Does Scripture make known to us any atonement apart from blood?

A very important question indeed, and the answer is NONE WHATEVER.

We would even go one step further and say that Scripture knows of no atonement apart from SHED blood.

Deuteronomy 12: 23 tells us that "the blood is the life." Leviticus 17: 11 says "the life of the flesh is in the blood." These two passages make quite clear what the meaning of blood is according to Scripture, and the latter verse ends with the words: "It is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul."

As we have already seen, an exceptional case such as Exodus 30 can be found where silver did duty as representing the sacrifices that could be purchased with it, but when we come to the great atoning work of Christ, of which all Old Testament atonement was but a type, it is "not . . . with corruptible things, as silver and gold . . . but with the precious blood of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot (1 Peter 1: 18, 19).

No atonement, then, apart from the blood of Christ and apart from that blood *shed*, for the verse already quoted in Leviticus says, as to the blood, "I have *given it to you upon the altar* to make an atonement for your souls." The blood in the veins of the animal destined for sacrifice accomplished nothing. It was its life, truly, but only as *given upon the altar*, i.e. as *shed sacrificially*, did it make atonement and that only in type. All hinges on the death of *Christ*. Not life merely, but life yielded up, atones.

There is undoubtedly great objection in the minds of many to the doctrine of the Blood. Can you explain why?

The explanation is not far to seek; it lies in their refusal to admit that man is a creature of forfeited life.

They will admit readily enough that man is not what he ought to be. They view him as a victim of misfortunes and cursed with an unpleasant environment; but with a life that is ever struggling upward and thereby evolving itself into finer and yet finer planes of existence.

God's word, on the contrary, reveals him as originally perfect yet speedily corrupted by sin, and that corruption so deep-seated and irremediable that the forfeit of his life becomes a necessity.

Believers in the innate goodness of man naturally reject the truth of atonement by the Blood of Christ. Those who know their own lost and ruined state gladly receive it as their only hope. There is no Unitarianism in the Bible.