

*"In the same way then, there has also come to be at the present time a remnant according to God's gracious choice" (Romans 11:5)*

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## An Atonement You Can Count on Forever

by Galen Peterson

The recent Academy Award nominated movie *Atonement* presents a popular perspective on the way that many people deal with their failings. In this story one of the characters tells a lie that leads to tragic consequences for other people, so she tries to make amends by feeling sorry plus doing good deeds for others and then confessing the actual truth later on. This movie depicts the commonly held perception that when we do wrong, we can atone for it by doing right.

The word atonement is technically not a biblical term. It was invented by the Protestant reformer William Tyndale for use in his translation of the Bible into English in 1526. He sought to express the concept of reconciliation with God by combining the words "at" and "onement." Unfortunately this new word does not convey whatsoever the original biblical meaning being communicated in passages where atonement is used,



leaving us with an ambiguous understanding of the word.

In those passages the Hebrew word translated by Tyndale as atonement is *kippur*. It literally means, "to cover." It is one of only a few Hebrew words that makes its way into English, albeit with a slightly altered pronunciation (*kippur/cover*). So the word *kippur* is pronounced in English as "cover" but is now commonly translated as "atonement."

Ask around and you will probably hear many interpretations of what atonement is. But few people will say it refers to a covering. It is more likely that the

response you will hear is along the lines of making amends for your wrongdoing. It makes sense, however, that we need to know what God intended atonement to be, not what people think it is. This is especially important since our understanding of atonement will have a direct bearing on our place in the hereafter.

In the Bible atonement refers to the way that sins are covered both literally and figuratively. Some people discount the consequences of sin. But the Word of God is very clear in declaring: "the soul who sins will die" (Ezek. 18:4). The soul who sins is everyone. No one can go through his or her life without failing at least once. And that is one time too many.

Death is equally certain. Death means separation. It is a separation from the physical world through a physical death. But it also means separation in a spiritual sense. God, who is perfect and pure in every way, will not spend eternity with imperfect impure

beings who could cause Him grief forever. Would you expect Him to do otherwise?

But God has come up with a plan to change us so that when we get to point of abiding with Him in eternity, we will no longer have the capability of committing sin. That is the final step when we go to be with Him. But that means there has to be a first step, which is atonement. Our sins have to be covered so God can symbolically look down upon us and not see any sin. In that way, the consequences of sin are removed and God can welcome our presence. That's what atonement is about.

When it comes to atonement, there are three questions that we need to ask: *Who* does the atoning? *How* is the atonement accomplished? *What* is our responsibility?

### **Atonement in Modern Judaism**

In today's most prominent branches of Judaism, those questions are answered in this way:

**Who?** The people do their own atoning.

**How?** It is accomplished through confession and repentance, making restitution, and giving to charity. According to the Talmud:

“Prayer, repentance, and charity avert the evil decree” (*Ta'anit 2:1, 65b*).

**What?** The responsibility of the people might be characterized by an attitude of solemnity and heaviness. Traditional synagogue services on Yom Kippur, the annual Day of Atonement, are replete with confessions of sin. It is said that the Gates of Heaven are closed on Yom Kippur, thus

sealing your fate for the next year. On this day the *Kaddish* prayer is recited in honor of those who have died. So there is a significant sense of solemn heaviness associated with atonement today.

Now these three things—people doing their own atoning, bringing it about through repentance and charity, and a sense of solemn heaviness—have not always been the characteristics of atonement.

### **Atonement in Biblical Judaism**

In biblical times, a very different type of atonement was practiced.

#### **Who did the atoning?**

Yom Kippur was very different from all other feasts. On other feasts every man was required to bring his own animal and produce to offer as sacrifices. That meant on Passover they brought a lamb without spot or blemish, and on First Fruits they brought grain offerings from the beginning of their harvests, and so on.

But on Yom Kippur the people brought nothing. In fact, unlike the feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles, they didn't even have to go to the Temple on Yom Kippur.

It was all about one man—the High Priest who brought the sacrifices and went into the Temple. He did the entire work of atonement for all the people, just one person representing everyone else in the nation. The High Priest served the role of an intercessor—one who acts on behalf of others. The High Priest represented the people before God and obtained for them the gift of new life through atonement, the covering of their sins.

### **How was the atonement accomplished?**

First the High Priest offered sacrifices for himself. Then he offered one animal—a goat—as a sacrifice for the entire nation.

*Then he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering which is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil, and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. And he shall make atonement for the holy place, because of the impurities of the sons of Israel, and because of their transgressions, in regard to all their sins... (Lev. 16:15,16).*

He placed blood on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant where God's *shekhinah*—His divine presence—was manifested. So in between God's presence and the people outside was this layer of blood. It served as a symbolic covering of the sins of the people. It had to be blood because:

*For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement (Lev. 17:11).*

Remember, “the soul who sins will die.” That is a severe form of judgment. But God has seen fit to allow a substitute to die in our place, thus demonstrating God's mercy in the midst of satisfying the need for justice.

In other words, there has to be a sacrifice involving the shedding of blood for genuine atonement to take place. No amount of confession and repentance, making restitution, and giving to charity will ever

comply with this requirement. Those are all worthy attitudes and behaviors. But they are not atonement. A life must be given. There must be a covering with blood for it to be true atonement.

### **What was the responsibility of the people?**

God's only instruction for the people was to "humble their souls" (Lev. 16:29). The Hebrew word used here has the root meaning of "looking down." It is a word picture of humility, which is an attitude that is the opposite of pride.

When the High Priest was in the Holy of Holies doing the work of atonement, it was a time for the people of Israel to refrain from any form of pleasure, including eating food (which forms the basis of the contemporary tradition of fasting on Yom Kippur). They were humbling their souls, looking inwardly and reflecting on their behavior and thoughts. But this was not the actual act of atonement. It was simply the proper attitude to have while the real work of atonement was taking place in the Holy of Holies on their behalf.

So these three things, then, are the characteristics of biblical atonement:

1. It was done by an intercessor on behalf of the nation.
2. It was based on sacrifice that involved the shedding of blood.
3. It called for people to humble themselves while it was taking place.

### **Atonement for everyone today**

Since none of these things were ever annulled in Scripture, it makes sense that these foundational aspects would remain

consistent throughout time. If it is of God, then these elementary characteristics should be evident in any era.

Historically we know that two events occurred that created new settings of atonement. The first occurred around 30 A.D. when Jesus died on the cross. As fully man, he could represent all humanity. As fully divine, he represented God as well.

God saw fit to bring about one final act of atonement, one that would never need to be repeated year after year, because this time the subject of the sacrifice was perfect in every way. Jesus never committed a sin, unlike everyone else who has lived. And perfection is not something that can be improved upon. The writer of the book of Hebrews tells us:

*[Jesus] 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 (Heb. 7:27).*

This is the final sacrifice that ever needs to be given. There is no need for more atonement when the perfectly enduring blood of Jesus was shed in order to cover our sins. Moreover, Jesus was not only the perfect sacrifice, He was the perfect intercessor as well. "He offered up Himself" it says. The writer goes on to say:

*...and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:12).*

Once for all is the assurance

that we have been given. So how does this message compare with the characteristics of biblical atonement?

1. *Biblical atonement was done by an intercessor on behalf of the nation—Jesus as our High Priest is our perfect intercessor.*
2. *It was based on sacrifice that involved the shedding of blood—Jesus died in our place.*
3. *It called for people to humble themselves while it was taking place—We are called to receive it as a free gift, acknowledging that He did it for me.*

All of these elements are consistent with what atonement represented from the very beginning of God's plan.

**F**orty years after Jesus gave His life another historical event took place. In 70 A.D. the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed by Rome. Why would God allow such a thing to occur? You can find many views on that subject. But there is only one explanation that makes sense in the full context of God's plan.

The Temple was no longer needed. Sacrificial atonement on Yom Kippur was no longer needed. It had been completed once for all. We are given a confirmation in the historical literature that God was behind this closing of the Temple and the work of atonement. The Talmud makes this incredible confession:

Forty years before the Holy Temple was destroyed, the lot of the Yom Kippur goat ceased to be supernatural; the red cord of wool that used to change white now remained red and did not change, and the western candle in the menorah in the sanctuary refused to burn continually,

while the doors of the Holy Temple would open of themselves. (Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma 39b*).

In spite of these things, the world of Judaism continued on, only now as a religious system no longer with a Temple and a priesthood. And no longer with the ability to do atonement in the way that God had mandated it. From that time forward, people would seek to atone for themselves, doing it without relying on the shedding of blood as God required, but with confessions, repentance and good deeds by human beings.

Although the emphasis on humbling yourself is a good thing, its role in modern attempts of atonement is very different from the original purpose. Now it is considered to be part of the atoning work itself, not a *response* to the atonement that is being done for you.

Well meaning? Yes. But it is inconsistent with the foundational aspect of biblical atonement as set forth by God. And that is a very sobering thought.

We recall the tragedy that struck Virginia Tech University in April of 2007 when 32 students were killed by a gunman. Liviu Librescu was an aeronautical

professor there, and also a Holocaust survivor from Romania. While the shooting was raging in the building where he taught, this Jewish man blocked the door with his own body so his students could escape through the window. This is another picture of atonement. He covered his students and gave his life so that they might live.

That is the same kind of thing that Jesus did for us. He willingly laid down His life so that we might live eternally. And when we believe that to be true, we never need another act of atonement.

So when we come to the realization of this wonderful act of love, we will take on a whole new way of thinking. Instead of worrying about whether or not we have done enough praying, confessing, repenting, making nice with others and giving to charities, we will be thankful that the price has been paid in full on our behalf.

Instead of thinking that we are so spiritual for all the religious things we have done, we will be humbled by knowing that Messiah cares for us not because of our religious devotion but He died “while we were yet sinners” (Rom. 5:8). That is a most humbling realization.

Instead of carrying around a sense of guilt, we will know that

we are forgiven. The debt has been paid in full, never to be held against us again.

We have a perfect intercessor in Jesus. We have an atonement that is true because it is based on His blood sacrifice. And we are called to be people of humility, as we believe in these things.

These are promises that are assured to endure forever. May this be our way of thinking today, and every day, as we share in the amazing gift of God’s way of atonement.



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