

SOTERIOLOGY: DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

PART 4

KEY TERMS: ATONEMENT

Atonement. The Hebrew word is כִּפָּר and it means to make atonement, to make amends, pardon, release, appease, forgive; it is to remove the guilt from a wrongdoing for any length of time. It can carry the idea a ransom, that is, the life of an animal is given in place of the person making the offering resulting in liberation for the one ransomed. Through the death of that animal according to the appropriate ritual procedures, the sinner is spared the death that his sins otherwise require. Notice this definition does not mention the idea of covering over. It does refer to forgiveness in some way at some level. Many theologians make the claim there is no forgiveness inherent in the meaning of atonement; we will see that view is incorrect.

The words “Day of Atonement” [יום כִּפּוּרִים] occur only three times (Lv. 23:27-28, 25:9). Although translated in the singular, it is plural which is a marker of superlative. The Day of Atonement is an extremely important day in Jewish thought and theology. It is an act of ceremonially accounting for wrong done in a covenantal relationship, which causes forgiveness, pardon, and right relationship. The word comes from an Akkadian cognate *kupuru* which means to purify or to cleanse [Randall Price, *The Coming Last Days Temple*, p. 554]; therefore, כִּפָּר can carry the meaning of to wipe, erase, or clean something and I would add then the result is making the unclean clean.

Most theologians think the word “atonement” means to cover over but some lexicons suggest that is questionable and most theologians today agree. Most of us have been taught this idea that sins were simply covered over through the Old Testament sacrifices while awaiting the true forgiveness that Christ would provide on the cross. “There is an equivalent Arabic root meaning ‘cover,’ or ‘conceal.’ On the strength of this connection it has been supposed that the Hebrew word means ‘to cover over sin’ and thus pacify the deity, making an atonement. It has been suggested that the OT ritual symbolized a covering over of sin until it was dealt with in fact by the atonement of Christ. There is, however, very little evidence for this view. The connection of the Arabic word is weak and the Hebrew root is not used to mean ‘cover’ [R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, s. v. “כִּפָּר”]. Another theologian stated, “This connection with the Arabic language has been virtually abandoned in modern scholarship because of the failure to demonstrate this meaning based on use in Hebrew as well as the methodological problem of using only Arabic to validate a Hebrew meaning” [Mark F. Rooker, *The New American Commentary: Leviticus*, p. 52]. It is best that we discard this idea that atonement refers to a temporary covering over of sin.

The word can and does mean to cover in the specific situation of tarring over something in a covering motion such as Noah was commanded to do when he was told to cover the Ark with pitch inside and out in Genesis 6:14 but that meaning doesn't

carry over to the forgiveness and reparations aspects of the word. It can carry the idea of a protective covering as does in this example of the ark. This is a separate meaning of the same word; therefore, context is an important consideration which, of course, it always is. The example of the Ark being covered with tar is always used as the example for the meaning of atonement but that appears to be invalid.

The idea conveyed in the Old Testament concerning atonement was that the sinning person was forgiven by God through the sacrifice that was made on his behalf. While the sacrifices themselves were symbolically pointing to the redemptive sacrifice Christ was going to make on the cross in the future, the forgiveness obtained through them was quite real at the time and it served to restore the person to fellowship or right relationship with God. In other words, it is true that atonement did nothing to provide the regeneration that resulted in eternal life but it did provide temporal forgiveness and the restoration of fellowship with God.

Procedures for performing these sacrificial offerings were set forth in the Law and both the sinner and the priest had a role to play in the process. Leviticus chapters 5-7 explain the procedures for the guilt offering which was made in order to offer reparation for wrongs committed against God and against other people.

Leviticus 6:6-7 ⁶“Then he shall bring to the priest his guilt offering to the LORD, a ram without defect from the flock, according to your valuation, for a guilt offering, ⁷and the priest shall make atonement [כִּפֹּר] for him before the LORD, and he will be forgiven for any one of the things which he may have done to incur guilt.”

The word for guilt offering, אָשָׁם, means an atoning sacrifice; it refers to guilt which is liability to a standard with some implication of punishing consequences. The point in this offering is not only that a person has committed an offense but that reparations for the wrong are due. This situation also calls for confession before the offering is made (Lv. 5:5). In this procedure, Leviticus 5:6 refers to the guilt offering, אָשָׁם, but also to the sin offering, חַטָּאת, which means this is not only a purification ritual but it is also an offering of reparations. Reparations are considered evidence of a true change of mind concerning the offense. This concept of a guilt offering is very significant because it was connected with the sacrifice of the Messiah.

Isaiah 53:10 ¹⁰But the LORD was pleased To crush Him, putting Him to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering [אָשָׁם]...

These Old Testament sacrifices looked forward to the ultimate and final payment for sins that was accomplished by Christ on the cross. That is not an issue and that is not in dispute. However, that renders atonement a temporal sanctification issue in the Old Testament because the cross was in the future. The Old Testament believers had their sins forgiven and they were restored to fellowship with the Lord through the sacrificial system. There is no reason to think that no forgiveness for sins was granted to people

before Christ; the text clearly contradicts that theology. The question is simply what did that forgiveness through atonement mean to the Old Testament believer? Did they enter into these ritual sacrifices thinking there was nothing in it for them at that time? Of course not. Did they think they were simply engaging in an exercise that only promised some benefit far into the future long past their lifetime? Again, of course not. I'm suggesting making sacrifices for atonement was a temporal sanctification issue for the believers of the dispensation of Law just as 1 John 1:9 is temporal sanctification truth in this dispensation of grace. They came away from their sacrifice knowing they were forgiven and restored to fellowship.

How did the Jewish people view this concept of sacrifice? At the point where the animal was selected to be the appropriate sacrifice, it was no longer for personal use but had become something set apart or holy. The most common word used for offering in Hebrew is קָרָבָן, which refers to something close or brought near. It carries the idea that the sacrifice has been brought near to God and it is a gift to Him. The person lays hands on the sacrificial animal which is an act of transference. The animal then stands in the place of the one offering it for sacrifice. One rabbi, Nachmanides, likened the sacrifice to a "burning in effigy" because the sprinkling of the sacrificial blood and the burning of the sacrificial body are as if they are the body and blood of the person offering the animal. He wrote this: "All these acts should be performed in order that when they are done, a person should realize that he has sinned against God with his body and his soul, and that 'his' blood should really be spilled and 'his' body burned, were it not for the loving-kindness of the Creator, Who took from him a substitute and a ransom, namely this offering, so that its blood should be in place of his blood, its life in place of his life..." [Nachmanides in his *Commentary on the Torah: Leviticus 1:9*, trans. Charles B. Chavel as quoted in Randall Price, *The Temple and Bible Prophecy: A Definitive Look at Its Past, Present, and Future*, p. 551].

It is easy to see that the Jewish sacrifice was to be viewed as the punishment the person making the offering should have, and deserved to have, done to him. The sacrifice was to be seen as personal punishment against his body. Blood was necessary because the life of the flesh is in the blood.

Leviticus 17:11 ¹¹'For the life of the flesh [נַפְשׁ הַבֶּשֶׂר] 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.'

The literal meaning of the Hebrew is not so much "life of the flesh" but rather it is conveying an idea more like "soul of the flesh." נַפְשׁ means breath or the inner being with its thoughts and emotions. Even more than the animal's blood representing the offering party, the soul of the animal represents his soul. It is a mistake to think that Jesus

did not have to shed blood in His sacrificial, substitutionary, penal death on the cross on our behalf. His shed blood was an essential component of the sacrificial process.

The Old Testament sacrificial rites could not, however, give a person the perfect conscience that is possible only with and through the sacrifice of Christ.

Hebrews 9:9, 11-14 ⁹which is a symbol for the present time. Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience,... ¹¹But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; ¹²and 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. ¹³For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, ¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Simply offering the sacrifice apart from a sincere desire to restore fellowship with God was unacceptable. The sacrificial system was not meant to be rote religious ritual with no personal attitudinal involvement on the part of the one offering the sacrifice. The Bible condemned in no uncertain terms Old Testament Jewish sacrifices offered without the proper motivation and attitude. Throughout the history of Israel, there were long periods of time when the system had devolved into ritual that did not include the appropriate attitude that God wanted from the people. Obviously, this was a serious problem at time of Christ's incarnation. Their religion became separated from their God; Jesus condemned that attitude over and over during His ministry.

Proverbs 21:27 ²⁷The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination, How much more when he brings it with evil intent!

Proverbs 15:8 ⁸The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, But the prayer of the upright is His delight.

The prophets frequently condemned the people for bringing sacrifices to the Temple without the appropriately correct mindset.

Amos 5:22 ²²“Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.

Hosea 6:6 ⁶For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, And in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

“The priests were expected to discern the attitude of worshipers to see if they had a truly contrite heart, a broken spirit, an awareness of the seriousness of the sin, and genuine repentance. A conscientious priest was deliberate in discernment, accepting the word of the penitent upon the presentation of evidence to support the claim of repentance and contrition, but hesitating if there was serious doubt” [Allen P. Ross, *Holiness to the Lord: A Guide to the Exposition of the Book of Leviticus*, pp. 170-171].

After the guilt offering was made, the priest ate it in the presence of the person who brought the sacrifice. This act signified that God had accepted the offering as the atonement and had forgiven the person [Ross, p. 171]. In this way, the people knew they had been restored to fellowship.

The sin offering described in Leviticus chapter 4 is more properly thought of as a purification ritual. This offering dealt not only with any specific sin, but also with the consequences of sin and the defilements of life that did not require forgiveness. Examples of the latter are the purification offerings required after childbirth or through contact with a dead body or the healing of leprosy and so on. Leviticus chapter 4 deals with the sin aspects of this purification offering while the other issues are dealt with in Leviticus chapters 12-15.

“God, by his grace, made provision for cleansing sin and its effects so that people might safely enter his presence. This provision was absolutely necessary given the circumstances of life in this world. Sinful acts and defiled conditions of any kind must be dealt with if communion with God is maintained. Even true worshippers, people who are steadfast in their devotion to the LORD and who seek to live in obedience to his laws, find that they need God’s gracious provision of cleansing if they are to continue in fellowship with him. They may fall into sin unwittingly; but even these should not be treated lightly. In line with this, the law in ancient Israel clearly revealed that sins of any kind angered God, deprived him of his due, defiled the sanctuary, and thus put a barrier between the guilty and God.

But it was not just the sin that defiled the LORD’s sanctuary and endangered the guilty; the effects of sin were just as serious. Living in this sinful world, one has to deal with contamination, corruption, diseases, and death. And under the Levitical system in Israel these things also rendered a person unclean and defiled the holy place. Leviticus taught that the holy God could not abide with any uncleanness or in a defiled sanctuary. Cleansing was thus required before people with impurities could enter his presence.

The purification offering was designed to deal with these barriers” [Ross, pp. 123-124].

The point of the sin offering was to remove pollution and defilement specifically because the sanctuary would become defiled if purification was not accomplished. That's why the blood of this offering was put on the accouterments of the Tabernacle and Temple rather than on the offending party. This all looks far into the future as we contemplate the cleansing of our sins by the blood of Christ Jesus which blood has also cleansed the heavenly sanctuary.

The word for sin offering, *חַטָּאת*, is commonly said to mean sin or wickedness; it is an offense to a moral standard but that is the meaning of the basic verbal stem. This particular word comes from a verb meaning to cleanse, purify, or decontaminate. The point is that the idea of purification offering rather than sin offering is the more accurate understanding of what is called the sin offering.

This sin offering is referred to as an atonement that results in forgiveness (Lv. 4:26, 31, 35). The people making this offering expected to be forgiven and restored to fellowship with God and that was accomplished through this offering.

The burnt offering, *עֹלָה קָרְבָּן*, was wholly burned on the altar as a gift to God. *עֹלָה* refers to going up, climbing, or ascending. The reference is to the smoke of the offering ascending up to God as a "soothing aroma to the Lord" (Lv. 1:9, 13, 17). *קָרְבָּן* refers simply to an offering or a sacrifice which is a gift to a deity of a general kind. The burnt offering refers to an offering of the entire part of a sacrifice that was clean and acceptable for sacrifice. This offering "was one of the most frequently made sacrifices and because it was one of the most important: it was the only sacrifice that belonged completely to God. No portion of the animal was consumed by priests or worshipers; rather, the animal was consumed on the altar. Thus it signified both complete surrender to God by the offerer and complete acceptance by God of the worshiper who brought it" [Ross, p. 85]. This was the sacrificial offering that was offered daily in the morning and evening in the Temple. It was also the sacrifice the people offered when they wanted to express a desire to draw near to God.

The burnt offering taught the people that no one could approach God without a substitutionary blood sacrifice to make atonement. The blood represented life and it was presented as an exchange that allowed the person to approach or draw near to God. The exchange made with the sacrificial animal was represented by the laying on of hands. The sacrifice had to be unblemished and perfect because it was the representative for a person who was less than perfect. The basis for the people to approach God, every one of whom was defiled and sinful, was only based on their sanctification through the substitutionary atonement of this blood sacrifice. The primary purpose of the burnt offering was to atone for sin and defilement so that the offerer could enjoy communion with God. Because life is in the blood, the substitutionary

nature of this sacrifice is evident. This sacrifice provided a pleasing aroma to the Lord which signified its acceptance. This offering was specifically a fellowship offering rather than a sin or guilt type of offering.

The burnt offering had a history that predated the Mosaic Law. Noah was commanded to offer a burnt offering when he disembarked from the Ark (Gen. 8:20). Abraham was told to offer Isaac as a burnt offering (Gen. 22:2). Moses' father-in-law, Jethro, offered a burnt offering (Ex. 5:3). Job presented burnt offerings because he feared his sons may have sinned and cursed God in their hearts (Job 1:5). My point is this concept of a substitutionary blood sacrifice for making atonement is well established in the Old Testament. It was part of the way God revealed Himself to mankind almost from the very beginning. Until the Fall, there was no need for a substitutionary blood sacrifice but immediately after Adam's rebellion, God killed an animal and used the skin to clothe Adam and Eve. Most theologians consider this event to be a revelation of the first sacrificial blood sacrifice for atonement and through it the couple was restored to fellowship with God. They still suffered the consequences of their sin which, among other things, included death, hard labor in order to survive, pain in childbirth for women, and banishment from the Garden but they were restored to a relationship with God.

Genesis 3:21 ²¹The LORD God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.

Genesis 2:17 ¹⁷but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die."

Romans 6:23 ²³For the wages of sin is death...

If the life is on the blood and if death is the penalty for sin, then it necessarily follows that shedding blood resulting in death is a necessary component of sacrifice. I don't think it is merely coincidence that the sacrificial animal is slain by slitting its throat and allowing its life blood to drain from the animal.

The Greek New Testament does not use any word translated atonement. The only exception is Romans 5:11 in the KJV and that Greek word means "reconciliation" [καταλλαγή] and not "atonement"; they should not have used "atonement" as the translation. The NKJV version corrected that error and uses "reconciliation." The Septuagint translates the Hebrew word for atonement as ἵλασμός which is translated propitiation in English in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, atonement "describes the Levitical sacrifices which were not a final dealing with sin and only anticipated the death of Christ" [G. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism & Arminianism*, 3d ed., p.70]. The New Testament uses several different words for the redemption provided mankind through the sacrificial death of Christ and atonement isn't one of them so it probably shouldn't be used when referring to the finished work of Christ on the cross. In

the New Testament, with the exception of the first part of each gospel, we are not dealing with the anticipation of the cross but with the fulfillment of the cross work of Christ. In terms of the use of that word today, the problem is that almost everyone uses the word "atonement" to describe the finished work of Christ on the cross and that usage isn't going to go away.

In the Old Testament, atonement was the temporal removal of guilt from the offending party with the final removal of guilt awaiting the sacrifice of the Messiah on the cross which was the ultimate, once-for-all-time sacrifice. In addition, the person offering the sacrifice was reconciled with God in terms of temporal fellowship. There is no such "waiting period" so to speak in this dispensation. The sins of the world have now been propitiated in Christ on the cross and that happened nearly two thousand years ago. We are not waiting for it to happen; it's finished work. I'm simply concluding that the word "atonement" is probably not the appropriate term to use in this age when referring to the sacrifice of the Lord on the cross. I just want you to understand that people frequently use it that way so just understand that and be aware of it.

In Old Testament theology then, "atonement was not made by the blood of an animal or by the manipulation of the people, but by what the animal represented in God's program. Forgiveness and purification were graciously bestowed by the LORD on the individual who by faith submitted to him and followed through with this ritual. And God was free to declare forgiveness because of his eternal decree that one day he would provide the perfect sacrifice to pay for the sins of the world once and for all. At the time Israel did not know how these sacrifices foreshadowed the death of the Messiah, the Lamb of God; they only needed to believe God's word of forgiveness and comply with his prescribed ritual to find forgiveness" [Ross, p. 94]. I think it is possible the Israelites knew more about the ultimate meaning of the sacrifices than Dr. Ross gives them credit for. I think they would have understood that Genesis 3:15 was the prediction of their Messiah who would be bruised on the heel. Once Isaiah's prophecy was written, all the religious authorities understood Isaiah 53 to be a reference to the Messiah and His substitutionary death is clearly presented by the prophet. It was only after the death of Christ that the Jewish religious authorities began to claim that Isaiah 53 was referring to the nation of Israel rather than to the Messiah of Israel. That is still the claim they make today.

I'm not going to elaborate on the grain offering and the peace offering. The grain or meal offering expressed the idea of being dedicated to God; dedication should follow atonement. The peace offering represented a state of peace between God and the offerer. Those are certainly true, but in terms of Soteriology, I wanted to show the link between the other three sacrifices and the substitutionary penal blood sacrifice of Christ on the cross on our behalf.

In this dispensation, no sacrifice is required for the atonement of personal sins. Restoration to fellowship is accomplished through the confession of individual, personal sins.