

“THE NATURE OF BIBLICAL ATONEMENT”

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The Importance of Atonement

When we talk about the Cross, we are addressing the doctrine of the Atonement. We find the most frequent use of the word atonement in the books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. All of the teaching on atonement found in the Bible is rooted in the teaching found in these three books. The need for atonement arises from the reality of sin. The Bible overwhelmingly speaks of Mankind as sinful. Sin consists of the personal violation of God through the breaking of His law. God’s character is impugned by our rejection of His sovereign rule through his law. God is clearly pictured as angry, in holy wrath, against all sin. This is because sin is a deadly threat to the whole Creation. All are sinners, and sin is viewed as our most serious malady. Sin places us in a grave situation because the wrath of God is against us. God tells throughout Scripture that He will judge and punish all who break his law, unless they accept the atonement He prescribes. In this way atonement is a *satisfaction* of God’s law. It is a *propitiation* because it mitigates the anger of God. Atonement is an *expiation* because the guilt of the sinner is removed. A result of atonement is *reconciliation*, because the relationship between God and Humanity is restored.

The primary form of atonement in the Bible is *substitutionary* and *sacrificial*. One is chosen to die for others. The one chosen is sacrificed or slain in a way that all its blood is spilled. This is to prove that death has been achieved. This is why blood is used as a symbol for the work of the Cross in the New Testament. The blood of Christ proves his death is achieved and therefore, his work of atonement for us in complete.

What Does the Use of Blood Mean?

In Scripture blood is of central importance in achieving atonement. As the Book of Hebrews makes clear, there is no forgiveness without the shedding of blood:

. . . the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. (Hebrews 9:22 NIV)

Since blood is essentially connected to work of atonement, the next question is: “What role does blood play in the atonement?” or, “Why is blood so important to make atonement?” To answer these questions we must first ask, “What is atonement?” The word “atonement” derives from the Anglo-Saxon word which means “making at one.” It occurs in the King James version once, where we are told that Jesus brings the atonement:

For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement. (Romans 5:10-11 KJV)

The idea behind atonement is represented by the biblical word *katallage*, which is translated “reconciliation.” The idea of reconciliation only makes sense when we understand its Old Testament background. Isaiah announced to Israel, “your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear” (Isaiah 59:2 KJV). Sin destroys right relationship with God. It creates enmity or antagonism between sinners and God. It separated them from God.

Because of the deadly seriousness of sin, Ezekiel warned the people, “Behold, all souls are mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die (Ezekiel 18:4 KJV). Sin against God is so grave that it is a capital crime, worthy of death! Because of this situation, the greatest need of Humanity is to satisfy God’s justice in relation to sin. A good or favorable relationship needs to be restored. This requires atonement. Atonement means the satisfaction of God’s justice, the appeasing of His wrath against our offenses, so that we can regain reconciliation or favor with God.

In Leviticus¹ 17:11, God instructed the people through Moses:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul. (KJV)

It is God who takes the initiative in atonement. “Atonement is secured, not by any value inherent in the sacrificial victim, but because sacrifice is the divinely appointed way of securing atonement.”² God chose to use blood as a means of atonement, of satisfying God’s wrath in order to bring Israel back into fellowship, or right relationship with God.

¹The central issue of Leviticus was, “How can a sinful people arrange their entire existence around a holy God?” This question pertains to us today. The answer is atonement. The first thing God taught Israel is found in the “Manual of Sacrifice” (Leviticus chapters 1-7). They needed a sacrifice to act as their substitute. The second thing they were taught was the need of a mediator – the Priesthood (Leviticus 8-10). This along with the Tabernacle, the third element, God provided a place of Atonement – the mercy seat – where the High Priest could present the blood of the substitute before God. The use of blood in the Mosaic sacrificial system was to advance atonement. It was to bring God and sinful Israel into proper relationship.

²J. D. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1977.), article “Atonement,” p. 108.

How Does the Blood Function in Atonement?

When God gave Noah and his sons commandments for the new covenant He made with them, he warned them not to eat meat with blood in it. God said that it was to remind them that he would require their blood from them if they ever shed another man’s blood (murder):

But flesh with the life thereof, which is the blood thereof, shall ye not eat. And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man. (Genesis 9:4-6 KJV)

This made bloodless meat *kosher* (ritually pure) food. It served to remind them that, if they murdered someone, they would die for it. The word “blood” (דָּם in Hebrew), as frequently used in the Bible, symbolizes death by violence. Blood is used this way 203 times in the Old Testament. An additional 103 instances refer to the death of sacrificial animals (also death by a violent act). Blood in the New Testament (αἷμα = *haima*) is used 25 times to specifically refer to violent death, 12 times it refers to animal sacrifice, and nearly all the rest refer to the blood of Christ.

From these figures it is clear that the commonest use of *dām* is to denote death by violence, and in particular, that this use is found about twice as often as that to denote the blood of sacrifice.³

What is the connection between blood and life? Since the life is in the blood, when the blood of a person is separated from their body (shed or poured out), that person dies. Blood represents the proof or sign of death.⁴ When God sees a person’s blood spilled out, it means that he witnesses that person’s death. He then requires the blood – the death – of the one who spilled the other’s blood. The shed blood represents the death of the one who possessed the blood. That is why the blood was presented and employed by the priests in the sacrificial system. The showing of the blood in various rituals was to show that the animal sacrifice was dead. It meant that the ultimate penalty for sin – death – had been exacted on the substitute. The blood was the proof.

In Exodus chapter twelve God commanded the blood of a lamb to be placed on the sides and top of the doorframe (the sign of the Cross). When the death angel came to take the first

³Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmann Publishing Co., 1983), p. 113. This is probably the best work on the meaning of the Cross and the Atonement one can find.

⁴The idea that the blood mystically represents the life or soul of a person continuing to exist separate from the body is not Jewish or Christian. It is pagan and contrary to biblical thought. Cp. Morris, *Ibid.*, pp. 114-118.

born male, he would see the blood, know that an innocent substitute had died in place of the first born, and would thus “passover” that house. Jesus was the true Passover. Like Egypt, all of sinful Humanity is under the plague of death (judgment of God). The death angel has been sent to take every “first born.” Jesus died on the Cross to take our place. By His death he “finished” the sacrifice necessary for Atonement. His shed blood was evidence of His death. It was not sprinkled on the doorposts and lintel of a house. It was shed upon the Cross. When the death angel comes to take us, we hide under the blood of the Lamb. That is, we look by faith alone to Jesus’ work of atonement on the Cross. This means we trust in Jesus’ death as if it were our own. When the “death angel” (the judgement of God) sees that we are under the blood of the Lamb (trusting in Jesus’ death on the Cross) he passes over us (we are saved).

On the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) God instructed Aaron how to make atonement for the people of Israel:

“Then Aaron shall offer the bull of the sin offering which is for himself, and make atonement for himself and for his household, and he shall slaughter the bull of the sin offering which is for himself. . . . “Moreover, he shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the mercy seat on the east side; also in front of the mercy seat he shall sprinkle some of the blood with his finger seven times. . . . “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; and thus he shall do for the tent of meeting which abides with them in the midst of their impurities. (Leviticus 16:11, 14, 16 NAS)

To bring atonement for the nation of Israel, Aaron, the High Priest, on the Day of Atonement, had to take the blood of the “sin-offering goat” into the Most Holy Place (the place representing God’s throne room) and sprinkle it upon the mercy seat (the place of atonement). This was done beyond the eyes of the people. This is a picture of the reality of atonement known only to God. In some way the sacrifice of the first goat propitiated the wrath of God. The Bible does not tell us how the death of Christ makes atonement. It only tells us that it does. There is a reality of the atonement known only to God. However, there was a second goat, called Azazel (goat that goes away) which the people *could* see:

“And when he has made an end of atoning for the Holy Place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall present the live goat. And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:20-22 ESV)

In a public ceremony the people were given a public ritual that taught them the truth of *substitution*. It also taught them the truth of *imputation*, because Aaron laid his hands upon this second goat and confessed the sins of Israel over it. That Israel’s sins were imputed to the goat is seen in the statement “the goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself.” Imputation is critical to the Day of Atonement, because atonement was only realized if the sins of the people were imputed by God to an innocent goat who was taken outside the camp, “cut off” or away from the presence of God and never to return. This is an Old Covenant picture of what Jesus Christ does to achieve atonement under the New Covenant. It also gives a graphic answer to the next three questions: “Who applies the Blood?,” “Where is the blood applied?” and “When is the blood applied?”

Who Applies the Blood?

We know that Jesus is the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29,36). It is His blood that is shed for the forgiveness of our sins (Ephesians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:18; 1 John 1:7; Revelation 1:5). We are justified by the blood of Jesus (Romans 5:9). But, Jesus is also the Great High Priest who applies the blood (Hebrew 9:7-12). He shed His blood on Golgotha and thereby applied it himself by dying on the Cross (Colossians 1:20; Hebrews 13:12). The effect of the blood is the effect of Jesus’ death (Hebrews 9:16-18). Because of His death in our place, he suffered the penalty of sin (1 Peter 2:24) and carried it outside the camp, witnessed in his cry, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”. Nevertheless, because He was perfect in obedience, he could not remain dead (Acts 2:24-28). God justified Jesus by raising Him from the dead (1 Timothy 3:16). Then Christ is taken up into Heaven by God, because He had finished His purpose on the earth (John 16:10-28; John 19:30; Hebrews 10:12-13). Now, as the ascended Lord of the Church, he acts as our Great High Priest. He ever lives to make intercession for us (Hebrews 2:17-18; 7:25-27). He presents his own sacrifice eternally to the Father on our behalf (Revelation 13:8). It is Jesus, the Great High Priest who applies the blood.

Where is the Blood Applied?

There is a sense that the pattern of activities performed by the high priest under the Tabernacle/Temple system are fulfilled in Christ’s priestly ministry. The High Priest entered the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, bearing the blood of the congregational sacrifice. There he would sprinkle the blood of the bull on the mercy seat or place of atonement to reconcile Israel to God. Jesus the true and only Sacrifice, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, ascended into Heaven as the Great High Priest, bearing His own blood on Himself, because He was the true mercy seat (*hilasmos*). Paul says, “Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;” (Romans 3:25 KJV).

The word “propitiation” is *hilasterion*. It is the word translated “mercyseat” in Hebrews 9:5. Jesus is called the mercy seat, the *hilasterion*, the propitiation, the place of atonement. There is no greater place to “apply” the blood than on Jesus himself. Jesus, as the Great High Priest, applies the blood. He uses the Cross like the priests hyssop and sprinkles the people with salvation. Jesus, makes the Cross the seat of mercy since he is the propitiation or the mercy seat. This is where the blood is applied. The blood was applied on that Friday, two thousand years ago, on the Cross where Jesus carried our sins and bore the naked wrath of God in our place. This is the good news of Jesus Christ.

When is the Blood Applied?

Rather than ask “When is the blood applied?” we should ask when was the penalty for sin paid. The Bible teaches us that it was paid by Jesus when he died. It also tells us where Jesus died – He died on the Cross. It is when Jesus died that the blood was applied. Hebrews is emphatic that Jesus presents himself as an atoning sacrifice once.

For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; not that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another – He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment, so Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation. (Hebrews 9:24-28 NKJV)

This means his death takes place at a particular moment of history. He died once. There was only one sacrifice for all time. Thus, his blood was shed once, for all time. It was *applied once* for all time two thousand years ago outside the city wall of Jerusalem on the Cross of Calvary. It only needed to be applied once because “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.” (Hebrews 10:14 ESV). The blood was applied once for all time on the Cross. This one shedding of Jesus’ blood is sufficient to take away the sins of the whole world, and more, to cleanse Heaven itself (Hebrews 9:24).

Jesus as the Lamb and as the High Priest presented his blood – His proof of death on the Cross. As he hung on the Roman stake with his blood running down over his body and onto the ground, He was presenting his offering. It was at the moment of imminent death that Jesus cried, “It is finished!” The wrath and law of God was satisfied. The penalty was paid. The veil of separation was rent. All this happened because Jesus died for us. And Jesus’ blood is the proof of it.

Pleading the Blood

So we may ask, “What does the Bible say is necessary for a person to obtain salvation?” The Bible says that we obtain all the blessings which Christ purchased through the Cross by faith. It is by faith in Jesus that we are in Christ, His death on the Cross is ours, and thus we have all the benefits of his blood. It is by faith that we are saved.

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. (John 3:16 NAS)

We do not have to “obtain” or “appropriate” this blood by means of rituals, ceremonies, ordinances, or acts of human obedience. We are only called to believe the truth about what the blood, or the Cross, means: that Jesus Christ died in our place; he gave himself to pay the price for our atonement, and now through his blood, by trusting in what Jesus did, we can be justified – right with God. We must only “plead the blood.” We need only come to the Father holding forth in the faith the doing and dying of Jesus in our place.

To plead in a court of law can mean to “put forward a plea of a specific nature in court.”⁵ In court an advocate pleads in order to “assert as defense, vindication, or excuse; claim as a plea.” If one is charged with a crime, as the defendant one must plead. Ordinarily, the plea is either “guilty” or “not guilty.” But, in the case of the Christian, before the judgment of God, the Gospel bids us to offer “the blood of Jesus” as our plea. In the Medieval Latin *placit* meant to “appeal to the law.” But, the Christian does not appeal to the Law in making a defense. Instead, we “plead the blood.” Or, in other words, we appeal to the death of Jesus on the Cross, who is our Substitute, and thereby our Savior.

⁵The American Heritage Dictionary