

What is atonement?

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If you are new to Christianity (or even if you have been a Christian for a long time!) certain words and phrases used by theologians may sound completely unintelligible. Nevertheless, it is helpful to know them in order to get a deeper understanding of the basics of the christian faith. One such word is “atonement”. Let’s find out what this word means and why it’s important.

A definition

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, ‘to atone’ means ‘to provide or serve as reparation or compensation for something bad or unwelcome’. This dictionary also tells us that the word ‘atonement’ is used to denote ‘the reconciliation of God and humankind through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.’ This brings us right to the core of the Biblical message. The word ‘atonement’ implies that something bad happened between God and

humankind, and this can be repaired or compensated by the death of Jesus Christ. Let's delve in a little deeper.

The 'bad' that happened

When God created the first humans, Adam and Eve, His purpose for them was to be His people and to dwell with Him. Man enjoyed life in God's presence. This is reflected in some Psalms, for example:

“ You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore. ” (Psalm 16:11)

“O Lord, I love the habitation of your house and the place where your glory dwells.” (Psalm 26:8)

However, in Genesis 3 we read how Adam and Eve disobeyed the Lord God. Upon realizing how serious their action was, “the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3:8). They were ashamed and no longer felt comfortable in the presence of their Creator. And rightly

so, since they no longer met the requirements of dwelling on God's holy mountain:

“O Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent? Who shall dwell on your holy hill? He who walks blamelessly and does what is right and speaks truth in his heart...” (Psalm 15:1-2).

Adam and Eve clearly had not done what was right. God held them accountable and sent them out of the Garden of Eden where they had been living with Him. Because of their rebellion, they could no longer exist before a holy God.

God took the initiative to repair the relationship

When God sent Adam and Eve out of His presence, He did not abandon them completely. On the contrary, He promised that one day, one of their descendants would successfully fight Satan (God's enemy who had tempted Adam and Eve into disobedience). This would open the way towards restoration of the original situation where God and man dwelt together. The rest of the Bible is basically a report of how God made this possible.

Sacrifices as a means of atonement

Humanity was exiled from God's presence, but He did not want this situation to continue forever. He chose one nation, the Israelites, to be His special people and said: "I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God" (Exodus 29:45-46). How was this possible? The answer can be found in the books of Exodus and Leviticus. The Lord God ordered the Israelites to build a tabernacle, a holy tent, as His dwelling place (Exodus 25:8-9; 40:34). He also gave detailed prescriptions for sacrifices that would enable people to enter this tabernacle, and so to come into God's presence.

Let me quote a helpful book by Michael Morales^[1] here: "The whole sacrificial system serves to atone and finds its meaning in the atoning function of sacrifice itself. [...] Atonement is a means to an end, a means to Israel's fellowship and communion with YHWH God" (Morales

2015, pp 124-125). Morales explains further that atonement has a twofold meaning in Scripture: ransom from death and purification from pollution of sin.

If sinful people wanted to come into God's presence, they were to choose a perfect lamb or goat and take it to the holy tent. Then, Leviticus 1:4 explains, "he shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him." The animal served as a substitute to present the people before God, reconciled and accepted. For more information on animal sacrifices, please read this article.

Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice of atonement

Animal sacrifices could not achieve atonement once and for all. A permanent solution was provided by the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. Not only for the people of Israel, but for all people. As the New City Catechism summarizes : "Since death is the punishment for sin, Christ died willingly in our place to deliver us from the power and penalty of sin and bring us back to God. By his substitutionary atoning death, He alone redeems us from

hell and gains for us forgiveness of sin, righteousness, and everlasting life.”

Jesus Christ was offered as a substitute in our place. He took upon Himself the sins of humanity, so that we might receive the atonement for our sins and be reconciled to God. “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of His blood-to be received by faith” (Romans 5:23 , NIV). If we accept Jesus’ offer by faith, we can “have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus” (Hebrews 10:19). We can be in God’s presence again, since Jesus has paid for the evil we humans did to our Creator. He has reconciled us to God.

It is very important to have your relationship with God restored, otherwise you’ll have to spend eternity without Him. Therefore, echo the prayer in Psalm 79:9,

“ Help us, O God of our salvation, for the glory of Your name; deliver us, and atone for our sins, for Your name’s sake! ”

[1] Morales, L. Michael. Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A biblical theology of the book of Leviticus.

(D.A. Carson, Ed.) New Studies in Biblical Theology, part 37. Nottingham : Apollos, 2015.

Thanks to Gspellimages for the wonderful painting!

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