

THE MERCIES OF GOD: Atonement

“Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being *fell* upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.” — *Isaiah 53:4-6*

Introduction

AN OVERVIEW OF SALVATION		
Its Arrangement	Its Accomplishment	Its Application
Before Time	An Historical Event (the cross)	Relative Time
Election	Atonement	Regeneration, etc.

Almost every religion proposes some form of “atonement.” There is an innate recognition that all human beings have sinned in some way, and that God is holy and righteous. The offense of sin requires the exercise of justice. A penalty must be paid. Religion attempts to explain how the penalty of sin can be paid without the destruction of the sinner. This is called “atonement.”

All religions that affirm the need for atonement make it a responsibility of *the offender*. Only biblical Christianity places atonement in the hands of *the offended*. For Christianity, the atonement as accomplished by God in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross is the center of the gospel—a fundamental tenet of the faith that cannot be denied:

- **1 Corinthians 15:3-4** – “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”

It is this central tenet of biblical Christianity which the world and all other religions explicitly reject. For example:

- The **Romans** depicted the crucified Jesus with a donkey-head (the “Alexamenos graffito” in Rome, c. AD 200).
- **Islam** rejects the idea that Jesus Christ could make atonement for others: “no soul shall bear another’s burden”; “each man shall reap the fruits of his own deeds.” Muslims vehemently deny that Jesus died on the cross.
- Mahatma Gandhi summarizes the perspective of **Hinduism**: “I could accept Jesus as a martyr, an embodiment of sacrifice, and a divine teacher, but not as the most perfect man ever born. His death on the cross was a great example to the world, but that there was anything like a mysterious or miraculous virtue in it, my heart could not accept.”
- **Buddhists** accept the possibility that Jesus died as a martyr; his death was therefore noble. But Buddhism explicitly rejects the idea that Jesus died a shameful death in the place of sinners.
- The view of **secularism** is expressed by British philosopher Sir A. J. Ayer (1910-1989), who considered Christianity the worst of the religions of historic importance because of it proclaimed “the allied doctrines of original sin and vicarious atonement, which are intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous.”

The apostle Paul summarized the world’s response to the Christian preaching of atonement when he wrote, “**But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness**” (1 Cor 1:23).

Sadly, it is also this central tenet of the faith which is neglected by many Christians today—a reality evidenced by the number of professing Christians seeking ecumenical unity with adherents of other religions.

“There’s a perception in the minds of many preachers that the depth of teaching they got on the atonement during their Bible college days is only for them as preachers, that it would be too deep for the ordinary Christian in the pew. This perception is entirely false. It’s also why, over time and across generations, churches lose the truth.” — *Conrad Mbewe*

A. Key Terms and Definitions

1. **Atonement.** “The work Christ did in his life and death to earn our salvation” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 568).

Fuller definition: “The aspect of the work of the work of Christ, and particularly his death, that secures the restoration of the fellowship between individual believers and God” (MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 493).

The Hebrew verb translated as “to atone” means “to cover.” The English word “atonement” (traced back to the 16th century) contains the idea of “at-one-ment” (“unity, harmony”).

This concept of atonement presupposes two truths: (1) God is perfectly righteous; and (2) human beings are thoroughly corrupt. As a result, enmity exists. “Atonement” answers the question, “How can the two—righteous God and sinful man—be *brought into harmony*? How can they be *reconciled*?”

Key idea:
that which is needed to
bring righteous God and
sinful man into harmony.

2. **Penal.** The adjective “penal” relates to the “punishment of offenders for violations of the law.” Related words include: penal code; penal colony; penalize; penalty; etc.

When used to describe the atonement, it indicates that the process of bringing reconciliation between God and man involved **the payment of the penalty** for the sins committed. The payment for sin perfect righteousness requires is *death*:

- **Romans 6:23** – “For the wages of sin is death.”
- **Ezekiel 18:20a** – “The person who sins shall die.”

The concept of “penal” atonement anchors atonement in the world of divine law and perfect justice.

Key idea:
punishment for the
commission of a crime

3. **Substitution.** The word “substitution” refers to “the act of replacing one person or thing with another.” An important synonym for the term is “**vicarious**”—“something performed, received, or exercised in place of another.”

When used to describe the atonement, it indicates that the process of bringing reconciliation between God and man involved someone other than the sinner paying the price for his sin.

The concept of substitution is found throughout the Bible, but is particularly illustrated in the OT sacrificial system, particularly in **Leviticus 16** and **the day of atonement**.

Key idea:
the act of replacing a
person or thing with
another

These concepts are combined together to describe the doctrine of **penal substitutionary atonement** (sometimes called PSA):

- “The view of the atonement that Christ’s death is a sacrifice offered in payment of the penalty of our sins. It is accepted by God the Father as the satisfaction in place of the penalty due to believers in Christ” (MacArthur & Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 925).
- “The notion which the phrase ‘penal substitution’ expresses is that Jesus Christ our Lord, moved by a love that was determined to do everything necessary to save us, endured and exhausted the destructive divine judgment for which we were otherwise inescapably destined, and so won us forgiveness, adoption and glory” (J. I. Packer, “What Did the Cross Achieve?,” 30).

A text which best demonstrates the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement is **Isaiah 53**.

B. Essential Characteristics

1. Necessitated by Sin

- **Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:23** – “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
- **1 Corinthians 15:3; 1 Peter 3:18** – “For Christ also died for sins once for all.”

Some have argued that penal substitutionary atonement was one of several options God had to save sinners (this view is called the “hypothetical necessity view”). They argue that there was nothing necessary in salvation itself to require Jesus’ death. For example, He could have solved the problem of sin merely by *divine fiat* (“Let there be forgiveness . . . And there was forgiveness!”). But the Bible describes sin as so antithetical to God’s character that it required the greatest possible expression of divine justice. Thus, there was no other way to bring reconciliation between God and man than through the death of Jesus (the “absolute necessity view”).

2. Motivated by Love and Justice

The atonement displays vividly both God’s marvelous love and His perfect justice:

- **John 3:16; 1 John 4:10**
- **Romans 5:8** – “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

“Who delivered up Jesus to die? Not Judas, for money; not Pilate, for fear; not the Jews, for envy; but the Father, for love!” —*Octavius Winslow*

- **Ezekiel 18:20a** – “The person who sins shall die.” See also **Romans 6:23**
- **Romans 3:24-26** – “. . . the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

3. Substitutionary in Nature

The concept of substitution is emphasized from Genesis to Revelation. Important texts include:

- **Isaiah 53:4-6; 1 Peter 1:18-19; 2:24**
- **2 Corinthians 5:21** – “He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

4. Contingent upon the Work of Christ

To achieve “at-one-ment” (peace, unity) between righteous God and sinful man, both *the payment of sin* and *the provision of righteousness* was necessary. As the substitute who would pay the penalty for sin, Jesus was required to live a life of obedience to the Father’s law (for the provision of positive/active righteousness) *and* he was required to die as a sacrifice (to pay the penalty for the disobedience of those for whom He serves as substitute).

- **Romans 5:19; Galatians 4:4-5; Hebrews 5:8-9**

“The perfect standard of God’s righteousness expressed in his law consisted of two key aspects: prescriptive commands that required full obedience and penal sanctions for the breaking of those commands.”

—MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 521

5. Efficacious in Achievement

The self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ was efficacious in two ways:

- a) **It was *once for all*.** There was no need for another sacrifice. “For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God” (1 Pet 3:18; cf. Rom 6:10; Heb 7:27; 9:12, 28; 10:10).
- b) **It was *for the elect*.** It accomplished *real* atonement for every one who was chosen by God to eternal life, for every one who would ever believe (Matt 20:28; John 10:11; Acts 20:28; Eph 5:25; Col 2:13-14).

Since the atonement is *substitutionary in nature*, it pays for the real sins of real people. It is not a *hypothetical* atonement that makes salvation merely *possible*. It is an *efficacious* atonement that makes salvation *a reality*.

“Jesus didn’t purchase save-ability. He took names to the cross.” —Paul Tripp

D. Practical Implications

1. **Sin is wretched.** An ever-deepening understanding that it was *my sin* that nailed him to the cross will create an ever-increasing hatred for sin itself. How can one be comfortable engaging in that which cost his Savior His life?
2. **God’s love is glorious.** God was not required to save anyone. Justice requires that all human beings receive the sentence of eternal damnation. But God chose to demonstrate His love to sinners, and His choice to save some from judgment necessarily required the greatest payment possible—the sacrifice of His Son (Rom 5:8).
3. **There is now no condemnation.** Elvina M. Hall captured the nature of the atonement well when she penned this chorus: “Jesus paid it all; all to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain; He washed it white as snow.” Because of the efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice, the penalty for all the sins of any true believer—past, present, and future—have been paid for in full. (Rom 8:1, 31-39).
4. **Hope is found only in Jesus.** No other religion in the world proclaims a gospel of atonement like biblical Christianity. There is hope only in Jesus Christ, the only Mediator who can truly reconcile God and man (John 14:6; Acts 4:12; 1 Tim 2:5-6). All other proposals for atonement found in the religions of the world are false.

For Further Reflection

Scripture Memory: 1 Peter 1:18-19

Recommended Reading:

- John MacArthur & Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, pages 511-28.
- Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgression*. Crossway, 2017.
- John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. Eerdmans, 2015.

Homework:

- Read through Isaiah 53 several times over the coming week. Write out a list of observations from the text regarding the nature of the atonement. Bring them to the next meeting and describe what you found.
- Review the definitions of the key terms and construct a definition of “penal substitutionary atonement” (PSA) in your own words.
- Find someone (not in Men of the Word) with whom you can discuss the concept of PSA. Come to the next meeting ready to discuss their response. Did they understand it? Did they agree with it? Why or why not?
- Review the hymns we sang (listed below), and consider why the doctrine of PSA has evoked the greatest creations of music and art.

Hymns: “Jesus Paid It All” (*Hymns of Grace* #54); “How Deep the Father’s Love for Us” (*Hymns of Grace* #80); “Here is Love” (*Hymns of Grace* #185).

This Week’s Audio: gracechurch.org/motw

Next Meeting: October 23 – “Propitiation”