

Chapter 12: Atonement

Almighty God. The Creator of the universe, and the one who establishes the laws by which we must live, ultimately knew that mankind would consistently fail to keep His commandments. He taught us His laws and by His convictions executed judgement. The commandments given to Moses were much the same as a contractual agreement. Once a person has broken one of these laws the contract invokes the penalty of punishment and eternal judgement. However the Creator also has compassion on us and through His love provided mechanisms for us to seek His forgiveness. Consider the following:

25 "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins.

26 Put Me in remembrance; Let us contend together; State your case, that you may be acquitted.

Isaiah 43:25-26 (NKJV)

As we continue our Bible study we will discover how God executes His plan to allow mankind to seek forgiveness for sin. Considering Isaiah 43:25-26 we can understand that God is demonstrating His effort and desire to forget our transgressions and to allow us to enter a state of reconciliation with Him. Ever since the fall of man people have attempted to seek forgiveness by performing an act of sacrifice. Remember Cain and Abel in Genesis 4 as an example. Also remember the numerous sacrifices and altars that were erected by Abraham and his descendants. Although this is not a common practice today in modern western civilisation God was able to use this behaviour of our ancestors to provide a temporary solution for the people to seek forgiveness for their sins.

Sin and Sacrifice – A Temporary Solution

Read Exodus 29 and Leviticus 1. Both of these chapters explain the sacrificial system, which was created according to God's commandment. Priests took animal sacrifices from the people as an act of atonement (compensation for wrongdoing) for their sins, which they committed against God. Consider the following verses:

40 "For Aaron's sons you shall make tunics, and you shall make sashes for them. And you shall make hats for them, for glory and beauty.

41 "So you shall put them on Aaron your brother and on his sons with him. You shall anoint them, consecrate them, and sanctify them, that they may minister to Me as priests.

42 "And you shall make for them linen trousers to cover their nakedness; they shall reach from the waist to the thighs.

43 "They shall be on Aaron and on his sons when they come into the tabernacle of meeting, or when they come near the altar to minister in the holy place, that they do not incur iniquity and die. It shall be a statute forever to him and his descendants after him.

Exodus 28:40-43 (NKJV)

32 *`If he brings a lamb as his sin offering, he shall bring a female without blemish.*

33 *`Then he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering, and kill it as a sin offering at the place where they kill the burnt offering.*

34 *`The priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger, put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and pour all the remaining blood at the base of the altar.*

35 *`He shall remove all its fat, as the fat of the lamb is removed from the sacrifice of the peace offering. Then the priest shall burn it on the altar, according to the offerings made by fire to the LORD. So the priest shall make atonement for his sin that he has committed, and it shall be forgiven him.*

Leviticus 4:32-35 (NKJV)

In Exodus 28:40-43 God commands Moses to establish Aaron and his family as priests to accept the sin sacrifices on behalf of the people. The priests effectively became mediators between God and the people which allowed them to “*contend together*” as mentioned in Isaiah 43:26 and seek forgiveness. Leviticus 4:32-35 informs us that the people were required to bring their sacrifice to the tabernacle (place of meeting) and kill it. Then the priest will perform the ritual on their behalf.

Animal sacrifice was the first method that God used to allow the people to make atonement for their sins. In order to understand this we must consider the circumstances of the people. Thousands of years ago wealth was determined by land ownership and livestock. You will have discovered this reading Genesis earlier in our study. Therefore God was requiring the people to sacrifice something that was meaningful to them. To kill one of their bulls or sheep was to give a portion of their wealth and even their food back to God as an offering to seek His forgiveness for the sin, which they had committed. If we were to consider this in our modern circumstances it would be the equivalent of offering a substantial amount of money or perhaps some belongings. Imagine if you would offer your car to God as an act of atonement for sin. Perhaps to some of our ancestors this would be a sacrifice of equivalent stature. When we consider atonement sacrifices we must remember that it is the intention of the sacrifice that God was concerned with not the slaughter of the animals themselves for why would the Creator have a need for the animals? Rather the desire was for the heart felt act of sacrificing something important to us to seek His forgiveness.

Corruption of the Heart

Once the people had genuinely sought God’s forgiveness by offering an atonement sacrifice they were given another chance to resist sin. As we have studied in Genesis 4 God’s desire is for us to rule over sin rather than to let it conquer our actions and motives. However the nature of sin caused the people to trivialise these sacrifices. The system of atonement gave the opportunity for mankind to continue to sin remorselessly and make a token sacrifice after the commandments had been broken. It is possible to understand that simply fulfilling the act of an atonement sacrifice does not guarantee that a person is genuinely repenting. We may understand this by considering traffic law. If we were habitually parking our car illegally and received a parking fine we would simply pay the fee but there is always an opportunity to illegally park again, possibly without being discovered. Therefore we would take the risk of receiving the penalty but we would continue to park illegally. The

sacrificial system could also have been abused in this manner by allowing a person to pay the atonement price for their sin but never convincing them to cease from performing their sinful acts.

Considering the apparent flaw in mankind's approach to atonement sacrifices now read the following passage to discover God's perspective of this problem:

11 "To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" Says the LORD. "I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle. I do not delight in the blood of bulls, Or of lambs or goats.

12 "When you come to appear before Me, Who has required this from your hand, To trample My courts?

13 Bring no more futile sacrifices; Incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies - I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting.

14 Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; They are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them.

15 When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood.

16 "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil,

17 Learn to do good; Seek justice, Rebuke the oppressor; Defend the fatherless, Plead for the widow.

18 "Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool.

19 If you are willing and obedient, You shall eat the good of the land;

20 But if you refuse and rebel, You shall be devoured by the sword"; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.

Isaiah 1:11-20 (NKJV)

Notice how God is telling us that He does not delight in the sacrifices and how He refers to them as "futile". He mentions that He "cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting." And that we should "Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Put away the evil of your doings from before My eyes. Cease to do evil" Therefore from God's perspective the act of atonement sacrifice is meaningless unless we seek to turn away from committing sin, are genuinely repentant, and change our deeds from evil to good.

Despite our hypocrisy God is still providing us an opportunity to seek true forgiveness. "Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool." He is giving us a direct promise of forgiveness. This is an absolute promise that our sins can be forgiven. Consider the terminology used here. "sins are like scarlet". Scarlet being the colour of blood, and also He states that "Your hands are full of blood", but God also tells us that our sins shall be made "as white as snow". Therefore we can conclude that if we "reason together" with God our sins will be forgiven. The blood red stain washed away to be as white as the snow. Our sins removed from us by God Himself.

Repentance

God is actively seeking true repentance for sin. This is an acknowledgement of the offences that we have committed against Him and a desire to be forgiven and to abstain from sinning again. Consider the following passages:

*8 Look on my affliction and my pain, And forgive all my sins.
19 Consider my enemies, for they are many; And they hate me with cruel hatred.
20 Keep my soul, and deliver me; Let me not be ashamed, for I put my trust in You.
21 Let integrity and uprightness preserve me, For I wait for You.*

Psalm 25:18-21 (NKJV)

*1 Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered.
2 Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity, And in whose spirit there is no deceit.
3 When I kept silent, my bones grew old Through my groaning all the day long.
4 For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me; My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. Selah
5 I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," And You forgave the iniquity of my sin. Selah*

Psalm 32:1-5 (NKJV)

*O LORD, do not rebuke me in Your wrath, Nor chasten me in Your hot displeasure!
2 For Your arrows pierce me deeply, And Your hand presses me down.
3 There is no soundness in my flesh Because of Your anger, Nor any health in my bones Because of my sin.
4 For my iniquities have gone over my head; Like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me.
5 My wounds are foul and festering Because of my foolishness.
6 I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long.
7 For my loins are full of inflammation, And there is no soundness in my flesh.
8 I am feeble and severely broken; I groan because of the turmoil of my heart.
9 Lord, all my desire is before You; And my sighing is not hidden from You.
10 My heart pants, my strength fails me; As for the light of my eyes, it also has gone from me.
11 My loved ones and my friends stand aloof from my plague, And my relatives stand afar off.
12 Those also who seek my life lay snares for me; Those who seek my hurt speak of destruction, And plan deception all the day long.
13 But I, like a deaf man, do not hear; And I am like a mute who does not open his mouth.
14 Thus I am like a man who does not hear, And in whose mouth is no response.
15 For in You, O LORD, I hope; You will hear, O Lord my God.
16 For I said, "Hear me, lest they rejoice over me, Lest, when my foot slips, they exalt themselves against me."
17 For I am ready to fall, And my sorrow is continually before me.*

*18 For I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin.
19 But my enemies are vigorous, and they are strong; And those who hate me wrongfully have multiplied.
20 Those also who render evil for good, They are my adversaries, because I follow what is good.
21 Do not forsake me, O LORD; O my God, be not far from me!
22 Make haste to help me, O Lord, my salvation!*

Psalm 38 (NKJV)

Psalms are poetry and often reveal the true feelings of the heart that God desires from us. David, the one who wrote some of the Psalms, demonstrates true repentance in his words. Notice how he mentions his personal afflictions, which are a direct consequence of his transgressions. David pleads with God to hear his requests for forgiveness and acknowledges his sin and personal failings. This is the exact action that God requires from us. When we understand that our actions transgress God's law we must take responsibility for what we have done, accept our failings, seek forgiveness and attempt to prevent ourselves from committing further transgressions. It is also important to acknowledge that despite our many failures God has never abandoned us, and He has always provided opportunities to seek forgiveness and learn from our mistakes. Consider the children of Israel that despite their constant failures God would encourage them to grow and provide an opportunity for them to return to the path of righteousness.

Changing our ways

As we read the scriptures it is apparent that God is giving us an important message. Read Isaiah 43 and consider verses 25-26:

*25 "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins.
26 Put Me in remembrance; Let us contend together; State your case, that you may be acquitted.*

Isaiah 43:25-26 (NKJV)

God is pleading with us. Just as a father would plead with a disobedient child. He is asking us to acknowledge Him. Although this plea is made to the children of Israel it applies to us also. Verse 25 is particularly profound as here God is stating that he will "*blot out your transgressions*". Therefore we can perceive that He will reason with us to allow our forgiveness if we truly repent from our sins. On the day we truly understand repentance He will find a way for us to return to Him. Consider the following:

*26 "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.
27 "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.*

Ezekiel 36:26-27 (NKJV)

God promises the children of Israel that He will cause them to obey His laws naturally. Consider the metaphoric language that He has used. A heart of stone is hard, cold, and unchanging. There is no love inside it. When God removes this stone and replaces it with a heart of flesh it is warm, beating with life and moving. By placing His Spirit within us we have a part of God living inside who reminds us to obey His commandments. It is quite plausible to reason that this is the source of our own personal conscience, the 'little voice', or feeling within that warns us not to commit an evil deed.

If we believe in the existence of God and wish to obey His will what must we do? Since God has made a great effort to help us follow His righteous path what is our own personal responsibility that we must fulfil in our lives? Consider the following verses:

*5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding;
6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.
7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and depart from evil.*

Proverbs 3:5-7 (NKJV)

*10 For "He who would love life And see good days, Let him refrain his tongue from evil, And his lips from speaking deceit.
11 Let him turn away from evil and do good; Let him seek peace and pursue it.
12 For the eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, And His ears are open to their prayers; But the face of the LORD is against those who do evil."*

1Peter 3:10-12 (NKJV)

Therefore it is our responsibility to trust God. To understand His will and to try and obey it through our thoughts and actions. Not to consider our own personal morality or the standards of other people as a source upon which to base our choices, but rather to perform good deeds and walk the path of righteousness if we are to have any hope of attaining God's favour.