

Defining the Atonement

The Atonement has become a term with many theological implications. It is not just merely a biblical word with a single idea, but has become a term which describes *“the whole scope of Christ’s saving work.”* It is a word describing the salvific or redemptive results arising from Jesus death. Atonement puts forth the idea of reconciliation between God and mankind, and this accomplished solely by the work of God in Christ’s sacrifice. Many have used the description of “at-one-ment” to describe the result of atonement brought about between God and mankind. It therefore has emphasis on the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. It is an English word used by translators in both an Old and New Testaments. The two Old Testament Hebrew words commonly translated as *“atonement,”* [kippur 3725], and [kaphar 3722] carry with them the idea of *“expiation”* (to remove offense or guilt) or to *“cover over.”*

- 3725 – **kippur** – ; expiation, -atonement.
- 3722 – **kaphar** - ; to cover, to expiate or condone, to placate or cancel:-- appease, make (an atonement, cleanse, disannul, forgive, be merciful, pacify, pardon, purge (away), put off, (make) reconcile(-liation).

The New Testament word normally translated as *“propitiation”* is the Greek [hilasterion 2435] and also carries with it the idea of *“expiation”* (to remove offense or guilt) or to *“cover over.”* In fact, the Greek term actually holds a more personal meaning to the means of expiation, namely that of *“an atoning victim”* or the actual sacrifice of atonement.

- 2435 – **hilasterion** - ; an expiatory (place or thing), an atoning victim, or (specially) the lid of the Ark (in the Temple):--mercy seat, propitiation.

In summary of the use of the biblical words, we can say that although the meaning of the words themselves is rather clear, the idea or concept of the atonement has taken on a theological meaning used to refer to the *“the whole scope of Christ’s saving work.”* In this scope of meaning, there are words which are frequently used to describe the nature, quality and character of the atonement. This is because Christ’s work is so profound, that the Bible uses many terms to describe it. These would be but are not limited to words like;

- **Substitutionary** – in the place of, *“Christ died in our place.”*
- **Vicarious** – in our place, for us, substitution implied personally, *“Christ died for us.”*
- **Propitiatory** – appeasement or satisfaction of God’s wrath toward sin, *“Christ satisfied God’s divine justice and paid the actual debt of our sin.”*
- **Expiatory** – the remove of guilt, *“Christ cancelled out or released us from the debt of sin.”*
- **Justification** – a legal declaration of righteousness, *“Christ justified us before God’s court on the basis of His own merit.”*
- **Sacrifice** – the personal cost to Christ was death in our place, *“Christ was the actual victim of divine justice, he was the sacrifice that died for us.”*
- **Reconciliation** – the restoration of relationship of mankind to God, *“Christ reconciled us to God and repaired the alienation we once had with Him.”*
- **Redemption** - to buy back, to pay the redemption price, *“Christ paid the price demanded by divine justice for our sins.”*
- **Salvific** – of salvation or according to salvation, saving quality, *“Christ saved us.”*

All of these terms deal with and relate to the alienation that has taken place between God and man because of sin. *Sin has brought about the desperate need of mankind to be reconciled to God, lest they be destroyed forever away from the presence of God.* The Bible plainly sets forth the doctrine that man as a sinner is guilty of breaking the law of God, of violating His righteousness. God has, therefore, judicially delivered man over to his own will so that

corruption has entered in, whereby he has lost all desire to serve God.

Romans 5:12 - 12 Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and **death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned** NASB

This means that man has no ability to save himself, for he does not realize his need nor has he the righteousness to provide atonement for his sin.

1 Corinthians 2:14 - 14 But **a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them**, because they are spiritually appraised. NASB

The atonement is what God has done to reconcile us, and to deal with God's alienation *from us* on account of our sin. God, by taking away sin, removes the ground of this alienation, and peace with God is the effect.

Romans 6:23 - 23 **For the wages of sin is death**, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. NASB

God was not obligated to save us, redeem us or do anything on our behalf. He was the offended party, and we were and are worthy of eternal wrath because of sin. ***But God because of His great love and mercy, freely chose to redeem us from that which we could not redeem ourselves.***

Grace is favor that God gives, that is unmerited by the recipient, and God is in no way obligated to give it but is free to do as He pleases.

Ephesians 2:4-5 - 4 **But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us**, 5 even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), NASB

It must be understood that this saving work of God in the atonement is in fact wholly God's work. The Scripture plainly declares that God reconciled us to Himself, it was His doing.

2 Corinthians 5:18 - 18 Now **all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ**, and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, NASB

People cannot save themselves from the desperate plight of sin, because this would cost them the ultimate payment of eternal separation from God. Therefore, if God does not act to save us, we will be hopelessly lost. ***The atonement is what God has done to save us.*** It is the historical events and objective facts of the actual sacrifice that God made on our behalf. The sacrifice of Jesus was the payment of our sin debt and did in fact redeem us and purify us by the removal of our guilt.

Titus 2:14 - 14 who gave Himself for us, **that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession**, zealous for good deeds. NASB

We were, by this atonement sanctified or cleansed from the corruption of sin so that we could be received into the holy presence of the infinitely pure God of Heaven.

Hebrews 10:10, 14 - 10 By this will **we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all**..... 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. NASB

Now then let us marvel together at the great things God has done! Let us see the desperate plight from which we have been snatched by the life and death of God Himself! What amazing love is this, that God would come and die in our place.

1 John 4:10 - 10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that **He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins**. NASB

It is this amazing love of God that has motivated Him to such actions! And by these things He has in fact worked all of these great works of salvation and reconciliation for us. Consider how Scripture describes these things. They are very profound!

Romans 5:8-10 - 8 But **God demonstrates His own love toward us**, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died **for us**. 9 Much more then, having now **been justified by His blood**, we shall be **saved from the wrath of God** through Him. 10 For if while **we were enemies, we were reconciled to God** through the death of His Son, much more, **having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life**. NASB

Let us respond in an appropriate manner with thanksgiving and praise! Let us rejoice in what God has done for us through Christ Jesus, and give Him the glory due Him!