

The Nature of the Atonement

The atonement has several very important *characteristics* which are important to realize. In the hymn “For Man the Savior Bled,” the writer makes the statement, “*Oh what heavenly wonders dwell in Thy atoning blood!*” Now when we consider the nature of the atonement, this truth is displayed wonderfully. There is so much depth of character in what Christ has done, it sends one’s heart and mind soaring! Let us consider then some of these matters. As we think about the very ground of the atonement we must consider that it is ***grounded in God’s Sovereignty and Eternal Decree***. This is to say that God planned the atonement, and all of its intricate aspects to come to pass exactly as they did from before the creation of the world.

1 Peter 1:20 - 20 For **He was foreknown before the foundation of the world**, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you NASB

This, of course, is true about everything that happens, but nonetheless also true of the atonement. Therefore, it was always the intended purpose of God for Jesus the Christ to come and give His life as a ransom for sinners, to satisfy and appease His divine wrath, by His sacrifice to stand in the place of those sinners whom He has chosen to save, and by these to reconcile them to Himself. This is very clear in Scripture. This is why God “*sent*” Jesus, to fulfill the plan of redemption He had purposed from all eternity.

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

John 5:36 - 36 "But the witness which I have is greater than *that of* John; for the works which the Father has given Me to accomplish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me, **that the Father has sent Me**. NASB

God is seen in Scripture as the cause of the atonement, the great architect behind it all.

Isaiah 53:6 – 6 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**. NASB

Romans 3:25 - 25 **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;* NASB

Atonement for sin is therefore CERTAIN! The awesome and wonderful thing about this is that since God has intended to save from the beginning, then that is exactly what He will do and has done. This is expressed in the very name of Jesus, which means, “*the Lord saves!*” In other words, this makes the atonement sufficient to achieve its ends, since its ends are the thing for which it was designed by God. This is greatly reassuring! We can rest in the fact that God has intended to save us, so we will be saved! This is the very purpose that Jesus has come, to consummate the ages by His great work of redemption!

Hebrews 9:26 - 26 Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now **once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself**. NASB

But what was it that moved God to design such a thing as this? Well, the answer to this question sheds more light on the *character* of the atonement. ***The death of Christ upon the cross is motivated by free and sovereign love!*** This is to say that what moved or motivated God to design a world with fallen people and give the life of His Son in sacrifice for their sins, was the desire to display His love in an amazing and death defying way! What words could be used to describe the profound depth of the love of God! Only Jesus the Living Word could do that through all that He has done!

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

John 3:16 - 16 "**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. NASB

Ephesians 5:2 - 2 and walk in love, just as **Christ also loved you, and gave Himself up for us**, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma. NASB

God was not obligated to save us, but in fact purposed to save us *freely*. God did not owe mankind a debt, on the contrary, He is the one offended by the actions of people. Therefore, if He plans to save the offending rebels, He does it by His own sovereign and free prerogative! He does it because He is gracious and merciful! Therefore God's love is not constrained by anything except the perfect, free and sovereign pleasure of His will.

Ephesians 1:4-6 - 4 just as **He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world**, that we should be holy and blameless before Him. **In love 5 He predestined us** to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, 6 to the praise of the glory of His grace, **which He freely bestowed on us** in the Beloved. NASB

This love is so profound that He Himself is willing to be the atoning victim and bear the very penalty which is reserved for those who induce His holy wrath. He *is* the sacrificial lamb which has to die, in my place, for my sin! What amazing love is this?

1 John 2:2 - 2 and **He Himself is the propitiation for our sins**; and not for ours only, but also for *those of* the whole world. NASB

As we have stated there is a host of biblical terms which describe the character of the atonement. This is to say that the Bible uses many different terms in different passages to describe what it is and what has been accomplished by it. Its very nature is that which is pictured in the Old Testament "*sacrifice.*" Therefore, Christ is our "*sacrifice,*" our Passover lamb that died "*vicariously*" (for us) and as a "*substitute*" (in our place). In speaking about this Old Testament sacrifice, John Murray states.... "*The sacrifice was the divinely instituted provision whereby the sin might be covered and the liability to divine wrath and curse removed. The Old Testament worshipper when he brought his oblation to the altar substituted an animal victim in his place. In laying his hands upon the head of the offering there was transferred symbolically to the offering the sin and liability of the offerer. This is the pivot on which the transaction turned. The notion in essence was that the sin of the offerer was imputed to the offering and the offering bore as a result the death penalty.*" Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament Passover, and the very sacrificial Lamb portrayed by it. He is the reality to which the Passover pointed, the ultimate sacrifice to cover our sin, so that the death angel of God's wrath could pass us by and we could be set free from the bondage of sin (Egypt-Slavery-Pharaoh).

1 Corinthians 5:7 -7 Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just **as you are in fact** unleavened. **For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed.** NASB

Not only this but Jesus death has an eternal and perfect efficacy that the Old Testament sacrifices of goats and bulls could never afford. This is because Jesus Himself entered heaven and the true tabernacle of God to offer His blood there in the presence of God.

Hebrews 9:11-12 - 11 But when Christ appeared *as* a high priest of the good things to come, **He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle**, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12 and **not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood**, He entered the holy place once for all, **having obtained eternal redemption.** NASB

He obtained an eternal redemption. His death was "*one sacrifice for sins for all time,*" that is, it was final, complete and sufficient to atone.

Hebrews 10:11-13 - 11 And every priest stands **daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins**; 12 but He, having offered **one sacrifice for sins for all time**, SAT DOWN AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, 13 waiting from that time onward UNTIL HIS ENEMIES BE MADE A FOOTSTOOL FOR HIS FEET. NASB

Because God has instituted the sacrificial system as a means of atonement, he has therefore been pleased to have a sacrifice appease or satisfy His wrath. This we call "*propitiation.*" *Propitiation is an "appeasement" or "satisfaction."* The holy anger and wrath of God toward sin demands a satisfaction of justice, and His vengeance is enraged toward sin and must have a subject to inflict the good and righteous penalty of death.

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

Therefore we must have a substitute to satisfy God's wrath or be consumed ourselves. This is what sets Christianity apart from every other world religion. Jesus Christ is the only sufficient substitute who can meet the just requirements of God's law in order to die vicariously (for us) as a substitute (in our place). Jesus becomes then this propitiation *Himself* to appease the wrath of God.

Hebrews 2:17 - 17 Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, **to make propitiation for the sins of the people.** NASB

Therefore, the atonement does in fact "appease" or "satisfy" God's holy wrath toward sin. ***Because this is true, the atonement is also "expiatory." This is to say that it removes our guilt by meeting the demands of holy justice, fully.*** The offense of our sins has been absorbed by the *sacrifice* of the body of Jesus for us, and the requirements of God's justice for sin have been "cancelled out."

Colossians 2:13-14 - 13 And when you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, 14 **having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us** and which was hostile to us; and **He has taken it out of the way,** having nailed it to the cross. NASB

The penalty deserved in our guilt, has been paid in full by the sacrifice of Christ. ***This is to say then that the atonement is "redemptive," that it pays the price required by justice.*** Jesus death on the cross is seen as a ransom price paid to redeem us from the penal sanctions of the law.

1 Timothy 2:5-7 - 5 For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, 6 **who gave Himself as a ransom for all,** the testimony borne at the proper time. NASB

Jesus death is the full payment price demanded by the law because of our violations of it. He redeemed us from the *curse* of the law.

Galatians 3:13 - 13 **Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law,** having become a curse for us — for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE" NASB

It is important to recognize that this redeeming from the law is in relation to the violations we committed against the law in our sin. However, there is expressed in the law the very character and nature of God to which we look and eagerly desire to possess. We are not redeemed from this eager desire and love for God's holy law, but only the penal sanctions it imposes upon us because of our failure to meet its holy requirements. So we honor and love the law in all of its goodness, and the holy price it imposes upon our failures to obey it, have been fully paid by the redemption of Jesus the Christ.

Ephesians 1:7 - 7 **In Him we have redemption through His blood,** the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, NASB

Revelation 5:9 - 9 And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for **Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men** from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. NASB

To this end therefore, the redemption that is in Christ has redeemed us from the very *power* of sin, that we might live a new life, free from the penalties of divine justice and eager to do what is good.

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

Through Christ's redemption, the consequences of the devil's temptations to sin have been fully paid, and he can no longer accuse and threaten us with the holy demands of the law because we have been set free from these to now honor and serve God, not by the motivation of fear, but of thanksgiving and devoted love! In this redemption, Christ destroyed the devil's work!

Hebrews 2:14-15 - 14 Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might **render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; 15 and might deliver those** who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. NASB

1 John 3:8 - 8 the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. **The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil.** NASB