

Atonement: What is It?

***“If, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.”
—Romans 5:10,11***

THE PROCESS OF BRING-ing the alienated human race back into accord with God is called the doctrine of Atonement. The necessity for atonement, or reconciliation, between God and his human creation is one of the most fundamental teachings of the Bible. Throughout its pages is repeated the theme of man’s fall, his need of a Redeemer, the sacrificial work of Christ, and finally the coming kingdom as the agency to accomplish the needed reconciliation. Our opening text is just one such example of the Scriptural narrative on this vitally important subject.

In many circles today, however, the plain teachings of the Bible regarding the fall of man and his present state of separation from God are made light of, and discounted as too primitive a belief to be

retained in modern theology. The authenticity of the Genesis account of the entrance of sin into the world is often rejected by labeling the book as mythology, noteworthy only for its literary style. Instead, man is pictured as making steady progress toward the sublime state as a result of his own exalted efforts. How differently, though, do the Scriptures view the matter!

THE GENESIS RECORD

The opening two chapters of the book of Genesis show that Adam was originally created in the mental and moral image of God. He was placed in a garden-like environment in Eden which flourished with vegetation that would sustain his life. He was given dominion over all the lower animals, whether creatures of the air, land, or sea. In effect, Adam was king of an earthly domain which had been established for him by God. He enjoyed fellowship and communion with the Heavenly Father as one of his sons on the human plane of existence. Here was a picture of tranquility and harmony existing between man and his Creator in the earthly kingdom of God.

How quickly this scene was changed, however, when Adam transgressed the law of God. He lost the right to reside in the earthly paradise which had been his. Thorns and thistles, and the sweat of his brow as he labored for a living, became his lot. Under the sentence of death, physical, mental, and moral decay began to set in, each day carrying him farther away from his original state of perfection.—Gen. 3:17-24

Under these circumstances of condemnation and imperfection, Adam also lost the right of direct

fellowship and communion with his Creator. Thus was forfeited his place in the earthly paradise, the original kingdom of God. This would have been a permanent loss, were it not for a plan of salvation designed by a loving God.

This is the Genesis account of the creation and fall of man. If it is mere mythology and cannot be depended upon as the inspired Word of God, then the foremost personalities of the Christian church have been deceived. Jesus frequently cited incidents mentioned in the book of Genesis in his own personal ministry among the Jews, making reference to individuals such as Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.—Matt. 8:11; 23:35; 24:37

The great Apostle Paul confirmed the creation account of Genesis when he wrote, "The first man Adam was made a living soul." (I Cor. 15:45; Gen. 2:7) Who, then, are we to believe? We prefer to side with Jesus and Paul, accept the book of Genesis as authentic, and observe that those who try to discredit it are not benefiting by the blessed enlightenment which it provides.

Another objection has been advanced by those who deny man's need for atonement. Their argument is that God should simply forgive man for a disobedient act, especially for a first offense. If the account of man's fall in the Garden of Eden be true, they reason that God should have immediately reinstated him to favor. This objection seems somewhat plausible on the surface. The basic question to be resolved is, could God have forgiven his wayward human creation without requiring an atoning sacrifice?

GOD'S CHARACTER ATTRIBUTES

Before the foregoing question can be answered, it is necessary to provide a background sketch of the character of the Creator and of the setting of man's creation. The Bible describes God as an invisible spirit being, possessing grand attributes of character which are in perfect balance with each other. Briefly, the chief characteristics of God are wisdom, justice, love, and power. All these attributes are constantly working together harmoniously in every act in which God is engaged. As the great Sovereign of the universe, God conducts all his affairs in perfect accord with each of these four fundamental qualities of character.

Consider, now, how God's attributes would have reacted to the impulse of simply forgiving the transgression of man. Divine wisdom at once would have foreseen the dangers of such a course. God had originally declared that the penalty for disobedience would be death. If he now altered the consequences, others of God's intelligent creatures, as well as man, would conclude that God was changeable and his word not trustworthy. The Scriptures expressly declare that in God there "is no variableness, neither shadow of turning."—James 1:17; Mal. 3:6

Further, divine justice pointed to God's position as the lawgiver of the universe. He is the great King of many creations on various planes of existence in addition to that of man. Man's disobedience to the just laws of his Creator represented a rebellion in one small part of the vast universe. It had to be dealt with fairly and strictly in accordance with those laws. One measure of justice could not be meted out to man and another to the remainder of creation.

Divine justice demanded the same standard, which was an exacting one, of full obedience to the divine will. Justice, then, required that the death penalty be carried out as originally imposed.

Divine love desired that man should be fully forgiven. Thus, in a further demonstration of infinite wisdom, God's mercy and compassion had already provided a way by which this would be accomplished, without violating the strict requirements of his justice. The solution was a plan of salvation, conceived before the creation of man, centered on a redemptive sacrifice to purchase back the forfeited life of Adam. The Son of God would be commissioned to perform this task, to which he willingly consented.

He would undergo a change of nature from the spiritual to the human state. He would become a ransom, an exact equivalent to Adam in his perfection, and then voluntarily offer his life as an atoning sacrifice. Concerning this, the Apostle Peter states that we have been redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot: Who verily was foreordained before the foundation of the world." (I Pet. 1:18-20) Hence, in this way divine justice would be fully satisfied, since a perfect human life was to be offered for the transgression of Adam.

By this atonement arrangement, the life of Adam would not be forfeited forever, but would be restored in the resurrection on the basis of the merit of the Redeemer. Furthermore, not only Adam, but the entire human race condemned in him, would benefit from such a plan.—John 1:29; II Cor. 5:18,19; Heb. 2:9; I John 2:2

This, then, is the method which God adopted to accomplish the work of atonement. It carries a logic which at once satisfies the reasoning of the inquirer for truth, and it counters all objections that are raised against it. It is a plan to which God's character attributes of wisdom, justice and love can give wholehearted consent, and the great power of the Almighty is pledged to carry it out. Indeed, man will ultimately be forgiven, but through a course which provides him with a valuable lesson in the results of disobedience to the divine will. God's plan provides a pathway which leads from condemnation in Adam to righteousness in Christ.

FURTHER PROOF

If the Atonement doctrine is fundamental, then it should be possible to produce additional scriptural support for it throughout the Bible. Evidence should be available showing the present fallen state of man, the method God has devised to redeem and restore him, and the final outcome of the application and execution of such a plan. Consider first the following texts to determine whether man is described as being in a condition out of harmony with God:

"We have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin; As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: ... They are all gone out of the way." "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him." "By the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; ... by one man's disobedience many were made sinners." "Know ye not that the friendship

of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God.” —Rom. 3:9-12; 5:8,9,18,19; James 4:4

The conclusion is self-evident. All mankind is described as sinful, unrighteous, at enmity with God, and under his condemnation and wrath. Fallen mankind stands separate from the righteousness and perfection of God, condemned before the divine bar of justice. Originally, the only separating influence between God and man was the sentence of death for disobedience. Now, however, as a result of the accumulated effect of many years of alienation and sin, degradation and depravity have set in, removing man still farther away from the divine image.

As a result of the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, all men are guaranteed an awakening from the sleep of death. (Isa. 26:19; Hos. 13:14; John 5:28,29) However, all will return from the tomb with the same character which had been developed in this life. Even the noblest individuals will have some measure of imperfection, and the average lot of man, no doubt, will display considerable vestiges of sin.

Unless, therefore, God were to provide some means of assistance subsequent to their rising from the dead, all men would no doubt immediately be sentenced once again to death. The lingering effects of imperfection would prevent them from rendering full obedience to the divine will and would only lead to a renewed condemnation. Thankfully, provision has already been made in God's plan to provide the temporary shielding of all humanity during the thousand-year Messianic kingdom, while the great work of man's restoration proceeds.

Christ Jesus will act in the capacity of “mediator [Greek: a go-between, a reconciler] between God and men.” (I Tim. 2:5) With Jesus will be the faithful church class of the present age. These dedicated believers, on the basis of their faith in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on their behalf, are justified, or reckoned righteous in God’s sight ahead of the world. Having proved their faithfulness and loyalty to God under present conditions of trouble, trial and tribulation, these will be qualified to be sympathetic “priests of God.” (Rev. 20:6) They, with Christ as their Head, will thus go about the great work of bringing man back into harmony with his Creator during the coming thousand-year kingdom.

A COVENANT ARRANGEMENT

When the old Law Covenant was originally instituted with the nation of Israel, Moses was selected by God to come up on the mount of Sinai and obtain directly from him the tables of the Law. After setting forth all of its precepts to the people, Moses sprinkled the tables of the Law with the blood of sacrificed animals. (Heb. 9:19) If the Israelites had been able to live up to the requirements of this covenant in obedience to the will of God, they would be blessed above all the nations of the earth.—Deut. 28:1-13

This entire proceeding foreshadowed a much greater and more beneficial arrangement. The Prophet Jeremiah wrote: “Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.” “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.”—Jer. 31:31,33

God will establish a New Covenant with man, starting with Israel and finally encompassing all the families of the earth. Instead of Moses, there will be Christ to act as the mediator of this covenant. Paul identifies Jesus as the “mediator of the new covenant,” stating additionally that “he hath obtained a more excellent ministry [than Moses], by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises.”—Heb. 12:24; 8:6

Jesus and the church, the Christ, will be in “mount Sion,” a symbol of the spiritual “heavenly Jerusalem,” administering the affairs and laws of the Messianic kingdom. (Heb. 12:22; Rev. 14:1) Instead of the blood of animals, there will be the merit of the blood of Jesus, which will make the New Covenant possible and take away the sin of the world. The Christ will set forth the laws and regulations of the kingdom and assist all those who are willing to come to a full knowledge of the Truth. All will be informed of their privilege to return to harmony with God and gain everlasting life.

Jeremiah’s prophecy continues: “They shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”—Jer. 31:34

THE TABERNACLE PICTURE

There is yet another beautiful picture of the great work of sin removal in the kingdom period found in the experiences of the Israelites under the old Law Covenant. To compensate for the inability of

the people to live up to the requirements of the Law, God instituted Tabernacle sacrifices, which he counted as cleansing the people of their sins in a “typical” sense. The High Priest sacrificed specified animals, which were accepted by God as an atonement for sin. When the sacrifices were completed, the children of Israel could receive the blessings of God through the priesthood for another covenant year.

Jesus is referred to in Scripture as the “great high priest, that is passed into the heavens.” (Heb. 4:14) His footstep followers are spoken of as his “royal priesthood.” (I Pet. 2:9) The sacrifices and service of the church during this life, carried out faithfully unto death, qualify them to become part of the royal priesthood in the Messianic Age. As priests of God, they will reign together with Jesus for the express purpose of blessing the masses of humanity returning from the grave.

As a result of receiving instruction in the ways of righteousness and acting in harmony with it, the world will gradually be restored to the original state of perfection represented in Adam. At the end of the thousand-year kingdom they will be fully cleansed of all imperfection and enabled to stand in the presence of God without the need of a mediator.

RESTITUTION THROUGH A PROMISED SEED

There is an interesting text of Scripture bearing on the restoration of man’s lost dominion which has generally been overlooked by most Christians. It is found in Acts 3:20,21: “He shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: Whom the heaven must receive [retain] until the times of

restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began.” Here is a clear statement which connects the Second Coming, or presence, of Christ in the affairs of earth with “restitution”—that is, the restoration of all that was lost in the fall of man.

Notice that this text cannot apply to the church, which is promised a new heavenly reward, not restoration to a former condition. It does apply, however, to the remainder of mankind, who will be blessed by a restoration of “that which was lost”—perfect human life in abundance. (Luke 19:10) As a result of the restitution process, man will regain his original state of perfection, the mental and moral likeness of God, the dominion of earth, and harmony with his Creator. Not only was this statement made by the Apostle Peter, but, as he points out, it has been “spoken by the mouth of all [God’s] holy prophets since the world began.” How strange, then, that more Christians have not understood that the kingdom era is designed to be one of blessing and benefit for man.

Other scriptures elaborate further on how the church will be used in helping to accomplish man’s restoration. The call of the church was not intended to result in the selfish enjoyment of heavenly bliss. Rather, this special class was designed by God to act as his instrument in blessing all the families of the earth. One of the earliest evidences of this is found in God’s promised blessing to Abraham. God said to him: “I will bless thee, and ... I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore. ... And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” (Gen.

22:17,18) The Apostle Paul later explained that the “seed” mentioned in this promise is, in reality, Christ, with his church. He wrote: “If ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.”—Gal. 3:16,29

The essential features of the work Christ and the church will accomplish during the Messianic kingdom have already been touched upon. The beauties of this arrangement can perhaps be summed up in these words of the prophet: “Thus saith the LORD ... I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages; That thou mayest say to the prisoners, Go forth; to them that are in darkness, Shew yourselves. They shall feed in the ways, and their pastures shall be in all high places. They shall not hunger nor thirst; neither shall the heat nor sun smite them: for he that hath mercy on them shall lead them, even by the springs of water shall he guide them.”—Isa. 49:8-10

Hidden within the wording of this text are rich gems of truth. The broad outlines of the entire work of atonement to be carried on by the Christ class are found therein. God’s purpose is shown in its position as mediator of a “covenant of the people.” The people to be blessed by this New Covenant are not just those who happen to be living at the time, but it will include all that are in the grave.

To these “prisoners,” bound by the shackles of sin, ignorance, superstition, and death, it will be the privilege of the Christ class to say: “Go forth, ... Shew yourselves.” This is another way of expressing the resurrection of the dead and the enlightenment which will accompany it and be available to all during

the kingdom. The inhabitants at that time “shall not hunger nor thirst,” not only because of the abundance of natural food, but also because they will be nourished and sustained by the truth of God’s Word. Through processes of instruction and judgment, all the willing and obedient of mankind will be led back to the ways of God and to harmony with him.

ATONEMENT’S GLORIOUS CLIMAX

“Then cometh the end, when he [Christ] shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.” (I Cor. 15:24-26) The “end” mentioned here is not the “end of time,” nor the “end of the earth.” It is the grand finale of the thousand-year reign of Christ and the church. It represents the climax of God’s great plan of salvation, marking the moment when the earthly creation will have been fully purified and brought back to the perfection lost in the fall.

Christ’s mediatorial reign will then have accomplished its objective, and thus the need for the mediator will have ceased. When Christ shall “deliver up” the kingdom to the Father, man will again stand directly before his Creator to enjoy all the benefits of human sonship. Reconciliation between God and man will be complete, and all will jubilantly shout forth the words of our opening text: “We ... joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement!” ■