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ATONEMENT

Background

Atonement is the act by which God and man are brought together in personal relationship. The word in English is derived from Anglo-Saxon words meaning 'making at one'. Hence, some have rendered it 'at-one-ment'. It presupposes a separation – indeed alienation – that must be overcome if we are to know God and have fellowship with him. The word 'atonement' is translated from the Old Testament 'Kaphar' (to cover), meaning that sins have been covered over by the blood of the sacrifice. In theology, the word 'atonement' has come to include the whole idea of redemption through the Blood of Christ. The word is used once in the New Testament, in Romans 5:11 (Authorised Version), but tends in modern translations to be translated as 'reconciliation' which is possibly a clearer word in modern language.

The need for atonement, or reconciliation, is bound up with man's thorough addiction to sin. All of scripture points to our sin. Some examples follow:

Isaiah 53:6 – *all we like sheep have gone astray*

Jeremiah 17:9 – *the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately corrupt, who can understand it?*

Psalms 14:3 – *there is none that do good, no, not one*

Romans 3:23 – *all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*

The apostle Paul described men as *enemies of God* (Romans 5:10), *hostile to God* (Romans 8:7), and *estranged and hostile in mind* (Colossians 1:21)

In Old Testament times

– sins were covered by God in anticipation of the Cross. Sacrifice was the remedy for sin, and a man would sacrifice not only for his own sins but also for the sins of his family. Having truly repented, he would sacrifice an innocent animal – and always an animal without blemish. He trusted that God would fulfil his promise by cleansing him from his sin, if he offered blood.

Exodus 30:10; Hebrews 10:4; Leviticus 1:3–4; 4:27–31; 16:11, 17, 30; 17:11; 23:27

Animal sacrifices were in anticipation of the sacrifice of Jesus

In a sense they might be thought of as foreshadowing the death of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 10:1; John 1:29; 1 John 2:2; Hebrews 9:13–15, 22, 26; 10:10, 14; Romans 3:25; 8:3; 1 Corinthians 5:7

Now, under grace, having repented of sins, and having faith in the blood of Jesus shed for us, we are reconciled to God. Atonement has been made. Reconciliation is achieved through the blood of Jesus. His blood was the necessary price to be paid for the redemption of the world. It is really no exaggeration, then, to say that Christ's death was the supreme moment, the supreme event, in the history of the world.

Mark 10:45; John 10:11; Romans 3:21–25; 5:10, 11; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 1:7; 1 Peter 1:18–19; 1 John 4:10

Notes

Terms that may be used in describing the atonement:

Representative – Christ's death was representative (see Hebrews 2:14–17 and Romans 5:19).

Propitiatory – Christ's death makes us what would otherwise be impossible – it makes us acceptable to God (see 1 John 4:10).

Vicarious – Christ's death was a substitute, because he died in our place – in the place of the sinner (see Isaiah 53:5–6, and 1 Peter 2:24).