



But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. -

Matthew 15:9

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Atonement

Recent events have brought attention to the subject of “the Atonement.” And before I go on let me get something out of the way. I don't pretend to have the final answer or the absolute truth. A writer many believe was inspired once said, “The science of salvation can not be explained....” Our salvation won't be dependent on whether we have correctly identified every step in the metaphors for salvation God sent to this world. We don't have to know exactly where in Heaven Jesus is today in order to direct our prayers to him. (Some of you may disagree with that and point me to a particular passage to refute me. If need be, I can deal with that passage and show how the shallow “where Jesus is now” interpretation hasn't the gravitas to make sense of the passage.) The simple-minded can know enough to attain salvation. So what follows is the attempt by someone who believes himself to be a few steps (how many could be debated) away from simple-minded to explore the extras that keep us occupied 'til he comes.

The importance of doctrine isn't so much that we get every phrase, word, and punctuation mark right. Doctrines are nothing more than windows on God. So when examining doctrine we aren't to fall into the trap of fighting heresy. That task is left to the beast, whose mark God's people are warned to avoid. The real issue should be, what God does that doctrine let us see? You say there's only ONE God? You're right. But there is someone who wants to be worshiped as God and that someone has convinced most churches to tell lies about God in their doctrines; lies that make God look more like this someone who has been named Apollyon and Abaddon (both names translate to “destroyer”) in the Bible.

The truth about God is that he is the life-giver and that he does not destroy. And now traditional Christianity rises up and condemns me as a heretic because

they believe such a teaching is a “liberal” ploy designed to free people to engage in hedonistic pleasure and unleash all sorts of terrible disorder on society. I could spend the rest of this document addressing that and all the assumptions and worldview behind such thinking. But then I wouldn't get to my main point. The idea that God must destroy sinners in order to purify the universe is based on accepting the lies of evolution and thus missing the truth that God's laws are natural, and sin will become its own punishment.

So the essentially legalistic view of the Atonement in which Jesus' blood represents him as the victim of the punishment sinners should have taken, gives us a window to the god that DOES use violence and punishment to assure acceptable behavior. The Atonement provided by Christ on the cross doesn't engage in legal ledgerdemain (misspelling intentional) to “clear our records,” it fixes the real problem so that we are right with God in reality instead of contrary to reality. By the way; the quotation in the first paragraph was only part of a sentence. It concludes, “but it can be known by experience.” It's my hope that what you're about to read helps you experience it more deeply in the same way it helped me.

The metaphor I spoke of earlier is the tent temple erected in the wilderness by the Israelites according to a plan given to Moses by God. I could spend a lot of time quoting texts to establish the physical layout of the temple compound. But that would distract from understanding what these things mean. If you already know the layout, great. If you don't, I encourage you to read the books of Moses for yourself and determine for yourself if I get it right. The courtyard was to be fifty by one hundred cubits. Accepting the cubit as about 18 inches, you have an area with dimensions about half those of a football field, or an area about a quarter of a football field.

The key attribute about the courtyard I'd like to emphasize is that it's two adjacent squares. Each of the squares has a center on which is located the focal point of activity in that section of the temple zone. The first half is completely open except for the barrier curtain around the courtyard. At the center of this area stood the brass altar, also called the altar of burnt offering. Here parts of certain animal sacrifices were consumed by a fire kindled by God himself. This has often been equated with the cross, where Christ, the lamb of God, was sacrificed by traditional conservative religious leaders.

The point of the system of animal sacrifices was to demonstrate the violence and destruction of sin. Most Christians, however, see it as an example of the violence with which God intends to eradicate sin, not of the violence the sin itself does to the soul, conscience, and body of the one it has enslaved. When God

gave his instructions to the two people he created on this earth he warned them of the effects of sin when he said, "In the day you eat of it you will surely die." (A full discussion of this event is beyond the scope of this document.) Death is the certain consequence to those who get trapped in the lies, self-focus and fear that are part and parcel of sin. God doesn't have to do a thing for that to happen. For that matter, God didn't have to do anything to stop it either, but because he is unselfish and cares for others he has done something to stop it and to reverse the damage it has done.

This is as far as the common people were allowed to go inside the temple courtyard. Standing with its door (curtain) on the edge of the second square was the temple itself. Being ten by thirty cubits with another double-square room (the ten-by-twenty Holy Place) immediately behind the curtain, left the inner ten-by-ten Most Holy Place right in the center of the second courtyard square. The larger room was entered by priests every day, and the furniture in it represents the daily activities of those who believe the truth about God. The smaller room was entered only once a year and only by the High Priest, a man selected by heredity, not by human choice.

Those who believe in the priesthood of the church (rather than the priesthood of all believers) let their preachers and theologians worry about the things behind that first curtain. So all most churches see in the Atonement is the event represented by the brass altar, the cross. They'll even say (as if the words can be found in the Bible verbatim) "The Atonement was finished at the cross." Now before I get all sarcastic about that (there are suggestions in the Bible that give them an excuse for saying that) let's just ask ourselves, "What does that assertion say about God?"

If the Atonement was completed at the cross and nothing more needed to be done, God could have eliminated a lot of suffering and destruction by eradicating sin altogether right then. So if he didn't, he must have a reason for all the additional suffering. He wasn't waiting for any events related to salvation of the human race to take place, so maybe he just likes to see sinful humans suffer in the misery that's the natural consequence of their choices. Or maybe there's a reason for that other half of the tent temple in the desert.

Now we've already explained that the first, larger room had to do with the daily experience of those who believe the truth about God and thus are able to trust him with their lives. But I've also said that the focal point of that half of the courtyard is the smaller inner room called the Most Holy Place where only the High Priest entered only once a year. Why all the restrictions? That may have had to do with the low levels of moral decision-making at which the Israelites

operated. It might also have indicated that the part of the Atonement represented there would only happen once in the whole history of the universe.

If you're familiar with this topic well enough you may see that I'm leading up to the traditional Adventist interpretation of this great metaphor of salvation. It's an interpretation that delves into the prophetic books of the Bible and attempts to set dates for new steps in the plan of salvation as represented by the daily and annual rituals associated with the tent temple and the later stone temples in Jerusalem. I believe that interpretation needs to be reexamined in the light of new knowledge about the character of the Creator. That's one reason for me to write this document.

The blood from the sacrifices was normally poured out at the base of the altar of burnt offering. But in limited cases the blood from the sacrifice was taken into the Holy Place where it was sprinkled on the horns of the altar of incense. When God forbade the Israelites to eat blood he said, "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." (Leviticus 17:11)

It's easy to read that and say, "The blood is, or represents, the life." Add to that the modern understanding of "atonement" and you have the makings of the doctrine of penal substitution. The blood (life) of Jesus atones for your life. God's justice has the death it demands as a penalty for breaking the law, and you are free. But atonement is NOT appeasement, it is reconciliation.

Let's examine the blood metaphor more closely. The blood, the vessels it flows through (the living plumbing) and the pump that pushes it through that plumbing are the circulatory system. The blood flows in a continuous cycle through the body. It takes nutrients to the cells and takes waste products away from the cells. There is an unending cycle of giving and receiving.

This cyclic exchange is found throughout life. Plants use carbon dioxide to build themselves, and release oxygen as they do so. Animals use the oxygen to burn the fuels they consume from plant matter and in return deliver carbon dioxide to the atmosphere for the use of the plants. Life consists of many such cycles of use and exchange. In that sense the life really is in the blood.

The book of Hebrews speaks of blood as a cleansing agent, and that is certainly one of its roles in a healthy body. "In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." (Hebrews 9:22)

Nearly all modern translations render the Greek used for that last word as forgiveness, as does the NIV quoted above. The Greek work is transliterated “aphesis” and means “a sending away.” Since evangelical Christianity has no doctrine for removal of sin beyond forgiveness its understandable that modern Bibles render this Greek word as “forgiveness.”

Imagine you've taken ill and been bedridden for a few weeks. When you first get up, still weak from illness and idleness, you realize your house has gotten dirty and needs a good cleaning. So you call up a cleaning service and arrange for them to come to your house and clean it. When the cleaning technician arrives he (or she) looks through the house, agrees with you that it's dirty, raises his (or her) hands and says, “I declare this house clean!” You are asked to sign the bill and the technician drives away.

Forgiveness is NOT removal of sin. Forgiveness is important, for it says God isn't holding your sin against you. Jesus' blood is not necessary for forgiveness, that's a gift from a God who is always giving. Jesus' blood is necessary for removal of sin from your life, just like a cleaning service should actually remove dirt from your house. And that is how the blood makes atonement for your life.

Let's go back to the circulatory function of blood. Like our physical lives, our moral lives also need a cycle of giving in order to function. When Satan introduced Adam and Eve to his lies about how the universe worked and about who God really was, he introduced fear and selfishness into their lives. Selfishness causes hoarding and breaks the cycle of giving that makes life possible. This is the mechanism by which sin destroys life.

So we see that it is most appropriate that blood be used as the symbol for that which restores the cycles of exchange and allows life to resume. And for that to happen sin must be more than forgiven; it must be removed from the life. If we are to attain eternal life, we must rid ourselves of the infection that kills us if it is not removed. And that's why salvation comes through Jesus alone, because mere forgiveness doesn't remove the cause of the problem, only Jesus' blood can do that.

God's been in the business of remedying sin in individuals since our first parents left Eden. That's the process revealed in the outer court and the daily services of the Holy Place. But at some point a God of love will want to bring this whole mess to an end, to stop the suffering caused by sin to humans and to the rest of creation on this planet. Surely a universe of loving individuals will not want such a blight to occupy their universe forever.

Hence we have the yearly ceremonies representing a complete end to sin. This one also involved blood. There was a ram, a bull, and two goats. The ram was a burnt offering, the bull was for the priest and his family, and the two goats were for the Israelites. The High priest would use incense smoke to hide himself from the “atonement cover” [mercy seat, KJV] until he had atoned for his and his family's sins with the blood of the bull.

Meanwhile lots were cast over the two goats, one chosen to be the LORD's goat and one chosen to be Azazel, the goat of removal. The LORD's goat was slaughtered, and the blood taken into the Most Holy Place to make atonement for the sins of Israel. Then the High Priest laid his hands on the head of the live goat, confessed over it the sins of the people, and sent it away from the camp.

A young Adventist pastor once shared with me what he and his fellows had discovered when he was in college. In an examination of the descriptions of various offerings at the beginning of Leviticus they found that the offering where the blood was taken into the Holy Place and sprinkled in front of the Altar of Incense was the offering for sins of ignorance, sins that the people didn't know were sins when they committed them.

This young pastor suggested that since 1844 (the date Adventists give for the “real” Day of Atonement) God began revealing to his people (Adventists, of course), things that people hadn't known were sins before. This included things like worshiping on the first day of the week. Thus God was dealing with the things people didn't know were sin and returning his people to him (reconciliation or atonement).

As a young Adventist I learned the “transfer of guilt” interpretation of these services. But to me transfer of guilt suggests a penal system, where payment must be made to appease the law that was broken. As I noted before, Atonement is not appeasement, though that's what it means to most people. My point is that we don't need to change God or the law in order to be reconciled to him, we need to change ourselves. We are the sinners, we are defective, we need repair in order to live.

And now a last point. Traditional Adventism says the live goat represents Satan. That leads to accusations that Adventists make Satan their savior, though Adventists point out that Azazel was not killed and that without shedding of blood there is no removal of sin. But the point of Azazel was to remove sin from the camp.

So I'd like to propose an adjustment. Two goats were used because God wasn't

in the business of resurrecting goats, and so the LORD's goat, which clearly did represent Jesus, wasn't around to take the sins away from the camp. But it is Jesus, not Satan, who removes sin, and the role of Azazel was to remove sin. Maybe the second goat represents the resurrected Jesus, who, through the Holy Spirit, applies his life (represented by the blood and comprising his perfect human character) to all believers who trust him enough to let him transform them.

Elkanah