

## Lesson 12: Atonement

Memory Verse: "Once a year Aaron shall make atonement on its horns. This annual atonement must be made with the blood of the atoning sin offering for the generations to come. It is most holy to the LORD." Exodus 30:10

In our last lesson we encountered a word which is often misunderstood. That word is "atonement." We read that the life was in an animal's blood and that God had given it to the Israelites to "make atonement for yourselves." Atonement is made for a number of things:

"for your lives." (Exodus 30:16)

"for the Most Holy Place" (Leviticus 16:16)

"for the Tent of Meeting and the altar"

"for the priests and all the people of the community" (Leviticus 16:33)

When the Israelites sinned in the matter of the golden calf, Moses told them he would, "go up to the LORD; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." (Exodus 32:30) This is the only place where the Bible mentions atonement for sin.

If you look in an English dictionary for the word "atone" it will say it means "make amends or reparation." In his Analytical Concordance, Robert Young said the Hebrew word translated "atonement" meant "covering." Neither gives us a good idea of the real meaning of the Hebrew. The origin of the word "atone" does, however.

The word was invented by an early English translator, who couldn't find an English word to translate the Hebrew *kaphar*. He took two ordinary English words and jammed them together. Those two words were "at" and "one." We might use the word "reconcile." When things that belonged together get separated, the one who brings them back together reconciles them.

Man and God belong together. God made us to be his friends. But Satan's lies, Adam and Eve's mistrust, and sin got in the way. Man needed to be reconciled to God. And we've already made the point that God didn't need to change in order for this to happen. God wants us to come to him. We are the ones who need to change. Atonement was made for the people and the things the people used, but never for God.

So we often speak of what Jesus did for humanity when he died for us as "the atonement." The problem with that is that people often think in terms of the modern definition of "atone" when they try to make sense of what Jesus did. They begin to think of Jesus as making a payment to God as reparations for the harm we caused him when we sinned. But that puts a negative light on God's character. Instead of giving, he's seen as demanding payment for a wrong committed against him.

So we repeat. God does not need to be fixed before we humans can be reconciled to him. The following verse puts a very different light on the matter:

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation: the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. (2 Corinthians 5:16-19)

The only hindrance to our reconciliation with God is ourselves. God sent Jesus and worked closely with him for as long as he was on earth trying to win us to trust him. Recall that the broken relationship happened when Adam and Eve feared God rather than trusting him. And only when we trust him are we going to freely, of our own choice, let him make the changes in our characters that need to be made.

Which leads us to the beauty of the plan God designed for saving the humans who fell into sin. Jesus' death does more than make it possible for God to remove the sin from our characters. Here are some other things Jesus did when he died:

1. Revealed the depth of his love, demonstrating that God willingly gives for the good of his creatures. This encourages us to trust him.
2. Exposed Satan as a murderer, as he and his angels were the ones prompting the crowd to demand Jesus' execution.
3. Gave the human race an example of faithfulness regardless of our circumstances. If death was good enough for Jesus it will do for us as well.
4. Demonstrated how easy it is to execute an innocent person even when we have multiple safeguards in place to prevent wrongful convictions.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6-8)

How is “While we were still sinners,” “just the right time”? Simply because without Christ's death we could never be changed from sinners into anything else. If God was going to fix what Adam and Eve had broken, he had to take the initiative. And some interpreters see that initiative in what God said to the serpent in Genesis 3.

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
he will crush your head,  
and you will strike his heel.” (Genesis 3:15)

While the passage can be taken literally to explain the uneasy relationship between humans and snakes, taking the passage symbolically suggests that a descendant of the woman (Jesus) would crush Satan's head. The word “enmity” means distaste or dislike. God would give Adam and Eve a distaste for Satan's ideas that would help them find their way back to God, who would be waiting for them eagerly.

Our salvation starts and ends with God. So what's our part?

Possible thought papers:

1. Read 2 Corinthians 5:11 through 6:2. What does Paul want the people to do?
2. Imagine what it would be like to spend an ordinary day with Jesus. What would you do? What would you talk about?
3. Can you think of something else Jesus death did that wasn't mentioned in this lesson?