

What Is an Atonement for Sin?

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Definition

An Atonement is a reparation, compensation, or payment to someone who has been wronged. The Biblical Atonement was an animal or grain offering that was given as a reparation compensation payment for the sins of the Israelites against God.

Thesis

It is my contention that Christ's death on the cross was a propitiation (a satisfaction), a reconciliation (a change that made us savable), a redemption (a payment for our sins), and a substitution (a sacrificial act where Christ died in our place), but not an atonement (a temporal payment for sin which needed to be repeated). The atonement sacrifices were a temporal payment. Christ's death was an eternal payment. It could be said that since Jesus was a substitution for us (Matthew 20:28; 2 Corinthians 5:21), He became sin for us and hence was an atonement to God for our sin. But there are two problems with that:

- (1) Biblical atonement was never a substitution. No one could offer a sacrifice to atone for someone else's sin. Indeed, Jesus died in our place, but that is never called an atonement in the Bible.
- (2) Biblical atonement had temporal consequences, Christ's death had eternal consequences.

My thesis challenges many of our Christian songs (like "Full atonement, can it be, what a Savior...") and statements of theology (like "substitutionary atonement"). An atonement was an animal or grain offering that covered the sins of the Israelites, but it did not pay for their sin. Hebrews chapters 9 and 10 make it clear that these sacrifices were for a past dispensation and were not to be performed after the cross. The author of Hebrews even says when Christian Jews persist in doing these sacrifices, *they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame* (Hebrews 6:6).

Paul calls Christ's death our passover (1 Corinthians 5:7), not our atonement. The word "atonement" does not occur in the New Testament. There are two New Testament Greek words that are often mistranslated as "atonement." One is καταλλαγή (*katallagē*), which is *reconciliation* (Christ's death on the cross changed humanity to make us savable), and another is ἵλασμός" (*hilasmos*), which is the word for *propitiation* (Christ's death on the cross satisfied God as a sufficient payment for sin). Neither of these represent the Old Testament atonement, which is the word כִּפָּר (*kaphar*) as in the Jewish Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur.

Atonement Sacrifices In the Millennial Kingdom

When it is understood that the New Testament declares Christ's death as a sufficient payment for sin, the question is often asked, "Then why are there sacrifices in the Millennium?" According to Ezekiel 45:17, during the Millennial Kingdom:

*"It shall be the prince's part to provide...the sin offering, the grain offering, the burnt offering and the peace offerings, to **make atonement** for the house of Israel."*

Two things should be noticed about the millennial sacrifices:

1. Millennial sacrifices are part of the theocracy of Israel, which is set up after the Second Coming during the Millennium. A theocracy is a government, where God makes the laws. Breaking the laws of the theocratic government is breaking the laws of God, and for Israel, God required an atoning sacrifice for that sin. In the Millennial Kingdom, Israel will return to a theocracy, which requires an atoning sacrifice.

2. The sacrifices of the Millennial Kingdom will be an atonement, an earthly payment to the theocratic government, for the particular sins of some individual Israelite, not an eternal payment for sin. The atoning sacrifices were, and will be, a significant payment, but the significance is earthly and temporal, not heavenly and eternal. Only Christ's death on the cross has eternal heavenly significance. Therefore, Christ's death on the cross was not an atonement. I realize the Christian community uses the word "atonement" in a general way, referring to the accomplishments of the cross. But we should keep in mind that, biblically, an atonement is a sacrifice which is legal and temporal, not what Jesus did on the cross.

The Atonement in Daniel 9

It seems that a difficulty with my theory is in Daniel 9:24. The question is, "Does this verse say that the death of Christ was an atonement?" Here is the verse in question:

Daniel 9:24, *Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy place.*

The word *weeks* literally means "a period of seven." It is indeed the word the Hebrew language uses for *weeks*, but it can actually be any "period of seven." For example, in Genesis 29:27, Laban equated *week* with *seven years*. In Daniel 9, it is clearly seven years, since none of what Daniel describes happened in seven days, weeks, or months. Daniel divided it into 69 ($7 + 62 = 69$), where the $69 \times 7 \text{ years} \times 360 \text{ days}$ in a year (used in all calendars at the time) is 173,880 days. When that is added to the date of the decree to rebuild Jerusalem (March 5, 444 B.C.), it brings us to Christ's "triumphal entry," the week of Jesus' crucifixion in A.D. 33.

The question is, "Does Daniel 9 refer to what we would call the death of Christ on the cross when it says it is *to make atonement for iniquity*?" That sounds like it contradicts my position that the cross of Christ was not an atonement.

But There Are Several Things In Favor of My Position

1. The immediate context, within the verse itself, connects the atonement to the Hebrew word for a sin offering. I would certainly agree that the atonement was a sin offering. But these offerings did not pay for all sin, they only covered it with a payment for a particular sin or, in the case of the day of atonement, it covered the sins of the nation for a year. But that atonement had to be repeated every year (on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur). By way of contrast, the New Testament clearly, repeatedly, claims Christ's death paid for all the sin of everybody for all time. Five times the New Testament says Christ's death was *once for all* (Romans 6:10; Hebrews 7:27; 9:12; 10:10; 1 Peter 3:18).
2. The Apostle Paul clearly stated that animal and grain sacrifices were part of the Mosaic Law, which was done away with when Jesus died on the cross (Romans 10:4). We are in a new dispensation (Ephesians 3:3-9; Galatians 3:1-5), which does not include atoning sacrifices. That is why Paul declared Christ as our Passover, not our atonement (1 Corinthians 5:7). The Passover celebration did not accomplish anything. It was a memorial of what was already accomplished by a sacrificial lamb. The atonement was not just a remembrance but a payment for some particular sin.
3. The author of Hebrews makes a strong case against animal sacrifices which were called an atonement in the Old Testament (Hebrews 6, 9, and 10).
4. The atonement in Daniel 9:24 is what Christ does at His Second Coming, not something He did on the cross. Remember the 69 weeks ($69 \text{ periods of seven years} = 483 \text{ years} \times 360 \text{ days per year} =$

173,880 days) takes us from the issue of the decree in 444 B.C. to the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem before His crucifixion. But Daniel 9:24 is about what happens after 70 weeks, not after 69 weeks. *Seventy weeks have been decreed for your people ... to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness.* These comments are about the Millennial Kingdom. The seventieth period of seven is the tribulation. Daniel did not know about the church age which is not about *your people* the Jews. The tribulation is the seventieth seven-year period, which is followed by the Second Coming, which is followed by the Millennial Kingdom, which will *make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy place.*

The decree to rebuild Jerusalem in March 5, 444 B.C. – 69 sevens of years – the crucifixion – the church age (which Daniel did not know about) – the seventieth period of seven years (the tribulation). For a total of the *seventy weeks* [periods of seven years] *have been decreed for your people* (the Jews up to the Second Coming).

Conclusion

The accomplishments of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross should not be referred to as an atonement for sin because:

1. The atonement sacrifices were a temporal payment. Christ's death was an eternal payment.
2. Jesus' death paid for all the sin of everyone all over the world for all time. No one could offer a sacrifice as an atonement for someone else's sin. Indeed, Jesus died in our place, but that is never called an atonement in the Bible.
3. An atonement in the Bible (in Old Testament Israel, as well as in the future Millennium) is part of a theocracy, a government where God makes the laws. An atonement is a payment made to the government when God makes the laws.
4. An atonement was a payment to God not a payment made by God.
5. An atonement did not pay for all sin, it only covered the sin as with the Day of Atonement. It covered the sins of the nation for a year (on the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur).
6. Christ's death was a Passover, remembering what was accomplished, not an atonement, accomplishing a payment covering sin.
7. The author of Hebrews makes a strong case against animal sacrifices, which were called an "atonement" in the Old Testament (Hebrews 6, 9, and 10).