

Atonement Old Testament Basis

Before reading (or listening to) this session, read Leviticus 16 and Hebrews 9:1-10:18

The word “atonement” is used a number of times in the Old Testament, where it translates the Hebrew words *Kippur*, *Keporeth* etc. These words carry the meaning of covering, suggesting that sinful objects and people need to be covered so that God can look upon the person or object which has been covered, not the sinfulness which clings to them. The best known example is “Yom Kippur”, the Day of Atonement, which passed into western consciousness generally after the Arab-Israeli war of 1967 when Egyptian and Syrian forces attacked Israel simultaneously on the Israeli holy day.

The whole procedure for the Day of Atonement is related in Leviticus 16. In summary, it involves Aaron (or his successors) making a sin offering and a burnt offering, washing himself ceremoniously and wearing special clothes, then entering the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies. The offerings are to make atonement for himself and for the altar and the tent of meeting and for the whole people. One of the goats is sacrificed. Aaron then lays his hands on the second goat he has chosen and confesses all the sins of the people upon it. The goat is then led out by a man appointed beforehand and taken into the wilderness, or to Azazel, where it is set free. The fast is to be celebrated on the tenth day of the seventh month. In 2020 this will be 27th September (at sunset) until 28th September (at nightfall).

For a reiteration of this day, read Lev23:26-32. A reference to the atonement of the altar is made in Ex30:10 and is followed in verses 11-18 by a command to make an atonement offering for the service (upkeep and repair) of the tabernacle. Each person gives the same amount regardless of station, wealth or income and so each is brought to God's remembrance. Lev25:9 links the Day of Atonement with the Year of Jubilee. It is the day of declaration of that year, coming after Rosh Hashanah (Jewish New Year) on the first of the month.

Almost all the uses of the word, “atonement” are found in Exodus, Leviticus (especially) and Numbers. I shall now go through each of these occasions in the order they appear in the Bible. In Exodus 29:33-37, God commands that Aaron and his sons shall be formally ordained and that during the ordination period of 7 days they shall offer various animal sacrifices and only they shall eat of the sacrificed animals which have been offered for their atonement. The record of this being carried out is in Leviticus 8. This office of Aaron's descendants is reiterated in 1Chr6:49.

At Mt. Sinai Moses tells the people that in making a golden calf and worshipping it as god they have sinned grievously. He promises to try and make atonement for them (Ex32:30). He then asks God for their forgiveness. Moses offers to sacrifice his life for them, but God refuses this offer, saying that he will punish in due course those who have sinned. To this end, a plague breaks out amongst the people.

Leviticus is above all the book of the Law. Right at the start of it God institutes a burnt offering for atonement. The offering may be a bull, sheep, goat or bird. Each are dealt with slightly differently, but in each case the blood of the animal is thrown or drained on the sides of the altar before the rest is completely burnt on the altar (Lev1:4).

In Leviticus 4 to 7 God institutes offerings for sin, for guilt and for peace (an act of thankfulness); by a priest, by the people as a body, by a leader and by an ordinary person. This is to make atonement and again the blood is brought to the altar and the flesh burnt, partly on the altar and partly on a fire outside the camp for completion of the burning.

Leviticus 10 recounts an occasion where the proper treatment of the sin offering were not fully carried out by Aaron (he and his sons did not eat the meat, but burnt it entirely). This follows the death of two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu for offering unauthorized or strange fire. These deaths are at God's direct hand. Aaron defends his actions by questioning whether God would be pleased with him eating the sin offering in such circumstances, and Moses approves his action.

Leviticus 12 describes actions to be taken after childbirth, when again an offering is made for atonement.

Leviticus 14 describes the sin offering to be brought by a cleansed leper to make atonement for himself and his house.

Leviticus 15 describes steps to be taken during menstruation and also for discharge from a man. In this latter case, after cleansing in water, the sufferer shall offer a sin offering for atonement.

Leviticus 17:11 is the verse quoted by Jehovah's Witnesses to prohibit blood transfusions. However, the context makes it clear that the prohibition is connected to the place of blood in sacrifice and atonement. Verse 7 mentions sacrifices to goat demons and refers to the pagan practice of drinking the blood of such sacrifices to ensure health and strength.

Numbers also records several times where atonement is involved in the religious aspect of personal life. Nu5:8-10 deals with sins in general, when conviction comes upon a person. Nu6:11 with the unavoidable uncleanness of a Nazirite. Numbers 8 deals with the separation to God of the Levites and their atonement. Nu15 deals with unintentional sin, Nu16 deals with Korah's rebellion and its results and Nu17 with Zimri's blatant sin. 28:22 links atonement with Passover (v22) and with the Feast of Weeks (v30) and 29:1-6 with Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year. Nu31:50 records the leaders bringing the plunder from the victory over Midian in atonement for their sin in taking the Midianite women.

Elsewhere in the Old Testament, outside the books of Moses, atonement as a word is used on only four occasions. (1Chr6:49 has already been mentioned.)

- David asks the Gibeonites how he may make atonement for Saul's breaking of the covenant between them (2Sa21:3).
- King Hezekiah includes atonement offerings in the rededication of the Temple (2Ch29:24).
- The people of Jerusalem promise to rededicate themselves to the Law and the sacrifices, including the aspect of atonement (Ne10:33).

Two of these are specific notes following times of conviction and repentance. The example of David is an indication of the need for personal atonement to others for the wrong done to them. (A concept which is also explicit in parts of the Law where restitution is required after wronging another.)

There is only one use of the word in the New Testament and that is a poor translation of Romans 5:11 in the AV of the Greek "*katallage*". This is better rendered "reconciliation" as in the NIV, ESV and the Revised King James Version. It is perhaps therefore surprising that atonement is such an important doctrine, especially for evangelicals. Nevertheless, we are taught that the law is a shadow of the good things to come (Heb10:1) and that Jesus said, "I did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it". We should look, therefore at the meanings foreshadowed by the Old Testament.

So atonement is linked with worship, with repentance, with offering and with cleansing. It is accomplished by blood and involves the covering of sins and the presence of God. The mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant is linked with atonement as the Hebrew word "kaporet" is from the

same root as kipur. God's presence, glory and mercy are linked to atonement or covering.

The Day of Atonement is clearly the most important picture we have in the Old Testament of Jesus' role, purpose and actions in atonement. On that day, the High Priest must firstly offer a sacrifice for himself, for the altar and for the people. These actions recognise that people cannot approach God because they are sinful. So the cleansing actions are necessary to remind people of their sin and need for cleansing and to give them a covering protection as they draw near to God. However, Jesus did not need to offer a sacrifice for himself as he had no sin and did not therefore need cleansing. Still, he went into the spiritual Holy of Holies by means of his blood.

“But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.”

Heb9:11,12

So Jesus was both priest and sacrifice. He offered his own blood for a payment to wipe out our sins, not merely to cover them. It is this thought which lies behind our song,

Because the sinless saviour died
My sinful soul is counted free
For God the just is satisfied
To look on him and pardon me
To look on him and pardon me.

Because of this we are able to approach God without suffering his wrath and judgement. This is symbolised by the tearing from top to bottom of the curtain which separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple (Matt27:51, Mk15:38, Lke23:45).

“Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need”

Heb4:16

Again, it is worth looking at Hebrews 9 where Jesus' ministry as priest is shown to be perfect, sinless and effective, in contrast to the Old Testament priests who offered sacrifices for a temporary covering for sin, not a permanent cleansing.

“It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.”

“...we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”

Heb10:4,10

There is however a second aspect to the Day of Atonement. Two goats are chosen; one is sacrificed (representing Christ's perfect sacrifice) the other is not. Over the head of the second goat, the High Priest confesses all the people's sins. The goat is led out of the camp into the wilderness and left to wander. The second goat represents a second aspect of Jesus' ministry on the cross; taking upon himself the sins of his people, the church, and removing themselves utterly from us.

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness.”

1Pet2:24

So, although the words used may be different, the ideas contained in and the need for atonement remain. Foreshadowed in the Old Testament and made clear in the New; represented in the blood of bulls and goats, but made perfect in Jesus; physical symbols and signs representing eternal, spiritual truths; the doctrine of the atonement is a vital part of our faith. We will pick this up again in the next session which deals with the doctrine of atonement.