

ATONEMENT, the basic doctrine of the reconciliation of fallen man to God through the sacrificial death of Christ, who, by shedding His blood for humanity, satisfied both divine justice and mercy. "They are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins" (Rom. 3:24-25).

According to ancient Jewish practice, the tenth day of the seventh month (Tishrin) was kept as an annual day of expiation. The Day of Atonement was one of strict fasting, total abstinence from manual labor, business transactions, and physical indulgence. The laws of purification and atonement were commanded by God to Moses (Lv. 16:1-34) and meticulously followed by Aaron, the high priest, to make expiation for himself and for others. These laws included the choice of a he-goat to be the scapegoat of the year. It had all the sins of the people laid upon its head by the symbolic imposition of the high priest's hands and was then released into the wilderness to carry away the burden of guilt. The ritual also included the sprinkling of the blood of two sin offerings, a bull and a goat, over the altars in order to obliterate the stain of guilt adhering to them.

The concept and application as specified in the Old Testament were in fact a symbolic prelude to the all-powerful and efficacious atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ. Two major differences, however, must be noted.

First, Aaron and the subsequent high priests who followed him were ordinary human beings who had to atone for their own weaknesses as well as those of other people; whereas the Incarnate Son of God offered Himself for all humanity. "Indeed, the law appoints men in their weaknesses as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever" (Heb. 7:28).

Second, in the Old Testament atonement was a recurrent annual event, restricted in terms of time, medium, and objective. By contrast, Christ's atonement transcended all limitations, boundaries, and restrictions. It was unique; it affected the required reconciliation once and for all. "Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the Holy Place yearly with blood not his own" (Heb. 9:25). It was unworldly; it was independent of an earthly medium; ". . . when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands . . .)" (Heb. 9:11). It was universal, embracing all nations; ". . . he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:2).

There are three parallels between the two types of atonement. First, just as the high priest would not be admitted into the Holy of Holies without sprinkling the blood of the sacrifices, man would not be admitted to the glories of heaven without atonement for his sins, an atonement affected in full by Jesus Christ. Second, none but the high priest could accomplish the atonement. Likewise, Christ alone atoned for mankind. "And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts

4:12). Third, "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb. 9:22). In the Old Testament it was the blood of animals, which had no free will of their own to accept to offer themselves for sacrifice. This symbolic relationship is clearly expressed in Hebrews (9:12-14): "he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from the dead works to serve the living God."

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