

What We Believe, and Why it Matters

**Part 4: Atonement**

COTN Articles of Faith 6

1. Atonement: Old Testament

2. Atonement: Christ's work

3. Atonement: your response



What We Believe, and Why it Matters  
**Part Four: Atonement<sup>1</sup>**  
*COTN Article of Faith 6<sup>2</sup>*

God's greatest desire and most costly effort is for you to be saved from sin. You know that if you have been with us in this series on our Articles of Faith – the statements of our belief. These are very important truths about the Christian faith that we all need to be sure that we not only *understand*, but that we *experience* if we are going to live life-to-the-fullest what God has for us in Christ, and if we are going to carry out our purpose in this world. And over and over again, you've heard the message of God's deep, all-consuming desire to be in healthy, unhindered relationship with us and to see us restored to our original capabilities. You heard it as the heartbeat of the Trinity – Father, Son, and Spirit, in eternal and equal relationship with each other, working together to restore us to relationship with God.

You heard it as the over-arching message of all of the Bible, which is why God has inspired and empowered it; so that we would hear his heartbeat of love for us, that we would see the kind of God he is, and realize what Jesus Christ the Son has done to save us.

You heard it as you understood the devastating results of sin that we've all got in our DNA – original sin, the sin we continue to choose to commit, and the pervasive, worldwide systemic sin that oppresses, abuses, and destroys people and creation.

You are going to hear it today as we begin to look specifically at what it is that Jesus Christ, the Son, has done for us.

This is so important to God, that he works in some really amazing ways in order to reach you and make sure you know that message.

One of the ways God did that was about three weeks ago. You might recall that during the sermon on the Trinity, I stopped in the middle of it and led us in prayer, for anyone who needed to accept Christ and what he's done for them, to do so right

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<sup>1</sup> Resources: Frank Moore, *Coffee Shop Theology* (Beacon Hill Press, 1998); Frank Moore, *More Coffee Shop Theology* (Beacon Hill Press, 1998); Al Truesdale, Ed., *Global Wesleyan Dictionary of Theology* (Beacon Hill Press, 2013); Gay Leonard, *Articles of Faith: What Nazarenes Believe and Why* (Beacon Hill Press, 1995); *Manual: Church of the Nazarene, 2017-2021* (Nazarene Publishing House, Kansas City, MO, 2017); Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1994); <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/sacrifice-atonement/>

<sup>2</sup> We believe that Jesus Christ, by His sufferings, by the shedding of His own blood, and by His death on the Cross, made a full atonement for all human sin, and that this Atonement is the only ground of salvation, and that it is sufficient for every individual of Adam's race. The Atonement is graciously efficacious for the salvation of those incapable of moral responsibility and for the children in innocence but is efficacious for the salvation of those who reach the age of responsibility only when they repent and believe. (Isaiah 53:5-6, 11; Mark 10:45; Luke 24:46-48; John 1:29; 3:14-17; Acts 4:10-12; Romans 3:21-26; 4:17-25; 5:6-21; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Galatians 1:3-4; 3:13-14; Colossians 1:19-23; 1 Timothy 2:3-6; Titus 2:11-14; Hebrews 2:9; 9:11-14; 13:12; 1 Peter 1:18-21; 2:19-25; 1 John 2:1-2)

then and there. What you don't know is that during that same time, God was doing something amazing in our Children's Church. I'd like to ask Pastor Casey and one of our children, Felicity, to come and tell us about it.

*Pastor Casey and Felicity*

What Jesus did on the cross for us, by dying on the cross and rising from the dead, makes salvation for us possible; all we have to do is accept it. What Jesus did is called "Atonement." That is the essential belief that we are going to explore today. "Atonement" means, literally, to make up for a wrong or an injury – to cover over someone's debt. It is a combination of two words and a suffix:

**"at + one + ment"**

...ment means an action or a resulting state. So it is the act of making two things "at one." So as an Article of Faith, at its most basic, it is what Christ has done for us to allow to be "at one-ment" with God the Father. It's important for us to be fully informed on what it is and Christ did, if we are going to more fully experience what it is.

Let's start with what our article of faith says about the Atonement:

Atonement: "We believe that Jesus Christ, by His sufferings, by the shedding of His own blood, and by His death on the Cross, made a full atonement for all human sin, and that this Atonement is the only ground of salvation, and that it is sufficient for every individual of Adam's race."

What Christ did on the cross for us is the only way that we can be brought back into right relationship with God, and what he did is good enough for every human being. There is no person that is too sinful or too far gone that Christ's work isn't good enough to pay for their sins. Does that make sense so far? Then we go on to say this (I'm just letting you know ahead of time, I'll probably need to translate it a bit):

"The Atonement is graciously efficacious for the salvation of those incapable of moral responsibility and for the children in innocence but is efficacious for the salvation of those who reach the age of responsibility only when they repent and believe."

Okay: "graciously efficacious" – what?! Sometimes, theologians think it's only good theology if it has multi-syllabic words that no one ever uses in common every day speech. Let me explain; what that means is that what Jesus did for us – purely by his grace and love for us – was 100% successful in producing the desired result. Jesus' death for us is 100% effective to save us. It covers those who are not able to be responsible for their own decisions, like babies, children, and those who are developmentally or mentally incapable of being responsible for their decisions. Hopefully you remember that from last Sunday?

Then the second part of that paragraph means two things: first, that without what Jesus did for us there is no other way to be brought back into a right relationship with God and be restored to our original design. Second, it means that, while Christ's sacrifice effectively did all that was necessary, it is not effective in our lives until we receive it or accept it. That's why God moved Felicity to lead the children in prayer for you three weeks ago. Because he wants more than anything for you to accept what Christ has done for you!

So in order to fully understand the Atonement, let's first look at...

## 1. Atonement: *Old Testament*

We need to go back to the beginning of the idea of atonement.

We all want the world to be “good,” right? We make governments and laws to try to encourage and reward and enforce and punish things that people do that are “bad.” And when governments don’t do a very good job, we make bigger governments to try to do the same thing, thus our own bloated and obese federal governmental structure. Either we expand the reach of law and governments, or we create alliances of several governments to attempt to oversee each other – thus we have the UN and NATO. All of this is to try to get people to act peacefully, with love and justice. But despite all our best efforts, we are still compelled to act in horrible, destructive, and sinful ways, either as individuals or nations. You might remember that from last week, right?

God knows that this evil, whether as a result of our sinful actions or because of systemic evil, this evil “ruins things, in at least two ways. (The authors of the Bible project remind us that) there’s a direct effect of our evil, like when someone steals from another person, they’ve created injustice, and therefore they owe something to make it right. But there’s another indirect effect of evil; it also ruins the environment of the relationship, creating a lack of trust, there’s emotional damage...it’s like vandalism, and they need to make *that* right, too.”<sup>3</sup>

So it would have been nice if God just made that right for us, by simply removing the evil from us and the world. But there’s a problem with that: we are sinful and evil. *We* cause injustice. So God would have to get rid of us, too.

You see, when God created us, he gave us *free will*. He gave us the freedom to choose him, or to reject him. Right? By definition, it’s not love if there’s not a choice to love, and in the Garden of Eden God wanted us to choose to love him, just as he chooses to love us. But, as we learned last week, we choose selfishness and sin over selflessly loving God. Well – *this is important*: God will never act against his nature. God will never do something that is contrary to who he is. He gave us free will, and he will not go against that. Also, as I said, God will not contradict himself, even when it involves his image *in us*. That’s because he is a God of justice; he is the only One who can determine and set what is right and wrong. And He never does wrong. Does that make sense? So if God were to great rid of evil and sin in the world, he’d have to get rid of us, too. And he won’t do that; he loves us! So instead of eliminating us, God created another way for us. “This is what’s so remarkable about the story of the Bible; this God is so good, that not only is he going to rid the world of evil, he’s going to do it without destroying humanity.”<sup>4</sup>

Very soon after Adam and Eve sinned, God established the sacrificial system as a method of dealing with sin. You can find explanations and examples of this all throughout the Old Testament, especially in the book of Leviticus. For example, Moses, the leader and lawgiver, spoke to Aaron, the priest, and said:

"Come near to the altar and offer your sin offering and your burnt offering, that you may make atonement for yourself and for the people; then make the

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<sup>3</sup> Bible Project, *Atonement*

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

offering for the people, that you may make atonement for them, just as the LORD has commanded." (Leviticus 9:7, niv)

This was done through various methods of offerings, but the most vivid was the sacrifice of an animal on the altar by shedding its blood. And that seems really weird and barbaric to us, but it was meant to be an incredibly powerful symbol of both God's determination to see justice take place, but also to express his grace toward us. The shedding of blood was vitally important, because sin is our blood disease; we inherit it and we pass it along. So God in his mercy allowed animals to shed blood to atone for our bad blood:

"For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement." (Leviticus 17:11, niv)

God allows the animal to be a substitute; it is symbolically dying in the place of the person who offered it. That is what the Bible calls "atonement," meaning literally, to cover over someone's debt.

"When presenting the animal for sacrifice, the priest symbolically prayed the sins of the people onto the animal. Then, the animal died for those sins. The blood symbolized the animal's life, which was taken because of the people's disobedience to God, reminding everyone of sin's seriousness"<sup>5</sup>; that it should be them dying for their sin instead of that animal. "The animal's blood atoned for, or 'covered,' the sins."<sup>6</sup>

And this had to happen day in and day out, year in and year out:

"Aaron shall make atonement on its horns once a year; he shall make atonement on it with the blood of the sin offering of atonement once a year throughout your generations. It is most holy to the LORD." (Exodus 30:10, niv)

And as you read the Old Testament, especially Leviticus, you see the priest sprinkling the blood of the animal all over the temple; this signified that God wasn't only atoning for the sin of the person, but cleansing the community of that residual, relational "vandalism"<sup>7</sup> that sin caused. "People left the worship service hoping God accepted their sacrifice but without peace of heart or a clear conscience. The next year they repeated the ritual."<sup>8</sup>

And all of this "sort of" worked. For a time, the people knew they could walk in God's love and favor – at least, that is, until they sinned again – which could take only a few days or even a few minutes.

So it simply covered over their last set of sins until they did it again – rather than the serious sacrifice of an animal's blood and life in their place motivating them walk right with God.

God spoke harshly and vividly about this through Isaiah the prophet:

"Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him...The

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<sup>5</sup> Moore, *Coffee Shop Theology*, 131

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> Moore, *ibid*

multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?” says the Lord. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats...Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me. New Moons, Sabbaths and convocations—I cannot bear your worthless assemblies...They have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them...Your hands are full of blood!” (Isaiah 1:2-14, niv)

For all the atoning opportunities God gave people, it didn't do any good. People continued in their injustice, ignoring the poor and the oppressed, and distorting and perverting justice.

But God followed up his divine and depressing diatribe with the solution: he planned to send the people a king; but not just any king – a servant king who would not only serve but actually suffer and die for the sins of his people, giving his life as a sacrifice:

“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many and he will bear their iniquities.” (Isaiah 53:5-6, 11, niv)

This was a solution that Scripture says God had in mind from the moment Adam and Eve sinned. So in fulfillment of his original promise God finally made good on his promise at just the right time. He dealt with the issue once and for all through Christ's work on the cross:

## **2. Atonement: *Christ's work***

Jesus knew exactly what he had come to do, because he and the Father and the Spirit had been planning on it – which is why Jesus described himself using the very same words that the Spirit had inspired Isaiah with:

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45, niv)

That word, “ransom,” refers to the sacrifice of atonement.

If you remember from this summer when Pastor Jason preached out of Hebrews chapters nine and ten about this very thing. Theologian and pastor Frank Moore points out that those two chapters give “the best explanation of how Jesus Christ fulfilled the Old Testament sacrificial system with His death on the Cross. In this passage we see Jesus characterized in the double role as both victim sacrificed and the Priest offering the sacrifice to the Father (9:11; 10:10). The shedding of Christ's blood brought forgiveness for your sins (9:22). Better than any spotless animal, Jesus was sinless (v. 14). Animal sacrifices can't really take sins away anyway (10:4). Christ's sacrifice *can* (v. 10). Also, because of his sinlessness, he did not need to make a sacrifice for himself like the priests and high priest were required to do (9:7). Because of the perfection of Christ's sacrifice, the conscience of the sinner is cleared (vv. 9, 14; 10:2). Not only are our consciences cleared, but also we are

made pure and holy in God's sight (v. 14) and given an eternal inheritance in heaven (9:15). Christ's sacrifice is the last one needed in the Old Testament sacrificial system. It is perfect and complete; nothing more is ever required (10:18)."<sup>9</sup>

So all through the New Testament it talks over and over again about Jesus' atonement for us.

John the Baptist knew right away, the first time he saw Jesus coming to him to be baptized:

"The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29, niv)

Paul writes in his theological magnum opus, the letter to the church in Rome:

"God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith." (Romans 3:25a, niv)

"At the Last Supper with his disciples, Jesus declared, "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (Matthew 26:28, niv)

Paul reminded us again in Ephesians 1:7-8...

"In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding." (Ephesians 1:7-8)

(In other words, God knew completely and fully what he was doing for us when he sent Christ to die for us.) ... The concept of Jesus' dying as a ransom to bring us back to God appears 140 times in the New Testament"<sup>10</sup>! You can see a large list of the more prominent Scripture passages if you download the manuscript or the document of our Articles of Faith from the website.

It is important to note that some people say that God sent Jesus, in order to dump all his anger and wrath and judgment on Jesus so that he didn't have to do it to us; that once he did that, his awful anger was satisfied and he would no longer be angry with us. It's a theological term called "penal substitutionary atonement," (that should impress you!) and we don't agree with that. The Bible makes it clear that Jesus suffered for us, but it does not say that he was punished in our place. Besides, God is not some legalistic God who demands justice but has no mercy or grace. That perspective does not show God's great love for us, which is his driving motivation.

And that's the key; God loves us. We ought to see the death of Jesus as an example of God's great love for us. It shows us that his compassion is far greater than our condemnation. When we see Jesus hanging on the cross, bloodied and tortured and humiliated, shedding his blood until there was only water left, giving up his last breath, we ought to say to ourselves, "That is how much God loves us."

So now you know the theology of the atonement. And remember what we said last week: we are responsible for what we know.

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<sup>9</sup> Moore, 131-132

<sup>10</sup> Moore, 132

If you are putting off accepting God's love for you through Christ, you can no longer procrastinate. You certainly can no longer claim ignorance. What is now left is...

### **3. Atonement: your response**

You must now decide what you are going to do with Jesus' atonement for you. And remember, Jesus' death was not just some sort of transactional tax payment. This was all done in order to allow you to be at-one-ment with God your creator and Father, who loves you infinitely.

But in case that's not enough incentive for you to accept what he's done for you and enter into this one-ness of relationship with God, you need to understand that his death for you has done more.

You see, Jesus' death was not final; three days later he rose from the dead. Not only did he pay the price, he actually broke the power of death and sin. Jesus now lives on, and he offers not just his death, but his life to anyone who will accept it.

If you can look at the cross of Jesus Christ, where he suffered and bled and died for you, and see in that how much God loves you, then I would encourage you to accept that love demonstrated in his death. I would encourage you to become at-one-ment with God, breaking the power of death and sin in your life, and then allow the resurrection life of Jesus Christ to be alive in you, so that you can live a brand new life, full of life to the brim and overflowing, abundant and free, filled with the very love of God in Christ. And even more than that, you now become a carrier of that love into the world.

Then you can say with the Apostle Paul:

“For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

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, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! 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 people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:14-21, niv)

Why would God prompt the heart of a little girl to pray for you during these moments? Because God loves you, and he wants you to be at-one-ment with him. He's done everything necessary to atone for your sin, even going beyond that in enabling you to live in his love and carry that love into this world. All that is left is for you to accept it. Why wouldn't you be the answer to a little girl's prayer?

*Close in prayer.*