

The Necessity of Atonement

Numbers 8:5–22; Romans 5:6–11

Today we return to our series on the book of Numbers. Two weeks ago we considered the theme “set apart for the Lord’s work.” At God’s direction the tribe of Levi was ceremonially set apart from the other tribes to devote themselves to serving the LORD in the tabernacle: carrying and transporting the tabernacle and its furnishings, assisting the priests in preparing animals for sacrifice, and teaching the law of the LORD to the people. The Levites were set apart for this work not because they were better or more deserving than the other tribes, but because of God’s sovereign choice.

But there is more! Did you notice our text uses the word “atonement” three times? In verse 12 we see that two bulls were to be offered on the altar to purify the Levites, one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering, “to make *atonement* for the Levites.” In verse 19 we learn that part of the work in which the Levites were to assist was “to make *atonement* for the children of Israel.” Verse 21 records that Aaron the high priest followed through and carried out the LORD’s instructions: “Aaron made *atonement* for them to cleanse them.”

Consider four truths: (1) Atonement is reconciliation with God. (2) Atonement requires cleansing from sin. (3) Atonement prepares us for God’s worship. (4) Atonement is a requirement for special service.

1. Atonement is reconciliation with God.

Now if you are a Bible reader—and you should be!—you surely have come across the word *atonement*. It is used about 80 times in all the standard translations. *Atone* is the translation of the Hebrew word כָּפַר (*kapēr*), meaning *cover, expiate, placate*. Its basic sense—*cover*—is used one time: when Noah *covered* his ark with pitch, to make it waterproof.¹ But the more common meaning of כָּפַר is *cover over*, or *atone*. The English word *atone* was first used way back in the thirteenth century (!) and was a compound of the words *at* and *one*, indicating that former *enemies* are now *reconciled*.

There is no greater blessing than to be “at one” with both God and man. The Psalmist speaks of this when he says, “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!”² Man intuitively understands this. Deep down in our hearts we long for peace and harmony and cooperation with other humans. But how hard this is to achieve! Sin brings selfishness. We each want our own way. True peace and harmony can be achieved only through Christ, the Prince of peace. When his Holy Spirit changes our heart, we are enabled to love our enemies. The first one we begin to love is God. We love him because he first loved us, and sent

¹ Gen. 6:14

² Ps. 133:1

his Son to die for our sins. But when the Holy Spirit changes our hearts, we are enabled to love our neighbor too. The grace of God enables former enemies to actually *love* each other. Your family—and your church family—should be places where peace and harmony reign!

In a fallen world, sinners are at *enmity* with God. We, fallen sons and daughters of Adam, are *enemies* of God. Though he created us to love him and have fellowship with him, we cannot do these things without the regenerating work of his blessed Holy Spirit. We must be born again! Sin separates. It separates between man and God and between man and man—separation both vertically and horizontally. Isaiah 59:2 says: “Your iniquities have *separated* between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear.” Separation from God is the root of all other problems. When we are separated from God, the result is isolation and loneliness. There are millions of lonely people. What they really need is the fellowship of the church, but they don’t know it. The church is the *communion* of saints. Communion is to have things in common. What the saints have in common is *Christ*. Another word for *communion* is *fellowship*.

John tells us in his first epistle: “That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have *fellowship* with us; and truly our *fellowship* is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. . . . if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have *fellowship* with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:3, 7).

Here is the best fellowship of all: fellowship with the God who loved us and redeemed us to himself by the blood of his Son, and fellowship with the saints, the people of God. Here is true fellowship, where people care about one another and work to bring out the best in one another. In the church there is to be no envying or strife. We are members of one another, and each member is important. No member is to say, “*I am the most important!*” As in our physical body, so it is in the body of Christ. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you.”³ As I think of my own body, my brain is pretty important. Yes, it is—but what could I do without my hands and feet, and without all the bones, muscles, ligaments, blood vessels and nerves that join them? In the church, Christ is the head; he gets supreme worship. But we, the members of his body, are important too. The Bible clearly tells us to have fellowship with one another, to speak to one another, to encourage one another. We are not to be self-centered and ignore one another. In short, we are to love God, and love our Christian brothers and sisters too.

Millions of people sit in isolation, glued to their tiny screens, not knowing that God made us to have real, eyeball-to-eyeball relationships with other human beings, fellowship that truly satisfies, where there are no big shots, no champions

³ 1 Cor. 12:21

who made it into the kingdom of heaven by their own goodness or deserving. Rather, the church of Christ is made up of those who were redeemed by his precious blood. The church is a level playing field, where we are all equally *undeserving*, where Christ alone is all-in-all.

Oh, the blessings of being “at one” with God and man! This is the meaning of the word *atonement*, which is used three times in our text. Let us now focus on each of these three uses. Consider point 2,

2. Atonement requires cleansing from sin.

Hear verses 9 and following: “And you shall bring the Levites before the tabernacle of meeting, and you shall gather together the whole congregation of the children of Israel. So you shall bring the Levites before the LORD and the children of Israel shall lay their hands on the Levites; and Aaron shall offer the Levites before the LORD, like a wave offering from the children of Israel, that they may perform the work of the LORD. Then the Levites shall lay their hands on the heads of the young bulls, and you shall offer one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering to the LORD, to make *atonement* for the Levites.”

Notice that the Levites were to be set apart for God’s service “before the tabernacle of meeting”—that is, in the presence of the LORD most holy. Ordination for God’s service wasn’t simply the work of man. It wasn’t man’s idea. It was the work of God, ordained and established by God himself. Many Christians, particularly in independent churches, act as if ordination is the work of man and not God. A bunch of people start meeting together, hoping to establish a church. Along the way, others join them. When they are able to support a pastor financially, they call a man. Perhaps he is a promising young man, gifted in teaching, but he’s not ordained. So they ordain him. He’s never been vetted by any court of the church. A group of Christians, perhaps sincere and well-meaning, ordain him in the best way they know how. But notice in our text that ordination is not the work of the congregation alone. It’s not done by a group of independent Christians. In our text the high priest, Aaron, himself ordained, presides over the ordination service. He is accountable to the elders of Israel. So likewise in every age the man who is ordained does not labor independently but is accountable to the presbytery.

In our text there are two young bulls, one to be offered as a sin offering, and the other as a burnt offering. Notice that the Levites *laid their hands* on the heads of the bulls before they were offered. This is common scriptural symbolism with a well-established meaning. Leviticus chapter 4 goes into detail on the meaning of the sin offering. If an individual sins against any of the commandments of the LORD, he is to bring a young bull without blemish as a sin offering. The person who has sinned is to *lay his hand* on the bull’s head, and the bull is to be killed before the LORD. If the whole congregation sins, then the assembly is to offer a

young bull for a sin offering, and the elders of the congregation, as representatives of the people, are to *lay their hands* on the head of the bull, and the bull is to be killed before the LORD. What does the laying on of hands represent? It is a symbolic transference of guilt from the sinner (or sinners) to an innocent animal who then is killed before the LORD. The message that is fixed in the eyes and hearts of the assembled worshipers is: “the soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezek. 18:4). Sin is no laughing matter. God is a God of inflexible holiness and justice. He is the righteous and holy One. The sinner who sins will die, either in his own person or in a Substitute—no exceptions! The bulls and oxen and goats and lambs of the old covenant foreshadowed the Messiah who would come—the Lord Jesus, the sinless substitute who would die, once for all, at the end of the ages, in the place of his people.

Here, beloved, is the doctrine of *substitutionary atonement*, and it is the basis of all true religion. It is vital that you understand it. Do you want to go to heaven? Then your sins have to be laid on Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Your sins have to be transferred to Christ, and his perfect righteousness has to be credited to you. That is the Gospel. There is no other way to be saved. This is not some isolated text. If you have a Bible search app on your phone, look for verses in Leviticus and Numbers that have both the words *hand* and *head*. You will be amazed at how many there are. Be sure to read them.

Atonement requires cleansing from sin, and the only way that sin can be cleansed is with the cleansing blood of the Lord Jesus. “The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from all sin.”

Murder is bloodshed. To murder an innocent person brings guilt and defilement on the human heart. Civil magistrates are required by the God of heaven to administer the death penalty to convicted murderers. If they fail to do their duty, then the blood of the innocent defiles not only individual hearts but the *land*. The LORD declares: “Blood defiles the *land*, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it” (Num. 35:33). Webster (1828) has a startling citation from Alexander Pope describing an execution: “The murderer fell and blood *atoned* for blood.” The blood of the perpetrator atoned for the blood of his innocent victim. May we all learn the lesson: “The murderer fell and blood *atoned* for blood.” If we hate our brother in our heart, then we are murderers. Ultimately, only the blood of Christ can atone for our sins. May we look to him alone for mercy! Amen.

3. Atonement prepares us for God’s worship.

The second reference to atonement in our text this morning is in verse 19, where we read, “I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and his sons from among the children of Israel, to do the work for the children of Israel in the tabernacle of meeting, and to make *atonement* for the children of Israel.” Notice

that the Levites were to assist the priests in offering sacrifices in the tabernacle. The Levites were given as a gift to the priests. We spoke of this last time. The work of offering animals, especially the large ones, bulls and oxen, was very physical work. Slaughtering and dressing the animals—skinning, quartering, removing the entrails, lifting up the carcasses and placing them up on the altar of burnt offering—was very physical, very demanding work. It was more than could be managed by the priests alone. So God gave capable men—Levites between the ages of 30–50—to assist the priest. The altar of burnt offering in the tabernacle was three cubits high; that’s about four-and-a-half-feet high—high enough for the gathered worshipers to see the slaughtered animals.⁴ God did not want the offering of animal sacrifices to be something done in secret. It was a public work.

Some of you young men do physical work or lift weights. Hopefully you take care of the body God gave you. But let’s see you lift up a bull and put it on a shelf four-and-a-half feet high. The counters in a typical kitchen are about three feet high. The altar of burnt offering was a full foot-and-a-half higher. It’s hard to lift an 18-pound ham or turkey and put it in the oven. Try that with a 350-pound bull carcass!

But do not miss the significance of the last part of verse 19: the Levites were to work in the tabernacle of meeting “to make atonement for the children of Israel, *that there be no plague among the children of Israel when the children of Israel come near the sanctuary.*” Notice that the purpose of atonement was to prepare the people for worship. If they came before the LORD without their sins forgiven, they were in danger of a plague—a contagious disease that spreads rapidly and kills many people. Israel knew what a plague was. They had seen the ten plagues God sent upon Egypt.

Here is no idle threat. It’s repeated in the New Testament. When God’s people take the Lord’s supper carelessly, without examining themselves and confessing their sin to God, the result follows: “For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep” (1 Cor. 11:30). How prone we are to minimize our own sins! Let us learn to confess them and weep over them and cry out to God for mercy!

God wants worship. But he wants his worship to be orderly, offered precisely in the manner he ordained. Worship is not a free-for-all. The church does not have permission to devise its own worship. We no longer bring animal sacrifices, but let us come, using the elements of worship set forth in the Bible—prayer, the singing of praise, the reading and preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper. Let us come with humility, in full dependence on the merit of Christ.

⁴ Ex. 38:1

4. Atonement is a requirement for special service.

Consider verses 21–22, “And the Levites purified themselves and washed their clothes; then Aaron presented them like a wave offering before the LORD, and Aaron made *atonement* for them to cleanse them. After that the Levites went in to do their work in the tabernacle of meeting before Aaron and his sons; as the LORD commanded Moses concerning the Levites, so they did to them.”

These verses document that Aaron and the Levites followed through and did what the LORD had specifically commanded. The Levites purified themselves. They bathed and washed their clothes. Then Aaron made atonement for them, to ceremonially cleanse them. Only after that did the Levites begin their work in the tabernacle.

Let us make a practical application: the Lord requires a *converted* ministry. Do you want to serve as a minister in Christ’s church? Then you have to give evidence that you are truly born again. God does not want unconverted men serving as ministers of the Word and sacrament. The ministry is not a career; it is a calling, and the men whom God calls must be *regenerate*—born-again by God’s Holy Spirit. If you are unconverted—if you cannot show, by a faithful life of obedience to Christ and his Word—that you love the LORD and endeavor to live according to his Word, then you do not belong in the ministry. Full stop! If you serve on the pulpit committee of a church looking for a pastor, then the first thing you must look for is a man who gives evidence that he is sorry for his sins, that is trusting for salvation not in himself but in Jesus Christ alone. A church has no right to install a minister who may be a persuasive speaker with a likable personality but does not have a fundamental commitment to Jesus Christ. How the church’s reputation has suffered under ordained men who make public statements condoning all manner of vile and perverse practices and claim to have authority from God to make such pronouncements!

How do we know if a man is converted? He brings forth the fruit of repentance. He exhibits the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. He speaks the truth of God without apology or compromise, trembling before him, knowing that one day he will stand before the Lord personally to give account.

Consider our New Testament text. It ends with the words “For if when we were enemies we were *reconciled* to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been *reconciled*, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the *reconciliation*” (Rom. 5:10–11 NKJV). Note particularly the last word: *reconciliation*. The 1611 KJV, as well as the earlier Tyndale and Geneva translations (1534 and 1557, respectively), have “the “*atonement*.” Historically, *atone* and *reconcile* were synonyms. One dictionary has this note: “When *atone*

joined modern English in the 16th century, it meant ‘to reconcile,’ and suggested the restoration of a peaceful and harmonious state between people or groups. Today, atone specifically implies addressing the damage . . . caused by one’s own behavior.”⁵ So *atone* and *reconcile* used to be synonyms!

But sinful man cannot simply say, “I’ll try to do better going forward.” Sin is still on our record, and God requires absolute perfection in order to enter heaven. But the Gospel teaches that for those who look to Christ in faith, his sacrificial death atones for our sins and his perfect life is credited to us as *our* righteousness. That is something that only *Christ* can do—and has done! You cannot save yourself. Your only hope is to look to Christ and receive his salvation as a free gift. Amen.

⁵ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/atone> (accessed 7-25-26)