

## **Atonement and Reconciliation – Mending a Broken Relationship**

Today, we are going to deal with Atonement and Reconciliation together, because within the framework of the New Testament, the atonement first deals with the reason for the breakdown in relationship between God and humanity, and reconciliation is then the resulting benefit of that healed and restored relationship.

### **The Atonement**

The Atonement goes to the root of the problem that caused the breakdown in our relationship with God – the sin of disobedience, or to put it more colloquially, the sin of doing our own thing in opposition to God’s direction, which is both offensive to God’s loving and holy nature, and destructive to our wellbeing.

We first meet the idea of atonement in the Old Testament where atonement is always instigated by and comes exclusively from God. The two classic examples of this atoning action of God occur in the leadup to Israel’s escape from Egypt, called the Passover, and the Day of Atonement sacrifice, which became part of Israel’s worship of Yahweh. However, this merciful atoning heart of God is woven throughout the whole of Israel’s sacrificial system.

### **The Passover** (Ex 12:1-14)

*The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in Egypt, <sup>2</sup> 'This month is to be for you the first month, the first month of your year. <sup>3</sup> Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month each man is to take a lamb for his family, one for each household. <sup>7</sup> Then they are to take some of the blood and put it on the sides and tops of the door-frames of the houses where they eat the lambs. <sup>12</sup> 'On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. <sup>13</sup> The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are, and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.*

This was part of God’s judgement on Egypt for their mistreatment of Israel as their slaves in their workforce and their rejection of his authority, that God would take the firstborn male in every Egyptian household, from the Pharaoh down. Even for Israeli, ‘all have sinned’, and it was through the sacrifice of an innocent lamb whose blood was then painted on the doorposts of their homes as a witness that the life of that lamb represented the atonement for their sin and their trust in God for his salvation. When John the Baptist saw Jesus, he cried out, ‘Look, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world’ (Jn 1:29).

### **The Annual Day of Atonement Sacrifice** (Lev 16:15-34)

<sup>15</sup> *'He shall then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain and do with it as he did with the bull's blood: he shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. <sup>17</sup> No one is to be in the tent of meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the Most Holy Place until he comes out, having made atonement for himself, his household and the whole community of Israel. <sup>34</sup> 'This is to be a*

*lasting ordinance for you: atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites.'*

This annual practice again represented an innocent life being given in exchange for God's loving and merciful forgiveness of their sins. It was placed on the cover of the Ark of the Covenant, called the mercy-seat, where God's mercy meets his judgement on sin, and results in peaceful relationship with God.

In the New Testament, it is Jesus himself who becomes our atoning sacrifice for all our sins.

*<sup>21</sup> But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith."*

(Rom 3:21-25)

*<sup>17</sup> For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. <sup>18</sup> Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.* (Heb 2:17-18)

As we can see, Jesus himself now become the innocent and sinless sacrifice who alone is able to not only make atonement for our sins, but literally *be* our atoning sacrifice. He is the one who pays the penalty of our sin, which rightly is death, but dying instead for us, and removing its guilt and allowing him to forgive our sins. This is what has laid the foundation for dealing with the offense of our sin before God, and opens the door for reconciliation, the restoration of harmonious relations between God and us.

## **Reconciliation**

The concept of reconciliation revolves around the restoration of broken relationships involving an exchange between parties that effects the restoration of the relationship.

In relation to its biblical applications, and particularly in the New Testament, it refers to the restoration of fellowship between God and humanity, which is always initiated by God, and actuated by the Holy Spirit through faith in the ministry of God's Son, Jesus Christ.

Because God is a trinitarian being, relationality is at the core of his creational activity, so while from our perspective the primary recipient of the reconciliation is us – humanity, involving the exchange of God's righteousness in place of our sin, which we must repent of, through the faith that God imparts to our human spirit. However, there is also a necessary exchange within God from his offense toward the self-centredness of sin, which is the antithesis of who God is, releasing him to welcome us into his everlasting love, which is now freely released to us through Jesus' reconciliatory mediation on the cross, and the convicting power of the Holy Spirit within our hearts.

Paul opens up the theological realities involved in this process in a number of passages:

<sup>10</sup> For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! <sup>11</sup> Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Rom 5:10-11)

<sup>17</sup> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: the old has gone, the new is here! <sup>18</sup> All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> 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. <sup>20</sup> 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. (2Cor 5:17-20)

<sup>19</sup> For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, <sup>20</sup> and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. <sup>21</sup> Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. <sup>22</sup> But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation – (Col 1:19-22)

The source of this reconciliation is motivated out of the love of God for his image-bearing creations, which is experienced both personally through the fellowship of the Holy Spirit within each responding believer, and also corporately within the fellowship of believers – the new faith community of the church.

*Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>2</sup> through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God.* (Rom 5:1-20)

These are the benefits that we now enjoy because Jesus is our atonement – he has removed the guilt and penalty of our sin – the death penalty no longer hangs around our necks, and as a result, we enjoy peace with God and have constant access to the rich blessings of his grace and the intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit!!!

<sup>4</sup> *The amazing grace of the Master, Jesus Christ, the extravagant love of God, the intimate friendship of the Holy Spirit, be with all of you.* (2Cor 13:14 – The Message)