

Substitutionary Atonement

A Bible Overview Information Paper

Substitute: is someone who takes the place of someone else

Atonement: is the process of bringing those who are separated into unity; it's making amends for a wrongdoer; it means to reconcile (Webster).

Atonement is like when you get a speeding ticket that you have to pay for. Once you've paid the ticket, it has been atoned and you're free of the debt.

In Scripture, we start to see God's plan for "substitutionary atonement" first in the Garden of Eden. God had made it clear to Adam and Eve that if they disobeyed His explicit command not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of good and evil, they would die. Thus, when they "fell", they felt guilt and knew their relationship with God had changed. God's way to cover their sin (provide atonement) was through the death of an animal whose skin would be their covering.

- When Adam and Eve saw the animal die with its blood spilled on the ground, they now knew what death meant. They had tried to cover themselves with fig leaves but they were still afraid of God knowing their relationship no longer was as it should be. God's way to bring them back into relationship with Him was by having an innocent animal die in order to provide a covering God would accept. (Sin is serious because it separates us from God. The penalty for sin is death: Romans 6:23. Thus, atonement carries a high price: a life must be given. One life is given so another can be saved.)

Next we see it in the Passover. Pharaoh had been warned that the 10th plague would be God sending the angel of death to kill all the firstborn males throughout Egypt. This could be avoided only if a spotless, unblemished, lamb was sacrificed and its blood put over the door frame of one's home. If such blood was not put over the door frame, the firstborn male died. God's way to save human life was by the unblemished lamb being sacrificed. Its' blood became the "substitutionary atonement".

The next time we see this is when the Israelites are camped around Mt. Sinai. Because they'd been slaves, they didn't know how to govern themselves. So, God set up laws for them to live by so they could be a nation with order and not chaos. God's way to remind them of their sinful nature and need for Him to guide them was the establishment of blood sacrifices so that their personal and national sins could be covered. Daily sacrifices could not actually remove sins, only cover them.

- One special day was called "The Day of Atonement" (Leviticus 16). This was the greatest day of the year for Israel and the only day the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place (Holy of Holies) to make atonement for himself and the nation. This event included two unblemished goats which represented the two ways God was dealing with the Israelite's sins.

- Lots were cast with one goat sacrificed for the people's sins. The living goat was sent off into the wilderness with the people's guilt laid upon it. It was called the "scapegoat". The people would watch this "scapegoat" walk off knowing that not only was their sin being forgiven but their guilt as well.

When John the Baptizer comes on the scene in the New Testament and he sees Jesus walk by, he says, "Look! There is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!" (John 1:29)

- Jesus was without sin.
- He chose to die for us. When He sheds His blood on the cross, He is that perfect sacrificial Lamb.
- Only in Christianity is there the concept that God Himself would come in human form to be our "substitutionary atonement."
- Jesus made the truly "ultimate sacrifice."
 - Whereas, the term making the "ultimate sacrifice" is used when one person chooses to die for someone else (like a soldier in battle for another) and as wonderful as that gift is, their sacrificed life cannot take away the others' sins. Only Jesus takes away sins (and proved it by rising from the dead.)

There are only two ways to make atonement for our sins:

1. Self-atonement- a self pay plan
2. Jesus- as the "substitutionary atonement."