

Wonderful Words of Eternal Life

Atonement

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Atonement

Let me begin by asking, are you in debt? Most of us are. Let me re-phrase it. Are you or have you ever been in debt over your head? Some of you may feel a sense of suffocation because the debt that you owe is more than you can bear. Maybe you're thinking about your mortgage, second mortgage, car payment, student loan and all those credit cards that have piled up. You suddenly are beginning to realize your income doesn't equal the outgo and bankruptcy may be staring you in the face. WHOA!

Now this lesson isn't about physical indebtedness. But if you're deep in debt or have been, you will better appreciate in your heart the nature of this lesson.

Atonement may bring the image of those dry old dusty preacher words. If you've been to church at all, you've probably heard preachers somewhere stand up and talk about atonement. Maybe you heard what it meant, but you've forgotten and you don't know that you ever really want to know again. Atonement is a wonderful word that you and I don't even have the luxury of not understanding if we're Christians. It's a word that shapes and manifests the destiny of our lives.

What does it mean? The dictionary provides its secular definition; to supply a need or to restore a deficiency. Interestingly enough, the Greek word used in the writing of the New Testament meant to pay a debt and particularly to pay a debt that an individual would be unable to pay. If you were to do that you would have atoned the debt. That's the reason for the little introduction about financial indebtedness. But atonement as used in the Bible has nothing to do with financial indebtedness. It has something far more important than that.

God creates every human being in His image. (Genesis 1:27) He creates every one of us absolutely spotless, holy, and without sin. Some of you have heard the doctrine of original sin proposed. It is the idea that when a child comes from its mother's womb it already has sinned as it has its parents' sins. There is nothing in the Bible to validate that. Instead, Jesus told the disciples in Luke 18 to let the little children come and be around him for such is the kingdom of God. They're not sinners. They're innocent and wonderful and clean. God really does make us in his image in a multitude of ways, one way being we're pure and without the stain of sin. But as we grow older and mature, one by one, time after time, we choose to sin. The Greek word rendered sin means to miss the mark. It was often used as an archery term. If someone was shooting at a bull's-eye and the arrow went off-centered just a little bit, that person missed the mark. That's the idea of sin. When I miss the mark of God's ideal for my life, I've sinned. When we hear the word sin or sinner, we tend to associate it with some heinous things. We think about criminal behavior. We think about that which is socially unacceptable and it includes all that. So, whenever we miss the mark for God's ideal for our life, we sin. Whenever we do something that God would not have us do, we've sinned. Whenever we don't do something that God would have us do, we've sinned. So make sure we understand that every time that you miss a mark, we've fallen short of God's intent and you have sinned.

Paul states in Romans 3:23 "all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory." In missing the mark, we begin to incur a debt to our Creator. He created us sinless and in His image, but little by little we begin to incur sin, and a chasm grows. The question is what are we going to do about it? That's a tough question. Since all men and women are sinners, they cannot pay that debt for each other. I don't have enough holiness to take care of myself let alone give you any. You don't have enough to take care of yourself let alone to lend me any. So collectively we're no better off than we are individually. We're just a mass of humanity going through time with this huge sin debt that will kill us.

Paul also said in Romans 6:23, "The wages of sin is death..." The idea of wage is that there is something earned by our actions. That's the payback. That's what's coming our way. What we can expect for our sins is death. You say, what's death? Oh, it doesn't mean being put into a casket under the ground, that's going to happen anyway. The word "death" means separation. Our sin debt causes us to be separated from the Almighty God who made us so perfect. Incidentally, the idea would be like the separation and the relationship you have with your banker if you kept accumulating a debt that you could not pay.

Well what do we do? Praise the Lord, God gave an answer. The answer has its roots way back in the Old Testament. Take your Bible and turn to Leviticus 17:11. It states a fundamental principle that is eternal. **"For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar."** Now I'm not sure why, but if you think about it for a moment it begins to piece together. God and His infinite wisdom decreed in essence that "humans, you're sinning and that sin is sapping the life away from you. Sin is creating a debt to Me that is drawing you farther and farther from Me. Your life is being drained and life is made possible by blood." Incidentally, only in the last few years are we scientifically beginning to understand just how true that statement is, how necessary blood is to life. Then God said, "Why don't We let blood, sacrificial blood poured out on the altar, pay for sin? It will atone for sin. Hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years later in the New Testament when the Hebrew writer was writing under inspiration in Chapter 9, verse 22, he repeats the same theme. It says, "without the shedding of blood, there can be no forgiveness" of sin. There has to be life to pay for sin. Life pays for death.

So Israel, knowing their sin and the growing chasm between them and God, saw payment for that sin debt that God specifically provided called "The Day of Atonement." The Day of Atonement would be that one day every year where Israel as a nation would have their sin debt taken care of. Aaron, who was the high priest, would have to take care of his own sin.

"Aaron shall bring the bull for his own sin offering to make atonement for himself and his household, and he is to slaughter the bull for his own sin offering." (Leviticus 16:11) Aaron would cut that bull's throat and pour the blood out on the altar to atone for his own sin, but then he had to do something else.

He would then slaughter the goat for the sin offering for the people and take its blood behind the curtain to do with it as he did with the bull's blood. He would sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. In this way, he made atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins had been. You see, God decreed that with the shedding of that blood, sin could have atonement. It could be paid. So Aaron did that until he died and then the high priest did it for years and for generations and for centuries, but there was one problem. The people were offering those blood sacrifices of animals in faith. They were coming before God obediently and they were humble and that pleased God and so God smiled upon those people, He forgave them, but what we need to understand is that the sin debt wasn't really being paid. Not by those animals. (Leviticus 16:15)

In Hebrews 10:1-3 the Bible says "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming---not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins," and verse 4 states, "because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." If you think about it, you know that's right. There's no way that the blood from an animal, even if it's offered in obedience and humility, could take away the sin of one who was made in the image of God. Therefore: no human being with those animal sacrifices could ever be truly cleansed. So entered Jesus Christ, The Word, who became flesh.

John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Verse 14 states "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld the glory of the only begotten of the Father." Hebrews 4:15 says that he lived a sinless life. "We don't serve a high priest, who cannot deal with our infirmities, but he has been tempted in all points like we, yet he was without sin." So when that one perfect, sinless individual came and lived, it made him fit to be the real, genuine and authoritative payment for the sin debt. "For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own." (Hebrews 9:24) This wasn't a copy. This wasn't a ritual and this wasn't a ceremony. Jesus actually paid the price.

John the Baptist "saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29) The apostle John also wrote in 1 John 2:1-2 "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin." Don't you like that? He says I'm trying to get you not to sin, but I know you're going to sometimes. When you do sin, listen. "We have one who speaks to the Father in our defense---Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." Isn't that incredible? Yes. Isn't that unfathomable? Yes, it is. Isn't that too good to be true? No, it's not too good to be true. It's absolutely true. When you go to that cross and when you accept that sacrifice and believe on the only name that you can believe in wherein you must be saved, Jesus. (Acts 4:12) When you repent of your sins, Acts 20:21, and when you re-enact that very death, burial, and resurrection by allowing yourself to be buried with Christ in the waters of baptism to come up a new creature with your sin buried in that watery grave, Romans 6:3-5, you become a Christian and you understand the concept of atonement.

John Bunyan wrote in the 17th Century one of the most famous works of all, called "Pilgrim's Progress." The main character in "Pilgrim's Progress" was a character called "Christian." It was all symbolic. Listen to what he said about Christian in this work. "Now I saw in my dream that the highway up which Christian was to go was fenced on either side by a wall, and that wall was called salvation. Up this way therefore did Burden Christian run, but not without great difficulty because of the load that was on his back. He ran thus till he came to a place somewhat ascending and upon that place stood a cross and a little below in the bottom, a sepulcher. So I saw in my dream that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders and fell from his back and began to tumble and so continued to do until it came to the mouth of the sepulchre where it fell in and I saw it no more." We lose our burden when we come to the cross too. Lesson #1065, Steve Flatt 7-7-1992

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