

We're doing four topics in September instead of ploughing through a book from the Bible. The first is Atonement, next week Communion, then the believer's position or identity in Christ, and lastly the priesthood of all believers.

What is atonement? It is a made-up word from Tudor times having an English root with a French ending. The English bit is "to be at one" and the French is the -ment, which turns a verb into a noun. (e.g. the verb "refresh" + "ment" = a thing that refreshes, and the addition of a w in the pronunciation of one only happened everywhere in southern and midland English until the seventeenth century and isn't in the word "only"). So the state of being "at one" with someone is what the word means. In other words, to be reconciled with others, having made amends for past mistakes.

In theology the atonement of Jesus Christ means the making up for the sins of the world by the death of Jesus on the cross.

Why is it important? Jesus was born to take on the sins of mankind and had to die to enable this to happen. The death of Jesus enables us to be saved, not by anything we might do (works) because none of us is good enough. Every other religion focuses on mankind seeking to earn approval from God or gods by doing things – worship, works, offerings to gain merit or favour. Only Christianity offers eternal life as a gift of God which none of us deserve save through the death and resurrection of Jesus and which is received by the grace of God in whom believers have faith.

It is not great faith that saves us, but faith in a Saviour. Certainty in our own salvation is based on understanding that the atonement was necessary and ordained by God.

We looked at the Old Testament sacrificial system over the last two weeks being necessary for sin to be laid on the animal that had to die to take the punishment a sinner deserved. We have to understand that God is holy and just. All sin must be punished. Exodus 34:5-7 *Then the Lord came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the Lord. ⁶And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, 'The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, ⁷maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. **Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation.***

There are three major views on atonement.

The ransom theory, the moral influence theory and the penal satisfaction view.

The ransom theory dates back to Origen (185-254AD) and assumes that the ransom was paid to Satan because he has all mankind in thrall. Jesus was a man but after Satan won by having him die like all mankind and so pay the price for sin, Satan lost because Jesus rose from the dead. The theory assumes God did a deal with the devil, rather than between God and the Messiah.

The moral influence theory dates back to Abelard (1079-1147) and assumes we are over awed by God's love that he sacrificed his son. For those who object to God doing a deal with the devil or with his son, this appeals to liberal theologians who cannot accept that their idea of a loving God could cruelly plan to have his son die a gruesome death.

The penal satisfaction view dates back to Anselm (1033-1109) which states that sin of every kind requires complete satisfaction of an infinite kind which could only take place if God himself took the

place of man as the ultimate sacrifice and punishment for sin. Christ's death was not a ransom paid to the devil, but a debt paid to Father God.

God is holy, sinless, unlike anything or anyone we can ever know, and he is just and righteous. As we saw in Exodus 34:7 sins must be punished.

We are all sinners, and without exception fall short of the glory of God. Sin can only be dealt with by needing a substitute to take on the punishment we deserve. Revelation 5:2-4 ²*And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, 'Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?'* ³*But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it.* ⁴*I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside.* None of us is worthy and without sin.

God is merciful and gives us what we don't deserve. Man received a substitute in the Garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve realised they were naked and conscious of sin. God showed mercy by wishing to be reconciled to man, being "at one" with man by clothing them to cover them up. Genesis 3:21-22 ²¹*The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.* ²²*And the Lord God said, 'The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live for ever.'* Thereafter sacrifice was necessary to expiate sin and pass it on to an animal that had to take the ultimate punishment for sin - death.

The atonement explains how God can be just and merciful at the same time.

Justice had to be satisfied – John 19:30 ³⁰*When he had received the drink, Jesus said, 'It is finished.'* *With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.* Jesus fulfilled the Law by his death (the ceremonial sacrifice) and his life (the moral sinless life) and gave complete satisfaction to the Father. 2 Corinthians 5:21. ²¹*God made him who had no sin to be a sin offering for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

So much in the Old Testament is a foretaste of what Christ modelled in his life. On the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, when the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle, later the Temple, he first had to offer sacrifice a bull for his own sin, then sacrifice a goat for the sin of the people. He then took blood from the bull and the goat slaughtered on the altar and took it behind the curtain to sprinkle over the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies.

Christ fulfilled the sacrificial system but he didn't need to offer a sacrifice first for his own sin, and all he did was to sacrifice himself for our sins, the sins of the people. When the blood of Jesus was shed, atonement (reconciliation between God and man) took place once and for all.

Hebrews 10:1-14 *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.* ²*Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.* ³*But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins.* ⁴*It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

⁵*Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:*

'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me;

⁶with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.

⁷Then I said, "Here I am – it is written about me in the scroll – I have come to do your will, my God."

⁸First he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them'– though they were offered in accordance with the law. ⁹Then he said, 'Here I am, I have come to do your will.' He sets aside the first to establish the second. ¹⁰And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹¹Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹²But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. ¹⁴For by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy.

The most important thing to remember is that our sins are dealt with because Jesus died for us.

He died for all of us – 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 *¹⁴For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. ¹⁵**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.*

However not everyone on the planet has Jesus interceding for them before the Father.

He intercedes only for those who accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour – Hebrews 7:25 *²⁵Therefore he is able to save completely **those who come to God through him**, because he always lives to intercede for them.*

Atonement takes effect only for believers – Romans 3:22-26 *²¹But now apart from the law the righteousness of God has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²**This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.** There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood – to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished ²⁶ – he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, **so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.***

We have to remember that Jesus says *'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.* (John 14:6). That is a pretty exclusive statement and as we see from the other texts already quoted, getting into heaven requires Jesus to intercede for us. The sheep who know his voice have assurance of salvation. Those who reject Jesus and those who he says he never knew, don't have that assurance that God will be merciful and forgive their sins. A lot of people think that those who never heard the Gospel will be saved, but if that were true, why bother evangelising if "good" people doing their best according to whatever moral customs they have will get to heaven without believing in Jesus? Jesus said go out into all the world to make disciples so that the lost may be saved. They are lost, and Jesus wouldn't call them lost if they could be found without him. Which is why we're doing Alpha... to reach the lost and pray that they accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

