

**Jesus is... Atonement**  
**Heb 2:9,14-17, Rom 3:21-26,**

Brothers and sisters, way back in 1997 I was making plans to become the area director for Young Life in the Niagara region of Ontario. I had successfully interviewed for the position, they had brought me out to their training camp, I had met with other area directors who would be my colleagues, I had made arrangement to move to St. Catharines, however...

Working for Young Life required you to find donors to contribute to your salary and unfortunately that was something I wasn't very comfortable or confident with and as a result I backed out of the arrangement at the last minute.

And I've always felt kind of bad about it, because I thought they did great work, I believed in what they were doing, they had invested in me and were excited about bringing me on and I had to bail on them.

So, a large part of why I've supported and encouraged our Young Life group here in Calgary has been to give myself a

sense of making up for bailing out on them back in Ontario, to personally atone for what I see as my failure.

And maybe you've done something similar? Perhaps you've taken the opportunity later in life when you are more established and connected and resourced to atone for something that you weren't able to do earlier on when you were younger – for your own sense of making it right.

But other times you need to atone for something because of how another person is feeling - or not feeling about you. A husband may notice his wife's affections are distant and cold... and he may realize, oh no!! this is because he forgot their anniversary... so the process of making atonement begins.

It is a complex process involving gifts, supplication, pleading, promises, giving his wife her space, and eventually over time – how long depends on what his wife feels is required by his infraction - the husband makes atonement for his mistakes and is restored to his wife's good graces and affections.

And there are situations where it seems difficult and uncertain if you can make atonement.

Many celebrities find out the hard way that fame and fortune are fleeting if you offend the sensibilities and values of your adoring public. Kanye West's recent social media blunders have cost him billions in endorsement deals, companies and people no longer want to associate with him. We'll soon find out if his recent hardships and losses are considered drastic enough to make atonement with the public for his sins or not...

And closer to home, the narrative that currently surrounds the instances of neglect, abuse and fatalities that occurred in various Indian Residential Schools at certain times during their approximate 130 years of existence makes it practically impossible for Canadians to offer enough financial compensation, land acknowledgements, public days of recognition and orange shirts to make atonement.

Even vandalizing and burning down church buildings does not seem to be enough to make amends with our national conscience on this matter and I know that many Canadians are wondering what it will take to atone for this?

Now I realize this is a raw issue for Canadians, but it's a good example of what it means to make atonement and the challenges and difficulties involved in that and I'd like to borrow some of the emotion that we might feel in relation to this as we look at what it means this morning that Jesus is the Atonement.

You see in our day to day lives having to make atonement is something real and concrete that we do, but when we talk about atonement theologically as part of our faith unfortunately it becomes conceptual and abstract for us, so this morning I'm praying the Holy Spirit would make it a real part of our faith in our everyday life.

So, from our day-to-day examples we know that atonement is needed when sensibilities or personalities are offended, when

wrong doing has been committed, or when laws have been violated. But the question is - how well does this line up with the scripture's perspective on atonement?

Well understanding that atonement is needed when a law has been broken is a good place to start because that connects us with how the Israelites were required to make atonement through offering sacrifices when they had broken the Mosaic Law.

And depending on what they had done wrong, there were different sacrifices and procedures to follow, not offering the right sacrifices the right way was an offense in its own right! So God had provided the Israelites with Priests, to help them offer the right sacrifices in the right way in order to make atonement for their sins.

And if you haven't figured it out yet – this is how I'm establishing the scriptural basis on which I can say that Jesus is... Atonement.

Because we've already learned how Jesus is Priest, the Great High Priest in the order of Melchizedek, surpassing the Aaronic Priesthood of the Mosaic Law, and the passage we've read this morning from Hebrews in vs. 17 indicates that as Jesus became this priest – his job as such was to make atonement for the people's sins.

And later in Hebrews 9:12 we read that Jesus accomplished this *not* by offering the blood of animals as the Aaronic Priests did, but *"he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption."*

This reference to *"his own blood"* is His death on the cross, which also connects with the reference to Christ's blood in our passage in Romans 3:25 where Paul identifies the blood of Christ as being *"an atoning"* sacrifice.

So, as we begin to prepare ourselves over the next couple Sundays in anticipation of celebrating Christ's sacrifice on Good Friday we ought to be asking ourselves; what does it

mean that Jesus made atonement in this sacrifice, that Jesus' death and his blood made the atonement?

Now to be honest with you there are a few different answers to this question. Any Theology 101 textbook or Religious Studies course on Christianity will present you with a section called "Theories of Atonement." The only problem is that most of them don't actually explain what Jesus does on the cross as atonement, instead they try to explain it as being something else.

For example, the Moral Influence theory explains Jesus' death has a subjective effect on us, that as we witness His noble self-sacrifice for us, done out of His great love for us, we are so moved by this action that we develop love for Jesus in return and are thus motivated to then repent and turn away from our sins.

Now it is true that the Holy Spirit gives us gratitude to respond to Christ's work of saving us – but the mechanism by which we are saved is not inspiration from Christ's sacrifice, the moral

influence theory is not atonement, its incorrect and ends up as emotional manipulation or behaviorism.

Another common explanation is called Christus Victor. This theory suggests that Jesus' death on the cross and subsequent resurrection is best understood as His victory over the wages of sin and death and the devil, and of course this is correct.

But battling against these evils powers and winning that fight is not the definition of atonement – so it shouldn't be presented as an explanation for Christ's atoning sacrifice, it is a result of that atoning sacrifice but it can't function as its definition.

And more recently false teachers have proposed that Jesus's death on the cross is best understood as the ultimate example of victimization and oppression, that its function is to exposes the power imbalance between the oppressed and the oppressor.

Jesus was an oppressed minority who challenged the oppressive majority, he spoke truth to power, and provoked and threatened the powerful religious elite who used their privilege to have him executed... brothers and sisters, do I even need to critique this theory for you??

Let me instead take you through our Romans 3 passage and we'll see what scripture teaches us about what Jesus' sacrifice on the cross means as atonement.

So starting in vs. 21, we have these references to the Old Testament Law and the Prophets. This links what God is doing in Jesus' blood sacrifice back to the sacrifices required by the Law and what the animal sacrifices represented and achieved as far as atoning for sins.

And as Paul explains in this verse the Law and the Prophets were pointing ahead – testifying – to how God would make righteousness available apart from perfect obedience to the Law. This is the goal for which the atonement is provided.

That's essential the point of vs. 22, we read that this "Righteousness of God" is something positive that we receive through faith and believing. We have faith that Christ's sacrifice and blood makes atonement; we believe that it is sufficient to atone for our sin – even though it might appear to us that atonement for what we've done is not possible.

Then in vs 23 – Paul emphasizes that we all need this atonement, that even those who have the Law need this atonement and in that respect there is no difference between being a Jew or a Gentile. The Gentiles break God's law out of ignorance and the Jews break God's law out of disobedience, so both are in need of atonement.

Moving on to vs 24 Paul begins to give us more insight into what Christ's atonement achieves. Certainly as I mentioned already it achieves a victory over sin and death, and Paul now gives us two terms, justified and redeemed, which apply this victory to us as persons.

So justification is a legal term and when Christ's atonement brings us justification we can understand that we are acquitted before God from the criminal charges we have as sinners. Christ's atonement not only gets the charges dropped but it also restores our reputation and clears our name with God.

Redemption is a commercial term that refers to purchasing a slave's freedom from their owner. So, Christ's atonement buys us back from sin and death and the devil. But we have to be a bit careful here, our modern minds are enamored with freedom as personal autonomy, freedom of choice and free will and that is a different kind of freedom from what the Bible means here.

We should realize that once Christ's atonement purchases our freedom it means we belong to Christ - not ourselves... 1 Cor 6:20 says *"You are not your own; you were bought at a price."* Rom 6:18 says *"You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness."* And from Jesus himself in

John 15:16 *"you did not choose me, but I chose you..."* Christ provides atonement – not autonomy.

Now – we finally come to vs. 25 the key verse for us this morning to understand atonement. "God presents Christ as a sacrifice for atonement, through the shedding of His blood..." It is simple and clear that God intended the death of Christ on the cross to function as atonement.

Whatever else we may find in scripture regarding the cross, the suffering, the shame, and so on, the death that Christ died upon the cross, His blood that was spilled on it functions as an offering to God to make up for the transgressions of human sin.

It makes up for all the violations of His law that contribute to it, its enough to cover all the outright rebellion and defiance against His person and it is sufficient to appease the anger and the offense God takes at the absolute wickedness of our sin.

Other translations of scripture use the term propitiation which perhaps does a better job of capturing what atonement does to appease, placate and return someone back into the good graces of another.

And that is really the heart of atonement brothers and sisters. Its something that restores the relationship and fixes all the aspects of how that relationship has been ruptured.

So if you come away with one thing from this message on atonement this morning maybe it needs to be a realization that our sins are not merely breaking abstract and impersonal laws... they are breaking God's laws, it's a violation of God Himself.

You're not just stealing some random chocolate bar – you're offending God in the same way a husband offends his wife.

We tend to keep our sins as abstract offenses -we know what we do is wrong, we don't believe its right, we know the consequences being drunk or doing drugs can have, if we are

ashamed of them its because of how other people will react to them.

But brothers if we don't grasp how our sin grieves the heart of God, we won't grasp why we need the atonement of Jesus Christ. Because brothers and sisters – our greatest enemy is not the devil, its not sin, its not even death – our greatest enemy is God Himself because of our sin.

Rom 5:10 confirms “we are God's enemies” and if our sin makes us set ourselves against God as such, God must set Himself against us, and so Jesus warns us *“Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Instead, fear the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell!”*

Brothers and sisters, the heart of atonement is relational and sin has changed the relationship that human beings have with God from benevolent and life giving to adversarial and life threatening, but the blood of Jesus atones for us, it changes God's disposition toward us, it placates his wrath. It restores us to His good graces.

So you can see how vs. 25 is a key verse to understanding what the bible reveals to us about how Christ is the atonement.

But for all the good news that verse contains for us, many people have a problem with Christ being the atonement and appeasing God's wrath through His sacrifice. They don't like that God would function this way, they find it unbecoming of Him, it makes Him capricious and vengeful or arbitrary.

Which I find a bit odd, because we find it completely reasonable that a wife expects a husband to atone for missing their anniversary.

We have no sympathy for celebrities who face the wrath of the general public for making racist or antisemitic statements and must make amends through being canceled, and we believe the general public is fully justified in their outrage and demands for perpetrators of child abuse to be locked up for life – with no chance to make atonement, because what could possibly atone for such atrocities?!

But yet we cringe at the thought that God could be as hurt as an overlooked wife? We find it distasteful that God requires we make amends with Him for blasphemous statements and using His name in vain? We accuse Him of being vengeful and capricious for being outraged at our flagrant wickedness and disregard of Him?

What am I missing here brothers and sisters? Why is it ok for us humans to be angry at selfishness and sin and require something to make atonement for it... but its not ok for a perfect and Holy God? What am I missing?

Well Paul explains why its ok in the second part of vs. 25 and in vs. 26. He gives us a double dose explanation that God can require atonement because He is righteous, and in fact Christ' atoning sacrifice demonstrates that very fact.

First, required atonement is a demonstrates God's righteousness in contrast to the accusation that He is capricious, impulsive, or easily outraged, as we are.

The fact is that when it comes to dealing with sin God has a loooooong history of forbearance. Now, with Christ's atoning sacrifice He's finally dealt with all the prior sins that he's overlooked as He worked out His plan in reality to bring about this atoning sacrifice, and foreshadowed through symbolic animal sacrifices which pointed ahead to Christ's atonement.

Second, necessary atonement demonstrated how God can now deal with our sin immediately in the present, there's no longer a need to be forbearing, Christ's atonement is now available. Sin does not have to be overlooked, God can be righteous and punish it right away because that punishment is accounted for in Christ's atonement.

I know this sounds like forgiveness instead of righteousness – but if you think about it, the only way we can be forgiven is because our sin is punished in Christ instead of in us. So, being a forgiving God never compromises God being righteous by letting things slide and overlooking wickedness and sin. It may have looked that way in the past, but now the atonement

has been made so Paul says God did this in order to be just and to justify.

So contrary to how we may feel about God requiring atonement, its actually something that proves He is a just and righteous God. And ironically if He wasn't then our own sense of justice and what we consider right and wrong and how offenders should make amends would ultimately be nothing more than our own capriciousness and impulsive vengefulness.

Brothers and sisters, Jesus is the atonement, the propitiating sacrifice that turns away the wrath of God and fulfills every requirement of justice that is needed to settle things and make things right in the world – past, present, future.

May the Holy Spirit open our eyes to see our need for this atonement

May the Holy Spirit help us to understand and believe it is given to us in Jesus Christ

May the Holy Spirit give us the faith to receive it in Jesus Christ

And may the Holy Spirit give the assurance that because of it – you are back in the good graces of the Almighty, all powerful, all knowing, eternal, loving, heavenly Father.

Who, as Paul reminds us in Rom 8:23 *“did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”*

Brothers and sisters – we give thanks to God for presenting Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for us.

Amen.