

ATONEMENT

ATONEMENT—describes the process of reconciliation between God and mankind, usually through a sacrifice for sin. It is commonly understood as "*at-one-ment*," indicating the restoration of a relationship that was broken due to sin. In a biblical context, *atonement* involves rituals and sacrifices, as described in the Old Testament, to make the people holy before God. *Atonement* signifies both the act of making amends as well as the restoration of a relationship with God.

In the Old Testament, *atonement* is the translation for the Hebrew word, כִּפָּר, כִּפָּרָה (*kâphar*), which means to make amends for wrongdoing, to cover, placate, or cancel, as in a debt).

In the New Testament, the word, "*atonement*," is found in Romans 5:11 (ONLY in the *King James translation*). Other versions translate the word, καταλλαγή (*katallagē*), as "*reconciliation*" (which is the literal interpretation of the Greek word).

Atonement is foundational to Christian theology, particularly regarding the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, which is seen as the ultimate act of *atonement* for humanity's sins.

Atonement is necessary to satisfy God's wrath which we incur by our sin—our disobedience of His will. The Scriptures abound in expressions of *divine wrath*.

In our relationship to God, we operate with two primary responsibilities: *personal* and *natural*! Through His creation of the universe, including mankind, we are obligated to recognize His sovereign authority—that is our *natural responsibility*.

However, God invites us into a *divine-human personal relationship* by faith in His only begotten son, Jesus Christ, whereby we are privileged to become "children of God"—this is our *personal responsibility*. *Atonement is God's solution to mankind's natural and personal sin problem.*

If we consider a court judge, he functions in terms of his personal relationships as well as his judicial authority. Judges must remain true to their legal responsibilities regardless of any personal relationships with prosecutors or defendants. In our court system, relational conflicts require the judge to recuse himself from the case.

However, since there is only one Judge to handle violations of divine law, this could seemingly pose a problem for God to fairly adjudicate mankind for their sins.

How can the Divine Judge maintain His personal relationship (“*love*”) with His *creatures* (“*sinner*”) and not prejudice the disposition of their crimes (“*sin*”) in His adjudication as the sovereign God?

If God compromised the authority of the law by denying His personal wrath against both sin and the sinner, it would conflict with His divine personal righteousness, and He would become *complicit* in their sin (“*crime*”). Judicial obligation must avoid the impact of the judge’s personal relationship in his adjudication of a crime.

So, how is this seeming conflict between God’s love for the law-breaker (“*sinner*”) and His divine righteous obligation (“*justice*”) to uphold the law resolved?

Divine benevolence that would categorically dismiss the punishment of law-breakers (“*sinner*”) would effectively undermine the authority of the law, dispute its legitimacy, and ignore the appropriate penalty (“*wrathful justice*”)! Such an act by the divine Judge would compromise His righteousness, nullify the standard for human behavior, and compromise His essential divine penalty!

However, if there were no means for law-breakers (“*sinner*”) to receive mercy from the court to avoid the consequent penalty (“*wrath*”), all mankind would be necessarily condemned without any ability to live in a personal relationship with the divine, righteous, Creator Judge.

God is altogether righteous! The Scripture ascribes absolute *righteousness* to God as variously expressed with synonyms like *holiness*, *goodness*, and *justice*. Because He is righteous, God can never impose *unjust* punishment, nor can He dismiss unjust deeds without just punishment.

Atonement demonstrates God’s just condemnation of sin (*the crucifixion of His sinless Son*) as well as His intentional decision to provide and maintain a loving relationship with mankind (*Forgiveness through faith in His Son*).

The act of atonement is accomplished through the sacrificial suffering and death of Jesus on the cross. At the cross, God demonstrated the wrathful resolution of sin’s penalty, and He established the way in which the sinner’s *just penalty* of death could be completely satisfied.

By means of this **just penalty**, God protects and corrects all rights and interests which suffer from sin. Therefore, *forgiveness* is only granted in a way through which God rewards His children in the truest and highest sense of judicial righteousness.

The means by which God fulfills both the terms of His personal relationship with mankind (“*love*”) and discharges His responsibility to uphold righteousness and justice (“*wrath*”), is called *propitiation* (see separate study on PROPITIATION).

Propitiation is central to the Gospel, as it signifies how Jesus *covers* our sins by His blood and enables our eternal relationship with God. In the New Testament, propitiation emphasizes God's divine action, rather than human efforts, to satisfy divine justice.

Two primary views of ATONEMENT:

1. **Limited Atonement**— through His death and resurrection, Christ intended specifically for the *elect* to secure their salvation (cf. Matthew 1:21). The “limitation” on Christ’s atonement reflects neither a deficiency for God in Himself nor any external restraint. The limitation is God’s own, prior elective decree.

The main argument for this notion of a “limited elect” comes from Jesus’ words in John 10:11, where He says, “*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.*”

According to some theologians, particularly those of the Calvinist or Reformed Protestant tradition, “*the sheep*” means only the elect, the particular sheep God has selected, not all people. Jesus’ sheep (that is, the elect) hear His voice and respond by following Him, whereas sheep who have another shepherd (such as the Pharisees in John 10:26) do not hear or respond to Jesus. In *limited atonement*, Jesus’ atonement is limited to His sheep. Calvinists, Reformed Protestants, and others who support the idea of limited atonement believe that the *elect* are the ones Jesus refers to as “*His church*.”

This view of “atonement” is sometimes characterized as “*5 Point Calvinism*” which can be remembered by using the acronym, T U L I P:

Total depravity— the Bible teaches that because of the fall of man (Genesis 3:6) every part of man—his mind, will, emotions and flesh—have been corrupted by sin. In other words, sin affects all areas of our being including who we are and what we do. It

penetrates to the very core of our being so that everything in our lives is tainted by sin and *"...all our righteous acts are like filthy rags"* before a holy God (Isaiah 64:6). This view acknowledges that we sin because we are sinners by nature. Or, as Jesus says, *"So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit"* (Matthew 7:17-18).

Unconditional election—God elects an individual to salvation not because of something worthy God finds in that individual but because of His inexplicable, mysterious will. He makes the choice as to who will be saved for His own reasons, according to His own perfect will, and for His own good pleasure (Ephesians 1:5). While some object to this doctrine of election as unfair, it is based upon God's will, and it pleases God—therefore, it must be good and perfectly just.

Unconditional election believes that, apart from God's supernatural work in the life of a sinner, men will always choose to reject God and rebel against Him. However, God intervenes in the lives of the *elect* and works in their lives through the Holy Spirit so that they willingly respond in faith to Him. Because the elect are *"his sheep...they hear his voice and follow him"* (John 10:1-30).

As for the *non-elect*, God is still gracious to them, but because of their sin, they are not thankful for His grace, nor do they acknowledge Him as God (Romans 1:18-20). Therefore, they receive the just punishment that they deserve. Those whom God has elected are beneficiaries of His sovereign grace and mercy, and those whom He has not elected receive the justice they have earned. *While the elect receives God's perfect grace, the non-elect receives God's perfect justice.*

Limited atonement, also known as *"definite atonement"* or *"particular atonement,"* declares that Christ's atonement on the cross was limited in both *scope* and *aim* to the elect. Jesus did not atone for the sins of everybody who would ever live in the world. His plan from all eternity was not provisional for all—rather, it was intentional and specific for only the *elect*. God sent His Son into the world with the specific purpose and design to provide redemption for the elect. Everyone whom the Father chose for salvation (the *elect*) will be saved through the atonement provided by Jesus on the cross.

Irresistible grace—Because God is sovereign, whatever He decrees to happen will inevitably come to pass, even in the salvation of individuals. The Holy Spirit works in

the lives of the elect so that they inevitably come to faith in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit will never fail to bring to salvation to those sinners whom He personally calls to Christ because they are elected by God the Father. Salvation is truly, fully, and finally a gift of grace. Ultimately, all those elected are persuaded by the Holy Spirit to confess Jesus as Lord and are born again by the Holy Spirit because God's grace, which is given to the elect, is irresistible!

Perseverance of the saints—those who are born again, the saved, the elect, will continue to trust in Christ forever. God, by His power through the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, *keeps* the believer forever. The saved are “*sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of the believer's inheritance until the redemption of the purchase possession*” (Ephesians 1:13-14).

After the new birth experience, God promises that because He began a good work in the elect, He will complete it (Philippians 1:6). The elected believer is eternally secure because God is eternally faithful (cf. Romans 8:1, 28-39).

2. **Unlimited Atonement**—Because God so loved the world, Christ intended to provide atonement for all people without exception through His death and resurrection—and He perfectly accomplished what He intended. Christ did *not* intend to *apply* atonement to all people without exception: application of atonement is individually accomplished through personal faith which is granted upon request (Ephesians 2:4-10). The responsibility for limiting the atonement rests with people who do not embrace/receive/accept/believe/trust the atonement that Christ freely supplied for all who exercise their faith in Jesus.

The reconciliation between the righteous God and the unrighteous sinner is neither *universal* nor *automatic in its* application. The atoning sacrifice of Christ does not automatically appease the personal wrath of God against the sinner, nor does it resolve His personal relationship with the sinner.

Atonement is provisional and conditional in that it provides mankind with the *opportunity* to be saved. *Sinners remain under the displeasure, curse, and condemnation of God until through their personal repentance and faith, they are actually reconciled to God by experiencing the new birth* (John 3:3).

The terms of atonement are threefold:

- **The wrath of God is satisfied**—God has profoundly declared His personal displeasure and condemnation against both sin and sinners.
- **The sinners convicted**—Sinners experience the condemnation and consequences of their sin and recognize their need for forgiveness.
- **God forgives and saves the sinner**—The sinner recognizes that God’s personal love and judicial reconciliation is freely available. The sinner’s repentance and personal faith create a new spiritual life that experiences God’s love, personal reconciliation, and eternal friendship.

Unlimited Atonement is based upon *penal substitution*—through the vicarious suffering of Jesus on the cross, the believer’s sin-penalty was fulfilled and the “divine wrath” was satisfied:

- *“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us”* (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- *“Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; for it is written, cursed is every one that hangs on a tree”* (Galatians 3:13).

The curse of the law from which Christ redeems us, is both the law’s condemnation of the sinner as well as its penalty for sin. Jesus can redeem us because He was made a curse for us through His crucifixion in which He took the penalty for our sin upon Himself.

As our *sin-bearer*, the sufferings and death of Christ are the only and necessary ground for forgiveness, reconciliation, and salvation: *“...he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed”* (Isaiah 53:5).