

# What is the atonement?

Imagine standing at the edge of the Grand Canyon, a vast chasm stretching out before you, separating humanity from the divine. This immense gorge represents our spiritual condition—a deep separation from God caused by sin, a gap too wide for us to bridge on our own. Into this awe-inspiring scene enters the most profound and transformative truth of the Christian faith: the atonement.

The atonement is more than just an abstract theological concept; it is the heartbeat of redemption, the turning point of history, and the cornerstone of our relationship with God. Yet, it is often shrouded in misconceptions and limited understanding. This article invites you on an illuminating journey to uncover the true essence of the atonement. We will peel back the layers of traditional views, contrasting them with the Biblical narrative that reveals a much richer, more profound meaning.

Through this exploration, we will venture from the ancient rituals of the Old Testament, where symbols and sacrifices pointed to a deeper need for reconciliation, to the pivotal moment of Jesus Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Here, in the agony of the cross and the triumph of the empty tomb, we find the answer to the most significant dilemma of the human soul—how to bridge the gap between a holy God and a fallen humanity.

## What is the atonement?



In the Bible, the concept of atonement centers on the profound act of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross, eliminating the chasm between man and God created by sin and death (Romans 5:8; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19). Through his perfect life, sacrificial death, and proof-providing resurrection (Hebrews 10:10; 1 Peter 3:18), Jesus offers complete forgiveness and reconciliation for our sins (Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:20), ushering in a restored and intimate relationship with God (Romans 5:10; Ephesians 2:13).

This act of atonement showcases God's boundless love and mercy (Ephesians 2:4-5; Titus 3:4-5), highlighting how, through Jesus, our sins are not only forgiven but entirely removed, resulting in spiritual wholeness (Psalm 103:12; Micah 7:19). The essence of atonement is captured in its very name: "at-one-ment" (2 Corinthians 5:18-21). It signifies the restoration of unity and oneness between humanity and God through a definitive and irrevocable substitutionary sacrifice (1 Peter 2:24; 1 John 2:2).

Atonement isn't simply a principle that requires continuous personal effort to become effective (Ephesians 2:8-9). The atonement doesn't become operative only after we have done all we can (Romans 3:23-24). Instead, the atonement is a complete, finished work by Jesus Christ, not contingent upon a sequence of rites, rituals, or a process of self-improvement (Hebrews 10:14). Instead, it is a gift of grace received through faith in Jesus Christ alone (John 3:16; Acts 4:12).

## What does the Bible's narrative show us about the atonement?

To delve into the significance of atonement, it's essential to trace its origins back to the Old Testament tabernacle/temple system, particularly the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur). The tabernacle and later the temple served as vivid representations of the separation between God and man, employing steps, symbols, and sacrifices to underscore the inability of human imperfections to bridge the chasm between God's perfect standard and our inherent sinful nature. The Day of Atonement and all its rituals stood as a powerful reminder of the divide that sin brought about between fallen humanity and a flawless God (Leviticus 16:15-19).

The Genesis account of the Fall into sin helps us understand the origin of this separation. After their willful disobedience, Adam and Eve were banished from the holy presence of God in Eden. At the entrance, cherubim (angels) with flaming swords acted as guardians, preventing sinful humans from accessing the garden (Genesis 3:24). The message was loud and clear: "Due to your sin, you cannot come in, you cannot enter into God's presence."

This separation theme was mirrored in the tabernacle and temple's design, particularly the innermost chamber called the holy of holies. Inside this sacred space resided the symbol of God's presence—the ark of the covenant and its cover known as the mercy seat. Inside this ark were Aaron's staff, a vessel filled with manna, and, most importantly, the stone tablets containing the 10 Commandments. This inner sanctum was shielded by a curtain, four inches thick, embroidered with cherubim (Exodus 36:35). Like with Eden's guarding angels, the message of this foreboding curtain was clear: "Due to your sin, you cannot come in, you cannot enter God's presence."

However, once each year, the high priest passed through the curtain, but he did so only with blood being poured on the mercy seat and burning incense clouding God's imminent glory.

During the Day of Atonement, the high priest undertook a series of rituals to address humanity's overwhelming separation from God. The first step involved selecting a male cow and a male goat. After being presented before God, these animals were sacrificed, and their blood was carefully collected. The high priest then ventured deep into the sacred temple/tabernacle, carrying the blood of the sacrificed animals. Reaching the holy of holies, the high priest sprinkled the blood on the ark's mercy seat as a profound symbol of reconciliation and propitiation, appeasing God's wrath. The blood, representing the sacrificed life, covered the surface of the mercy seat, temporarily veiling the Commandments within the ark from God's view (Leviticus 16:15-19, Hebrews 9:7-8).

Herein lies the powerful imagery: the Commandments, embodied in the stone tablets, outlined the impossible "you shall" and "you shall not" of God's law. Yet, in the act of blood sprinkling on the mercy seat, the sins represented by these Commandments were appeased and covered through propitiation. The blood effectively acted as a shield, satisfying the just requirements of the law and providing a way for imperfect humans to approach a holy God.

The wages of sins is death, and that penalty was met through this act of propitiation (Romans 6:23, 1 John 2:2). The lives of the animals were given in place of the people who had sinned. This act averted God's wrath and caused him to have a favorable disposition toward the people.

The blood-covered mercy seat, a symbolic representation of God's throne, was now a place where the presence of God could meet with humanity, albeit in a limited and veiled manner. The crimson message was clear: "Because the wages of sin, death, has been paid for you, you can come into my presence."

However, as powerful as this blood sprinkling was, it did not provide a lasting solution to the problem of sin and separation (Romans 3:25-26). The ritual served to appease the wrath of God temporarily but did not eradicate sin. The symbolism was clear—the blood of animals could cover sin, but it could not thoroughly remove it (Hebrews 2:17).

The second phase of the Day of Atonement ritual involved another goat, known as the scapegoat (Leviticus 16:20-22). The high priest placed his hands on the scapegoat's head, confessing the sins of the people over it. This symbolic act transferred the sins of the community onto the goat, signifying the removal of sin from the people. The scapegoat was then sent far away into the wilderness, carrying the burden of the people's sins with it. The message: "Your sins have been removed; you can enter my holy presence."

This dual goat ritual vividly depicted the multifaceted nature of atonement. The first goat sacrificed, and its blood sprinkled addressed the need to temporarily appease divine justice, allowing a limited connection between God and humanity. The second goat, the scapegoat, symbolized the removal of sin, illustrating the need to eradicate the barrier between humans and God completely.

Yet, despite the profound symbolism of these rituals, neither goat could provide a final and ultimate solution. They pointed God's people forward to a different sacrifice offering genuine atonement for sin, an all-encompassing sacrifice capable of eradicating sin once and for all. They pointed to Jesus as the one who would ultimately unite humanity and God (John 1:29, 1 Peter 1:18-19). See A Closer Look below.

## Why did the atonement need to take place?

The atonement was necessary because of the nature of sin and God's character. Sin, which is rebellion against God, results in spiritual death and separation from him (Isaiah 59:2). God, being perfectly holy and just, cannot overlook sin. The justice of God required payment for sin, and the love of God provided that payment through Jesus Christ (Romans 3:23-26). Without the atonement, we would be hopelessly lost, facing eternal separation from God. The atonement bridges the gap between a holy God and sinful humanity, offering forgiveness and reconciliation through Christ's blood and all-sufficient merit.

## Where did the atonement take place?

According to the Bible, the atonement occurred on the cross at Golgotha, a hill outside the walls of Jerusalem. This site holds unparalleled significance in the Christian faith as the place where Jesus Christ, the Son of God, made the ultimate sacrifice for humanity. While the Garden of Gethsemane was indeed a place of intense emotional and spiritual anguish for Jesus, where he prayed fervently and prepared himself for the suffering to come (Luke 22:42-44), it was on the cross where the act of atonement was completed.

At Golgotha, Jesus willingly endured the agony of crucifixion, a Roman method of execution marked by extreme pain and suffering. Christ's crucifixion was not merely a tragic end to a righteous man's life but the climax of God's redemptive plan for humanity, fulfilling ancient prophecies (Psalm 22; Isaiah 53). On the cross, Jesus bore the sins of the world, as stated in 1 Peter 2:24, "He himself bore our sins" in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness, "by his wounds you have been healed."

The significance of the cross in Christian theology cannot be overstated. It was there that Jesus offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin, satisfying God's justice and demonstrating his love (Romans 5:8). The atonement made on the cross is central to Christian belief, as it represents the moment when sin and death were defeated, and eternal life was made available to all who believe in Jesus Christ.

## What did the atonement do?

The atonement of Jesus Christ accomplished several vital and transformative things. Most importantly, it provided complete forgiveness for our sins. In 1 John 1:9, it is written, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." Jesus' sacrifice on the cross cleanses us from our transgressions, giving us purity in the eyes of God.

Furthermore, the atonement reconciled us to God, restoring the relationship that was broken due to sin. Colossians 1:19-22 explains this beautifully, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross." Peace between the Creator and his creation was made possible through the atonement, bridging the gap that sin had created.

Additionally, the atonement defeated the power of sin and death. In Romans 6:4-11, Paul writes about how we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection, giving us new life and freeing us from the bondage of sin. The atonement signifies the victory over sin and the grave, granting us the hope of eternal life with God.

Moreover, the atonement displayed God's perfect love and justice, showcasing his character in an unparalleled way. Romans 5:8 says, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." The atonement is the ultimate expression of God's love, showing that he was willing to sacrifice his own son to save us while also upholding his justice by addressing the penalty of sin.

The atonement is the cornerstone of the Christian faith, embodying the hope, assurance, and foundation of our salvation. Through the atonement, we receive the incredible gifts of forgiveness, reconciliation, victory over sin and death, and an unparalleled understanding of God's love and justice. The atonement is not just a historical event but a present reality that impacts every aspect of our lives, inviting us into a deep and meaningful relationship with God, transformed by his grace and mercy.

## How do I make use of the atonement?

To benefit from the atonement is not about a human decision or effort but about the transformative work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. We cannot come to faith in Jesus Christ by our thinking, choosing, or strength. But through the calling and enlightening work of the Spirit, we come to believe and trust in Christ (John 6:44; 1 Corinthians 12:3). This faith is a gift from God, received through hearing his word (Romans 10:17). In this way, recognizing our sinfulness and believing in Jesus' sacrificial death and resurrection for our salvation is entirely a result of divine grace and action (Ephesians 2:8-9).

## Does Jesus' atonement apply to everyone?

The atonement of Jesus is universally applicable, as Christ died for all and reconciled the whole world to himself (1 Timothy 2:5-6). This concept emphasizes that Jesus' sacrificial act was sufficient for the sins of all humanity (2 Corinthians 5:19). However, this atonement becomes effective for individuals who trust in the finished work of Christ, those who have faith, which is also a gift given by God (Ephesians 2:8-9). While the offer of salvation extends to all (Romans 10:13), it is through faith that people receive the benefits of Christ's atonement (John 3:16). This understanding underscores that salvation is entirely a work of divine grace, not dependent on human decisions or actions (Titus 3:4-5).

## A Closer Look: The Atonement

On Good Friday, Jesus, the ultimate High Priest and perfect Lamb, offered himself as the once-and-for-all sacrifice that fully atones for sin and conquers death (Hebrews 9:11-14). His shed blood covered not just the Ten Commandments but all of humanity's transgressions (Hebrews 9:22; 1 John 2:2). The crucified Christ became himself the new mercy seat, welcoming man into the presence of God (Hebrews 4:14-16; 10:19-22). Like the scapegoat of old, Christ took the world's sins upon himself and removed them (Isaiah 53:6; 1 Peter 2:24).

God wanted to ensure the whole world knew the significance of this moment. With Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, the temple curtain was suddenly and dramatically torn in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51), marking the end of the spiritual divide between God and humanity. This powerful act signaled the culmination of the foreshadowing found in the Day of Atonement, affirming that Jesus had paid the ultimate price for humanity's sins. The curtain—adorned with the guardian "keep out" cherubim (Exodus 26:31)—when it was torn, symbolized the reversal of the separation caused by the sin at the Fall in Eden (Genesis 3:24). It declared to all, "Because of Jesus, you are welcomed into God's presence, always."

The atonement shows how seriously God takes sin (Romans 6:23). Yet, Jesus' perfect life and substitutionary death satisfy every requirement for God to be able to forgive humanity (Hebrews 9:22). The total weight of sin was conclusively addressed through Christ's atoning sacrifice, giving genuine reconciliation and unity with God (Colossians 1:20). Christ's death averts God's wrath against sin. It provides forgiveness once and for all (1 John 2:2).

Jesus made obsolete the Old Testament temple and priesthood practices, fulfilling the law and rending wide the curtain (Matthew 27:51; Hebrews 8:13). The book of Hebrews eloquently captures this transformative moment, “Their sins and iniquities will I remember no more. Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin. Having, therefore, brethren, boldness to enter the holiest by the blood of Jesus” (Hebrews 10:17–19, Hebrews 10:19-22). Jesus’ blood paid for all sin, and now all can approach God without fear of death and punishment (Hebrews 4:16).

The torn curtain is a powerful symbol of the completeness of Jesus’ sacrifice, offering us direct access to God’s presence (Ephesians 2:18). The foreshadowing found in the Day of Atonement finds its ultimate fulfillment in the events of Good Friday, where Jesus’ atoning sacrifice brings humanity into a new covenant with God—a covenant of grace, forgiveness, and unbroken communion (Hebrews 9:15).

## What does atonement mean for you?

The atonement is not just a historical tale; it is your story, woven into the grand tapestry of redemption. It means that you stand forgiven and beloved through the selfless act of Jesus (Ephesians 1:7). Your sins demanded payment. Jesus made that payment once and for all and for you (Hebrews 9:26). Like the scapegoat, Jesus carried your sins far away and banished them from God’s sight and yours (Isaiah 53:6).

Pause momentarily and let this truth wash over you: the atonement confirms that you are cherished and accepted just as you are (Romans 5:8). Jesus’ sacrifice washes away every stain, inviting you into a deep and intimate relationship with your Creator (1 John 1:9). His sacrifice isn’t a ladder you must now tirelessly climb but rather an elevator trying you into the magnificent holy presence of God (Hebrews 10:19-20).

The torn curtain beckons you, inviting you to approach God with courage, free from shame and guilt. The atonement hasn’t just dealt with your death problem, leaving sin for you to deal with. Through the precious blood of Jesus, you are eternally reconciled to God (Ephesians 2:13). Death and sin need not separate you from Heavenly Father any longer. Jesus has accomplished it all. His resounding words echo through time, “It is finished” (John 19:30).

Amid religious systems often demanding enduring effort, merit, and worthiness, the atonement speaks a different language. It proclaims that in Christ, you are already enough (2 Corinthians 5:21). Your identity is rooted not in your failures or successes but in God’s boundless love and grace. Christ’s sacrifice draws you into harmonious communion with your Heavenly Father (Romans 8:38-39).

So, as you journey through life, remember that the atonement is not just a theological concept; it is a personal reality that transforms your daily existence. It is a beacon of certain hope, a source of supreme strength, and a constant reminder that you are loved beyond measure. The atonement invites you to walk confidently in the freedom Christ has secured (Galatians 5:1). Everything you need for God’s forgiveness, the removal of God’s righteous wrath, and reconciliation with God himself, Jesus provides (Colossians 1:20). For those once separated from God by sin and death, the atonement heralds the good news that Jesus is enough (Romans 5:10).

## Study Atonement in the Bible

- Leviticus 16
- John 1:29
- Romans 3:25
- 1 John 1:7
- 2 Corinthians 5:19
- Hebrews 9:12

## Songs about Atonement

- ***There Is a Fountain Filled with Blood*** by William Cowper speaks of the cleansing power of Jesus' blood and how it washes away sin.
- ***Nothing but the Blood*** by Robert Lowry underscores the significance of Jesus' blood in cleansing us from sin.
- ***In Christ Alone*** by Keith Getty and Stuart Townend includes a strong declaration of Christ's atoning work and the believer's hope in him alone.