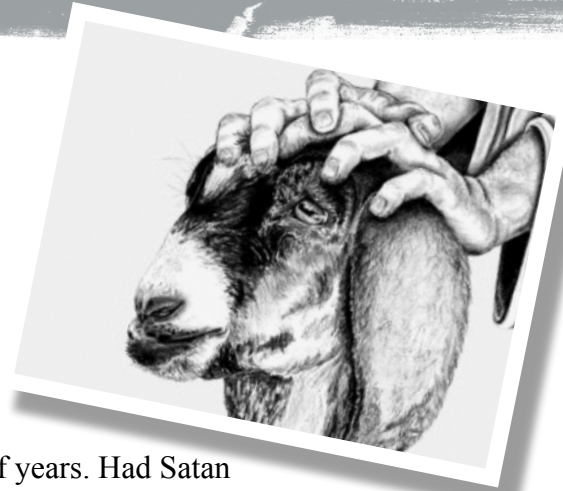


FORGIVENESS & ATONEMENT

PART 1

GOD'S FORGIVENESS & ATONEMENT FOR PAST SINS

“*In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin
You had no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I
have come—In the volume of the book it is
written of Me—
To do Your will, O God.’”*
Heb. 10:6-7 NKJV



Review of Study 13

The Age of Grace (AOG) was God's secret (mystery) for thousands of years. Had Satan and the powers of darkness known what God would accomplish in our Age, they would not have crucified Christ. Had Christ not died, no one could be saved, not in any age. The AOG was crucial to the salvation of all humans in all ages, and that all depended upon keeping our Age a mystery. Today, God dispenses His grace based upon faith in Jesus Christ. This abounding grace is more than Satan could have imagined; he was totally outwitted because of God's secret. As God's grace is dispensed, it first saves us and then works in our lives to change us from within. Thus, God's grace not only saves us, it also has a divine influence, changing our lives by molding our minds and hearts to conform to His will.

INTRODUCTION

An unbeliever's sins are not forgiven, so she or he is spiritually dead. The consequence of being spiritually dead is an eternity in Hell. The believer, on the other hand, is forgiven and can revel in the thought of what Christ has promised her or him. Life on earth is short, generally having some good and some bad, but the idea of spending all eternity suffering in Hell is unimaginable. The good news is, God has always had compassion on the sinner and His desire is to take us from the dead to the living by forgiving our sins. It is important to understand we can be forgiven every wrong we have ever committed (whether an unintentional wrong, a deliberate act, a wrongful thought, or the lack of doing what we should have).

For believers, knowing our sins are forgiven by the Almighty creates within us a never-before-known sense of ease; finally there is one thing in life that is "for sure." No one can ever change what God has done, creating peace of mind by knowing our future is secure in Christ. The believer is at ease, secure, and free from the penalty of sin (which is an eternity totally separated from God). Separation from God may not sound all that bad, except all the good things a person takes for granted are given to us by God. A life without God is a life lived in total darkness, isolated, afraid, suffering, and deprived of every good thing. The opposite life (with God, enjoying His goodness, being blessed, and experiencing joy) is an inconceivable blessing. We naturally think God would

resist forgiving us, and would want us to suffer a little (or a lot) for all the wrong we have done. In reality, just the opposite is true; God is constantly striving to forgive people, and asks only that they have faith in Christ. The idea of God being willing to forgive a sinner and to bring good into his or her life is unheard of, except in Christianity.

We will learn that forgiveness cannot be accomplished by animal sacrifices (Heb. 10:4); therefore, Christ had to come in human form as the one, true Sacrifice for sin. This raises a serious question: if animal sacrifices cannot forgive sin, what then was their value and why did God demand them for thousands of years? We will look into this issue and discover many wonderful truths.

EXPLORING THE OLD TESTAMENT

As wonderful as forgiveness is, there are significant misunderstandings about this topic in Christian circles. In Adult Study 14, we will look at forgiveness and atonement in the Old Testament (OT), in easy-to-understand terms. In Adult Study 15, we will consider the New Testament's teaching on forgiveness and justification. Our basic goals for these two studies are:

- to understand the biblical concepts of forgiveness, atonement, and justification,
- to determine how God dealt with the sins of those living before Christ, and
- to know if our future sins are already forgiven.

Animal Sacrifices

Leviticus 4:27-31 will be used as an example of the many animal sacrifices involved in forgiving (or atoning) sin in the OT. In this passage, if a common person (versus a ruler or priest) unintentionally sinned by doing something against any of the commands of the Lord, when the person became aware of the sin he had to bring an offering to the Lord. A woman presumably worked with her husband, father, or kinsman to do the same. The offering (sacrifice) was to be a kid of the goats, a female without blemish (some offerings were male, some female; perhaps a reminder of the equality of sin). The sinner had to lay his hand on the head of the kid and kill the offering at the designated place. Then the priest would take some of the blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering (within the Tabernacle or Temple), and pour all the remaining blood at the base of the altar. The priest then removed the

fat of the sacrifice and burned it on the altar for a sweet aroma to the Lord. By following this sacrificial system, the priest made atonement (a covering) for the sinner, and the sinner was said to be forgiven. **"So the priest shall make atonement for him, and it shall be forgiven him"** (Lev. 4:31b).

Your Thoughts: Who or what did the sacrifice without blemish represent? What did the laying on of hands represent? Who actually killed the sacrifice? (Answers: a sacrificial animal without blemish was a symbol of Christ, Who was without sin; the laying on of hands was a way of confessing sins and transferring them to another; the sinner killed the sacrifice, just as each of us participated in Christ's death.)

There were many required sacrifices during the year, in addition, sacrifices were required each time a person became aware of unintentional sin, each time a person intentionally sinned (stole, lied, lusted), and for many other reasons. We can be happy we did not live back then. The basic idea was that if a person trusted in God and followed this sacrificial system, his or her sins were atoned, that is, *covered*. Covered sin is out of sight and out of the mind of the sinner. The sinner saw them removed and the burden of them lifted. However, this process had to be repeated over and over, all through a person's life. God knew the actual penalty for those sins was not yet justly "taken care of," and that the penalty would someday have to be paid in full.



Figure 1. Atonement can be likened unto sweeping dirt under a rug. Each speck of dirt is a sin, but the sin is well covered. The dirt is out of sight and no one knows it is there but the person who put it there. The sin still exists, but life can go on, as if the floor were clean.

The Ark of the Covenant

The Ark of the Covenant is part of the OT sacrificial system. It was the most holy item in the tabernacle. The Ark was a special requirement of the Lord for use in the Holy of Holies within the Tabernacle (later the Temple). The Ark was a rectangular chest/box about 44 inches long and 26 inches in width and height (1.1 by 0.7 meters) (Ex. 25:10-22; Lev. 37:1-15). It was made of wood but covered with pure gold, it had a gold crown (decorative molding) around it, and it had two golden poles with which to carry it. On top of the Ark was the Mercy Seat (basically a lid). On the ends of the Mercy Seat, and part of it, were two cherubim made of pure gold; they were facing each other with their wings stretched out touching one another. They looked down upon the Ark and their outstretched wings formed a sort of protected area (a cove) on the Mercy Seat where the Lord would communicate with the High Priest once a year.

The cherubim were symbols of the presence and holiness of God dwelling between them. God would speak to the High Priest from within the cloud over the Mercy Seat. This was all symbolic of the actual throne of God in Heaven, **"For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us"** (Heb. 9:24). Cherubim are always pictured (Ezek. 1:5-12; Rev. 4:7-8) around the throne of God, assuring its holiness and sanctity. In fact, before he fell,

Satan was the anointed cherub (Ezek. 28:14) and had a special position around the throne of God. Imagine that, Satan, an anointed cherub, with the duty of assuring the holiness of the throne.



Figure 2. Representation of the Ark of the Covenant.

The Ark originally had three items in it: the Ten Commandments written in stone, a pot of manna, and Aaron's rod that budded (Heb. 9:4, Deut. 10:2-5, Ex. 16:33). The symbolism of these three items is instructive. The law was a ministry unto death: **"But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones...."** (2 Cor. 3:7), meaning the law could only condemn a person but could not do anything about sin. The manna would have been rotten and putrid, because it could not last (Ex. 16:19-21). Aaron's rod, once alive and budding, was now nothing but a dead stick.

Discuss: What did the Ark symbolize? (Answer: Death! All the things in the Ark at one time were thought to be life-giving, in one way or another, but when seen in their correct perspective they were really dead and of no value in forgiving sin. The Ark was, in many respects, a symbolic coffin to carry the dead.)¹

However, the Mercy Seat was the exception to the Ark's being a coffin. There, God met with the High Priest, and the sins of the people were dealt with once a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16, 23:26-32; Num. 29:7-11). The High Priest had to come with the blood of a bull and sprinkle it seven times on the mercy seat to make a sin offering for the priests. This atoned for the priest's sins. Then he had to take two goats (Lev. 16) and kill one as a sin offering and sprinkle its blood on the mercy seat seven times for the sins of the people and to cleanse the tabernacle/temple. All this assured the tabernacle was holy, the priest doing the work was cleansed, and the

¹ The Ark was something of great national significance related to the worship of the one and only true God. It was often used as a talisman (something with extraordinary effects) in battles.

people's sins were atoned. This process turned what would have been a throne of judgment into a mercy seat, as such, God could act mercifully toward the sinner.

Discuss: Atonement means *to cover*. The OT offerings covered up sin. The blood of the first Passover in Egypt allowed the Lord to pass over that house; the blood of a sacrificial animal allowed the Lord to pass over the people's sins. However, were the sins of the people truly forgiven? (Answer: No, but atonement did allow God to act mercifully toward the sinner.)

The Scapegoat

In Leviticus 16, one goat was killed, as mentioned above. However, the other goat was not killed, and this goat teaches us what was really happening in God's sight. The High Priest would place both hands on this goat, confess the sins of the people, and then the goat—laden with the sins of others but not its own—was sent into the wilderness. This was the *scapegoat*. The people's sins were transferred to the innocent scapegoat, which then carried the sins away into the wilderness, never to be seen again. The sins were out of sight, no longer to be remembered by the people. After the goat was released, God could act mercifully to the people because the scapegoat was an atonement that allowed God and humans to be temporarily reconciled. Sin was taken out of sight and not seen by humans, although it was still known by God. True resolution of the sin problem waited the day when God's righteousness and justice were vindicated, that is, the day when Someone would make it possible truly to take sin away and wipe it out, forever. The scapegoat was a symbol of the Sin-bearer to come, Who took away the sins of the world.



Figure 3. Both hands were placed on the innocent goat's head and the sins of the people were confessed. The

scapegoat was released and bore the sins of the people into the wilderness.

David's Experience

There are three Hebrew words used in the OT that are translated in some form of the words forgive, pardon, or remit (pardon is generally the idea represented).^{2 3} The idea in the Old Testament, when one of these words is used, is that sin was *covered or pardoned*. Remember, a pardoned criminal is free from the penalty of his or her crimes, but is still guilty. The OT saints were pardoned, and this was fantastic news for them. However, they were still guilty, and their sin was not dealt with in a manner consistent with true justice. So from a human viewpoint, a person's sins were gone, removed as far as the east is from the west. The sinner was pardoned, which gave great comfort; however, in God's impeccable books, each of those sins was still shown, and after each sin were these words, in bold, capital, red letters **"NOT PAID."** Pardon and true forgiveness are two different things, but humans could rejoice in His mercy as a result of offering a sacrifice. *Mankind's conscience was placated, but God's justice was not.*

At this point, we can better understand what David meant when he said, **"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered"** (Psa 32:1). David was delighted that the penalty for his sin was pardoned. The second phrase interprets the first, showing that *forgiven* really means his sin was *covered (atoned)*. David realized God covered his sins, and rejoiced that God treated him as though they were forgiven. In reality, his sins were sent into the wilderness, or swept under the proverbial rug; sin was not yet dealt with in a just manner since the penalty was not paid.

² Brown, Francis; *The New Brown – Driver – Briggs - Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*; Associated Publishers and Authors, Inc.; LaFayette, Indiana; 1978.

³ Wilson, William; *Wilson's Old Testament Word Studies*; Mac Donald Publishing Co; McLean, VA.

TAKE TO HEART

Conclusion

The whole OT sacrificial system was an ongoing process that was repeated day after day, year after year. Thus, it was temporary in nature and never completed. This system provided an atonement (covering) for sin, which allowed God to act mercifully. God's mercy temporarily eased the conscience of the sinner, while at the same time made him or her more aware of sin. The sacrificial system did not consider any future sins (sacrifices were always retroactive in nature). When sin was atoned, God did pardon the sinner, but the sinner was still guilty and the penalty was unpaid.

The sins of all believers from Adam until the death of Christ were covered by animal sacrifices (or other requirements of the law). The OT system made no payment for the penalty of sin, so the payment kept accumulating year after year. Over thousands of years, millions of gallons (a gallon is about four liters) of animal blood had been shed to cover the sins of believers; but how many sins were truly forgiven with all this blood? *Not one, not a single sin!* No sin was truly forgiven, and a huge debt was building and building; how could God allow this to continue?

We now know sins cannot be truly forgiven (taken away) by any animal sacrifices, "**For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins**" (Heb. 10:4). True forgiveness means to take away sin (to purge it); but animal sacrifices only covered them, and the scapegoat only removed them from sight. Over the

millennia, with hundreds of thousands of people offering sacrifices, God refrained (called forbearance) from judging those sins. Eventually, the matter of God's forbearance came into question. How could a righteous God go on and on covering sin and not really getting rid of it (true forgiveness)? *Something* more than the OT sacrificial system was needed to truly deal with the penalty of sin. God was passing over sin, covering it up, and driving it out of sight; but, this could not go on forever.



Figure 4. Covering sins for thousands of years is somewhat represented in this cartoon. By the time of Christ, the situation was more like a mountain of sin with a little rug on top trying to cover it up. However, a day was coming when "**I will remember your sins no more**" (Jer. 31:34).

Note: We are leaving this study in the middle of God's plan for dealing with sin. Please see Adult Study 15, which will complete this topic.