



"Nothing that man can present to God by way of sacrifice can ever purchase the blessing of forgiveness."
—Charles H. Spurgeon

18-Sep-15

The Price of Atonement

We will soon be observing the Day of Atonement. Like Luke in [Acts 27:9](#), we tend to think of this holy day as "the Fast." Afflicting our souls by not eating and drinking for the entire 24-hour period looms large in our thoughts as the day approaches—and certainly as we are experiencing the hunger pangs as hour number 23 crawls along! Even so, the holy day is called "the Day of Atonement" in [Leviticus 23:27-28](#), which is its proper name. We can assume that, while we do fast, the concept of atonement takes precedence.

The instruction on the Day of Atonement in [Leviticus 23:26-32](#) repeats certain words and phrases, emphasizing them. The repetition informs us about what [God](#) wants us to focus on:

And the LORD spoke to [Moses](#), saying: "Also the tenth day of this seventh month shall be the Day of *Atonement*. It shall be a holy convocation for you; you shall afflict your souls, and offer an offering made by fire to the LORD. And you shall do no work on that same day, for it is the Day of *Atonement*, to make *atonement* for you before the LORD your God. For any person who is not afflicted in soul on that same day shall be cut off from his people. And any person who does any work on that same day, that person I will destroy from among his people. You shall do no manner of work; it shall be a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings. It shall be to you a [sabbath](#) of solemn rest, and you shall afflict your souls; on the ninth day of

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the month at evening, from evening to evening, you shall celebrate your sabbath." (Emphasis ours.)

The word "atonement" is mentioned three times, once in verse 27 and twice in verse 28 (afflicting the soul and doing no work are also mentioned three times, but these are responses to the atonement). The first two mentions confirm "the Day of Atonement" as the proper name for this holy day. It is a special day, a day devoted to atonement.

The Hebrew word behind "atone" is *k par*, which means "to atone," "to propitiate," "to appease," "to pacify," or "to wipe clean." The root of this verb suggests the idea of covering. It is easy to see the link between *k par* and the name the Jews use for this day, Yom Kippur. The Day of Atonement is a day of covering.

Most uses of *k par* in the Old Testament are theological, describing God covering or purging [sin](#) through sacrifice. In one instance, though, when God instructs Noah about building the ark, He commands him to cover the ark with pitch ([Genesis 6:14](#)). We can discern what the word implies from this illustration. Obviously, Noah and his sons carefully coated the entire ark with pitch so no water could seep in. Their efforts were vital in saving their lives. A similar result occurs when sin is truly covered—it is hidden completely, and the sinner can continue living without guilt.

However, most of the Old Testament usages of *k par* possess the theological thought of covering over or atoning for sin by using the life blood of an animal sacrifice. A bull, goat, ram, or some other animal sanctified to be used as a sacrifice is killed, its blood drained out, and is offered to cover the sin. Yet we know from reading the New Testament that this ritual practice was not truly effective. Notice [Hebrews 10:4](#): "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins."

This is a crucial principle in terms of the difference between the Old Covenant and the New: It is impossible for the blood of animals to take away sin. The author of Hebrews, probably the apostle Paul, means that a sacrifice greater than a mere bull or goat is required to remove the sin of a human being. In the centuries under the Old Covenant, all that happened when an Israelite offered an animal to God for his sins was that the sins were "covered," hidden from sight. We could say that they were ceremonially smoothed over. Paul calls "those sacrifices . . . a reminder of sins every year" ([Hebrews 10:3](#)), which God "did not desire, nor had pleasure in them" ([Hebrews 10:8](#)).

One thing that did not happen was their complete removal; the sins were not paid for, not forgiven. The blood of bulls and goats does not have what it takes to purge sin, to

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cleanse the guilt. Conversely, under the New Covenant, sins are not only forgiven but also forgotten. As Paul goes on to write in [Hebrews 10:17](#), quoting [Jeremiah 31:34](#), a prophecy of the New Covenant, ". . . then He adds, 'Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.'"

There is a simple reason why an animal sacrifice is ineffective: The life of a bull or goat is not worth as much as the life of a man. A person cannot pay or trade for an item with something of lesser value. Even though a person might slaughter many bulls and goats to cover his sins, such a costly sacrifice still does not approach the price of a human life.

Imagine a person taking his beat-up 1984 Buick Skylark, with its ripped interior and faded paint—not to mention its 235,000 miles and its perpetual cloud of oil-smoke—to a Porsche dealer, and saying, "I would like to trade my Skylark for the latest and greatest Porsche." No dealer in his right mind would go for that! Not even twenty such clunkers would be sufficient to pay for a Porsche.

In [Genesis 2:17](#), God set the cost of sin: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." When someone sins, he comes under the death penalty; the punishment is his life! We cannot expect God to forgive sins for anything less. Although bulls and goats have life, and they have value, it is still well under the price of human redemption. It is a fact of life that a lesser thing cannot redeem a greater one.

In order to give life back to the sinner, the sacrifice must be worth at least as much or more than the sinner's life. A human, even if he gives his own life in payment for his sins in death, pays only for himself. There is no [hope](#) for anyone else or anything beyond his death. The person who would make such a payment makes a transaction: his life for his sins—and nothing remains.

So, a suitable, costly-enough sacrifice had to be offered so that the sins of mankind could not only be covered—as they were under the Old Covenant—but be completely paid for, forgiven, removed, and forgotten. The only worthy payment, of course, was the sinless life of the Creator God, who became flesh and dwelt among us—[Jesus Christ \(John 1:14\)](#). Only He has a value high enough to pay for everyone's sins and still have incalculable value to spare. So, because of who He is, our holy God, He could be raised again to life and become life for us ([Romans 5:6-11](#)).

That is the true price of atonement, which should be our focus on the Day of Atonement.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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by Martin G. Collins

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