

HE SUFFERED UNDER PONTIUS PILATE, WAS CRUCIFIED:
THE ATONEMENT

God does not need us. We are not important to him in most senses of the word. He does not care how good you are because you can never be good enough. He is not impressed by your work or your education or your income or your social status. He is not interested in your looks, whether or not you are pretty or ugly. How bright or dumb you are does not impress him. Your strength is nothing in his sight. Your accomplishments are trivial. He is not counting on you to accomplish anything, what would a Sovereign, All Mighty God need for to do for him? We don't have much standing before God and we have absolutely no rights. We do not have a right to expect his compassion, his interest or even a modicum of his attention.

Yet, God has chosen to love us. I think we need to learn to appreciate this mystery. Years ago, the hymn, At The Cross, had these words in the first verse:

Alas! and did my Savior bleed
And did my Sovereign die?
Would He devote that sacred head
For such a worm as I?

But someone later changed the words to say, "for sinners such as I." We don't like to be thought of as sinners, but a worm? Yet, Isaac Watts actually had the theology right when he used the word worm. Many have complained about worm theology but the fact to be a sinner before God is to be less than a worm. A worm has a purpose, a sinner does not. The sinner's only purpose is to go to hell.

But because of the love of God, our status has been changed from nothingness, from worms, to sons and daughters of God. I don't know if we can ever explain why God loves us. It is beyond our understanding. Scripture never really tells us. I have often wondered after Adam and Eve sinned why God did not scuttle the whole project. But he didn't and we are now the recipients of God's great love and mercy. And if we are to understand this, we need to not only understand our sorry state before him, we need to understand what the love of God has done for us. We need to know how far God would go to love us worms.

Sin drives an eternal wedge between God and us. We are separated from God by our sin. Furthermore, we stand guilty before God who is holy and just. And his holiness rejects us and his justice condemns us for we are all have been judged in his Court and found guilty and the penalty is death. Any sin, one sin, all sin, has put us in this position. You cannot cite one aspect of your

being that might have redeeming value. We are born sinners and once the sin born in us takes hold our deliberate conscious mind, we are slaves to sin, never able to escape its control. And never able to pay for the offense in God's court. The penalty of death hangs over us all.

It is a bleak situation. The only way we can get out of it is if God gets us out. God has done that. He has done it in such a way that it satisfies His holiness and justice. He has done it in such a way that we understand the seriousness of our sin. Jesus did this on the Cross.

God produced a kind of history that would help us all understand what is necessary for our salvation. It is expressed in the Old Testament practice of the Day of Atonement which is called by the Jews, Yom Kippur. It happened year after year for a thousand years to weave into our minds what Christ would do for us.

On the Day of Atonement, the High Priest made preparations for himself and the people of God. First he would offer up a sacrifice for his sins and the sins of his family. He would lay his hands on a young bull and confess his sins. Then the bull was sacrificed and he would carry some of the blood into the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was the inner chamber of the Temple and Tabernacle. It was considered the throne room of God. The Holy of Holies contained the Ark of the covenant, a box covered with gold. Two gold cherubim sat on the top of the box and in between was the Mercy Seat, the very throne of God.

The High priest would enter the Holy of Holies with a great deal of fear because he was entering the presence of God. He held an incense censer which would produce a cloud of smoke so that the Priest could not see the Ark. if a sinful man gazed on the holiness of God he would die. Then he would pour some of the blood upon the Mercy Seat to make atonement for his sins.

In the New Testament the Mercy Seat is translated as propitiation. This act meant two things. God's wrath was propitiated, it was turned away from us. And our sins were expiated, they were forgiven and removed from us.

Two identical goats were selected. One was chosen to be for the Lord and the other was chosen to be for Azazel which means "scapegoat." The one selected as the goat for the Lord, is killed and its blood is caught in a golden basin. The High Priest takes the blood and enters the Holy of Holies as the representative of the people. He takes the scapegoat, and lays his hands on the head of the goat and confesses the sins of Israel over the goat. Thus he transfers the sins to the goat and the goat is lead away into the wilderness to die.

The two goats are considered as one sacrifice. The Blood is required by God as the price for the forgiveness of sins. In fact, what as required was a life. In Leviticus 17:11 we read, "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement." The requirement of blood reflects the

seriousness of sin. In fact, the sacrificial animal was the substitute for the people who had sinned. And the scapegoat was the symbol that with the washing away

The Book of Hebrews points out one flaw in this means of atonement, it had to be repeated over and over again. It was not a permanent solution. The Day of Atonement was a pointer to the day when Jesus became our Atonement.

In the earlier part of this Book. The writer says that the earthly temple was but a copy of a heavenly one, a symbol and that the sacrifice in the temple cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience (9: 9). But, when Christ came, the real and final thing came as well. He became both our high priest and our sacrifice. He offered his life for ours.

A life for a life. When Jesus came to John at the river Jordan to be baptized, John looked up and said, “behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!” John knew that Jesus had come to be our sacrifice. Jesus is the God-Man, the unique One who is able to completely and with finality take away our sins. God in the flesh himself became our sacrifice, our substitute, our life for a life.

What Jesus did on the cross was one and for all. If you remember, when Jesus died the veil of the temple, which separated the holy of holies from the rest of the temple, was torn into. It was because the Temple was no longer necessary. The Sacrificial system was no longer necessary. A priesthood was no longer necessary. Jesus was our sacrifice. What he did was once and for all time. And it covered all the sins of all the people who would believe in Him. The writer of Hebrews says that Jesus became the mediator of a new covenant and all of those who have been called receive the promise of eternal life.

A worm such as I. We are sinners, yes. We stand guilty before God. But, Jesus became our Atonement for sin. He became our sacrifice. He died in our place. And as many as receive him, he gives them right to become children of God.