

Chapter 12

ATONEMENT WITH GOD



"Paschal Lamb" stained glass window courtesy of University Hts. Baptist Church Springfield, Mo.

INTRODUCTION

It is important to begin this chapter with the concept of “LONGING FOR GOD”; a need that has found a home inside the heart and soul of every human being from the beginning of time. As Christians, we believe the story for us began in the Garden of Eden when, through actions of disobedience, two human beings separated themselves from God; behavior that impacted mankind forever; meaning their sin brought death without hope unless our loving Father intervened.

Thus, whether you believe the story to be purely symbolic or true, man's longing for God and need for atonement were established once and for all. When one understands and accepts the importance for each individual to be “at one” with the Creator, the life-long search for happiness by all people becomes clear in the mind. Since, at birth, God breathed life into each one of us and will draw that same spirit back to him when our physical body dies; it is no wonder being “at one” with the Creator is at the very core of the human experience. When communion with the Father is severed through sin, resulting in separation from him, it is truly astounding the extent to which an individual will go in order to find appeasement.

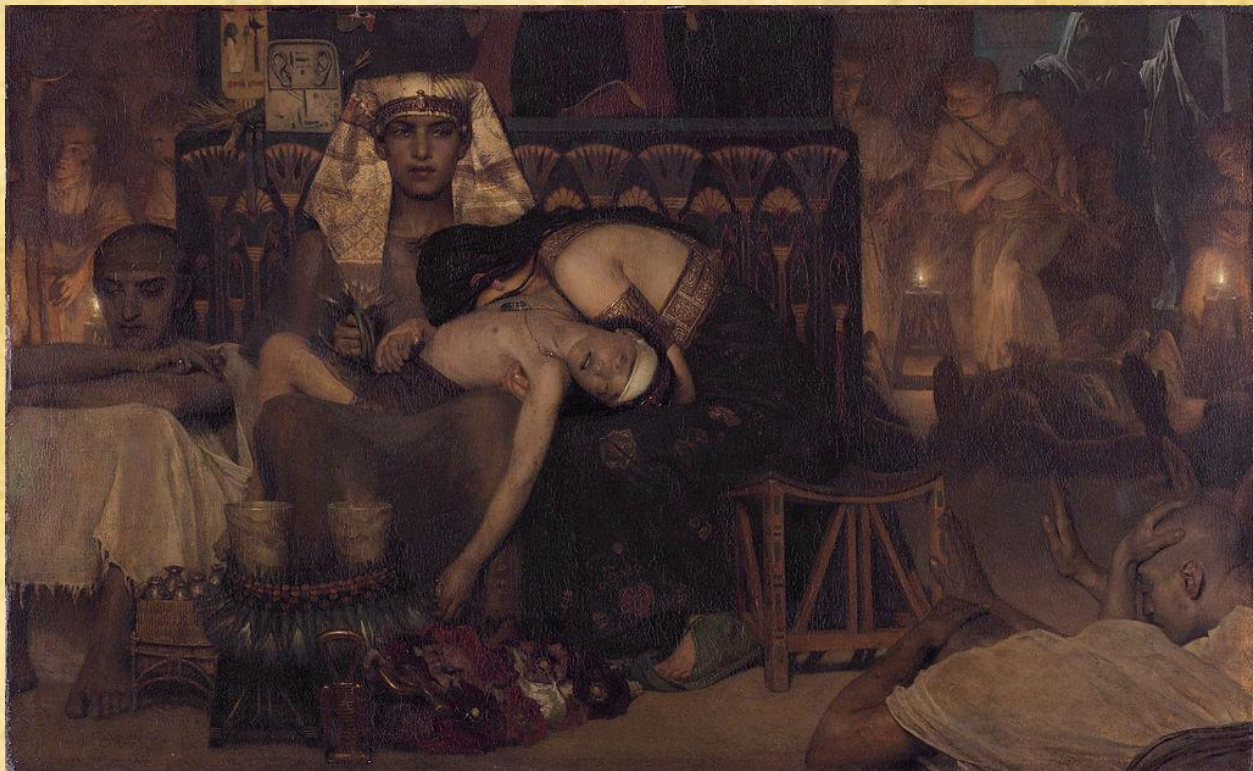
Although there are some that will deny the very existence of God calling it primitive and silly, others will try and satisfy the great chasm in their lives by filling the emptiness with material things, fads, or significant causes to join as a way of replacing the eternal solution. Added to this wild and crazy search is the monster called PRIDE that often will result in the inability of some to make a stand on believing in Jesus because of fear of what others will think, or refusal to admit to a mistake.

Ladies and gentlemen, as a volunteer in the nursing home, I have witnessed personally God's saints taking their final breath of earthly air with joy and jubilation as well as unbelievers crying out in fear from never having accepted Jesus as Savior; thus dying in a state of total separation from their Creator. Sadly, I will always recall one unbeliever having a sign posted on her door, “Mrs. _____ is never to be alone.” Having refused all invitations to Christ and then in an advanced state of mental deterioration, time for connecting to the Father had expired and FEAR dominated.

Therefore, I urge one and all to read this chapter with an open heart and willingness to receive the urging of the Holy Spirit. Also, if you are around those that have not made their way to the Father, please consider reading this chapter together in a loving manner. Sweetly, as two children of God, let his all encompassing love wrap you in his mighty arms as he beckons you toward a closer walk with him. To intimately know our Lord is to hunger and thirst after righteousness.

BLOOD AND ATONEMENT

In order to understand why Jesus had to die on the cross to atone for our sin, we need to refer back to Exodus Chapter 12 when God was getting Pharaoh to the point that he would release the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. It is in this chapter that the death angel was to take the first born in each family unless a lamb without blemish was slaughtered and its blood was put on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where the lamb was eaten. (For detailed instructions regarding the celebration of Passover, refer to Exodus 12: 1-30; when God's chosen peoples' first born sons lives were spared as the death angel passed over the Israelites homes.)



The Death of the Pharaoh's Firstborn (1872 painting by Lawrence Alma-Tadema)

Also included in the Old Testament Scriptures is the description that sin is a very serious business with a Holy God; a time when mans actions are considered to be totally against the Creator. **Psalm 51: 4** succinctly states **"Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge."** (New International Version) One fact that can be gleaned from the Old Testament teachings regarding sin was the break it caused in communication with the Creator; meaning it was considered a life and death situation. Thus, throughout the book of Leviticus, it is made perfectly clear under the first covenant the only way forgiveness (cleansing) for sin could occur was through the blood of an

animal without blemish; especially a lamb sacrificed on the altar. The reason presented for the sanctity of the blood was because the **life** of a creature is found in the **blood**. **Leviticus 17: 10-12** (NIV, New International Version) **"Any Israelite or any alien living among them who eats any blood---I will set my face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from his people. For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar: it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. Therefore I say to the Israelites, "None of you may eat blood, nor may an alien living among you eat blood."** (To read about the ritual of sacrifice in detail, you may desire to turn to Leviticus 4: 27-35.)

Consequently, as we note the continuous silver thread God weaves throughout the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments regarding the instances when he had to step in and save human beings, it should become apparent, once again, that man is not capable of dealing with life experiences by himself. Only our all knowing Father is able to save mere mortals; no matter the number of people classified as "EXPERTS" in this world offering solutions. Scripture also states that God can make foolish the wise; those that think they are above Bible teachings, relying only on self or accepting the thoughts of mankind.

Therefore, when God made a covenant with the Israelites that they were to become his chosen people, he intended them to be a witness to others. In other words, they were blessed to be a blessing to others; a concept they did not understand. Instead, their feelings translated into that of exclusivity rather than inclusivity. (Be careful about pointing judgmental fingers in their direction regarding this attitude. That same danger exists today in churches, as well.) As a result, no matter how many times they sacrificed animals on the altar seeking God's forgiveness, or how often God saved them from total destruction as a people, the Old Testament is replete with circumstances describing them repeatedly falling away from God due to sinful actions and disobedience.



High Priest Offering Incense on the Altar (illustration from the 1894 Treasures of the Bible)

A NEW COVENANT

Given the fact that the Old Covenant (First Covenant) was broken by God's chosen people, the Scripture from Jeremiah below describing the chance for a new beginning clearly shows all mankind the Father's true nature; that of the all consuming love he has for his creation.

Jeremiah 31: 31-34 (ESV)

"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

In order to clearly understand God's purpose for the New Covenant, it is important to recall the role the shedding of blood plays in making atonement with him by focusing on the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews 9:22 (New International Version (NIV))

"In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."

Folks, without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin which had to be done in order for man to be drawn back to the Creator. Therefore, possessing unimaginable love for his children, the Father found a way to run right along beside them with an offer of forgiveness and grace that would make man acceptable in his sight once again. **SINCE IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE FOR GOD TO DIE HIMSELF, THE SHEDDING OF BLOOD WOULD BE ACCOMPLISHED THROUGH THE SACRIFICE OF HIS ONE AND ONLY SON; JESUS.** John 3: 16 reads, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Therefore, through the actions of mercy and grace, Jesus was born into this world for the sole purpose of dying on the cross at Calvary as a blood sacrifice without blemish that would offer atonement for all God's creation. (The holiday Christians celebrate called Christmas is far more significant than focusing simply on Baby Jesus being born in a manger, isn't it?) Do you now understand why the word "unfathomable" is often used when describing God's love for his children; meaning you? Even the name God assigned to his One and Only Son before taking on human form and being received by his loving earthly parents, Mary and Joseph, held extraordinary significance. Following the customs practiced during Biblical times, even his name described his mission because of its definition. (Jesus means "Savior," and is the same name as Joshua in the Old Testament.) Friends, our Jewish Messiah was born already crucified before uttering his first cry!

THE LAMB OF GOD

As Isaiah speaks about Israel straying from God, he refers to them as wandering sheep and prophesies that they will be led back into the fold by the Messiah yet to come. Going further, he then depicts their Savior as being in the position of a sacrificial lamb; meaning he will be pierced for their sins. Isaiah 53: 6-7 distinctly points to Jesus as being the perfect blood offering from God; thus, establishing the name for him as, “THE LAMB OF GOD,” with these words:

“We all like sheep, have gone astray, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.” (NIV)

Since Bible Scripture refers repeatedly to the importance of the Isaiah Scroll and the numerous times it was read in the synagogues, it is certainly predictable for John the Baptist to lean on the Scripture quoted above when he saw Jesus walking by. As a



forerunner with the mission of paving the way for the Lord, and in the process of baptizing people with water, every aspect of his words were providential when he exclaimed, *“Look the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me. I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel.’”*

Jesus (on the left) is being identified by John the Baptist as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”, in John 1:29.^[1] 17th century depiction by Vannini.

Then, in the book of John 1: 32-34, John the Baptist discloses the reason why he was able to verify Jesus by stating, *“I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. I have seen and I testify this is the Son of God.’” (NIV)*



"Trevisani baptism christ" by Francesco Trevisani - <http://www.1st-art-gallery.com/Francesco-Trevisani/The-Baptism-Of-Christ,-1723.html>.
Licensed under Public Domain via Commons

Also, looking closely at the words John spoke when he saw Jesus shows the providence of God going even deeper. Although John would have probably been so familiar with the Book of Isaiah that he had committed it to memory, thus, being aware of the prophesy about the awaited Messiah, there still would have been no reason for him to identify Jesus as "THE LAMB OF GOD," unless arranged by God, himself. This, folks, is a moment of enlightenment!

Then, moving along in Scripture to the writing of Paul in **1 Corinthians 5: 7**, when he includes in his words to the church, *"For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed,"* even more credence is added to the concept.



Last, it is important to note in the book of Revelation that Jesus is referred to as "THE LAMB," twenty-nine times; the first being chapter 5: 6, *"Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders."* (NIV)

Lamb bleeding into the Holy Chalice, carrying the vexillum. (Wikipedia)

Also, Scripture reads that Jesus was both human and divine because of being the Son of God and the Son of Man. In fact, Jesus referred to himself as being the Son of Man over eighty times in the New Testament; a preferred title he desired for himself that truly demonstrated humility and commitment to his

mission. As “THE LAMB OF GOD,” Jesus had been sent by the Father to reclaim a world whose inhabitants had broken their communication with the Creator through sin and disobedience. Thus, realizing he had only three years to announce himself as Messiah and deliver the good news of the kingdom, the resolve he demonstrated in choosing and preparing his disciples was understandable. He not only taught them continuously, but also demonstrated the Fruit of the Spirit through his behavior and showed them above all how important it was to stay in communion with the Father. Yet, all the while, Jesus described as the man of sorrows, knew his destiny was crucifixion on the cross; a death that was outlawed later due to it being such an inhumane method of punishment. Would you be able to function in life possessing in advance information on the horrible death you would encounter? Most of us would probably become mentally insane out of fear and angst.

TIME FOR CONTEMPLATION

It is certainly easy to understand the desperate need of mankind to be saved by the Creator. However, the concept of a human sacrifice in the form of Jesus our Savior presents a challenge for many people due to the shedding of blood through death on a cross. If we are truly honest, there probably have been times when we ask the questions to ourselves, “Why did God not choose another way to forgive us? Why did his Son, Jesus, have to die?”

In answer to those questions, this writer will bluntly state that it is impossible for the human mind to understand the things of God; this being one of them. Thus, at this point, the words I pray are, “Dear Lord, please help me to understand the things you desire me to know and accept the fact that as a mere mortal, I do not possess the ability to ever think like you. Without your love and understanding, I am lost.” **Isaiah 55: 8** states: *“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the LORD.* (NIV)

Then, when the writer reaches the point of complete frustration and totally at a loss as to wrapping her arms around a situation, she simply quotes from **Psalms 46: 10**, *“Be still and know that I am God.”* (NIV)

No matter our lack of understanding, let us celebrate with great joy the Second Covenant of our Lord and the gift of eternal life it offers through the shedding of the blood of Christ to all who repent and believe he is the Messiah, Savior of the World. Then, when focusing your eyes on the blood stained empty cross, let us further be reminded that our Lord was resurrected and sits at the right hand of the Father arbitrating for each one of us. Having lived on this earth in the form of the Son of Man, he understands all our sorrows and temptations.

Sources:

“Christian Believer; Knowing God With Heart and Mind” by J. Ellsworth Kalas

“New International Application Study Bible (NIV)





GROWING IN THE WORD



- 1) Are the images you have in your mind regarding atonement that moved from the sacrifice of animals on the altar as described in the Old Testament to that of the blood of Jesus being shed for our sins troublesome? Share your feelings.
- 2) Is it difficult to explain to an individual hearing it for the first time? Share your ideas on how this might be accomplished. What if you are presenting it to a high school or college age student? Might your approach differ?
- 3) Brain storm as a group, ways to explain atonement to others.
- 4) Remember the faith walk differs with every individual. Some people seem to accept Christ as Savior and have a gradual growth as a believer, while others appear to have no trouble with the concept and accept immediately. Talk about each type of acceptance together.
- 5) How do the two journeys above impact the role of going along beside the individual as a disciple?
- 6) In closing the time together, read or sing the old familiar hymn below called, “NOTHING BUT THE BLOOD OF JESUS” allowing the words to demonstrate the necessity of atonement for every child of God.

NOTHING BUT THE BLOOD OF JESUS

1 What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Refrain:

O precious is the flow
that makes me white as snow;
no other fount I know;
nothing but the blood of Jesus.

2 For my pardon this I see:
nothing but the blood of Jesus.
For my cleansing this my plea:
nothing but the blood of Jesus. [Refrain]

**3 Nothing can for sin atone:
nothing but the blood of Jesus.
Naught of good that I have done:
nothing but the blood of Jesus. [Refrain]**

**4 This is all my hope and peace:
nothing but the blood of Jesus.
This is all my righteousness:
nothing but the blood of Jesus. [Refrain]**

United Methodist Hymnal, 1989

Robert Lowry (1876)

Amen!



Painting of "Jesus, Man of Sorrow," from the United Methodist Church, Mountain Grove, Missouri