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Sacrificial Atonement by Jesus and God’s Wrath in the Light of the Old Testament

John W. Kleinig

People in the ancient world believed that they could atone for their sins by offering sacrifices to their gods and the spirits that haunted their world. In a stark reversal of that conviction, the Bible teaches that God himself atones for the sins of the world by the sacrifice that he provides for them. In fact, God so loved the world, it claims, that he offered his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16). So, “whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36).¹

In the third article of the Augsburg Confession, we confess that Jesus was truly born, suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried in order to be a sacrifice (offering) not only for original sin but also for other sins and to propitiate God’s wrath. Then in the following fourth article, we confess that those who believe in Christ are justified for the sake of him who by his death made satisfaction for their sins.² So through faith in him, they receive God’s favor, his pardon for their sins, righteousness, and eternal life. Thus our justification is the result of his self-sacrifice. His blood justifies us.

This confessional Lutheran teaching has recently been challenged on many fronts by those who cannot stomach this whole “bloody” business. In our own circles, the most forceful attack on this teaching has come from those who are uneasy about the propitiation of God’s wrath by Christ’s sacrificial death.³ They separate justification from its foundation in Christ’s atoning death and his fulfilment of God’s law by what he suffered on our behalf.⁴ While we may lament these challenges,

¹ All Scripture quotations are the author’s translation.

² For further references to Christ’s atoning sacrifice as an act of satisfaction for guilt and punishment, see AC XXIV 21, 25–27; Ap IV 178; XXIV 19, 23, 55; SA III III 38; LC II 31; FC SD III 56–57. The clearest explanation of what is meant is given in Ap XXIV 19. There an atoning sacrifice is defined as “a work of satisfaction for guilt and punishment that reconciles God, conciliates the wrath of God, or merits the forgiveness of sins for others.”

³ Jack D. Kilcrease discusses this in his article “Atonement and Justification in Gerhard Forde,” *CTQ* 76 (2012): 269–293. For a comprehensive study of how the atonement has been understood from the Reformation to the present time, see Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

⁴ The radical critics of the classical teaching on atonement as propitiation share an aversion to the relevance of God’s law for believers, because Christ is the end of the law for them.

they do give us occasion to reassess our teaching biblically and present it appropriately in our secular context where nothing is held to be holy any longer and in the church where the teaching of it has, at best, been largely one-dimensional.

I want to show how the teaching of atonement in the New Testament is best understood in the light of the much more explicit treatment of it in the Old Testament. I intend to examine four topics all too briefly: the role of atonement in its actual context, God's provision of atonement for his people, the association of atonement with God's wrath, and the delivery and reception of it and its benefits. In all this, I assume that teaching of atonement does not really explain the significance of some sacrifices but what is accomplished by them.

But before I do that, I want to define what I mean by atonement.⁵ It is an act performed by the high priest in the old covenant and Jesus in the new covenant that has three complementary purposes: (1) it gains God's gracious acceptance of unclean sinners (propitiation)⁶; (2) it obtains pardon for sin and cleansing from its impurity (expiation); and (3) it grants beneficial access to his presence (reconciliation). Through Jesus as victim and priest, we have a gracious God, a clean conscience, and fellowship with him as our heavenly Father.

What Is the Role of Atonement in Its Actual Context?

The Role of Atonement in the Old Covenant

To grasp what is accomplished by atonement in the Old Testament, we need to realize that it was a rite, a divinely instituted ritual enactment, that fulfilled a very practical purpose. The rite of atonement was meant to provide the Israelites with safe access to God's presence at the tabernacle and the temple.

⁵ In the legislation for sacrifice in the Pentateuch, the high priest is authorized by God to make atonement "on behalf of" (Hebrew לְעַלְמָא) other people (Lev 1:4; 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:6, 10, 13, 16, 18, 26 [6:7]; 8:34; 10:17; 12:7, 8; 14:18, 19, 20, 21, 29, 31; 15:15, 30; 16:16, 30, 33; 19:22; 23:28; Num 8:12, 19, 21; 15:25, 28; 28:22, 30; 29:5) "by means of" (Hebrew בְּ) the victim (Exod 29:36, 37; Lev 5:16; 7:7; 19:22) and its blood (Lev 17:11) "upon" (Hebrew עַל) the altar for burnt offering (Lev 8:15; 17:11) and the incense altar (Exod 30: 9–10; Lev 16:18) "before" (Hebrew לְפָנַי) the Lord (Lev 5:26 [6:7]; 14:18; 19:22) "on account of" (Hebrew עַל) their sin as well as "from" (Hebrew מִן) their sin (Lev 4:26; 5:6, 10; 16:34) and its impurity (Lev 14:19; 15:15, 30; 16:16).

⁶ Even though the Augsburg Confession and the Apology refer repeatedly to atonement as an act of propitiation, atonement, apart from the German text of AC III 3 and the Latin text in Ap XXIV 19, is not usually understood as the appeasement of God's wrath but as the provision of his favor. In the Latin text, Christ reconciles the Father to us (AC XX 9), so that we are received into his grace (see the Latin text of AC IV 2; V 3; IX 2; XX 9; XXVI 5; XXVII 37); in the German text, he reconciles the Father to us (AC II 3; XX 9), so that we obtain his grace (AC XXVI 5; XXVII 37) and are pleasing to him (AC IX 2) and thus have a gracious God (AC V 3; XX 15).

The performance of atonement presupposed two practical, spiritual realities. First, all Israelites were more or less unclean before God from their sins and their sinful environment. Second, their impurity was incompatible with God's holiness, like darkness with light and gasoline with fire.

The provision of atonement was God's solution to an immensely vexing, practical problem. The basic problem was this: how could unclean Israelites approach their holy God, safely and beneficially, without desecrating his holiness by their impurity and thereby incurring his wrath? Or, how could a holy God make his dwelling with his people in the midst of their impurities, in order to meet with them there (Lev 16:16; cf. Exod 29:46; Lev 26:11)?

God instituted the rite of atonement as his solution to this dilemma. He instituted it as an essential part of the divine service at the tabernacle to cleanse them from their impurity and demonstrate his approval and acceptance of them. It was his gift to them. Through its enactment, he provided safe and beneficial access to himself and his blessings, like the rite of absolution in the divine service. After the rite of purification, both the priests and the people could draw near to God in the daily service and be sure of a favorable reception from him; they could bring their offerings to him and eat the holy bread and meat from his table as his guests.

The rite of atonement was the first enactment of every morning and evening service because it was the basis for all that followed in them. It was also augmented and expanded pastorally by God's institution of personal and corporate sin offerings for purification from sin,⁷ as well as his institution of personal guilt offerings in compensation for acts of desecration.⁸ These occasional offerings atoned for transgressions against the Lord's commandments.⁹ Like our rite of private confession and absolution, they provided pardon for the Israelites who were burdened by specific sins.

The Role of Atonement in the New Covenant

While the issue of atonement is largely the same in the New Testament, its context is changed. Jesus makes atonement by his self-sacrifice for the sins of the whole world rather than just the Israelites. In this, he is not just the priest but, surprisingly, also the victim. As both high priest and victim, he makes atonement by

⁷ See Exod 29:10–14; Lev 4:1–5:12; 6:24–29; 8:14–17; 9:7–12, 15; 12:6–7; 14:19, 30–31; 15:13–15, 28–30; 16:11–19; Num 6:10–11; 8:12; 15:22–29; 28:15, 22, 30; 29:5, 11, 16, 19, 22, 25, 28, 31, 34, 38. For an analysis of the sin offerings and their fulfilment by Jesus, see John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 109–124.

⁸ See Lev 5:14–6:7; 7:1–10; 14:12–18; Num 6:12. For an analysis of the guilt offerings and their fulfilment by Jesus, see Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 128–138.

⁹ See Lev 4:1–2, 13, 22, 27; 5:17; Num 15:22–23.

his self-sacrificial death. By his suffering and death, he brings unrighteous people into God's presence (1 Pet 3:18).

Because Jesus is God's Son, atonement is a trinitarian enactment. He was chosen by his holy Father as a sacrificial offering before the creation of the world and revealed in the last times for the sake of humanity (1 Pet 1:19–20). Since God loved all people, he sent his Son to be the atonement for their sins (1 John 4:10; cf. Rom 5:8); he offered up his Son once and for all to bear the sins of the world (Heb 9:28). Through the eternal Spirit, the Son in turn offered himself without blemish to God the Father (Heb 9:14).¹⁰ Since he loved the church, he gave himself up on her behalf as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God the Father (Eph 5:2, 25). So because it is a trinitarian enactment, it is eschatological in its nature and scope. It occurs in human history for the benefit of humanity, reaches God's presence in heaven, and anticipates the last judgment. Its practical purpose is the favorable reception of sinners by God now in the divine service and on the last day.

Thus, since it has to do with the last judgment, the focus of atonement in the New Testament shifts from God's holiness to God's righteousness. The basic issue now is this: how can an ungodly sinner gain the approval and acceptance of God the holy judge now and in the last judgment? Or, how can God the holy judge justify sinners and admit them safely and beneficially into his presence, without justifying their sin and compromising his righteousness? Or, how can sinners already now participate in the eternal life of God here on earth?

Three other things have therefore also been changed by the death of Jesus. First, the act of atonement is now no longer performed repeatedly as a regular rite each morning and evening at the temple in Jerusalem, because Jesus has made atonement for all human sin, once and for all, in human history by offering himself as the perfect, sinless sacrifice (Heb 7:27; 9:28; 10:10, 14; 1 Pet 3:18). Second, through Jesus as high priest all people, Jews and Gentiles, now have safe access to God the Father (Eph 2:13; Col 1:19–22). Through him and his blood, they may now "draw near" to God the Father with boldness and confidence to receive grace and mercy from him (Heb 4:16).¹¹ Since they have been justified by his blood, they have access to the grace in which they now stand (Rom 5:1–2, 9). Third, through Jesus and together with him they may draw near to God's presence in his heavenly sanctuary, participate in heavenly worship together with the angels, and serve as his holy priests here on earth (Heb 10:19–21; 12:22–24, 28–29).

¹⁰ See John W. Kleinig, *Hebrews* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 430.

¹¹ See also Heb 7:25; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22; 1 Pet 2:4.

How Does God Provide Atonement for His People?

God's Institution of the Rite of Atonement in the Old Covenant

The foundational passage for atonement in the Pentateuch is Leviticus 17:11 where God makes this decree: “the life (soul) of the flesh is in the blood, and I myself have given it to you on the altar to make atonement on behalf of your lives (souls), because it is the blood that makes atonement by means of the life (soul).”¹² Here two things need to be noted. God gives the blood that by right belongs to him to his people; he gives it on the altar to give them atonement by it, for it is not the death of the animal but the blood from the slaughtered animal that makes atonement. Here as elsewhere in a liturgical context, the Hebrew verb *kipper* (“make atonement”) is used as a technical term for the performance of the rite of atonement¹³ by the high priest.¹⁴ It refers to an act in which the blood from the victim is poured out by being splashed against the sides of the altar for burnt offering. By its association with the word for “ransom,” the rite of atonement is also understood as the payment that God makes to ransom his people.

The divine decree that institutes the rite of atonement also makes that rite a divine enactment. It is the word that empowers it, like Christ's command in Baptism. The focus in God's institution of atonement is on the blood of the sacrificed animal and its use in the divine service. God gives that blood and atonement through it as his gifts to his people. The blood must be splashed against the altar for burnt offering for God to provide atonement for them through his appointed high priest.¹⁵ Three things need to be noted. First, God institutes the use of blood as the means by which he grants atonement. Second, God institutes this rite as a vicarious act by which the life of an animal is exchanged for the life of the Israelites, so that its death provides life from him through it.¹⁶ Third, the Israelites are ransomed from death by its blood.

Since God instituted the rite of atonement as part of the service of burnt offering each morning and evening, its place in the order of service there shows us its nature

¹² For an analysis of the role of blood in atonement, see Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 358–372, and *Hebrews*, 433–437.

¹³ See Baruch Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), 64–65, and John W. Kleinig, “The Blood for Sprinkling,” *Lutheran Theological Journal* 33, no. 3 (1999): 129–130.

¹⁴ See Exod 29:33, 36, 37; 30:10; Lev 1:4; 6:30 [6:23]; 7:7; 8:15, 34; 9:7; 10:17; 14:18, 19, 20, 38; 15:30; 16:6, 11, 16, 23, 27, 30, 32, 33; 23:28; Num 5:8; 8:12, 19, 21; 15:25, 28; 28:22, 30; 29:5.

¹⁵ The altar for burnt offering is not the place for the slaughter of the victim but the place for the offering of its blood and meat to God.

¹⁶ See Bernd Janowski, *Sühne als Heilsgeschehen: Studien zur Sühnetheologie der Priesterschrift und zur Wurzel KPR im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982), 199–221, 242–247.

and purpose.¹⁷ Each service at the sanctuary was enacted in three stages that revolved around three main rites that were performed by the high priest on behalf of the congregation. The first of these was the rite of atonement. In it, the high priest splashed the blood from a slaughtered lamb against the four sides of the altar for burnt offering as an act by which both the priests and the people were cleansed from impurity.¹⁸ It came first because it provided the basis for the rest of the service. The second was the rite in which the priest burned the most holy incense on the golden altar of the Holy Place as an act of intercession for God's favorable reception of his people.¹⁹ The third was the rite of burnt offering in which the high priest burned up the meat from the lamb and some of the flour from the grain offering on the altar for burnt offering and offered it to God in a column of smoke.²⁰ Like the glory cloud, God thereby met with his people to give them safe and beneficial access to his presence (Exod 29:42–44). All this culminated in the performance of the Aaronic benediction by the high priest.²¹ Through it, God gave his blessing and protection, his acceptance and his grace, his approval and his peace to the congregation.

The rite of atonement came first in the divine service because it ensured that the priests and the people had safe access to God in it; it ensured his acceptance of them and their offerings; it ensured that they did not defile the sanctuary and desecrate the holy things of God (Lev 1:3–5). When it was combined with the rite of atonement for a sin offering or a guilt offering, the blood by which atonement was made brought three additional benefits from God: the remission of specific transgressions,²² the cleansing of the impurity from them,²³ and, in the case of priests at their ordination, their consecration by him.²⁴

God's Provision of Atonement in the New Covenant

There are at least three foundational passages in which Jesus establishes the doctrine and practice of atonement in the New Testament. The first of these is his

¹⁷ See the description and analysis of the divine service by Robert D. Macina, *The LORD's Service: A Ritual Analysis of the Order, Function, and Purpose of the Daily Divine Service in the Pentateuch* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019).

¹⁸ For an examination of the nature and purpose of the blood rite, see Macina, *The LORD's Service*, 102–121.

¹⁹ For an examination of the nature and purpose of the incense rite, see Macina, *The LORD's Service*, 121–142.

²⁰ For an examination of the nature and purpose of the burning rite, see Macina, *The LORD's Service*, 142–158.

²¹ For an examination of the nature and purpose of the blessing rite, see Macina, *The LORD's Service*, 158–168.

²² See Lev 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:7; 19:22; Num 15:25, 26. For the sense of the formula for remission, see Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 104–105.

²³ See Lev 12:7, 8; 14:19, 20, 31, 53; 16:30; Num 8:19.

²⁴ See Exod 29:33, 37; Lev 8:15, 20.

declaration that he, the Son of Man, had come “to give his life, his soul, as a ransom in exchange for many” (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45). Here “many” is to be understood in the light of Isaiah 53:11 as the whole of humanity. His eschatological mission as the representative of humanity was to sacrifice his life for the human race.

Second, in his institution of Holy Communion in Matthew 26:28, Jesus declared that his blood was about to be poured out on behalf of many for the remission of sins, like the blood from the sin offerings that was “poured out” on the altar for burnt offering (Lev 4:4, 18, 25, 30, 34 LXX).

The third and much less noted passage is the parable of the tax collector and the Pharisee in Luke 18:9–14, which, significantly, is set in the temple. There the tax collector prays: “God grant atonement to me, sinner that I am!” (Luke 18:13). The Greek passive imperative here is difficult to translate into good English. Its literal sense is “God make atonement for me; God be propitiated for me and propitious to me.”²⁵ Jesus draws a surprising conclusion to this parable. He does not say, as one would expect from the Old Testament, that the tax collector was forgiven, but declares that he went home justified. Jesus therefore associates God’s provision of atonement with the justification of sinners. That was something new. It fulfills the prophecy in Isaiah 53:11 that God’s servant would justify many by bearing their iniquities.

God’s provision of atonement for sinners is explored in a number of ways in the epistles. In 1 John 4:10, we are told that out of love for us God sent his Son to be the atonement for our sins.²⁶ That was the purpose of the incarnation. He himself is our propitiator and expiator.²⁷

In Romans 8:1–4,²⁸ Paul teaches that God the Father sent his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.²⁹ Jesus satisfied all God’s righteous demands by presenting himself as a sin offering. By his atoning death, God condemned sin in the flesh and freed sinners from condemnation to death as transgressors. As a result of this sin offering, God also now gives his life-giving Holy Spirit to them, so that his just demands, the righteous requirements of his law (cf. Rom 2:26), might be fulfilled

²⁵ The Greek *ἱλάσθητι* is also used as a plea to God in LXX Ps 78[79]:9 and Dan Theod 9:19.

²⁶ The term for atonement here and in 1 John 2:2 is *ἱλασμός*. It is used in the LXX for a sin offering in Num 5:8; Ezek 44:27; 2 Macc 3:33, the Day of Atonement in Lev 25:9, and forgiveness in Ps 129[130].

²⁷ See Bruce G. Schuchard, *1–3 John* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2012), 147, 441 n. 56, and 449–450.

²⁸ For a good analysis of this passage, see Michael P. Middendorf, *Romans 1–8* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 609–615.

²⁹ The Hebrew term for sin and its guilt is also the technical term for a sin offering. While the LXX usually translates this by *περὶ τῆς ἁμαρτίας*, “the one for the sin,” or “the one of the sin offering,” it also, in some instances, translates it by *ἁμαρτία* (Lev 4:20, 24, 29; 5:12; 6:18). This seems to be the sense here and perhaps also in 2 Corinthians 5:21. See Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 122.

in those who walk by the Spirit rather than the flesh.³⁰ The passive here indicates that this is what God does in us and together with us. The fulfilment of God's law comes from Christ's death for those who are in Christ Jesus. Thus his death for sinners does not give them a license to sin but results in the fulfilment of God's law. The same Jesus who fulfilled God's law for them also now fulfils God's law in them through the Holy Spirit, who transforms their minds and enables them to put to death the misdeeds of the body. They therefore cooperate with the Holy Spirit in fulfilling God's righteous demands.³¹

The benefits of his atonement for sin are enumerated in the passages that tell us what his blood accomplishes for us who are its beneficiaries. By the atoning blood of Jesus (Rom 3:25), God cleanses us in our conscience from all sin (1 John 1:7; Heb 9:14) and justifies us (Rom 5:9); by his blood God remits our sins (Matt 26:28; 1 Cor 11:25; Heb 9:22; 12:24) and redeems us (Eph 1:7; Heb 9:12; 1 Pet 1:18–19; Rev 5:7–9); the blood of Jesus brings us near to God the Father (Eph 2:13) and gives us unrestricted access to the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 10:19–22); by his blood God makes peace with us (Col 1:20), sanctifies us as his holy priests (Heb 10:29; 13:12), and equips us for God-pleasing service together with Jesus (Heb 13:20–21).

The goal of all this is explained in Hebrews. In 9:11–17, we are told that the blood of Jesus, the anointed high priest who offered himself without blemish to God through the eternal Spirit, purifies our conscience from dead works, so that we already now in this life can serve the living God; we have been purified by his blood for participation in the heavenly liturgy. There, we offer well-pleasing service together with Jesus and the angels (Heb 1:14; 8:2, 5; 12:20–29).

Our cleansing for divine service is the foundation for the amazing appeal in Hebrews 10:19–22: “Therefore brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, (the way) of his flesh, and since we have a great high priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled from a bad conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.” Since Jesus is our high priest in God's heavenly temple, and since we have been sprinkled with his most holy blood, we have access to God the Father in heaven itself. We all may go where no high priest ever went even on the Day of Atonement. We may draw near to God's presence in heaven with a good conscience in the full assurance of faith. The blood by which he atoned for our sins qualifies us for

³⁰ This includes his righteous decree of death for sinners in Romans 1:32.

³¹ See the discussion on cooperation in FC SD II 63–66, 88, 90.

heavenly service. We not only have unrestricted access to God in heaven, but we also have the assurance of a favorable reception from him.³²

What Is the Connection between Atonement and God's Wrath?

Atonement and God's Wrath in the Old Covenant

Since human impurity is incompatible with God's holiness, proximity with God's holy presence is, as the prophet Isaiah realized in his great vision of God's theophany at the temple in Jerusalem, fraught with great danger, like entry into a nuclear reactor. God's holy presence is both life-giving and death-dealing; it annihilates anything that is unholy and unclean.

There are, in fact, two correlated dangers that threaten those who come into unprotected contact with God. The first and most obvious danger is the defilement of God's dwelling place by human impurity from sins against the second table of the Decalogue (Lev 15:31). This has severe, inescapable consequences, like the burnt skin of a finger that touches the hot plate of a stove. So the first basic rule for God's people is that no unclean person was allowed to handle any holy thing or eat any holy food.

The second danger is the desecration of the most holy things, the things that sanctify the sanctuary, the priests, and the people. They are not just desecrated by contact with unclean people but also profaned by their unauthorized use; they are desecrated when unauthorized people handle them or even when authorized people handle them in an unauthorized way or for an unauthorized purpose. So the second basic rule is that no unauthorized person was allowed to approach the sanctuary (Num 3:10, 38; 4:19–20; 16:40; 18:4, 7).

The defilement and desecration of the most holy things resulted in God's wrath (Lev 10:16; Num 1:53; 16:22; 18:5; 25:11). By his wrath, God not only showed that he could not tolerate the desecration of his holiness, but he also dealt with it in keeping with his holiness and righteousness. He manifested his wrath and dealt with its cause by afflicting a plague on the congregation (Num 8:19; 16:46–50; 25:8–9, 18; 26:1; 31:16; cf. Exod 32:35) and putting the perpetrators to death (Lev 10:2; 15:31; 16:1; Num 3:4, 10, 38; 4:19–20; 18:3, 7, 32). Thus the usual penalty for defilement and desecration was death. We see how this happens in three exemplary cases: the desecration of the tabernacle by Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10:1–11, the rebellion of Korah in Numbers 16–17, and the atrocity at Baal Peor in Numbers 25. The ultimate penalty for the most severe cases, as at the end of the monarchy, was their exclusion from his presence in the land where he resided with them (Lev 18:24–28).

³² For further consideration of this passage, see Kleinig, *Hebrews*, 501–509.

The consequent dilemma for God's people is voiced by the congregation in the case of Korah's rebellion. They unleash this complaint against Moses in Numbers 17:12–13: "Behold, we perish, we are undone, we are all undone. Everyone who comes near, who comes near to the tabernacle of the Lord shall die. Are we all to perish?" In response to their justifiable complaint, God decrees that the priests and Levites would be liable for the transgressions of the people. They would protect the people from violating God's holiness and bear their iniquity in cases of desecration (Num 18:1, 23, 32), just as the scapegoat bore the iniquity of all Israel on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:22). The penalty for desecration would fall on them rather than the people. By their faithful service of God, the priests would avert God's wrath from the congregation (cf. Num 25:10–13).

Atonement and God's Wrath in the New Covenant

Even though little is taught about this in the New Testament, what is taught by St. Paul in Romans is significant. There Paul claims that just as God's righteousness has been revealed through the gospel (1:17), so his wrath is also revealed from heaven against all human ungodliness and unrighteousness (1:18). By ungodliness, Paul most likely refers to sins against the first three commandments, sins that desecrate God's holiness; by unrighteousness, he refers to the last seven commandments, sins that violate the order of creation and defile their transgressors.³³ His wrath, however, is not revealed directly but through the consequences of these transgressions. The revelation of the wrath that he inflicts in the present age foreshadows the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be openly revealed to the whole world (2:5; cf. Matt 3:7; Eph 5:6; Col 3:6; 1 Thess 1:10). The teaching about the revelation of God's wrath is the backdrop for the teaching about the revelation of God's righteousness through Jesus as the mercy seat in God's new temple in Romans 3:21–26. Jesus is now the place of atonement, the place where God the Father provides atonement for us through his blood, the place of redemption and justification for us. So in 5:9, Paul concludes that since we have been justified by his blood, we will be saved from God's wrath now and in the last judgment.³⁴ By his atonement, Jesus not only saves all believers from God's wrath and the death penalty that it exacts, but also gives them eternal life with him. They have life from him rather than death apart from him.

³³ See A. Schlatter, *Gottes Gerechtigkeit. Ein Kommentar zum Römerbrief* (Stuttgart: Calwer, 1965), 49, and Otto Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1957), 53.

³⁴ See the discussion on the propitiation of God's wrath by Christ in Ap IV 46, 80, 82, 142, 224, 291; XII 146–147; XXVII 17.

How Are the Benefits of Atonement Delivered and Received?

The answer to this in the Old Testament is relatively straightforward. God grants atonement for his people through the obedient performance of the divine service by the priests and the obedient participation of the Israelites in it. God's law prescribed how this was to be done by them. The Israelites therefore receive the benefits of atonement by approaching God in a state of ritual purity as defined by the Ten Commandments.

In the New Testament, the teaching on the delivery and reception of the benefits from Christ's atoning death is much more complex and open to misunderstanding. Based on the final words of Jesus in John 19:30, the most common misunderstanding is that Christ's work of atonement ended at his death. We are said to benefit from it when we acknowledge that this is so for us, or when we commit ourselves to him and live in obedience to him. This is partly true. His sacrifice of atonement is complete. But his service as high priest still continues. In the present age, he delivers its benefits to his disciples in and through the church; they receive them through faith in him.

This ongoing delivery of atonement is taught in at least four places. The first is 1 John 2:1–2: "But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the atonement for our sins, and not just ours only but also for the sins of the whole world." John's use of the present tense is significant and emphatic. The risen Lord Jesus is the atonement for all sins; as our advocate with the Father, he is both our propitiator and expiator. He mediates God's grace to us and his pardon for our sins. Through his presence with us, he now offers us the atonement that he won for us by his death.

The second place is Hebrews 2:17: "He (Jesus) has been made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to atone the sins of the people." According to this letter, Jesus was installed as high priest at his exaltation. There at God's right hand, he now officiates as our priest. There he now atones the sins of the people by forgiving their sins and reconciling them with God the Father. Through him as their merciful high priest, they have a gracious God. Through him as their faithful high priest, they can now "approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb 4:16).³⁵

The third place is 2 Corinthians 5:18–21. There Paul maintains that God has given the ministry of reconciliation to the apostles and their successors. Through their proclamation of Jesus as our sin offering who took on our sins to give us his righteousness, God declares that he no longer holds our trespasses against us and

³⁵ For further consideration of this passage, see Kleinig, *Hebrews*, 124–127 and 138–142.

calls us to be reconciled to him by received reconciliation from him. Through this ministry, reconciliation is proclaimed and delivered to people on earth.

The fourth place is Romans 3:21–25: “But now the righteousness of God has been revealed through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe . . . being justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God presented as the mercy seat/place of atonement through faith in his blood/by his blood.”³⁶ The redemption that comes from the sacrificial death of Jesus is now available to us in Jesus. Just as the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant was the place from which God provided full atonement for his people on the Day of Atonement, he now presents Jesus to us as our mercy seat, the place where we may find atonement for sin. Just as God provided atonement for sin and its impurity through the blood of the sin offerings in the old covenant, so he now presents its benefits to us in and through the blood of Jesus. Here Paul’s use of the phrase “in his blood” is, I think, most likely meant to recall the words of institution in 1 Corinthians 11:25, in order to show that he delivers the benefits of atonement to us most obviously and completely in the Lord’s Supper.³⁷ There the blood by which he atoned for us delivers the benefits of his atoning sacrifice to those who believe in him. The benefits that he delivers to us in his blood are received by us through faith in him. Faith receives what he won for us by his death.

Luther explains this most memorably in his tractate “Against the Heavenly Prophets,” where he says (AE 40:213–214):

We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. . . . He has not won it in the supper or the sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once and for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously. . . . If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it there. . . . But I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross.³⁸

³⁶ See Middendorf, *Romans 1–8*, 272–274, 285–289, and Stephen Hultgren, “*Hilastērion* (Rom. 3:25) and the Union of Divine Justice and Mercy. Part II: Atonement in the Old Testament and in Romans 1–5,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 70, no. 2 (2019): 546–599.

³⁷ See also Luke 22:20; Rom 5:9; Eph 2:13; Heb 10:19; Rev 1:5; 5:9; 7:14.

³⁸ Martin Luther, *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and the Sacrament* (1525): vol. 40, 213–214, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–).

Conclusion

Since secular people have no sense for God's holiness, they find it hard to make sense of God's provision of atonement for sin in both testaments. Yet their behavior shows that it is not alien to them. They may be disgusted by the whole bloody business and have nothing but contempt for God's holy wrath, even as they become increasingly wrathful; they may reject God's law and any suggestion that they are sinners, even as they regard those who differ from them as irredeemably wicked. Their hearts betray them in many ways, racked as they are by a vague sense of guilt and shame, pollutedness and unworthiness. They frantically seek vindication for themselves as victims of oppression by some law other than God's law and use it to condemn others for their perceived wrongdoing. They seek to purify themselves in what they think and how they live, because they feel polluted and long for a world free from pollution. They try to atone for the human pollution of planet earth by the sacrifices that they make and require others to make.

So we would be remiss if we capitulate to secular rationalism by disregarding the doctrine of the atonement. The biblical teaching on God's provision of atonement for the sins of the world needs to be heard and heeded now as much as it ever was, even though it has always been utterly offensive to human sensibilities. To be sure, we would be wise to follow the example of the New Testament in speaking of it in other ways than by the exclusive use of this word. The New Testament itself does this for us by its proclamation of Christ's death and its benefits in many different ways.

I maintain that the classical doctrine of the atonement is not theoretical but immensely practical. The full teaching of it equips us pastors for effective ministry in six ways.

1. To engage relevantly and practically in the ministry of reconciliation together with Jesus for people who have been estranged from God and one another.
2. To deliver people from bondage to the devil and the polluting powers of darkness with the blood of Jesus.
3. To provide a clear conscience with God's word as law and gospel for people who feel unclean and unworthy of God's love.
4. To give people actual access to God the Father and his manifold grace in the divine service.
5. To minister pastorally to people who have sinned as well as those who have been abused by others.

6. To reach out with the gospel to Muslims, Buddhists, and secular animists who have a deep awareness of retribution and their own spiritual pollution.

In conclusion, the impulse to demand atonement from others and seek it for ourselves shows up in some fashion in all societies. Evil cannot be ignored; it must be dealt with. The gospel of Jesus does not just affirm that, but turns it around. God does not just require atonement for evildoing and injustice; he himself provides vicarious atonement for all people through Jesus.