

Atonement: Then and Now *The Story Begins*

I stated last week that the meaning of the atonement must be understood through a story. I believe that the story of the practice of atonement rituals begins within the story of Adam and Eve. It is there we must start to understand the need for sacrifice, forgiveness and the rituals developed for the temple worship. What follows is my understanding of the story of Adam and Eve and how it informs us of our problem and the need for atonement.

Adam and Eve lived peaceably with God, at one with each other in the caretaking of creation. But then, because of Adam and Eve's desire for independence and power, that oneness and peace was broken. But it was not only their relationship with God that was broken, their identity and spiritual life was shattered. After they ate the fruit, rebelling against God, something was torn inside them. Guilt, shame and a desperate need for wholeness began to take hold of them. Sin had destroyed them. Now they don't know what to do to restore this brokenness. Their failed attempt at solving the problem made matters worse. The fig leaves were not just a way of making themselves presentable to God, it was a way of hiding from God, which in the end was a way of lying to themselves and to God. The fig leaves became masking agents that would further harm their relationship with God, and others. Extended into community life, this habit within human nature would divide communities from each other. Laws and rituals became ways in which they continued to propagate and justify their lie. At the same time, they created a culture that elevated their own way of life, and disdained others. This cultural identity did not create a brotherhood with others, but a desire to control and overpower others.

This psychic mechanism was the same one working in Cain, which led to violence against his own brother. Maslow, a student of Freud, says of this human condition, "Freud's greatest discovery, the one which lies at the root of psychodynamics, is that the great cause of much psychological illness is the fear of the knowledge of oneself--- of one's emotions, impulses, memories, capacities, potentialities, of ones' destiny. We have discovered that fear of knowledge of oneself is very often isomorphic with, and parallel with, fear of the outside world." In other words, when these individual psychic forces work themselves out into community and culture, they demand the creation of rituals in order to dull the pain and fear we feel inside. Atonement rituals are born out of such fears and feelings of shame of who we are. These mechanisms are nothing but fig leaves which provide the illusion that we are fine, and keep the pain and fear at bay, thus perpetuating the lie that we are all right.

In the case of Israel, they established sacred rituals of atonement, designed to forgive the sins of the people. They were given laws and purity rites from Moses, in order to hold those psychic forces together, and diminish their capacity to overcome their desire for power and control. In the case of Cain, he is destroyed by Abel's acceptance by God, rejecting his own self, the pain is too much. He cannot live humbly either, therefore he takes up his hand against his brother. What he needed to be whole and restored, is to

be stripped of his anxiety and need for power, and come to God with a simplicity of forgiveness. Instead, he goes and creates a community that was characterized by violence. This community was nothing less than a new kind of fig leaf. It provides for its members the ability to hide, justifying their behavior. It also creates the opportunity to blame and justify their brutality toward their neighbor, thus violating the basic law of humanity.

What is it that can help us address these forces and our spiritual needs to become godly human beings? That is the question before us, and the underpinnings of how atonement became a dominant practice in our human communities. Atonement has two features to its exercise. One is to deal with the sin of humanity and the psychic forces within us, second, becoming a human being of goodness and mercy in the world.

In the history of Israel there has also been two ways that the above has been achieved. There was a need of a sacred space for God's presence in the world, and there was a call for a humble approach to God crying out for forgiveness. These acts, within the worship and interaction of God and Israel, were the foundations of atonement, for the benefit of the nation.

The psalms are the teachers of forgiveness, which led the repentant to a new way of life. In the Psalms of Lament, almost all of them end with the promise of living God's law in the world, for the benefit of all. There is no sacred act in forgiveness, other than prayer and confession before God; begging for God to save them. The most famous of these psalms is 51. Notice its progression and its purpose. He says, "Wash away all my guilt and cleanse me from my sin . . . Create a pure heart in me, O God, and give me a new and steadfast spirit . . . I will teach transgressors the ways that lead to thee and sinners shall return to thee again . . . My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; and wounded heart, O God, thou will not despise." This act of contrition is coupled with a firm desire, in faith, to follow God's ways, and to teach others the same. In other words, the psychic forces inside the petitioner are assuaged by the power of mercy, and now he feels free to live in the world with a greater sense of peace. Atonement (at-one-ment) has been achieved without ritual, within the presence of God, which is the key to all acts of atonement.

But ritual also has a strong presence in the Old Testament understanding of atonement. Rituals are ways in which we connect with our God. But how? No doubt there is an element of sacrifice, which is in all ancient religions. But the sacrifice does not stand alone in the sacred act of atoning for sins. For instance, in Leviticus 16 there are sacrifices for purity, holiness and forgiveness. The emphasis is not necessarily on the sacrifice but on the purpose. Jacob Milgrom, one of our outstanding scholars, has suggested that the purpose of pouring blood on the Mercy Seat, in the Holy of Holies, is not to cleanse the sins of the people, but to purify the temple for the coming of God. If it is true, as I believe it is, it means that atonement is achieved through the presence of God, not only by the sacrifice. The sacrifice is a means to the real action of atonement--the presence of God. The people are atoned by the coming of God to the temple. They

have made preparations for God to enter the place of forgiveness. Both the temple and their hearts. Stephen Finlan, has said, "To say, "atonement of sins was accomplished through repentance alone," is to treat the spiritualization of second to fourth century rabbis as though they are normative for the functioning cult. In fact, people poured into the temple with their sacrifices, seeking purgation even when the city was about to fall. The spiritual doctrine of repentance became dominated in the rabbinic period ---- because there was no longer any temple to encourage a literal interpretation." His point being that there was strong evidence of the need for temple rituals of atonement and repentance leading to forgiveness. Both have their point in providing atonement.

While these two features of the atonement----ritual and individual repentance---were predominant, there was a third way that arose in the third to first century B.C., that caught the imagination of the people. It also caught the eye of Paul, in which we will be dealing with next week. In the Fourth Book of Maccabees the soldiers and heroic men who died for the nation, were said to have atoned for their sins. These were the martyrs which provided an example of courage, but also, they became the models of what it meant to be an Israelite. They were the men of God.

This model of dying for others to atone for the sins of the nation had a long history in Greek and Roman culture. Stephen Finlan says, "Dying for others was a major theme of the Greek literature, and was adapted by Jewish religious ideology and by Roman political thought and literature. The principle martyrological formula in Greece literature was "so and so died for X," with X being the city-state, Greece, or some religious principle. Paul gives us numerous examples of the noble death theme in his "dying formulae", "Christ died for us.: (Romans 5:8)

This third avenue of seeing the atonement confirms the purpose of atonement presented at the beginning of this article-----atonement is a means to live a godly life. These martyrs contribute to how to live----we sacrifice ourselves for others because of our love for that which is greater than me. When Paul says, "Christ died for us," he not only means that there is some sense that Christ is giving us something we couldn't get anywhere else----forgiveness, but we are also receiving the spirit of the martyr who provides a spiritual example.

All these practices within the Jewish community address the problem of the forces within us that drive us toward sin, and the need to build a godly life. This final point we will address next week, as we begin to wrap up the meaning of atonement "then and now."