

A Perfect Covering

“Atonement” in the Day of Atonement

Leviticus 16:6 Aaron ... shall make atonement for himself and for his house.

¹⁰ ... to make atonement over [the goat for Azazel]

¹¹ ... and shall make atonement for himself and for his house ...

¹⁶ Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place ...

¹⁷ ... to make atonement in the Holy Place until he comes out and has made atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel.

¹⁸ and make atonement for [the altar] ...

²⁴ ... and make atonement for himself and for the people.

²⁷ ... to make atonement in the Holy Place

³⁰ ... on this day shall atonement be made for you to cleanse you. You shall be clean before the LORD from all your sins.

³² And ... shall make atonement

³³ He shall make atonement for the holy sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly.

³⁴ And this shall be a statute forever for you, that atonement may be made for the people of Israel once in the year because of all their sins." And Aaron did as the LORD commanded Moses.

(Lev 16:1-34)

Coverings of Figs and Skins

We have seen how important Genesis 1-3 is to Leviticus. Everything from the design of the tabernacle, to periods of sevens and eight, to resting, to the cleanliness laws of

animals, men, and women, to sin and sacrifices, to priestly protection of sanctuaries have their roots in the first three chapters of the Bible. This idea should continue to invade our thoughts as we try to understand the Day of Atonement.

Adam and Eve were put in the Garden to **serve and guard** the sacred precincts. They were to keep the place holy by **obeying God's law** not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If any unclean thing tried to slither its way in, or begin hissing crafty words of temptation, or strike at them with venomous lies and deceit, they were to cast it out by the authority of God Almighty. But as we know, this is what they did not do.

Following their rebellion, a rather **strange exchange** occurs between the man and God. Adam hears the thunderous rustling sound of footsteps¹ and he knows that the LORD is approaching in judgment. So, he quickly sews together **fig leaves** for he and his wife in the form of loincloths. They used this to **cover themselves**, as it says because “**they knew that they were naked**” (**Gen 3:6**). When God gave Eve to Adam and married them in a covenant

¹ That this is not a quiet innocent stroll is proven in the language “spirit of the day” (often translates as “cool of the day” where ruach—“spirit” or “wind” becomes a cool breeze), which is technical language for judgment. See **John H. Walton**, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 35; **Meredith G. Kline**, “Primal Parousia,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 40.2 (1977): 254 [245-80]; **Johan Lust**, “A Gentle Breeze or a Roaring Thunderous Sound?,” *Vetus Testamentum* 25 (1975), 110-115.

ceremony (2:23-24), it tells us that “the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (25). But now their eyes were open, they knew their nakedness, and they were ashamed.

What had they done? This is where it gets strange. This was no sexual rebellion.² Rather, they had eaten from the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge. They turned the sacred place into a dining room, not a bedroom. Why then should they cover their loins? Why not their mouths or their stomachs. The conversation that Adam has with the walking Lord reinforces this strange point. Christ³ called out, “Were are you?” (Gen 3:9).

Adam replied, “I was afraid” (10). Afraid? But he was in the Garden of Eden. Totally protected. Paradise. What could he possibly be afraid of there? “I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself.”

The Great God says, “Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded

² There are clearly sexual overtones in this story. Perhaps the most obvious are 1. The proper order of man guarding and the woman helping has been disrupted by Satan usurping Adam’s role and going to the woman, Eve not deferring to her husband to answer the Shining One, and Adam abdicating of his role as high priest. The functional job-descriptions of the sexes had been blurred; and 2. God curses the woman in child-birth. 3. In listening to the Nachash, they were guilty of violating the First Commandment, having other gods before Yawheh, thereby committing spiritual adultery. All kinds of other sexual problems have been proposed here, usually involving Eve and the Nachash (Satan), sometimes with Adam and the Lilith in the background. But these are purely speculative and have little business in the text of Genesis. Clearly, there is something about the sexes happening here, and the curse on the woman even involves childbirth.

³ The Targum reads, “The Word of the LORD.”

you not to eat?” (11). How did the LORD know what Adam had done? Was he just a really good guesser? Was it only because of his omniscience (certainly, God did already know)? But could it also be because of what Adam said? If it was what he said, what would being naked have to do with eating the forbidden fruit or the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?

The solve this puzzle, you first have to realize that the nakedness could not have been purely sexual in nature. If the point was simply to encourage modesty,⁴ why would the LORD very quickly kill a sacrificial animal and then use it to cover them all over again? The fig leaves would have sufficed. The nakedness was originally fine, so now it has to have other implications.

In English, as in Hebrew, we have all kinds of ways of thinking about this and related terms. “We talk of naked power, naked truth, the heart bared, a bare land, an exposed site, deceit exposed and also a barefaced lie.”⁵ In Genesis, spies come to see the “nakedness of the land” (Gen 42:9, 12). This meant that the land was vulnerable and undefended. It can also imply a bare place, something devastated, like a desert. This is all rather interesting to think about, given

⁴ Much of this discussion is inspired by Mary Douglas, “Reading Leviticus through Genesis: Covering,” in *Leviticus as Literature*, 244-47.

⁵ Douglas, 246.

what Adam was supposed to be doing in the Garden—guarding and protecting it.

Viewed in this way, it starts to make sense of why Adam was afraid because he was naked. **He had become exposed, laid bare.** He was guilty. His eyes were opened, and he knew it. He knew that he was now vulnerable, undefended, and devastated by what he had done. So, he told God about it.⁶ It was therefore a simple matter to conclude that he had disobeyed the command. The ax was at the root, and Adam was about to be cut down.

Yet, after the subsequent curse on Satan and judgment of Adam and Eve, the **story returns to their nakedness.** But now, rather than be covered in fig-leaves, the LORD God kills a sacrificial animal and “**clothed**” (**3:21**) our parents in its skins. While this certainly had **a spiritual signification (and we’ll get to that in due time)**, it was perhaps also very practical. For God had just cursed Adam’s work with “**thorns and thistles,**” and as Mary Douglas suggests, this was a covering much more appropriate to their exposure and vulnerability to the cursed earth outside of Eden that they would now have to endure. In other words, this clothing also served a more basic function of “covering” and protecting.

⁶ In this way, you can read **Gen 3:10** as a kind of positive confession and admission of guilt. However, Adam quickly retreats to blame in **vs. 12**.

Day of “Atonement”

Having looked last time at the full chapters of Leviticus 16 and all that was involved in the Day of Atonement, today I want to look more closely at the meaning and significance of “atonement,” both for the OT saints and for NT Christians. Atonement is surely one of the most fruitful subjects we can spend our time contemplating. It is at the center of the entire Pentateuch in this special day. As we look at its meaning, I’ll confine myself mostly to Lev 16 and related NT passages.

The Hebrew word for “atonement” in Leviticus 16 is *kaphar*. It has a broad range of meanings, but it is always translated by the word (*exhilaskomai*; Lev 16:6, 10, 11, 17, 17, 18, 24, 27, 30, 32, 33, 34). So this is a good place to start. The root word *hilaos* (and *hilaros*) means cheerful, joyous or gracious, benevolent.⁷ We get the word hilarious (as in happy) from this. This helps you see how the Greek verb they translate as “to make atonement” in Leviticus 16 means “to be friendly, gracious” or better, “to make friendly, gracious.” This is one of its primary meanings, and this

⁷ G. H.-Link et al., “ἱλάσκομαι,” ed. Lothar Coenen, Erich Beyreuther, and Hans Bietenhard, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 148; “2261 ἱλάσκομαι,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology: Abridged Edition*, ed. Verlyn D. Verbugge (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000).

should give you a feel for what a wonderful word atonement is. Through atonement, God is made friendly towards us.

Curiously, the English words “atone” and “atonement” do not appear a single time in the NT of the ESV or NAS. This doesn’t mean it isn’t an important idea, because it is found throughout the OT, especially in Leviticus 16. This word-group appears one time in the KJV (**Rom 5:11**), where the others translate a different Greek word (*katallage*) as “**reconciliation**”⁸ Reconciliation means to bring two people together who were enemies. It is, as the literal contraction of the etymology of the English word atonement means, “**at-one-ment**.”⁹ So this is **a second meaning** of our word “atonement.”

“Atonement” appears three times in the NIV where it translates various words related to our Greek word above (*hilasterios* in **Rom 3:25** and **Heb 9:5**; *hilaskomai* in **Heb 2:17**) as “**sacrifice of atonement**.” All these other translations use “**propitiation**” (**Rom 3:25**; **Heb 2:17**) or “**mercy seat**” (**Heb 9:5**) rather than “sacrifice of atonement.”

The “mercy-seat” is found in **Leviticus 16:2, 13, 14, 15**. The Hebrew is *kappareth*. Again, the Hebrew word for “atonement” is *kaphar*, so these are clearly related. The

⁸ *Katallage* is literally an exchange where personal relations are re-established (reconciled) from enmity to friendship (Friberg Lexicon).

⁹ See Online Etymology Dictionary for “atone” and “atonement.”

mercy-seat is the **golden lid** topped by two cherubim that went on the ark of the covenant. Because it is a lid, you could also call it a “**covering**.” As Adam and Eve were covered, so also the ark is covered. Last time I called it a throne. The idea of *mercy-seat* kind of fits this in that it is a seat, but it loses that sense of it being the *King’s* seat. “Mercy” though tries to get at the atonement part of this in that atonement is making God favorably disposed, gracious, or *merciful*.

It is upon this mercy-seat, this covenant-cover, this throne of the king that **atonement is made** by the priest when he sprinkles blood on it seven times (**Lev 16:14-15**). The picture you need to have in your mind is that the priest is sprinkling blood on the very place, indeed in front of the very Presence of **the visible God** who “appears” (**16:2**) to him in the Most Holy Place. This visible God is none other than the Word of God Himself—**the eternal Son of God** preincarnate.

This is relevant to the NT. Returning to **Rom 3:24-25** for example, Paul says that we are justified by God’s grace as a gift, through the redemption, “**That is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a *hilasterion* by his blood.**” Ah, we just looked at this word group, because we find it throughout Leviticus 16. The Complete Jewish Bible uses the word *kapparah* here, because it can refer to the mercy

seat. So in one sense, what Paul is saying is that **Jesus is the mercy seat** of the NT and his blood is what is sprinkled. This makes great sense of the fact that he was the one appearing to Aaron when he sprinkled blood onto the mercy seat all those years earlier.

The NIV translates this as the “sacrifice of *atonement*.” There’s our word atonement. Most translations call it a **propitiation**. Propitiation has a prefix—**pro**. This word means “**for**.” So, propitiation means that God (it is always applied to him) is “for” something. What is he for? He is “for” us. Through propitiation, God is **made favorable** (from the etymology friendly or gracious or happy above) towards us.

It has a synonym. The synonym is “**expiation**.” So, for example Dabney says of **1Jn 2:2**, “**Christ is the propitiation (the same word as expiation) for the sins of the whole world.**”¹⁰ Like all of these words, expiation has various shades of meaning, some of which we just don’t have time to look at much today. Among them are **to appease** or make well disposed. Hence, the synonym. But expiation also has a prefix—**ex**. This word means “**out of**” (as in *exit*). Here, it

¹⁰ **R. L. Dabney** *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publications, 1895), 61.

would be the removing or taking away of something.¹¹ This can take place in several ways.

It can happen through a **covering**.¹² That also sounds familiar. Again, we have seen this idea of a covering several times now, but especially with Adam and Eve's fig leaves and sacrificial skins and again at the mercy seat. Coverings take things "out of" sight. In the case of the Day of Atonement, sin (intentional, unintentional, ceremonial, it doesn't matter) is covered out of sight. Because of this, some translations use "expiation" rather than "atonement" throughout Leviticus 16 (see TNK and NJB for example), so that you could call it the Day of Expiation. But "atonement" has this meaning too through the synonym.

There are two other ideas to think about in the Day of Atonement in terms of understanding what atonement means from Leviticus 16. The first is one many people miss. It is **not merely the blood** on the mercy seat that brings atonement. It is also **the goat that goes out to Azazel**. **Lev**

¹¹ **R. C. Sproul** has a good discussion of this part of these words. "What Do Expiation and Propitiation Means?" *Ligonier Ministries* (Apr 17, 2019), <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/two-important-words-good-friday-expiation-and-propitiation/>.

¹² "Guilt is said to be expiated when it is visited with punishment falling on a substitute. Expiation is made for our sins when they are punished not in ourselves but in another who consents to stand in our room. It is that by which reconciliation is effected. Sin is thus said to be 'covered' by vicarious satisfaction. The cover or lid of the ark is termed in the LXX. *hilasterion*, that which covered or shut out the claims and demands of the law against the sins of God's people, whereby he became 'propitious' to them." **M. G. Easton**, "Expiation," *Easton's Bible Dictionary* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1893).

16:10 tells us that he will “make atonement over” the goat. How does that happen? It happens when the sins of the people are confessed over its head and it is lead “out” into the wilderness away from the camp. Expiation. What does this act add to the meaning of atonement? Heiser explains,

The goat for Azazel that wasn’t sacrificed purged the people from impurity by removing the impurity out of the camp away from sacred space and into the wilderness, the domain of Azazel ... Impurity was to be driven out of the camp and go here to protect the sanctity of the tabernacle, its vessels, the place upon which it rests, and the people. This goat is not an offering to Azazel because there’s no ritual killing here. The goat is just a vehicle for the removal of impurity. Impurity was sent to where it belonged, the realm where Yahweh was not.¹³

So, the idea of “purging” now comes in. Purging is removing, taking it away. Again, *expiation*. Heiser, in fact, calls the *kapporeth*, “the place of purging.” He does this because that other word, *kipper*, means “to wipe off,” “to burnish,” “to cleanse,” or “to purge.” “This meant that

¹³ Michael S. Heiser, *Notes on Leviticus: from the Naked Bible Podcast* (BlindSpot Press. Kindle Edition).

expiation was conceived of as a cleansing or wiping away of impurity, getting rid of contamination,” he says.

The final idea comes from [the washing](#). A good example of this is [vs. 24](#). “And he shall bathe his body in water in a holy place and put on his garments and come out and offer his burnt offering and the burnt offering of the people and make atonement for himself and for the people.” Now, clearly there is an offering and the shedding of blood that is here. But there is also washing. Dr. Hess points out, “[The bathing and clothing symbolize \[a\] change of position ... The bathing does not symbolize ritual purification from sin alone, because the priest also bathes when he exists the Most Holy Place. Instead, it is a purification that removes anything—holy or unholy—that might be taken into the other world where he finds himself.](#)”¹⁴ Thus, the bathing of the body helps reinforce the idea of [scrubbing or purging or washing impurities away](#).

So there are all kinds of things going on with “atonement.” It makes God friendly towards sinners. It takes away the deadly effects of sin. It brings, at some point, reconciliation or at-one-ment. It purges. It washes. More than any other way, it does this through covering. Even here,

¹⁴ [Richard Hess](#), *Genesis ~ Leviticus*, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary Revised Edition, ed. Tremper Longman III & David E. Garland (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 723.

there is also the **clothing**. What is the clothing? It is a *covering*. In fact, I think a good case can be made that of all the meanings we've discussed, "covering" is the one most central to Leviticus. As we look at this, you have to remember that Leviticus 16 comes after 5 chapters on clean and unclean distinctions. This is not accidental. Indeed, the end of Ch. 15 prepared us for the Day of Atonement when it said, "**Thus you shall keep the people of Israel separate from their uncleanness, lest they die in their uncleanness by defiling my tabernacle that is in their midst**" (**Lev 15:31**). The Day of Atonement is the remedy in all those cases. God is gracious even before atonement is made. It simply is part and parcel of who he is.

Mary Douglas helps put this context into a coherent definition for atonement as "covering."

According to the illustrative cases from Leviticus, to atone means to cover, or recover, cover again, to repair a hole, cure a sickness, mend a rift, make good a torn or broken covering. As a noun, what is translated as atonement, expiation or purgation means integument [the tough outer protective layer] made good; conversely, the examples in the book indicate that defilement means integument torn. Atonement does not mean covering a sin so as to hide it from the sight of God [me: this is what Adam tried to do]; it means making

good an outer layer which has rotted or been pierced [me: this is what God did by covering Adam in the skin of the sacrificial animal].”¹⁵

What is she referring to with covering or repairing a hole or curing a sickness or making good an outer layer? She is referring to the nearly dozen times that “atonement” appears in Leviticus 12-15. She explains,

We have been made ready for chapter 16 with many examples of defective coverings: the skin of a body, the garment of wool or skin that covers the body, the house whose walls cover the garments on the bodies of inmates ... We cannot be told more clearly that major transgression has ruptured a protective covering ... Leviticus has elaborated a series of torn covers as figures for the violated tabernacle.¹⁶

Indeed, everything about atonement in Leviticus has been about the coverings of things. From the inside of the body with things like the thick layers of suet fat over the kidneys and liver that God says belong to him, to the outside of the body with hides covering animals, skin covering

¹⁵ Mary Douglas, “Atonement in Leviticus,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 1.2 (1993/94): 117-18. [109-130]

¹⁶ Ibid., 123.

people, **garments** covering skin, **houses** cover bodies, and so on.¹⁷ Atonement always seems to be circulating around each and every one of these things in Leviticus.

Importantly, the very structure of the book as it is patterned after the tabernacle itself teaches us through these things that, “**The tabernacle stands for the protective covering of God’s righteousness.**” In other words, the tabernacle keeps people safe from who and what God is in the same way that the ark kept Noah safe from the flood. This starts to explain a fact that so many don’t think about when atonement comes to mind. **It is not just the people, but the tabernacle itself that has to be atoned.** Why? It is because the “skin,” if you will, of the tabernacle has become contaminated by the people’s continual contagious uncleanness. Remember, “**According to Leviticus uncleanness comes to everyone universally and without exception by virtue of biological existence, from contact with corpses, from eating flesh with blood in it, from suppurating [festering, pus-filled] bodily sores, and also from moral transgressions and apostasy.**”¹⁸ It cannot be wholly avoided and since it is contagious, even the

¹⁷ **Douglas**, *Leviticus as Literature*, 247.

¹⁸ Douglas, “Atonement,” 114.

tabernacle is in need of covering and repair. Someone summarizes how important this is,

Applied to the mercy seat in the holy of holies, this would suggest that the sins of Israel, in effect, eroded the symbolic representation of ‘the protective covering of God’s righteousness’, and that the application of blood acted as a sort of reparative sealant, a kind of ritual mortar that annually repaired that covering and prevented God’s holiness from ‘breaking out’ against Israel.¹⁹

With all of this, I hope you are starting to see both how important atonement is and what exactly it is that it does. Frankly, without such a concept, all of us would be doomed. But God has made a way possible for atonement to be made and to be had. In this regard, I want to finish by thinking about these two points. **Who makes atonement** and **who can have it?**

¹⁹ David A. de Silva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle to Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 312, n. 32. He adds, “Douglas’s argument is certainly unassailable as far as Leviticus is concerned, but the author of Hebrews appears to stand at some remove from understanding atonement as ‘covering,’ shown by his frequent use of the verb ‘cleansing’ (*katharizo*, a term that highlights the ‘washing’ off of dirt from a surface) both for the conscience of the worshiper (9:14) and the effect of Christ’s blood on the heavenly sancta (9:23-24).” While this is true, we can notice two things. First, this idea of washing is, as we have seen, there in the Day of Atonement. Second, Hebrews does have the idea of covering present. For example, “For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh...” (Heb 9:13). This is precisely what Douglas has been discussing—skin as a covering in need of repair.

Who Makes Atonement?

In Leviticus 16, it is clear at least in one sense that **the priest makes atonement**. It literally says so. “**And the priest who is anointed and consecrated as priest in his father’s place shall make atonement, wearing the holy linen garments. He shall make atonement for the holy sanctuary, and he shall make atonement for the tent of meeting and for the altar, and he shall make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly**” (**Lev 16:32-33**). The priest can do this because he is God’s specially called and ordained intercessor and mediator between God and man. The priest represents the people to God.

But there is **someone else here** besides the priest in this ceremony. This is **the Son of God** before whom the priest literally sprinkles blood at the ark’s covering. This matters in more ways than you might guess. Before getting into this, remember who this Son of God is. He is the Word of God, the fully divine intercessor and intermediary *in the OT*. Intercessor? Yes. He intercedes for God’s people for the Father in heaven in such a way that Israel could say that they have two Yawheh’s (Father and Son), but only one God. This is why Paul says, “**an intermediary implies more than one,**

but God is one” (Gal 3:19). It’s the only thing that makes sense. God had a mediary between Moses and himself. This mediary was Christ, yet Christ is God. The amazing thing is, the Jews at Qumran believed that the angels were the heavenly counterparts of the priests (think of how they attend the throne and take out the tongs to cleanse Isaiah) and that the High Priest of heaven was none other than the Son of God himself.²⁰

All of this matters in the NT in how the words *hilasterion* and *hilasmos*, which we looked at earlier, are used. Romans 3:24-25 talks about, “Jesus Christ, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood...” John says, “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1Jn 2:2). And again, “God loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (4:10). It is important, for a couple of reasons, that you understand that each time the word is used it is used as a noun rather than a verb.

²⁰ See Margaret Barker, “Atonement: The Rite of Healing,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49.1 (Feb 1996): 1-20. <https://www.marquette.edu/maqom/atonement.html>. “The implication of this belief must be that what was performed in the temple ‘was’ the service of heaven and so the rite of atonement must have had a heavenly counterpart, for want of better words. The association of atonement and covenant of creation in the texts cited above suggests that atonement rituals were creation and covenant rituals. Further, the role of the priests is significant. According to the Qumran texts they were angels, and there is enough evidence elsewhere to suggest that the high priest was the Lord. The tradition recorded in Deuteronomy 32.8 (using the Qumran and LXX reading rather than the MT) is that the lord was the first among the sons of El Elyon, in other words, the chief of the angels.”

This distinction is really important. Listen to the difference between, “Doug is *a climber*” and “Doug *has climbed* all of Colorado’s fourteeners.” What is the difference? “Nouns speak to what a thing is, what it does. Verb speaks to what a thing is doing, or has done, or shall do. And unlike verbs, nouns do not have tense.”²¹ It might be, and in fact is true that Doug has climbed all of the fourteeners. But if I simply tell you that Doug is a climber, you have no way of knowing that without more information. But you do understand that Doug is a climber and has certainly climbed something.

Applying the noun to Christ, it is not that Christ has propitiated (a verb), as so many incorrectly interpret these verses (though clearly he did do that, see **Heb 2:17**).²² It is that *he* is the propitiation (noun). Like I said earlier, it is as if *he is the mercy seat itself*. He is the covering. The focus is on the person, not the action (though the blood is present). The point is, besides being the High Priest and the Sacrifice, *Jesus Christ is also the propitiation itself*. He is what makes God favorable. It is not just that he has atoned, but that *he is the atonement*, the thing that makes God favorable, the place it all happens.

²¹ David Ponter, “1 John 2:2 and the Argument for Limited Atonement,” *Calvin and Calvinism* (Feb 16, 2015), http://calvinandcalvinism.com/?p=15807#_ftnref4_1853.

²² See Ibid.

Here, I'm putting your eyes squarely on the one Christ when you think of atonement. Not his work, here, as much as on his person. It is this person who did the work. He is the one who is our atonement, the one whose blood is spilt, the one who makes God favorably disposed, gracious, and friendly. You have to see and know and understand this. For it is your very life and hope. The Day of Atonement ritual itself teaches this, not only through typology, but through [the Presence of Christ on the mercy seat](#) when the priest offers the blood. It is Christ and his sacrifice on the cross and nothing else. This was true in the OT, as the mercy-seat represented Christ at whose feet the blood was sprinkled; it is true in the NT as Christ fulfills in his incarnation and obedient death the mercy-seat and the blood of the OT ritual.

Who Can Have Atonement?

A second question is more difficult and has been debated for centuries. [Who can have atonement for them?](#) We are Reformed Christians and perhaps the main reason atonement is stock vocabulary with us is because of the 20th century invention called "TULIP."²³ The "L" in TULIP

²³ T.U.L.I.P. has only been around for about a hundred years. [Jonathan Moore](#) writes, "The 'T.U.L.I.P.' acronym appears to have originated no earlier than a 1905 lecture in New Jersey by

stands for “Limited Atonement.” The idea is that the atonement is only for some people, therefore only some people can have it. Clearly, this question is central to Leviticus 16, so it needs to be thought through.

Many people think this controversy has only been between Calvinists and Arminians, i.e. all Calvinists believe in limited atonement, all Arminians believe in unlimited atonement, and anyone who says they are a Calvinists who believes in unlimited atonement is a closet Arminian. That is much too simplistic a view of the history and the topic. It is true that the Arminians teach that Jesus’ atoning work is for everyone. But they also believe that there is no special sense God has in it for the elect, because there *are no elect* (except in empty-set groups). Therefore, while available to all, people have to choose it of their own freewill. Many Calvinists respond by saying that the atonement was available only for some. But, because of election, it was

Dr. Cleland Boyd McAfee (1866-1944), a leading Presbyterian minister in Brooklyn, New York (William H. Vail, “The Five Points of Calvinism historically considered,” *The Outlook* 104, May-August [1913]: 394). Perhaps the first influential popularization of this acronym, still in print to this day, is Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1932), 59-60, 150-161.” Jonathan Moore, “The Extent of the Atonement: English Hypothetical Universalism versus Particular Redemption,” in *Drawn into Controversie*, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin and Mark Johns (Oakville, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 146, n. 98. See also Kenneth J. Stewart, “The Points of Calvinism: Retrospect and Prospect,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, 26.2 (2008): 187-203. Available at: http://www.covenant.edu/docs/faculty/Stewart_Ken/Points%20of%20Calvinism%20Retrospect%20and%20Prospect.pdf; and Richard A. Muller, “Was Calvin a Calvinist? Or, Did Calvin (or Anyone Else in the Early Modern Era) Plant the ‘TULIP’?”, Available at: <https://agrammatos.files.wordpress.com/2018/02/was-calvin-a-calvinist-12-26-09.pdf>.

certain that all for whom it was available would receive its benefits.

But this debate has not just been confined to these two groups. For instance, [the Lutherans](#) believe in unlimited atonement. But they also believe in predestination and election of particular people to salvation. There was no one in history more strongly opposed to an Arminian kind of freewill than Martin Luther. His book *Bondage of the Will* is a classic of total depravity and sovereign grace in election. Many Calvinists look at this and become perplexed. How could they think such an obviously contradictory thing?

But in fact, the history of [this debate also exists within the Reformed community itself](#). For example, the Entire English delegation to the [Synod of Dort](#) believed there was a sense in which the atonement was unlimited. One third of the divines at [Westminster](#) believed in an unlimited atonement. And there are even a couple of [Reformed Baptists](#) who were chief instruments in our confessional documents (Paul Hobson) and catechisms (Hercules Collins) who believed that in some sense Christ's death was for the whole world without exception. In fact, in all of these places, those who held to a *limited* atonement had a much different spirit than many today. They advocated for and created “[studied ambiguity](#)” in the language of the

Confessions so that, in the words of George Gillespie, a strong advocate of limited atonement himself, “**every one may enjoy his owne sence.**”²⁴

None of these men were considered closet Arminians by anyone in those assemblies. Each was respected and accepted as Reformed through and through.²⁵ In fact, a good case can be made that every single first-generation Reformer,

²⁴ See Jonathan Moore, “The Extent of the Atonement: English Hypothetical Universalism versus Particular Redemption,” in *Drawn into Controversie*, ed. Michael A.G. Haykin and Mark Johns (Oakville, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 149 [124-61].

²⁵ **Going Deeper:** This also includes Moise Amyraut, who was tried on three separate occasions for essentially non-Reformed, and on each occasion, he was vindicated by the synods of Alençon (1637), Charenton (1645), and Loudun (1659). Richard Muller calls the disagreements with Amyraldians “non- or sub-confessional” even though they were of “fairly significant theological weight.” He also says, “Not only was Amyraut Reformed in ecclesial and confessional location but his theology also arguably fell within the boundaries established by the Gallican Confession and the Canons of Dort,” and “Amyraldian hypothetical universalism can be recognized as belonging to the internal diversity of the Reformed tradition itself.” As an example, Muller cites Francis Turretin who, though he does not agree with their position, nevertheless refers to them positively as “the Reformed theologians,” “our men,” and “our ministers,” adding even that “this must not be concealed,” something which appears to have occurred by and large in our own day. Richard Muller, “Diversity in the Reformed Tradition: A Historiographical Introduction,” in *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates Within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism* (Oakville, CT: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 17-19.

Carl Trueman agrees with Muller (even though he, like Turretin, does not like Amyraldianism), saying that “Amyraldian authors were not on that score regarded as heretical . . . the Amyraldians, however, are considered ‘among the Reformed.’” [Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (England: Ashgate, 2007), 29-31]. Over a hundred years earlier, Philip Schaff, writing on the polemical Helvetic Consensus Formula, says that its principle author, John Henry Heidegger (1633-1698) “was personally mild and modest; he spoke the truth in love, and resisted the pressure of extremists in Switzerland and Holland who suspected even him of unsoundness, and desired a formal condemnation of the schools not only of Saumur but also of Cocceius and Cartesius. Instead of this, he speaks in the preface of the Formula, respectfully and kindly, of the Saumur theologians, and calls them *venerable brethren in Christ, who built on the same foundation of faith*, and whose peculiar doctrines are *not condemned as heresies, but simply disapproved.*” Schaff, *Creeeds of Christendom*, 1: 486-87. I talk about all of this in my paper, “On Amyraldianism, Different Senses of Ability, The Death of Christ, and Being Reformed,” available at https://www.academia.edu/39260165/On_Amyraldianism_Different_Senses_of_Ability_The_Death_of_Christ_and_Being_Reformed.

including Calvin himself, believed in some kind of an unlimited atonement. Calvin would say in **Leviticus 16:7** that the two goats are fulfilled “in Christ, since He was both the Lamb of God, whose offering blotted out the sins of the world ... after Christ had been offered for sin and had borne the curse of men.” When he explains what “sin of the world” means in another place he says that it includes, “every kind of unrighteousness which alienates men from God” and that God “extends this favor indiscriminately to the whole human race” (Calvin, *John 1:29*). He makes this quite clear in his comments on **Isaiah 52:12**,

That, then, is how our Lord Jesus bore the sins and iniquities of many. But in fact, this word “many” is often as good as equivalent to “all“. And indeed, *our Lord Jesus was offered to all the world*. For it is not speaking of three or four when it says: “For God so loved the world, that he spared not His only Son.” But yet we must notice that the Evangelist adds in this passage: “That whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but obtain eternal life.” Our Lord Jesus *suffered for all*, and there is *neither great nor small who is not inexcusable today*, for we can obtain salvation through him. *Unbelievers* who turn away from Him and who deprive themselves of him by their malice are today *doubly culpable*. For how will they excuse

their ingratitude in not receiving the blessing in which they could share by faith?

(Calvin, *Sermons on Isaiah's Prophecy of the Death and Passion of Christ*, 52:12)

Calvin is hardly alone. Others include the likes of Luther, Zwingli, Tyndale, Latimer, Cranmer, Coverdale, Bullinger, Ursinus, Zanchi, and many others of their generation. Later, you would have Calvinists like Richard Sibbes, John Davenant, William Twisse, Richard Vines, James Ussher, Stephen Charnock, John Bunyan, Matthew Henry, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, William Shedd, Robert Dabney, and many more advocate for the same thing.²⁶

The problem for us is two-fold. First, almost everyone today is ignorant of this history. It just isn't being taught. It's like these things don't exist, but they do. Second, I think that people have really misunderstood some very important things about "atonement." This comes to the surface when the question arises in our minds, how could any self-respecting Calvinist come to such a conclusion, and we feel this knee-jerk impulse to say, "That's not what they are really saying."

²⁶ My friend David Ponter has an exhaustive list of these from primary sources in what I find an invaluable resource at "For Whom Did Christ Die?" *Calvin and Calvinism* (May 6, no year), http://calvinandcalvinism.com/?page_id=7147.

So allow me to ask a question. What would make a Calvinist's view of unlimited atonement differ from an Arminian's view? I mean, there is no question but that all Calvinists, including everyone I mentioned above, view the Arminian understanding of unlimited atonement as bad. So does their own view differ? The answer is, it very much differs. But how?

The **Arminian** view of unlimited atonement is strictly, *in every sense, unlimited*. Jesus dies for everyone. Period. You appropriate it by your own free will. But for every single Reformed person, whether they believe in limited or unlimited atonement, they also believe that the death of Christ was for the elect in a way that it was not for the non-elect. The classic way this has been stated by everyone except the most ardent hyper-Calvinist, is that **Christ's death is sufficient for all, but efficient for the only the elect**. Not for "some" (i.e. those who use their freewill), but the "elect." In fact, this predates the Reformation. As Davenant says of the medieval schoolmen, "**To them it seemed sufficient to teach that Christ died for all sufficiently, for the predestinated effectually.**"²⁷ For the Arminian, there is no predestination for any individual,

²⁷ **John Davenant**, "A Dissertation on the Death of Christ," in *Exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Colossians* Vol. II, trans. Josiah Allport (London: Hamilton, Adams, and Co., 1832), 336 [313-558]; available from <http://archive.org/stream/expositionofepis02dave#page/310/mode/2up>;

therefore, there is nothing necessarily effectual about the atonement for anyone. It is only effectual incidentally, when someone uses their freewill. But that was completely up to them. Theoretically, no one could use their freewill and Jesus would have died having saved no one. And that is what is so reprehensible about their view to everyone in the Reformation.

The differences in what Reformed people who believes in limited atonement vs. unlimited atonement mean by this phrase is complicated, but both affirm the truthfulness of that sufficient/efficient distinction in one way or another. No Arminian can. That is why both sides were accepted at the assemblies. But let me explain what I think is happening in the Day of Atonement and why I believe what Christ did is following right in line with this minority view when it talks about his death being a propitiation for the whole world, as Calvin said, “indiscriminately.”

At the Day of Atonement, **who is atoned?** The answer is, **everyone**. There is no **Israelites** who is not atoned. In fact, the atonement is for more than just the Israelites. Even **the sojourners** are supposed to rest and reflect on this day, presumably, because they have atonement too. But how can this be? Were all Israelites individually elect? Did all Israelites go to heaven? Did every sojourner in Israel go to

heaven? We can talk of atonement in such terms, because the word can mean “reconciliation.” This is where the language “particular redemption” is more helpful than limited atonement. Only the elect are redeemed by the atonement. Only they are reconciled. But were all these people elect?

But this is where it becomes so important to remember that *it isn't just people who are atoned*. It is also *the tabernacle itself*: the mercy seat, the altar, the tent of meeting, the holy sanctuary. But no one would ever think that the tent of meeting is going to “go to heaven.” Therefore, something can have atonement and not necessarily go to heaven, or as we might like to put it, “be saved.” So, we might call it unlimited covering, unlimited expiation, or something like that and this part has nothing to do with being saved. It is distinct from reconciliation or at-one-ment. Two things are happening in the atonement, not just one. It isn't only about salvation.

What's happening with the tabernacle is *not* the subjective experience of a person moving from death to life, as it is when someone is reconciled. It isn't someone coming to faith in Christ. It is *a legal, ritualistic means of God purging sin from the midst of his people* where so that he may dwell among them. This is objective. This is about God. This is about his righteousness. This is about the contagious

and disastrous effects of sin having to be covered. This is about purging and wiping away what sin does so that he may dwell among them and not break out against them. That's what the priest is doing when he atones for the mercy seat. This is what Christ is doing in Romans 3 as our propitiation. Because that's what Christ is. Christ *is* the propitiation. He is the Atonement. Would anyone really want to say that God is only satisfied in Christ for the elect, but not the elect? No. God is simply satisfied in Christ. Christ is the propitiation and he is not limited in that sense.

Think about this atoning for a place with respect to the new covenant. Here, God is not dwelling only in Israel any longer. He is going to dwell everywhere in his special presence. This is the glorious promise of the prophets. “His rule shall be from sea to sea” (Zech 9:10). “From Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Cush, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea” (Isa 11:11). “From the rising of the sun to its setting” (Mal 1:11). “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea” (Hab 2:14).

Therefore, God had to devise a way for **the entire world to be atoned**, all its people, all of its places, so that *wherever he comes*, he would not break out against us for our contagious uncleanness. This is the fulfillment of the Day of

Atonement in Israel with all Israel and the entire sanctuary complex being atoned. Literally, the world is being atoned, but not saved. This occurred **when Jesus went into heaven itself**. “For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf. Nor was it to offer himself repeatedly, as the high priest enters the holy places every year with blood not his own, for then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages *to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself*” (**Heb 9:24-26**).

“**Putting away sin**” does not mean, here, forgiving people and bringing them to heaven. It means taking away its sting, its contagion, its disease-like effects that penetrated even to the mercy seat in Israel. It means conquering sin itself. It means cleansing the holies. That puts a bit of a different spin on it than most people think, doesn’t it?

But, **there is more in the day of atonement**. As we saw last time, **the people have a responsibility** in all of this. Their responsibility is to **turn from their sins in repentance**, as symbolized by their “**afflicting**” themselves (**Lev 16:29**), as symbolized in the humble entrance of the priest in his simple, *clean clothing* (**16:4**). This means that the *application* of the

atoning work of the priest and the blood is not applied to everyone indiscriminately. Now I *am* talking about salvation. This is why Hebrews goes on to say, “**And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him**” (Heb 9:27-28).

“**Many**” here may very well not mean everyone. Not because atonement wasn’t made for everyone, but because not everyone is eagerly waiting for him. That would mean that the death of Christ, his offering made “once for many,” has **a particular, effectual purpose** to actually save those who are waiting for him.

But who waits for him? Not those who use their freewill. But those who **hear the good news**, who are brought to life by it through the effectual work of the Spirit who is strong and powerful and mighty and gracious and kind to affect such a work in a dead-man’s heart. These are the people who are waiting for him, because they have been brought to faith through this powerful message that Jesus’ blood allows him to dwell in their hearts by his Spirit, because his priestly work on their behalf did all that was necessary to overcome every single thing they have ever done against him, unwittingly or deliberately.

In the end, I agree with **Martin Luther** and would urge to you consider his plea and, if you agree with it, to share it with all you know.

It is certain that you are a part of the world. Do not let your heart deceive you by saying: “The Lord died for Peter and Paul; He rendered satisfaction for them, not for me.” Therefore let everyone who has sin be summoned here, for He was made the expiation for the sins of the whole world and bore the sins of the whole world. For all the godless have been put together and called, but they refuse to accept. Hence it is stated in Is. 49:4: “I have labored in vain.” Christ is so merciful and kind that if it were possible, He would weep for every sinner who is troubled. Of all men He is the mildest, of all the gentlest. With every member He feels more pity than Peter felt under the rod and the blows. Take any man who is extraordinarily kind and gentle. Then you would know that Christ is much kinder to you. For just as He was on earth, so He is in heaven. Thus Christ has been appointed as the Bishop and Savior of our souls (cf. 1 Peter 2:25). But at His own time He will come as Judge. Since we see this, let us give no occasion to gratify lust.²⁸

If you will hear and believe this truth, then know that your own coverings will not work. Only the coverings God

²⁸ **Martin Luther**, “The Catholic Epistles,” in Luther’s *Works*, 30:236-237.

uses will work. There are two, just as there are two goats, but only one atonement, even though both make atonement. **One covering atoned for the earth-sanctuary** so that Jesus might become a friend of sinners. See? Atonement makes God friendly towards us. **The other covering** is that of the sacrifice being applied to the person, be it Adam and Eve or Joshua the high priest. He was a man who had dirty garments. And Satan was accusing him. But the Angel of the LORD said, “**Remove those filthy garments for behold, I have taken away your iniquity and will clothe you with pure vestments.**” This clothing is the clothing of Christ’s righteousness credited to your account when you trust in this very Jesus, who is “*The propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world*” (1Jn 2:2).

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