

Atonement

Isaiah 53:5–6, “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Question: How does Jesus’ death forgive my sin?

Key Verses: Leviticus 17:11; Luke 22:37; 1 Peter 1:18-19

“Jesus died for me.” You hear that all the time in Christian circles—songs, sermons, conversations. Yet what does that mean, precisely? The big theological term *atonement*. You’ll run across that now and again in Scripture and sermons. Over half of its uses in the Bible are in a single book—Leviticus—where it describes the role of a sacrifice to cover the sins of the people. Atonement basically means that you owed a debt and somebody else paid it for you.

According to Scripture, sin has a penalty attached to it. Specifically, our sin is mutiny against the Divine. The penalty is death. Leviticus 17:11, “For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.” To recover our relationship with God there needs to be a blood sacrifice. Perhaps that seems barbaric or archaic. However, I’m not sure our earthly evaluation holds much weight, particularly when we are the ones that broke covenant. We are the ones who marred the good creation. We are the ones poisoned by our own pride and Satan’s seductions. Furthermore, to call God barbaric because he demands death does not align with this self-sacrifice in sending his own son to pay the penalty of that death. Perhaps our best response to this Biblical truth is submission more than critique and obedience more than censure. In light of that, there are three things embedded in Isaiah 53 that will help us grasp with better clarity the idea of atonement in the Bible.

Great Surprise of Isaiah 53 for Modern America

The first sentence of this essay reads, “Jesus died for me.” That is a particularly American way of expressing this kernel of truth. For the Jews it would be “us” not “me”. It would be nation, not individual. Truth be told, that is far more accurate. The sin of Israel was not merely a personal peccadillo. Their sin was a national crisis that led to exile. Whether we like it or not, whether we perceive it or not, our own nation in our own time is experiencing national levels of moral bankruptcy. It is not just me who needs a savior, it is “we the people.” Our communities, our churches, and our nation could use a good bit of saving.

Isaiah 53 is one of four poetic portions of the book that have been labelled “Suffering Servant Songs” (Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–13; 50:4–11; and 52:13–53:12). Each of them describes how the Servant Suffers on behalf of the nation and brings healing to God’s people. Some have seen the Suffering Servant as the entire nation of Israel. That is, God’s people suffering for his

cause. The problem with that is that those suffering need a savior. Since the nation itself was the problem, the nation can hardly be expected to save itself. Furthermore, during the first century, the Suffering Savior was never expected to be a nation, a military, or a corporation. It was an individual identified as the Messiah. Case in point: The Ethiopian Eunuch was reading Isaiah 53 on his way home from the Temple and asked Philip about this Suffering Servant, “Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” (Acts 8:34). Philip, of course, took the opportunity to preach Jesus—he is that Suffering Servant. The point is that both Philip and the Ethiopian expected Isaiah 53 to be fulfilled by a Messianic Savior. Philip wasn’t the only one to talk like that. According to the Jewish Talmud (*B. Sota* 14a), Moses asked that his own life be blotted out for the sake of the nation (see Exod 32:32). This conversation was couched in terms of Isaiah 53:

“Because he poured out his soul unto death”—because he surrendered himself to die, as it is said, and if not, blot me, I pray thee etc. “And was numbered with the transgressors”—because he was numbered with them who were condemned to die in the wilderness. “Yet he bore the sins of many”—because he secured atonement for the making of the golden calf.

It was clear back then, and should be today, we need a savior. What was not clear was that such a savior would suffer on behalf of his people rather than causing suffering for his enemies. Enter Jesus. He was a very different kind of savior. Nonetheless, his intention was not merely personal; it was national. He was not rescuing a relationship but a people formerly known by the name Israel now called Church.

Great Surprise of Isaiah 53 for Ancient Israel

This Idea that the savior would suffer turned the normal Jewish perspective on its head. In Judaism the wicked were supposed to be sacrificed—a “ransom” for the righteous (cf. Isa 43:3, 14; Prov 21:18; 1Q34; *T. Benj.* 3:8). The Messiah was to save Israel with power, not suffering. He was to dish out the pain, not absorb it in himself. The expectation was that he would conquer Israel’s enemies not lay down his own life. To illustrate how “upside down” this idea is, read this ancient Jewish paraphrase of the passage called a Targum: Isaiah 53:3 says, “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” The Targum translates this as: “Then the glory of all the kingdoms will be for contempt and cease; they will be faint and mournful, behold, as a man of sorrows and appointed for sicknesses; and as when the face of the Shekhinah was taken up from us, they are despised and not esteemed.” Isaiah 53:4 reads, “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.” Targum rewords this as: “Then he will beseech

concerning our sins and our iniquities for his sake will be forgiven; yet we were esteemed wounded, smitten before the LORD it was a pleasure to forgive the sins of us all for his sake.” Isaiah 53:5 states, “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” Targum interprets, “And he will build the sanctuary which was profaned for our sins, handed over for our iniquities; and by his teaching his peace will increase upon us, and in that we attach ourselves to his words our sins will be forgiven us.”

Why does this matter? Because while Israel expected a King and got a sacrifice. We expect a sacrifice and got a King. Power and sacrifice are not antithetical as long as a resurrection stands between them. What Israel had to learn was that their Messiah was a suffering servant. What we must remember is that our Savior is our international leader of a global organization known as the church through which his rule and reign on earth is accomplished.

Great Fulfillment of Isaiah 53 for Jesus

This Servant Song is chalk full of allusions to Jesus’ life and ministry.

52:14 “His appearance was marred beyond human semblance” fits the description of his brutal beatings.

53:2 “He had no form of majesty that we should look at him” is true of a peasant carpenter.

53:3 “He was despised and rejected by men” was true during his execution.

53:4-8 “He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows,” “He was pierced for our transgressions,” “with his wounds we are healed,” “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all,” “Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter,” “Stricken for the transgression of my people,” are descriptions of the cross.

53:9 “They made his grave with the wicked and with the rich man in his death,” is a poetic juxtaposition of the criminals on the cross and the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea.

53:10 “When his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand” predicts the resurrection.

53:12 “Shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities” describes Jesus’ substitutionary atonement.

Given all this obvious overlap, it is stunning that the New Testament authors didn’t make more of Isaiah 53. Nonetheless, what is stated is clear enough. Jesus himself alluded to Isaiah 53:12 in Luke 22:37 “He was counted among the lawless.” Significantly, Jesus introduced the quote as a fulfillment of prophecy, “This scripture must be fulfilled in me.” He concluded it in the same way: “Indeed what is written about me is being fulfilled.” Hence, it is framed with the gravitas of fulfilled prophecy. Jesus saw himself as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. In fact, he spells

that out in Mark 10:45 as his vocational purpose connecting both national leadership and personal sacrifice: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” This echoes Isaiah 53:11, “Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”

Mark 10:45 is no lone wolf. All the New Testament authors except James and Jude speak unanimously of the substitutionary effect of Jesus’ death, (John 11:49–52; Acts 20:28; Rom 3:23–25; 2 Cor 5:14–15; Gal 3:13–14; 1 Tim 2:5–6; Titus 2:14; Heb 9:22, 28; 1 Pet 1:18–19; 1 John 2:2; Rev 5:9). Jesus himself is the most likely source for this peculiar idea. After all, each of the Gospels remembers Jesus as speaking of his death as beneficial for others (esp. Mark 10:45/Matt 20:28; Luke 22:19–20; John 12:24, 32). Three prominent New Testament Authors are particularly clear about Jesus’ victory through suffering.

The Apostle **Paul** writes, “For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again,” (2 Cor 5:14-15).

His fellow Apostle and the first Gospel preach, **Peter** said, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect,” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Finally, the beloved Apostle **John**, one of the inner three stated, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world, (1 John 2:2). There is a clear univocal voice in the New Testament: Through Jesus’ suffering and death, we were released from our bondage and he was enthroned with the Father.

Key Points:

- Atonement is a necessary payment of blood sacrifice for our sins.
- Jesus sacrificed his life to save a nation not merely individuals.
- Sacrifice and Victory are not antithetical. The former is the means to the latter.
- The New Testament is unanimous in applying the principle of Isaiah 53 to Jesus.

Action Step: Mark Isaiah 53 in your Bible to read the next time you take communion.

Further Resources: Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (1983).