

Pierced for Our Transgressions

Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. Isaiah 53:4-5

Jesus lived a short, humanly-speaking uneventful life on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea nearly 2000 years ago. As a young man he worked in his father's carpentry trade until he was thirty years old. His ministry lasted three short years when he died the death of a common criminal, crucified on a Roman cross. And yet today over two billion people worship Jesus as God as an untold number have since His death. Why has human history revolved around this man? What is the significance of Jesus' death? Christians worship Jesus because he died in their place, for their sins. This is known as substitutionary atonement ("at-one-ment") which transforms the scandal of the cross from a gruesome method of execution into a symbol of forgiveness, victory and life. The thread of atonement is woven throughout the Bible, filling out the necessity and accomplishment of Christ on the cross as our substitute.

Atonement in the Bible

Jews and students of the Old Testament recognize the importance of Yom Kippur. Once a year, the high priest offered two goats, a sin offering and a scapegoat. The goat used for the sin offering was killed and its blood sprinkled on the mercy seat within the most holy place of the tabernacle or temple (Lev. 16:15). The scapegoat was then brought before the high priest who put both of his hands on its head and confessed the nation's sins, symbolically transferring the sins of the people onto the animal which was then led off into the wilderness (16:21-22). The Day of Atonement revealed that blood had to be shed for sin and sin had to be taken away and eliminated from the people of Israel (Heb. 9:22). But the sacrifice of animals could never accomplish what they symbolized which is why Yom Kippur foreshadowed the real atoning death of Christ (Heb. 10:1-7). The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23), and the wages could not be avoided by the death of a goat. Instead of eternal death and punishment, the Bible teaches that God offered Himself, not just on our behalf, but as one of us.

- Hebrews 2:17 Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.
- Romans 3:25 God set forth [Jesus] as a propitiation by His blood.
- 1 John 2:22 And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.
- 1 John 4:10 In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.
- 2 Corinthians 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

- Hebrews 9:28 So Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many. To those who eagerly wait for Him He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.
- Isaiah 53:6-7 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. He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.

Applications

Christianity is fundamentally different than every other religion in which the god or sage tells his friends how to save themselves or become righteous through good deeds or knowledge. Only in the Bible does God enter into the condition of His enemies in order that He might suffer and die on their behalf, and thereby bring them to Himself. For those who embrace it, this truth annihilates all self-image based on performance, and therefore all insecurity. God loved you when you didn't love Him. We are called to imitate Jesus who endured the cross for the joy that was set before Him, the joy of loving others and seeing them transformed.