

Prayers

Thoughts on prayer

Let your praise today be for the wondrous works of God, which are all around you. During the course of this day, look around you and see what God has done. You may have to look beyond the surface of human achievement, but God is always present, waiting to be found. Find Him and praise Him!

A prayer for today

Christ, I call upon Your Name, for You are with me. I am never alone, never without help, never without a friend, for I dwell in You and You in me! ‘Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.’ AMEN *(David Adam)*

Meditation

Love of Jesus, fill us up and overflow
so all the world may know Your glory!

Joy of Jesus, surprise us now and lift us high
so all may see our glorious worship!

Peace of Jesus, flood our hearts, consume us
so all our suffering may be sealed!

Light of Jesus, change our lives, transform us
so all our strength is focused!

Touch of Jesus, envelop us and warm us
so all our wounds are wondrously healed!

Strength of Jesus, help us and encourage us
so all our energy is fruitful in Your service!

Bible Passage

Hebrews 2:16-18

¹⁶ He did not intent to come to assist angels, but to give real help to the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷ This is why He had to become like His brothers and sisters in every possible way, and so become a compassionate and faithful High Priest in the service of God, making atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ As a result, He now has the power to help those who are being tested because He Himself was tested through suffering.

Review

SUMMARY

Jesus is like a Jewish High Priest who atones for our sin. But what does 'atonement' mean? This is a Biblical way of explaining that Jesus' sacrifice on the Cross makes it possible for sinful people to be accepted into God's presence. 'Atonement' is about restoring relationships; those separated are enabled to be 'at-one'

Everything so far in Hebrews is designed to help us understand that God's work is done primarily for us through His Son, and not, as some Jews and others of the first century thought, through angels. This is not to defame angels who have always been at God's disposal for a variety of work, from delivering God's messages to people and prophets to protecting God's people both spiritually and practically. The work of salvation is a different matter however, and in this passage, Hebrews begins to dig more deeply into the role of Jesus in this.

The saving work of Jesus is a wonderful thing and we can relatively easily speak about it or confess our sins and accept our redemption; but in our praise and worship of God at this awesome benefit, we should not skip trying to understand how this work was actually achieved. This is what Hebrews now begins to explain. As the letter continues we will soon find ourselves in awe at the details revealed by the letter, especially from Old Testament Scripture.

Jesus became a human being in order to help people

The first point here is that Jesus '*had to become like His brothers and sisters in every possible way*' (2:17). What a wonderfully expressive phrase. Each time Hebrews speaks of Jesus, it emphasises the connection He has with people, even though He is God and comes from God. How often do we speak of being related to Jesus as a brother or a sister? This is deeply intimate language and justifiably so; Jesus was both a very real man and also God.

There may be no way we can ultimately understand this, but there are still many aspects of it we can explore for our benefit, and this is what we must do. Jesus was God come to earth as a man, He was no peculiar, superior being, commanding others or being an unbearable 'know all'. He was an emotionally secure and complete man able to relate to people in a powerful, indeed beautiful way. Indeed, the one great feature of Jesus according to the Gospels is that He was deeply compassionate and understanding of people in almost every situation. Think for example of Jesus dealing with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), or healing crowds of ill people after helping Peter's the mother-in-law (Matt 8:14f.), or blessing a child (Matt 18:2f.).

As we go forward in Hebrews, we must not forget Jesus' humanity, but it is also the starting point for everything Hebrews says about the Saviour.

A compassionate and faithful High Priest

The High Priest is essential to Judaism, but few understand what Scripture says about the role. As Israel emerged as a nation, the tribe of Levi was set aside to do the work of worship; so in the wilderness, the Levites performed all Levitical sacrifices, and the sacrifice of animals was not just for worshipping God, it was the right way to slaughter animals. 'Fellowship' sacrifices, for example, were divided between an offering to God and that given to worshippers to eat.

Both Moses and Aaron came from the tribe of Levi, and where Moses became the great leader of God's people who took them out of Egypt, Aaron was made the 'High Priest', the most senior of his tribe. The job of the priest was to represent the people to God and God to the people, and after being ordained to the role (Exodus 29), Aaron was the first 'High Priest', with a special role in the regular sacrifices and prayers offered to God in worship (Exodus 29f.), first in the tabernacle and later, the Temple. The most important sacrifice performed by the High Priest was at an annual festival called the 'atonement', the purpose of which was to seek and obtain the mercy of God for the conscious and unintended sins of God's people. This one great act (see Leviticus 4,5) was central to the worship life of Judaism.

Over time, the role of the High Priest became extremely important, and the High Priestly families of later generation were descended from Aaron, and held great power, especially when after the Exile, the rule of kings waned and Israel need spiritual direction (Neh. 3:1f., Haggai 1,2, Zech 3:1f.). In Jesus' day, they retained great power even though the country was ruled militarily by Rome (see the role of the High Priest Caiaphas in Jesus' death - Matthew 26).

Jesus makes atonement for the sins of the people

It was only natural therefore that Hebrews, in trying to speak to Jewish people about the details of Jesus' work of salvation, describes Jesus as a 'great High Priest' who takes away sin (2:17). The focus here is on the word 'atonement'. What does it mean? It is all very well for us to say that what the old sacrifice for atonement did for the people of Israel in Old Testament times, Jesus has done for us now. But there is more.

In the Old Testament act of atonement, a 'scapegoat' was released into the desert having had the sins of Israel confessed over it through the laying on of hands (Leviticus 16:18-27). This was dramatic and symbolic, but could such a ritual be said to truly take away sins?

The word used here for 'atonement' is fascinating and almost untranslatable. It is a word which emphasises the idea of something that is truly effective. It also contains within it the ideas of pardon, mercy, and significantly, forgiveness. So the sacrificial death of Jesus is not a mechanical ritual by which we are saved. These words mean atonement is practical, merciful, effective, emotional, and utterly specific in the way it targets sin. We are not saved by general ritual; we are saved by the grace of God working in the sacrificial death of Jesus to deal effectively with the sins we confess to God. Atonement is one word, but it means so much.

Jesus' power to help; spiritual and practical truth

The last sentence of this phrase is dramatic. We can trust the effective power of our salvation, says Hebrews, because Jesus was a person, just like us! Here, we have departed completely from anything a regular Jew might accept. Yet this verse (2:18) has for centuries been a source of great comfort. The atonement works for us because Jesus has suffered as we suffer, and more so.

The connection of salvation and suffering is important. Some preach that by faith in God we receive the benefits of His love and become rich in God's blessing; indeed, these blessings can often be material benefit. Yet the truth is that over the sweep of history the Christian church has grown when the church has suffered, and suffered for Christ, that is, for the Gospel. So because of this every Christian who suffers may find spiritual zest and zeal for life. Suffering is the authentic sign of the work of God, and though we do not seek it, when it comes, especially as persecution from people or from the devil (sometimes as sickness or torment), we can know that God is truly at work in us for His glory.

Application

Discipleship issues

Specific salvation

It seems to me that the wondrous thing about the work of God in Christ is that His grace is not general but specific. My sins are not taken away because some church leader prays about it, or because I am a part of a great church which is obedient to the Gospel, or because prayers are said for me when I need it. My sins are dealt with by the grace of God when I accept that Jesus has already won my salvation on the Cross; atonement is done, and all I have to do is accept it! Of course, although God's grace is sufficient for the sins of everyone, atonement becomes real as we each submit specific sin to the Saviour, whether through confession or through submission to the Father's will, or however the Spirit leads us to expose sin.

Why should anyone stand back from this glorious benefit? Once we know that God will atone for our sins through Christ, why should we not confess all to receive the approval of our Lord? In truth, if we keep our sins hidden, they remain a barrier to our salvation and practical Christian service, and this is not because the grace of God is insufficient, but because we are reluctant to confess all.

Unfortunately, the main reason why people stand back from submitting to the complete grace of God is because they do not trust this message completely, and prefer to keep parts of their lives untouched by His love. He has some of us but not all, and people turn away from the benefits of God's grace by refusing to submit aspects of their lives they like or are comfortable with. They would rather remain as they are than be completely transformed, and that is tragic.

Suffering

Inwardly, people perceive that if they yield completely to God then this will have consequences they do not wish to deal with. They may have to release finances (as did Levi - Mark 2:14), they may have to face reshaping their lives and doing things like having 'quiet times' or working for the poor and giving away they feel they do not have. God always calls His people to move away from their comfortably arranged lives. In addition, the dread of suffering is also one of the reasons why people hold back.

Yet suffering is something we can never avoid. It is a constant companion to life, and although people try to arrange their lifestyle, home, and work in as much comfort and security as possible, suffering always creeps in. For example, society today is good at keeping people alive, but only for longer; as many people die as were born. Sickness and chronic illness remain a scourge within society because hospitals do not cure all ills, especially of the mind.

Yet this can be precisely where we find our comfort in this passage. Jesus knows what it is like to suffer, from the pain of a lashing to the torment of being abandoned. So when we suffer, we may look to a passage of Scripture such as this and find comfort and blessing. Jesus has been before us, and out of His suffering, by His grace, comes our redemption and ultimately our peace, whatever earthly state afflicts our souls.

Questions for groups

1. *What does this passage reveal to you about the nature of salvation, and what can you learn from the idea of 'atonement'?*

2. *Does the idea that Jesus suffered help you or do you find this strange in any way? If possible, discuss this with others.*
 3. *How do you deal with sins when you find out that something you have done or are doing is not what God would want from you?*
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Final Prayer

Fill us with the joy of Your presence O Lord Jesus Christ! Clean our dirty souls, get rid of the rubbish of this world, and give us the delight of knowing that in You, we can be free to be creative and imaginative in the exercise of our faith. Praise God! AMEN