



Tough Questions From Christian Teens

What About Sacrificial Atonement?

By

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We are answering tough questions from Christian teens in this special series. If you haven't read previous questions and answers, we invite you to look back at posts from the past several weeks and read those that interest you.

We also invite you to share these questions and answers with young people in your family and church. It is estimated that more than 70 percent of teenagers from Christian families are walking away from their belief in Christ during high school or college. Our hope is that answering some of their tough questions will help many think seriously about the great reasons to believe in Jesus.

Here is the next tough question from a Christian teen.

The question came from one of my students who I've known for many years and is now an older teen. That's one of the reasons my answer is more in-depth with him. You may want to simplify your answer with a younger teen.

How is it appropriate for God to allow someone different from the offender to take the punishment? It seems analogous to a judge allowing a murderer's willing father to be executed in his stead. An answer to this one that I find quite solid is that sacrificial atonement only works when the judge is also the offended and the sacrifice.

Awesome question!

This is the heart of the Bible and the Gospel of Christ.

We first read about 'atonement' in Exodus 29 –

They shall eat those things with which the atonement was made, to consecrate and to sanctify them; but an outsider shall not eat them, because they are holy. v. 33

The context is the consecration of Aaron and his sons as God's priests. The Hebrew word translated 'atonement' is *kaphar*. It means 'to cover over, pacify, make propitiation.' The first time we find the word in the Bible is Genesis 6:14 –

Make yourself an ark of gopherwood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and outside with pitch.

The words 'cover it' are the translation of *kaphar*. The Hebrew word for 'pitch' is *kopher*, which means 'ransom, the price of a life.' We see in God's salvation of Noah and his family the beautiful picture of 'atonement' – atonement by means of a ransom payment.

God's 'atonement' is a 'salvific covering.' He designed it 'before time began', 'before the foundation of the world' ..

And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear; knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was

foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was [h]manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God. 1 PETER 1:17-21

... who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began, but has now been revealed by the appearing of our Savior Jesus Christ, who has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. 2 TIMOTHY 1:9-10

... in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began, but has in due time manifested His word through preaching, which was committed to me according to the commandment of God our Savior. TITUS 1:2-3

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and

without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will. to the praise of the glory of His grace, by which He made us accepted in the Beloved.
EPHESIANS 1:3-6

All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. If anyone has an ear, let him hear. REVELATION 13:8-9

We see the first ‘covering’ introduced in Genesis 3:7 ..

Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.

Adam and Eve made ‘coverings’ for themselves as soon as their eyes were opened following their disobedience to God. They sewed and ‘made’ coverings for themselves because they knew they were naked.

The Hebrew word for ‘coverings’ is *ḥăḡōrōt*. The word means ‘belt, girdle’ and was a covering for the ‘loin,’ which fit with Adam and Eve covering their nakedness.

That was a human attempt to make a covering for what brought them shame. Genesis 2:25 tells us that Adam and Eve were both naked and not ashamed prior to Satan’s temptation.

What God did was to cover Adam and Eve Himself ..

Also for Adam and his wife the Lord God made tunics of skin, and clothed them. GENESIS 3:21

The Hebrew words for ‘tunics of skin’ are *kāṭēnōwt* ‘ōwr and means God ‘clothed’ Adam and Eve with animal ‘hides.’ Where did God get animal hide? Removing hide from an animal is done after killing an animal. Why would God kill animals to use their hides to cover Adam and Eve?

This introduces us to ‘substitutionary atonement,’ which is the heart of your question:

How is it appropriate for God to allow someone different from the offender to take the punishment?

Adam and Eve tried to hide themselves with fig leaves. Their attempt to cover their shame wasn't suitable to 'atone' for their sin against God. God introduced how He would atone for sin by the death of a 'substitution' – animals in this situation.

Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat. And the Lord respected Abel and his offering. GENESIS 4:4

We see Adam and Eve's son Abel continue 'substitutionary atonement' when he brought the 'firstborn' of his flock and their 'fat.' Why would Abel do that?

Look back at Genesis 3:15 for a minute. This is part of what God said to Satan (the serpent).

And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel.

God introduced His eternal plan of Jesus Christ being the 'substitutionary atonement' in the Garden of Eden. Everything we read about animal offerings points to Christ's death on the Cross, beginning with God making a covering for Adam and Eve from

the hides of animals and continuing with Abel's righteous offering of the firstborn of his flock.

As we read through the Old Testament Law we find multiple commands about animal sacrifices used for 'substitutionary atonement' for the sins of individuals, families and the nation of Israel. However, when we come to the New Testament we learn that the blood of animals could not take away sins. So, why thousands of years of God commanding people to offer the blood of animals as atonement? Because the blood of those animals looked ahead to the day when the Son of God would shed His blood to atone for sin.

For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins. But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. Therefore, when He came into the world, He said: 'Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, But a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices

for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come— In the volume of the book it is written of Me—To do Your will, O God.’ Previously saying, ‘Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them’ (which are offered according to the law), then He said, ‘Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God.’ He takes away the first that He may establish the second. By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. HEBREWS 10:1-4

Jesus paid the penalty for our sins. His death on the Cross was the ‘substitutionary atonement’ God had looked toward from designing His plan in eternity.

God said this about the blood of bulls ..

Thus you shall do to Aaron and his sons, according to all that I have commanded you. Seven days you shall consecrate them. And you shall offer a bull every day as a sin offering for atonement. You shall cleanse the altar when you make atonement for it, and you shall anoint it to sanctify it. Seven days you shall make atonement for the altar and

sanctify it. And the altar shall be most holy. Whatever touches the altar must be holy. EXODUS 29:35-37

Leviticus 16 is God's Law concerning atonement. I recommend reading that chapter, then immediately reading Hebrews 10. Reading the two together will help with perspective on substitutionary atonement.

You may also find it helpful to read Isaiah 53 since it prophesied the violent death of the sin-bearing Messiah hundreds of years before Jesus died on the Cross ..

But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed.' ISAIAH 53:5

Animal blood never had the power to take away sins. The only blood that could do that was the shed blood of God's Son on the Cross. When God introduced blood sacrifice to Adam and Eve, He was showing them how He would fulfill His promise that the Seed of the woman would defeat Satan and destroy his works. As John wrote ..

'He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. 1 JOHN 3:8

In answer to your question about the appropriateness of God allowing someone different from the offender to take the punishment, you used this analogy ..

It seems analogous to a judge allowing a murderer's willing father to be executed in his stead.

In the case of sin, neither the murderer nor his or her father qualify to atone for the sin of murder. They are both sinners and unable to atone for sin. The murderer cannot atone for his sin and the father cannot substitute himself for the murderer because he is also a sinner and under the curse ..

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them.' But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for 'the just shall live by faith. GALATIANS 3:10-11

Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. ROMANS 3:20-26

We all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, which means only someone without sin would qualify to atone for sin. Who is that? Jesus Christ.

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. 2 CORINTHIANS 5:20-21

Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. HEBREWS 4:14-15

God “passed over the sins that were previously committed” for thousands of years “to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.” Those years of animal sacrifices, from Adam and Abel to Noah and his sons to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and the priests and prophets of Israel, came to completion when Jesus died on the Cross. Redemption is “in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood.” Jesus Christ died in our place. He died for our sins. He paid the ransom God accepted. We have access to salvation because of Christ’s great sacrifice on the Cross.

Thank God for substitutionary atonement! Without it no one would have any hope for salvation and eternal life.

Thanks so much for your question!

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