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Introduction

The Doctrine (Church Belief) of Atonement¹

An old herdsman was taken to the hospital. He was sick, blind, and dying. While he was there his granddaughter came every day and read to him. The old man enjoyed the soft sound of the child's voice. One day she found a Bible in the room. She opened the Bible to 1 John 1 and began to read. The old man listened very carefully. When he heard the words "And the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin," he stopped her.

The old man: "Tell me, is that really there?"

Granddaughter: "Yes, Grandpa, it is there."

The old man: "Could you read it to me again?"

Granddaughter: "'And the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.'"

For a few seconds there was silence. Then the old man asked, "Are you quite sure that is there, in that book?"

"Yes, Grandpa, quite sure."

"Please, take my hand and place my finger on that verse and read it to me again." As she did it, tears came down from the old man's sightless eyes. And his voice spoke slowly and boldly: "My dear child . . . if anyone should ask you how I died, please tell them that I died . . . cleansed."

What this story shows is that the doctrine of atonement is not an empty dream of salvation.² Instead, it is the saving power of God in the lives of fallen human³ sinners.

What is atonement? The word *atonement* means that any block to fellowship with God is removed. In other words, atonement means being restored to full fellowship with God. But it also includes the idea of expiation (sin payment). *Expiation* is a fancy word that means removing any barrier (block) that appears between God and us. The doctrine of atonement focuses on the sacrifice⁴ of Christ as the full payment for our sins. This payment removes the barrier between us and God. Then it leaves us reconciled (restored; brought back to God again) to Him.

The atonement is the basic doctrine of the Bible. All other doctrines depend on it. It is centered in Christ's life, death, and return to life. It also points to Christ's going to heaven to work as our High Priest and His soon return to earth.

1. atonement—Jesus' dying for our sins so we would not have to die for our sins; the cleansing and forgiving power of Jesus' death to wash away our sins.

2. salvation—God's plan for saving sinners from eternal (without end) death.

3. human—having to do with men, women, or children.

4. sacrifice—the act of giving up something of value, such as a life, to save or help someone or something.

It calls our attention to our great need of salvation, and to God's loving effort (work) to save us.

A proper understanding of the Bible doctrine of God also is important for understanding the atonement. God's love made it possible for Him to restore us to fellowship with Him through Jesus Christ. We should never think that the death of Christ was necessary for God to love us. God sent Christ to die for us because He *already* loved us. The Bible doctrine of atonement is based on God's love for sinful and rebellious humans (people).

The full benefits (good things; rewards) of the atonement are given to those who accept God's offer of salvation in Christ with the Holy Spirit's leading. This is the only way to receive forgiveness and reconciliation.⁵ The believers' hearts are filled with love and thankfulness to God and Christ for this unequalled sacrifice.

We hope that during this quarter you will study the meaning of Christ's sacrifice as man's Substitute.⁶ We, too, hope that this study will make you more dedicated to serve the One who suffered so much for us. Then you can live or die in peace, as the old herdsman did.

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5. reconciliation—the act of making peace with God again; restoring or bringing a person back to God's favor and to a full relationship with God.

6. substitute—someone or something that takes the place of another person or thing. Jesus is our Substitute because He died for our sins.