

The Import of “Atonement”

When the guns of August, 1914 erupted, people recognized society had not progressed as far as the excitement of the industrial age proffered. The optimism of the 19th century was chilled by a failed 20th. As theologians looked around for new answers to eternal questions, one of the first casualties was what Scripture teaches about the atonement. Theologians, looking elsewhere for a more humanly acceptable view of God, i.e., a God who would not require such a primitive blood-based atonement, sought different reasons for the death of Jesus the Christ. They de-mystified His sacrifice by offering a “new” core reason for His death. His death was not to satisfy an angry, jealous, vengeful God, but to demonstrate God’s love by providing the perfectly transcendent example of love. Mirroring the Marcion notion that the “God of the Old Testament” was not the God of the New, the 20th century offered new flavors of an old heresy. The 21st still suffers.

In Romans, Paul presents a case for accountability—regardless of one’s exposure to the revealed will of God. Whether pagan, Jew, or believing Gentile, all are condemned because of our nature. Demonstrating that only the blood of Christ will propitiate our sins, Paul uses an “Old Testament” idea—כִּפָּר, the mercy seat, in Greek, ἱλαστέριον—to prove a solution to an eternal problem. We have sinned beyond restoration, and only the mercy seat, the propitiating act of God can restore us. The sacrificial blood of Christ is the one and only solution. Paul writes:

²¹But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. ²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, ²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement,¹ through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26)

The key to understanding why the Christ had to be sacrificed is found in understanding the word “atonement.” Otherwise, Paul’s claim that justice would be found through faith in His blood makes neither logical nor spiritual sense.

The frequency of the word “atonement” (ἱλαστέριον) in Romans and Hebrews may only be understood from its Old Testament contexts (*kaphar*; see Table 1).

¹Or as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin.

Table 1

“Atonement” Frequencies of כִּפָּר and ἱλαστήριον		
<u>Exodus</u>	7	<u>Psalms</u> 3
<u>Leviticus</u>	44	<u>Proverbs</u> 2
<u>Numbers</u>	15	<u>Isaiah</u> 5
<u>Deuteronomy</u>	2	<u>Jeremiah</u> 1
<u>1 Samuel</u>	1	<u>Ezekiel</u> 6
<u>2 Samuel</u>	1	<u>Daniel</u> 1
<u>1 Chronicles</u>	1	ἱλαστήριον
<u>2 Chronicles</u>	2	<u>Romans 3:25</u> 1
<u>Nehemiah</u>	1	<u>Hebrews 2:17 & 9:5</u> 2

Given the abundant use of “atonement” (כִּפָּר, *kaphar*) in the Hebrew Scriptures, one must go there first to understand what Paul means in Romans when he says Christ was presented by God as a sacrifice for atonement, through faith in His blood. As noted in Table 2, *kaphar* was a primitive root, a cover (as a primitive form of tar/asphalt). Metaphorically, *kaphar* was used to communicate pardon (e.g., 2 Chronicles 30:18), reconciliation (e.g., Leviticus 16:20), forgiveness (e.g., Jeremiah 18:23) and appeasement (e.g., Genesis 3:20).

Paul uses ἱλαστήριον² to communicate this mercy seat in Romans 3:25. It is from the kapporeth (the lid of the Ark, the “mercy seat”) that Paul was probably founding his argument. Several arguments support this contention. For example, the LXX uses ἱλαστήριον to translate kapporeth, the word that Tyndale translated from Luther’s German translation, “gnadenstuhl,” which literally means “seat of grace” as in the location of grace.

²Relating to an appeasing or expiating, having placating or expiating force, expiatory; a means of appeasing or expiating, a propitiation. Used regarding the cover of the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, which was sprinkled with the blood of the expiatory victim on the annual day of atonement (this rite signifying that the life of the people, the loss of which they had merited by their sins, was offered to God in the blood as the life of the victim, and that God by this ceremony was appeased and their sins expiated); hence the lid of expiation. From Strong’s Concordance, as accessed 3/13/2008 at <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Lexicons/Greek/grk.cgi?search=2435&version=nas&type=eng&submit=Find>

Table 2
kaphar כִּפֶּר Lexical Contexts

Strong Concordance Number	Hebrew Transliteration כִּפֶּר	Lexical Alternatives ³
<u>3722</u>	<i>kaphar</i> <i>kaw-far'</i>	a primitive root; to cover (specifically with bitumen); figuratively, to expiate or condone, to placate or cancel:-- appease, make (an atonement, cleanse, disannul, forgive, be merciful, pacify, pardon, purge (away), put off, (make) reconcile(-liation).
<u>3723</u>	<i>kaphar</i> <i>kaw-fawr'</i>	from ' <i>kaphar</i> ' (3722); a village (as protected by walls): -village. Compare 'kphiy'r' (3715).
<u>3724</u>	<i>kopher</i> <i>ko'-fer</i>	from ' <i>kaphar</i> ' (3722); properly, a cover, i.e. (literally) a village (as covered in); (specifically) bitumen (as used for coating), and the henna plant (as used for dyeing); figuratively, a redemption-price:--bribe, camphire, pitch, ransom, satisfaction, sum of money, village.
<u>3725</u>	<i>kippur</i> <i>kip-poor'</i>	from ' <i>kaphar</i> ' (3722); expiation (only in plural): -atonement.
<u>3726</u>	<i>Kphar ha-'Ammowniy</i> <i>kef-ar' haw-am-mo-nee'</i>	from ' <i>kaphar</i> ' (3722) and ''Ammowniy' (5984), with the article interposed; village of the Ammonite; Kefar-ha-Ammoni, a place in Palestine:--Chefar-haamonai.
<u>3727</u>	<i>kapporeth</i> <i>kap-po'-reth</i>	from ' <i>kaphar</i> ' (3722); a lid (used only of the cover of the sacred Ark):--mercy seat.

Given the import of Paul’s use of ἱλαστέριον, understanding the lexical meaning becomes important. Therefore, how ἱλαστέριον is used in the New Testament bears more scrutiny. Consider for example, Hebrews 2:17.

For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for⁴ the sins of the people.

The author of Hebrews demonstrates that the ultimate high priest, Jesus the Christ, is superior to all preceding priests, even Melchizedek to whom Abraham showed respect.

³Strong’s Hebrew Dictionary, <https://www.sacrednamebible.com/kjvstrongs/STRHEB37.htm>

⁴Or *and that he might turn aside God’s wrath, taking away.*

He is superior in that He overcomes the power of death, and even he who possesses the power of death (i.e., τον διαβολον). It is His role, as the faithful high priest of τον θεον, to “make propitiation” [ἱλασκεσθαι].

Consider also Hebrews 9:5 where the Hebrews writer uses ἱλαστέριον as a direct, not metaphorical, reference to the Ark of the Covenant’s “mercy seat.” “Above it [the Ark of the Covenant] were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat [ἱλαστέριον].” Thus, ἱλαστέριον does indeed refer to the *kaphar* referenced in the Scriptures noted in Table 2.



We can conclude then, when Paul uses ἱλαστέριον⁵ as an idea to communicate this mercy seat, he was asserting that the atonement of Christ is:

1. An expiatory-sacrifice; i.e., a sacrifice which conciliates the offended party, in this case, Jehovah—the God of the universe.
2. A blood-sacrifice; i.e., a sacrifice which necessitates the loss of the sacrificed entity, in this case, Jesus the Christ, the Creator of the universe (Colossians 1:16).
3. A mercy⁶-driven sacrifice; i.e., a sacrifice which is not offered by the offending party, human beings, but by God. If it were a *justice*-driven sacrifice, then the offending party would need to provide a perfect sacrifice, one without blemish.

⁵Relating to an appeasing or expiating, having placating or expiating force, expiatory; a means of appeasing or expiating, a propitiation. Used regarding the cover of the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, which was sprinkled with the blood of the expiatory victim on the annual day of atonement (this rite signifying that the life of the people, the loss of which they had merited by their sins, was offered to God in the blood as the life of the victim, and that God by this ceremony was appeased and their sins expiated); hence the lid of expiation. From Strong’s Concordance, at <https://bible.crosswalk.com/Lexicons/Greek/grk.cgi?search=2435&version=nas&type=eng&submit=Find>

⁶The ἱλαστέριον is a **mercy** driven sacrifice because the root, to show mercy, of the word ἱλαστέριον is found in Luke and used as such, for example, by him. See Luke 18:13—But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, “God, be **merciful** [ἱλασθητι] to me, the sinner!”

Conclusion and Application

Our view of God determines how we live our life. If there is a single jewel in the Christian faith, it is that we must have a high view of God. In fact, how we live is determined by our view of God. If we view God as far flung deity resting on a stool light years away, then our life will reflect a distantly cold spirituality. Not only will God be a cool, if not cold, relationship, but our relationships with others as well will suffer from frostbite. If we view God as a sovereign part of our everyday life, then God is Holy Spirit, the παρακλητ—(paraclete) one who walks beside. If we view God as the high priest of all high priests, then God is our intercessory sacrifice. If we view God as *our* Father, then we fear not His wrath, but disappointing Him. It is the Son who makes Father God *our* God, and Holy Spirit who directs us to the Son.



One facet of God is His justice—He expects righteousness and accordingly justice, if righteousness is not forthcoming (e.g., the exile of His people to Babylon). Another facet of our God is love. Love is indeed a facet of God, but just one facet. One’s view of God as sovereign, just, jealous, **and** loving must be accurate and high. Communicating that well and forcefully is our mission and our glory as it reflects our God. To do otherwise is to have low and uni-dimensionally myopic view of God.


Atonement as expressed in the mercy seat—a place where justice *and* mercy were *simultaneously* manifest—is indeed an apt expression of Christ’s propitiating sacrifice. To be sure, His sacrifice demonstrated love, and it demonstrated an excellent example for us to emulate, but above all, His blood sacrifice covered our sins, redeemed us from our sins, and paid the ultimate price for our depravity. To assert otherwise makes our Christ a foolish prophet who knew not what He was doing.

The NAS Old Testament Hebrew Lexicon

NAS Verse Count

Exodus	7
Leviticus	44
Numbers	15
Deuteronomy	2
1 Samuel	1
2 Samuel	1
1 Chronicles	1
2 Chronicles	2
Nehemiah	1
Psalms	3
Proverbs	2
Isaiah	5
Jeremiah	1
Ezekiel	6
Daniel	1

Strong's Number: 3722 [Browse Lexicon](#)

Original Word	Word Origin
rpk	a primitive root
Transliterated Word	TDNT Entry
<i>Kaphar</i>	TWOT - 1023,1024,1025,1026
Phonetic Spelling	Parts of Speech
<i>kaw-far'</i> 	Verb

Definition

1. to cover, purge, make an atonement, make reconciliation, cover over with pitch
 - a. (Qal) to coat or cover with pitch
 - b. (Piel)
 1. to cover over, pacify, propitiate
 2. to cover over, atone for sin, make atonement for
 3. to cover over, atone for sin and persons by legal rites
 - c. (Pual)
 1. to be covered over
 2. to make atonement for
 - d. (Hithpael) to be covered

NAS Word Usage - Total: 101 appease 1, appease* 1, atone 3, atoned 2, atonement is made 1, atonement shall be made 1, atonement was made 1, atoning 1, canceled 1, expiation can be made 1, forgave 1, forgive 4, forgiven 5, made atonement 3, make atonement 71, makes atonement 2, making atonement 1, pardon 1

The NAS New Testament Greek Lexicon

Strong's Number: 2435	Browse Lexicon
Original Word	Word Origin
ilasterion	from a derivative of (2433)
Transliterated Word	TDNT Entry
Hilasterion	3:318,362
Phonetic Spelling	Parts of Speech
<i>hil-as-tay'-ree-on</i> 🗣️	Noun Neuter

Definition

1. relating to an appeasing or expiating, having placating or expiating force, expiatory; a means of appeasing or expiating, a propitiation
 - a. used of the cover of the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies, which was sprinkled with the blood of the expiatory victim on the annual day of atonement (this rite signifying that the life of the people, the loss of which they had merited by their sins, was offered to God in the blood as the life of the victim, and that God by this ceremony was appeased and their sins expiated); hence the lid of expiation, the propitiatory
 - b. an expiatory sacrifice
 - c. a expiatory victim

NAS Word Usage - Total: 2

mercy seat 1, propitiation 1

Romans 3: 25 God presented him as a sacrifice of **a**, through [Ro 3:25](#) whom God displayed publicly as a **propitiation** in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed;

Hebrews 2: 17 and that he might make **a** for the sins of the people.

Hebrews 9: 5 overshadowing the **a** cover.

[Heb 9:5](#) And above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the **mercy seat**; but of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

<p>ATONED (6)</p> <p>Dt 21: 8And the bloodshed will be a for.</p> <p>1Sa 3: 14The guilt of Eli's house will never be a for</p> <p>Pr 16: 6Through love and faithfulness sin is a for;</p> <p>Isa 6: 7your guilt is taken away and your sin a for."</p> <p>Isa 22: 14"Till your dying day this sin will not be a</p> <p>Isa 27: 9By this, then, will Jacob's guilt be a for, and</p>	<p>ATONE (3)</p> <p>Ex 30: 15offering to the LORD to a for your lives.</p> <p>2Ch 29: 24altar for a sin offering to a for all Israel,</p> <p>Da 9: 24to a for wickedness,</p>
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