

The lasting relevance of the Atonement (Hebrews 13:7–17), part 1

Hebrews 13:10–11 indicate clearly the theme of verses 8–16 which in turn have significance for understanding the instructions about leaders in verses 7 and 17. That theme is “atonement” as pictured in the Day of Atonement of the Old Testament. Only the sacrifices on that day fit the description of verses 10–11. “To atone” means to provide satisfaction for some wrong that has been done. Jesus Christ fulfills the picture of the Old Testament atonement by providing satisfaction in His sinless death for the wrongs which we have done. Though some challenge the full relevance of His atonement for us today, or even the truth of it, this passage makes clear that the atonement which Jesus made was and is fully relevant.

I. Reasons for the lasting relevance of Christ’s work of atonement:

1. *The eternal sameness of Jesus Christ gives a lasting relevance to the atonement (13:8).*
 - a. Two truths about Jesus are emphasized, which have already been established in this letter: His eternal existence and His sameness throughout time. (Note that even though the Son took on flesh, it did not change His essential character. He remained fully God who does not change.)
 - b. Since there is no change in the Person who worked the atonement of believers, there is no change in the relevance, giving a sure foundation for an unchanging message and a constancy in Christian life.
2. *The power of grace alone to strengthen us gives a lasting relevance to the atonement (13:9).*
 - a. Among all possible kinds of strange teachings, dietary regulations were prevalent in Judaism and in the surrounding pagan culture. But dietary regulations cannot of themselves help a person spiritually.
 - b. God’s grace, all which He freely gives the believer, is what strengthens the inner spiritual life (the “heart”), countering hardness and waywardness (3:8, 10) and conforming to the promises of the new covenant (8:10; 10:16, 22).
 - c. Since the atonement is God’s great evidence of His grace, the atonement remains fully relevant for us today and the place where the believer must seek spiritual help.
3. *The sanctifying work of Christ’s suffering gives a lasting relevance to the atonement (13:10–12).*
 - a. Just as the burning of the sacrifices outside the camp showed the disgrace of sin, so the manner of Christ’s death outside the gates revealed the contempt of the Jews for Him and ultimately the disgrace of the sin He bore for us.
 - b. Only by the atonement are believers set apart to God (made holy). There is no other way, and nothing needed to be added, to be right with God.

II. Ramifications of the lasting relevance of Christ’s work of atonement:

1. *The atonement opens a path with Jesus in His disgrace to a lasting city (13:13–14).*
 - a. Following Jesus separates us from those who do not follow Jesus and invites the same contempt from those still in the “camp”.
 - b. Following Jesus and leaving the camp is reasonable because the world will not endure (12:27) but those who follow Jesus inherit an eternal city that is yet to come.
 - c. The atonement still calls believers today, who have gone out to follow Jesus, to accept the reproach which comes from those perishing still in the “camp”.
2. *The atonement provides a lasting basis for other sacrifice: sacrifices of praise and doing good (13:15–16).*
 - a. The atonement removes the need for any further sacrifice for sin. But the words “therefore through Jesus” indicate that the atoning work of Jesus provides the basis of other sacrifice.
 - b. Christians may offer a sacrifice of praise, which occurs when the lips profess from the heart the truths about God which He Himself has revealed. The atonement makes that praise acceptable. And they may offer a sacrifice of doing good and sharing, that is, helpful actions and material help.
 - c. These and other such sacrifices are pleasing to God, but only “through Jesus”, that is, because of the atonement. Without first having sins atoned for, good works do not please.

The death of Jesus Christ on the cross was a sacrifice, atoning for sin. Its importance has not changed because Jesus has not changed. It is the very basis for our worship, making even our praise and doing good pleasing sacrifices to God.

Questions for further thought and discussion:

- In what ways do you (can you) show the value you place on the atonement?
- How might believers in our culture face shame or reproach when they follow Jesus?
- Jesus believers had to leave the “camp” of Judaism. What might be the parallel application for non-Jews today?