

Substitutionary Atonement

And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. (Genesis 22:13)

Substitutionary: The testing of Abraham in the sacrifice of his only son Isaac provides the clearest picture of the Christian doctrine of substitutionary atonement in the Old Testament. A substitute is a person or thing that takes the place or function of another.¹ In Genesis 22, God tests Abraham with the commandment to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering. Surely this was the most difficult thing Yahweh had ever asked Abraham to do but Abraham obeys God and takes Isaac to Mt. Moriah to offer his son to the Lord. During the journey to the top of the mountain, Isaac asks his dad about the absence of a sacrifice. He said, “Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is **the lamb** for a burnt offering?” To which Abraham responds with, “God will provide for Himself **the lamb** for a burnt offering, my son” (Gen 22:7-8). And this is exactly what happened. Just moments before Abraham was ready to end his son’s life and offer him as a burnt offering, a voice from heaven stops Abraham. “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” Then Abraham looked up and there was a ram (a male sheep) strategically trapped in the thicket. “So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son” (Gen 22:12-13, CSB). The ram died and Isaac lived, providing a foreshadowing of Christ, the male “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”, dying so that others may live (John 1:29).

Key New Testament verses that point to this substitutionary death include:

- For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die –⁸ but God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, **Christ died for us** (Rom 5:6–8).
- Christ loved us and gave himself up **for us**, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Eph 5:2)
- By this we know love, that He laid down His life **for us**, (1Jo 3:16).
- **Christ died for our sins** in accordance with the Scriptures (1Co 15:3).

Atonement: Throughout the Old Testament animal sacrifices were offered to God to make atonement for sins. Wayne Grudem says atonement is the “doctrine concerned with the removal of guilt, the covering over of sin, or the satisfaction of the penalty for sin that separated humankind from God, especially with reference to the obedience of Christ even unto death on the cross.”²

Key New Testament verses regarding atonement include:

- He [Christ] himself is the **atonement sacrifice** for our sins (1Jo 2:2, CSB)
- [Christ] had to be like His brothers and sisters in every way, so that He could become a merciful and faithful high priest in matters pertaining to God, to **make atonement** for the sins of the people (Heb 2:17, CSB)
- [The Father] loved us and sent His Son to be the **atonement sacrifice** for our sins (1Jo 4:10, CSB)
- For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed (1Co 5:7).

Propitiation is a common choice in English translations for **the sacrifice that bears God’s wrath** so that God can be just and the justifier of those who are sinners but believe the gospel (Rom 3:26). Paul writes “whom [Christ] God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith” (Rom 3:25; ESV, KJV, NASB).

Sometimes this doctrine will also be described with two other words: vicarious and penal.

- **Vicarious:** performed or suffered by one person as a substitute for another or to the benefit or advantage of another.¹ Christ’s atonement is to the benefit or advantage for all who believe upon Jesus as their savior – it is to these alone that the efficacy of the atonement is applied.
- **Penal:** involving punishment, penalties, or punitive actions¹ in Christ’s case, the penalty for sin was death.

Finally, no other chapter in the Bible describes the vicarious and penal nature of Christ’s atonement better than Isaiah 53.

¹ Merriam-Webster, *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1996).

² Douglas Mangum, *The Lexham Glossary of Theology* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2014).