

Atonement, Justification, and Regeneration

“For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement” (Romans 5:10–11).

“And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God” (1 Corinthians 6:11).

“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Titus 3:5).

Christians toss around twenty dollar words ever so glibly, often hardly knowing what they mean. By God’s grace, however, we are not saved through our knowledge. We are saved based on the repentant state of our heart, through the finished work of Jesus Christ on Calvary’s cross. Much of what we learn about our salvation actually comes after we are saved. It is important to understand the process, however, in order to maintain strictly doctrinal stands in an age of growing apostasy. Some churches have been so lax in this area through the years, that they have ceased to be true Christians and are incapable of leading others to salvation.

Note: The material presented in this lesson draws heavily from *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, produced by Merrill F. Unger and published by Moody Press. This is an excellent source of information on a wide variety of subjects. We heartily recommend it.

I. Atonement

“For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement” (Romans 5:10–11).

Atonement for a Christian is that special result of Christ’s sacrificial sufferings and death by virtue of which all who truly repent (determine to turn from sin to godliness) and exercise faith receive forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Included in atonement are the ideas of substitution, the covering over or blotting out of sin and a reconciliation between God and man. Atonement offers “at-one-ment” with God. It is entirely an act of love.

A. Synonyms for atonement in the Bible

1. Reconciliation

*2 Corinthians 5:18–19; Ephesians 2:16; Colossians 1:20;
Hebrews 2:17*

2. Propitiation

Romans 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 1 John 4:10

3. Ransom

Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6

4. Redemption

Luke 2:38; Hebrews 9:12

B. Atonement is a substitution

*2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13; Titus 2:14; 1 Peter
2:24; 1 Peter 3:18*

C. Atonement has been enacted once and is capable of covering all sins for all time

Some would take issue with this statement, crucifying Christ again with every communion, but the scriptures quite clearly indicate that this is impossible!

Hebrews 9:12–26; Hebrews 6:4–6

D. Atonement was and is absolutely necessary for human salvation

Luke 24:45–47; Luke 9:22; Romans 5:8; John 15:13

E. Christ's atoning death demonstrated God's wrath toward sin as well as His love for sinful men

John 3:16; Romans 3:25–26; Romans 5:6–8

F. Atonement was built into the creation. As Merrill F. Unger wrote: "When man fell, he fell into the arms of divine mercy."

1 Peter 1:19–20; Revelation 13:8

G. Atonement is universal. It is available to everyone.

Romans 5:18; Romans 10:13; 2 Corinthians 5:14–15; 1

Timothy 2:5–6; 1 Timothy 4:10

1. For those who accept it, atonement is the actual, objective grounds for forgiveness of sins and acceptance with God for the repentant believer

John 3:16; Acts 2:38; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14

2. For those who reject it, atonement provides no benefit

Mark 16:16; John 3:36; Hebrews 10:26–29

H. Atonement, the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross, was the apex of history for man.

1. Before the cross, the law demanded blood sacrifice for sins, always pointing to the final sacrifice

Hebrews 9:7–9

2. After the cross, man points backward to that event to claim his right to salvation

1 Corinthians 1:18; Ephesians 2:15–16; Colossians 1:20;

2:14

II. Justification

“Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24).

“Justification is a divine act whereby an infinitely Holy God judicially declares a believing sinner to be righteous and acceptable before Him because Christ has born the sinner’s sin on the cross and ‘has been made unto him righteousness’ (1 Corinthians 1:30)’ ” *Unger’s Bible Dictionary.*

A. Justification is a product of God’s grace

Titus 3:4–5

B. Justification is possible as a result of the atoning sacrifice of Christ Who has settled all the claims of the law

Romans 3:24–25; 5:9

C. Justification is provided on faith in the finished work of Christ on the cross alone, and not by any human merit or works

Romans 3:28–30; 4:5; 5:1; 8:31–34; Galatians 2:16

D. The justified one knows that Another, his Substitute, has born his guilt and that he stands without accusation before the judgment bar of God

Romans 8:1, 33–34

E. Justification makes no one righteous. It is not the bestowment of righteousness as such but rather declares one to be justified whom God sees as perfected once and forever in His Beloved Son. When I am justified, God sees me “just-as-if-I’d” never sinned.

III. Regeneration

“Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost” (Titus 3:5).

“And you, being dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your flesh, hath he quickened together with him, having forgiven you all trespasses” (Colossians 2:13).

Regeneration is a change wrought in a man at the spiritual level by the Holy Ghost through which he becomes “quickened” (brought to life) spiritually and in fact the possessor of eternal life.

Ephesians 2:1–5

A. Synonymous terms for regeneration in the Bible

1. Born again

John 3:3, 7; 1 Peter 1:23

2. Born of God

1 John 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18

3. Born of the Spirit

John 3:6, 8

B. Other Bible passages that express the idea of regeneration

*Ezekiel 36:25–26; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 4:22–24;
Colossians 3:9–10*

C. Regeneration is not accomplished through baptism.

Some churches teach that anyone baptized into that faith receives regeneration but this cannot be supported biblically and leaves the individual in dire danger of hellfire.

Romans 3:20; Titus 3:5

IV. Important Differences in These Terms

Sometimes the terms atonement, justification, and regeneration are used as if they are interchangeable. However, each term has a distinct meaning and usage. There are important differences that must be recognized.

To restate what has been pointed out in previous lessons, God always creates at three levels (see Lesson 5 section II), and establishes processes and systems within His creation in sets of sevens (see Lesson 2 section II:C). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that when God creates a “new creature” (Ephesians 2:10; 4:24; Colossians 3:10) that it occurs through the three-part process of atonement, justification, and regeneration.

“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

A. Each part of the Godhead is uniquely active in the creation of the “new man”

1. Atonement is the specific work of God the Son in our behalf toward salvation

Romans 5:8; 1 Thessalonians 5:9–10

2. Justification is the specific work of God the Father in our behalf toward salvation

Romans 3:23–26; 8:32–33; Galatians 3:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:9–10

3. Regeneration is the specific work of God the Holy Ghost in our behalf toward salvation

John 3:5–8; Titus 3:5

B. The body, soul, and spirit of a man all benefit from these three works of the Godhead

1. Atonement paves the way for justification and regeneration. In addition it pays the price of the bodily “second death” (Revelation 20:11–15) for all who will accept it. Christ’s resurrection after His atoning death paved the way for the bodily resurrection, allowing the individual to enter eternity with a glorified body

Romans 8:30; 1 Corinthians 15:51–54

“And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together” (Romans 8:17).

2. Justification covers the willful sins committed by the soul so that God sees them no more and they cannot cause it to lose eternal life

Psalms 103:12; Isaiah 43:25

“Behold, for peace I had great bitterness: but thou hast in love to my soul delivered it from the pit of corruption: for thou hast cast all my sins behind thy back” (Isaiah 38:17).

3. Regeneration gives life to the spirit, knitting it to the Holy Spirit of God so that it is alive for ever more

*John 17:20–21; Romans 8:9; 1 Corinthians 3:16;
Ephesians 2:22*

*“But he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit” (1
Corinthians 6:17).*

C. Differences between justification and regeneration

Atonement was a one time act that avails for all time. It is therefore easy to differentiate from the other two terms. Justification and regeneration, however, both occur at the instant of salvation for each individual that is born again. They occur instantaneously and simultaneously. Thus, they are the terms most often confused with one another.

1. Justification is a change in our relationship to God
Regeneration is a change in our moral and spiritual nature
2. Justification is necessary because of the fact of guilt
Regeneration is necessary because of depravity
3. Justification is the removal of guilt by divine forgiveness
Regeneration is a change from a state of depravity to a spiritual life

V. Evidences Seen in the Life of a Believer

A. Evidences of atonement in the believer's life

1. Atonement will not be fully evident in this lifetime The full evidence of the atonement having been applied will not be apparent until Christ returns to resurrect and to rapture his own. At that time our bodies will be “changed” so that we can forever dwell with Him.

1 Corinthians 15:51–52; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18

2. Atonement will be indirectly evident There is another sense in which evidence of atonement can be seen in one's life. Atonement is the necessary prerequisite for justification and regeneration. Therefore, if evidences of these are found, they are proof that atonement is active in the believer's life.

B. Evidences of justification in the believer's life

1. One who is truly justified will manifest this in good works.

“Was not Abraham our father justified by works, when he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God”

(James 2:21–23).

This passage shows the undeniable relationship between faith and works. We are justified entirely by faith, but after that good works will be the natural out flowing of justification's operation in a man's life.

“For he shall have judgment without mercy, that hath shewed no mercy; and mercy rejoiceth against judgment”

(James 2:13).

2. One who is justified will follow after righteousness

Romans 5:16–19; 2 Corinthians 6:14–18

C. Evidences of regeneration in the believer's life

1. One who is born of God will seek to live righteously

1 John 2:29

2. One who is born of God will seek to fulfill the command to love

Luke 10:27; 1 John 4:7

3. The born of God will live an overcoming life

1 John 5:4

4. The born of God firmly believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God

1 John 5:1

D. What about those who claim to be saved but don't exhibit these evidences in their lives? There are two possibilities:

1. They are unsaved

Matthew 7:21–23; 23:13–29; Acts 20:29–31; 2 Timothy 2:16–19; Jude 3–19

2. They are saved, but:

- a. They are backslidden: *Jeremiah 5:6; 8:5; Hosea 11:7*

- b. They are out of God's will: *1 Corinthians 5:1–5*

- c. They are under God's chastisement: *2 Samuel 7:14; Job 5:17; Acts 5:1–10; 1 Corinthians 11:32; Hebrews 12:5–11*

E. How can we tell whether a person is saved under these conditions?

The Bible tells us we are not to judge another man's motives or his heart. In this regard, they stand only before God for judgment (Romans 14:13). We are warned not to usurp our Lord's position as judge of His people (Romans 14:3–4). However, we are charged with being "fruit inspectors" (Matthew 7:15–20). Therefore, we can entertain serious doubts about anyone's salvation who lives "in the world," shows no fruits of the spirit (Galatians 5:22–23; Ephesians 5:9), and shows no evidence of God's chastening his life. In either case we are exhorted to either restore them to the faith (Galatians 6:1) or to win them for Christ (James 5:20).