

GOD AT RISK

The word “atonement” may be the most important word in the Bible, because its real meaning is “at-one-ment.” Something has gone tragically wrong in God’s universe. What was once in harmony and oneness has been ripped apart so completely that it seems totally impossible to put it together again, but that is exactly what the word “at-one-ment” means—to put together what has been torn apart.

If free choice has been and will always be the unalterable basis for a relationship between God and the beings He created, then the atoning process must be complicated and lengthy if it has any hope of restoring the unity which has been almost totally lost. If we do not understand how this at-one-ment is being accomplished and what it will take to complete it, we will never understand why we even exist or what lies ahead in our future. This may well be the most important Bible subject for us to understand as completely as humanly possible. If we have any hope of understanding how this drama will end, we must understand how it all started.

THE BEGINNING OF EVIL

The greatest trial in history was brewing. The most majestic created being was filing suit against his Creator God. Lucifer was the five-star general of the angelic host. “But when God said to His Son, ‘Let us make man in our image,’ Satan was jealous of Jesus. He wished to be consulted concerning the formation of man, and because he was not, he was filled with envy, jealousy, and hatred.” (EW 145)

So we learn that the tearing apart of God’s harmonious universe began over God’s plan to create you and me, and the specific charge was that God was unfair in excluding Lucifer from the planning committee. Apparently the work that Christ and Lucifer did was so similar that Lucifer saw no real difference between him and Christ. To curb this brewing palace coup, the Father called an assembly of all the heavenly host, and explained that the Son had from all eternity been equal with Himself in omnipresence, in omniscience, in power and authority. Even in heaven, angels did not completely understand the precise relationship among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, so God decided to make this relationship crystal clear.

Up to this point Lucifer was raising questions, some of which were legitimate, but it was at this point that rebellion began and the universe was being torn apart. “Satan unblushingly made known his dissatisfaction that Christ should be preferred before him. He stood up proudly and urged that he should be equal with God and should be taken into conference with the Father and understand His purposes. God informed Satan, that to His Son alone He would reveal His secret purposes, and He required all the family in heaven, even Satan, to yield Him implicit, unquestioned obedience...Then Satan exultingly pointed to his sympathizers, comprising nearly one-half of all the angels, and exclaimed, ‘These are with me! Will you expel these also, and make such a void in heaven?’” (SR 17, 18)

Now we come to the point where Scripture begins its description of what was happening in heaven. “For thou has said in thine heart, I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will sit also upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north: I will ascend above the heights of the clouds: I will be like the most High.” (Isa. 14: 13,14)

What happened next is extremely important to understand God’s plan of at-one-ment. “After Satan and those who fell with him were shut out of heaven, and he realized that he had forever lost all its purity and glory, he repented, and wished to be reinstated in heaven....Both he and his followers wept, and

implored to be taken back into the favor of God.” (EW 146) Here we have repentance with weeping and imploring. Surely this would be enough.

“Satan trembled as he viewed his work....Where is he? Is it not all a horrible dream? Is he shut out of heaven?...The loss he had sustained of all the privileges of heaven seemed too much to be borne. He wished to regain these.” (SR 26, 25, 27) Notice what Satan wanted to regain—the privileges of heaven, its purity and glory.

“His mighty frame shook as with a tempest. An angel from heaven was passing. He called him and entreated an interview with Christ. This was granted him. He then related to the Son of God that he repented of his rebellion and wished again the favor of God. He was willing to take the place God had previously assigned him, and be under His wise command. Christ wept at Satan’s woe, but told him, as the mind of God, that...the seeds of rebellion were still within him.” (SR 26) Can we see why even angels had questions about God’s handling of Lucifer? They can’t read minds. Only Christ could read the inward thoughts and character of Satan. The character of Satan would need a lot of demonstration. One key point would be the huge difference between outward repentance, even with tears, and heart surrender to God because He knows best.

“When Satan became fully convinced that there was no possibility of his being reinstated in the favor of God, he manifested his malice with increased hatred and fiery vehemence.” (SR 27) Very quickly, the true heart of Satan became very apparent.

THE CHALLENGE OF SATAN

If God is to restore at-one-ment to the universe, then He must set in motion a far-reaching plan to answer all of Satan’s legitimate charges against God’s system of government. Jan Paulsen summed up the issue very well. “In God’s final and ultimate answer to the sin problem there are issues to be taken into account that are wider and larger than my personal salvation....For the larger picture—namely, for the eternal security of...[all] creation,...God will also have provided a far-reaching answer that deals with the roots as well as the consequences of rebellion.” (*Adventist Review*, Nov. 30, 2000) There is something far more important than your salvation or mine, or the salvation of all those who live on this tiny Planet Earth.

“As it is written, That thou mightest be justified in thy sayings, and mightest overcome when thou art judged.” (Rom.3:4) “The plan of salvation had yet a broader and deeper purpose than the salvation of man. It was not for this alone that Christ came to the earth; it was not merely that the inhabitants of this little world might regard the law of God as it should be regarded; but it was to vindicate the character of God before the universe.” (PP 68,69)

One of Satan’s charges is very legitimate and demands a clear answer. “The people of God have been in many respects very faulty. Satan has an accurate knowledge of the sins which he has tempted them to commit, and he presents these in the most exaggerated light, declaring, ‘Will God banish me and my angels from His presence, and yet reward those who have been guilty of the same sins? Thou canst not do this, O Lord, in justice. Thy throne will not stand in righteousness and judgment.’ (5T 474) “He pronounces them just as deserving as himself of exclusion from the favor of God. ‘Are these,’ he says, ‘the people who are to take my place in heaven?’ (PK 588,589) In other words, he says that justice

demands that if I am excluded from heaven, then all sinners must also be excluded; but if you can forgive them and take them to heaven, then you must take me back also.

GOD'S RESPONSE – PHASE 1

If God is going to vindicate His character and plan of at-one-ment, He has to resolve this problem of justice vs. mercy. Ps. 85:10 puts this issue clearly. "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." God takes the initiative in this all-out war. "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." (Gen. 3:15) This is the first promise of at-one-ment. In Satan's attempt to dethrone God, his own efforts will destroy him.

God's counterattack is seen most clearly in Phil. 2:6-8. "Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." God's response to Satan would not be the exercise of arbitrary force, but instead humbling Himself to take the same human form as those who have to live under Satan's stolen control of power, and to allow Satan to attack Him in the same way he attacks all human beings.

The supreme evidence of the difference between God's way and Satan's way is seen in John 12:31-32. "Now is the judgment of this world: now shall the prince of this world be cast out. And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." God's way is drawing, not driving or forcing. God humbles Himself to man's level of functioning and thinking, allowing Satan to do whatever he can to discredit God.

"And he said unto them, I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven." (Luke 10:18) After living a life of total obedience to God in spite of Satan's all-out efforts to lead Christ to rebel just once, Satan then takes it upon himself to take the life of His Creator, and the universe watches it all. "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need." (Heb. 4:15,16)

Christ's life and death was unfolding the law of God as the law of self-sacrificing love. Calvary is the supreme unfolding of the law of God. "The law of Jehovah is the tree; the gospel is the fragrant blossoms and fruit which it bears." (1SM 212) God's justice and fairness are the basis of all He does, and the fruit is at-one-ment. God refutes Satan's lie that justice and mercy cannot coexist in harmony. Christ showed that sinners could be safely taken to heaven, not just by being forgiven, but by developing characters in harmony with God's law. In contrast, Satan wanted forgiveness without character change.

This is the sacrificial phase of the atonement process, and it is the heart of the entire plan of God to restore the universe to harmony. Do we fully understand how important this part of the at-one-ment is?

"The death of Christ upon the cross made sure the destruction of him who has the power of death....There will be no danger of another rebellion in the universe of God....It is through the efficacy of the cross that the angels of heaven are guarded from apostasy. Without the cross they would be no more secure against evil than were the angels before the fall of Satan. Angelic perfection failed in

heaven. Human perfection failed in Eden, the paradise of bliss. All who wish for security in earth or heaven must look to the Lamb of God. The plan of salvation, making manifest the justice and love of God, provides an eternal safeguard against defection in unfallen worlds....Oh, we do not comprehend the value of the atonement! If we did, we would talk more about it." (ST Dec. 30, 1889)

But if God guaranteed the destruction of sin and Satan by the sacrifice of Christ, why didn't He end the atoning process and the agony of sin and suffering immediately after the cross? Why has God allowed two thousand more years of Satan's rule?

GOD'S RESPONSE – PHASE 2

"Yet Satan was not then destroyed. The angels did not even then understand all that was involved in the great controversy. The principles at stake were to be more fully revealed. And for the sake of man, Satan's existence must be continued. Man as well as angels must see the contrast between the Prince of Light and the prince of darkness. He must choose whom he will serve." (DA 761)

If there is one thing we need to continually remind ourselves of, it is that God's actions are never haphazard. He is never caught by surprise. If there has been a two thousand year delay, there must be a very good reason for it. It has to be part of His plan to make sure sin will never raise its ugly head again throughout all eternity. At the cross not all of Satan's lawyer-like charges had been answered. The angels still had some questions, and human beings still did not understand completely the contrast between Christ's ways and Satan's ways. More evidence on God's side would be needed.

So we come to the next step in the atonement plan. "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession." (Heb. 4:14) "Whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest forever after the order of Melchisedec." (Heb. 6:20) "But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises." (Heb. 8:6) "Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." (Heb. 7:25)

Jesus begins a new phase of the atonement process as our High Priest, who is able to legally forgive any human being who is willing to ask Him for a second chance. He is applying the benefits of His sacrifice to guilty sinners.

GOD'S RESPONSE – PHASE 3

There is still one nagging charge of Satan against God's atonement plan, a charge which rears its head in each new generation born under Satan's rulership of this world.

"Satan, the fallen angel, had declared that no man could keep the law of God after the disobedience of Adam. He claimed the whole race under his control." (3SM 136) "Satan declared that it was impossible for the sons and daughters of Adam to keep the law of God, and thus charged upon God a lack of wisdom and love. If they could not keep the law, then there was fault with the Lawgiver." (ST Jan. 16, 1896) Satan's charge was clearly leveled against fallen man's ability to keep God's law.

"He (Christ) came to this world to...prove to the universe that in this world of sin human beings can live lives that God will approve....Satan declared that human beings could not live without sin." (RH March 9, 1905) Note again that Satan's charge relates to human beings in this world of sin. Part of Christ's

mission consisted in “revealing to the heavenly universe, to Satan, and to all the fallen sons and daughters of Adam that through His grace humanity can keep the law of God.” (MLT 323)

Satan’s charge goes like this. Yes, Christ was totally obedient, as were a few rare human beings like Enoch, but what about 99.99% of those who have been forgiven? Are they totally obedient? They can’t obey 100% of the time because they have fallen natures, which make them incapable of keeping Your law. My influence over them is stronger than any grace You give them. All You can do is to keep on forgiving their continual sinning. No matter what You do, Jer. 50:20 will never be fulfilled. “In those days, and in that time, saith the Lord, the iniquity of Israel shall be sought for, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and they shall not be found.” Neither will Ezek. 36:27,23 be fulfilled. “And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them....And I will sanctify my great name, which was profaned among the heathen, which ye have profaned in the midst of them; and the heathen shall know that I am the Lord, saith the Lord God, when I shall be sanctified in you before their eyes.” As long as forgiveness is all Your atonement plan can offer, my charge stands, and You will never be fully vindicated, because Your grace is insufficient to protect Your people from my power over them. Just show me any generation that have accepted Your forgiving grace and are covered with Your robe of righteousness who have stopped yielding to my deceptions. Where are any people who are keeping Your law 100% of the time? You just keep covering up their sins under the cloak of mercy and forgiveness. You haven’t defeated me yet.

The reality is that God has put Himself at great risk by forgiving sinners, because when we do the same things over and over again, and God has to forgive us countless times, it looks very much like obedience to God’s law really is impossible. But if it can ever be demonstrated, not by angels in a perfect environment, and not just by Enoch or Jesus or John or Paul, but by a host of garden variety sinners who must live in Satan’s world, harassed by a fallen nature and a lifetime of sinful habits, that forgiving grace leads directly to enabling grace, then God will have proved Satan wrong.

God’s plan of salvation really works. The only way it can be clearly seen what happens when God’s enabling grace has taken total control of God’s people is by setting aside a period of time after the close of probation in which the rules change. No longer is forgiving grace available. The whole universe will watch as our High Priest steps out of His role as Forgiver. Then they will see what will happen when only enabling grace will be offered from heaven.

Today we are still living during the time when forgiving grace and enabling grace work together, with some successes and some failures. But this epoch must come to an end. A demonstration must be made, and that is what the final atonement is all about. Satan’s most powerful attacks must be matched up against God’s enabling grace at a time when forgiveness is not an option. Is God’s grace more powerful than Satan’s deceptions? Will the future be safe from another rebellion?

The matter of greatest importance in the universe is not the salvation of men, important as that may seem. The most important thing is the clearing of God’s name from the false accusations made by Satan. The final atonement is Christ ministering His blood, no longer in forgiveness, but in enabling power—power for victory over sin—and it will be seen in our lives.

All of this was foreshadowed by the events during the Day of Atonement in the Old Testament. “For on that day shall the priest make an atonement for you, to cleanse you, that ye may be clean from all your sins before the Lord.” (Lev. 16:30) Do we understand the full meaning of this day? It is called “making

an atonement.” There had been sacrifices of atonement—forgiveness—all year long. This is something different. It is a cleansing atonement, with the end result being “clean from all your sins before the Lord.”

What does this Old Testament day teach us about our lives today? “We are in the great day of atonement and the sacred work of Christ for the people of God that is going on at the present time in the heavenly sanctuary, should be our constant study.” (5T 520)

Christ virtually says to Satan, “I will produce a people, through my grace, in the most degenerate age of earth’s history. I will separate them from sin completely. They will reflect the image of Jesus fully. I will step out of the sanctuary and they will live in the sight of a holy God without an Intercessor.” Such a people will be produced that will be the wonder of the whole universe. Through them Satan will be forever defeated, and every question that could be raised against the law of God, such as whether humanity could keep it, will be forever answered in that special people which Scripture calls the 144,000.

“And when he hath made an end of reconciling the holy place, and the tabernacle of the congregation, and the altar, he shall bring the live goat: And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness>” (Lev. 16:20,21)

After completing the work of cleansing the lives of the people, in type, the high priest then went into the first apartment, took up the sins, and went out and placed them upon the head of the scapegoat. Then a fit man, someone who was able, someone who was prepared, had to lead that scapegoat out into the wilderness. It is very doubtful that the fit man represented Christ. The high priest, representing Christ, completed the cleansing. After that a fit man was chosen out of the congregation to do one thing—to remove the scapegoat from the camp of Israel. No atonement was involved. It is much more plausible to understand that the fit man represents the 144,000.

In 1852 Ellen White recorded what she was shown about this dramatic scene. “I saw that Jesus’ work in the sanctuary will soon be finished. And after His work there is finished, He will come to the door of the first apartment, and confess the sins of Israel upon the head of the scapegoat....Then while the plagues are falling, the scapegoat is being led away. He makes a mighty struggle to escape, but he is held fast by the hand that leads him. If he should effect his escape, Israel would lose their lives. I saw that it would take time to lead away the scapegoat into the land of forgetfulness after the sins were put on his head.” (Spalding-Magan, p. 2)

The struggle to escape is Satan’s last attempt to prove that God’s plan doesn’t work. If he can get God’s sealed people to sin after Christ’s forgiving work has ended, then Israel would lose their lives, and Israel represents God’s faithful people, who are now called the 144,000. Notice that it takes some time to prove God’s case after the close of probation. The purpose of the time period after the close of probation is to give time for a final demonstration about who is telling the truth. God claims that His grace and power will enable a whole generation to live without sinning when Satan brings his greatest deceptions and persecutions to bear against the ones whom God has sealed. Satan claims that even God cannot keep all of this final generation from yielding just once to his influence and persuasion. Who is telling the truth? The universe needs to know.

Satan has full charge of the world and all the legions of darkness, and all the wicked join with him, which means that a whole vanguard comes against God's people to overthrow them. But Satan is held fast. If Satan could lead just one of the 144,000 into sin—if he could lead one of them to choose to transgress the law of God in the least particular—he would triumph. Here is a people who, for the first time in earth's history, have had all their sins blotted out, and have been sealed for eternity. God can say, in the hearing of the whole universe, "Here is a people who have been completely separated from sin, and I promise that they will never go back into sin again."

It is a desperate struggle between Jesus and Satan. Once it was a struggle between Jesus and Satan personally. During the time of the plagues it is again a struggle between Jesus and Satan, but this time it is Jesus fully lived out in the lives of the 144,000. By the mere fact that they do not fall into sin, Satan is defeated, his cause is lost, and he is held fast.

WHAT IS AT STAKE

Throughout the Bible, God makes it very clear that nothing is more important in all the universe than to have His reputation cleared and His name honored. And that is exactly what John is telling us in Revelation 7. Jesus will not return until God has a people who make guarding the name of God the most important purpose of their lives.

Revelation 7 opens with these words: "And after these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth, nor on the sea, nor on any tree. And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads." (Rev. 7:1-3)

Why is God holding back these last-day winds of terror and destruction? Why? Because God's people are not ready. Hold back the east wind of human madness. Why? God's people haven't caught on yet about the purpose of the gospel. Hold back the west wind of satanic fury until God's people are ready to carry out their last assignment. Hold the winds until God's people are ready to be sealed.

Down here in the days of the held winds God is telling the universe when He writes His name in the foreheads of His faithful ones, "Listen to them. You can trust what they say. I can give them my seal of approval. The quality goes in before my name goes on." So what is this seal that makes Satan so angry? "Just as soon as the people of God are sealed in their foreheads—it is not any seal or mark that can be seen, but a settling into the truth, both intellectually and spiritually, so they cannot be moved—just as soon as God's people are sealed and ready for the shaking, it will come." (LDE 219)

There is a remarkable statement in Heb. 11:39,40. "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect." This chapter enumerates the heroes of faith all down through earth's history, and it says that they will not receive the promise of immortality until something dramatic happens in the generation who will be alive when Christ comes. The amazing truth is that there could be no resurrection of the righteous dead without the development of the 144,000. Not until that is done can the work be finished, and that work, simply put, is to finish with sin.

During the past thirty years we have heard much about Christ's work in the heavenly sanctuary since 1844. We have reviewed the prophetic evidence upon which the confidence of our Adventist pioneers was based, and we have found it to be sound. But there has been a deafening silence about the cleansing work in our hearts corresponding to the cleansing work in heaven. The heavenly sanctuary cannot be cleansed from sin until our hearts are cleansed from sin. The great cleansing in God's heavenly sanctuary cannot be completed until the work of final atonement is completed in my heart and yours. It is only when the final atonement shows that God can stop the flow of sins from our hearts that God can justly remove our sins from the sanctuary above. The blotting out of sins in my life will be followed by the blotting out of sins in the heavenly sanctuary. Only in that way can Satan's charges be effectively answered.

Ellen White puts it very succinctly: "There must be a purifying of the soul here upon the earth, in harmony with Christ's cleansing of the sanctuary in heaven." (Mar 249) This is the time for us to make sure that all sin is really cleansed from our hearts. This is the time for us to show the world how God's government really operates.

The Day of Atonement and the Final Atonement is the reason for our existence as Seventh-day Adventists. God's name is in jeopardy until He can demonstrate that His grace can produce people who will love Him completely, all of the time, with no questions or reservations, and no quibbling or rationalizing. They just love Him, because He first loved them. And they will prove, once and for all, that love always produces obedience, and for once, this love and obedience will be continuous.

Satan is fighting very hard to remove this concept from the minds of every Seventh-day Adventist, because if he can destroy this concept, he can nullify God's calling of this people one hundred fifty years ago, and he can delay the coming of Christ much longer. Will you defy him and make the final atonement the focus of your study, and the unifying core of everything you do from now until the second coming of Christ?

We will conclude this study with the thoughts of one whom God called to help Him complete the final atonement over one hundred years ago—A. T. Jones. "The finishing of the mystery of God is the ending of the work of the gospel,...the taking away of all vestige of sin and the bringing in of everlasting righteousness—Christ fully formed—within each believer, God alone manifest in the flesh of each believer in Jesus." (*The Consecrated Way*, p. 117)

Only in this way can Gen. 3:15 be completely fulfilled. The chosen Seed will bruise the serpent's head. The plan of at-one-ment will be completed. God's people will be completely at-one with God for the rest of eternity. Every phase of the atonement is vital, from the sacrificial lamb in the Garden of Eden to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, to the development of the fit man for the close of human probation. Lord Jesus, may it be soon.