

Lesson 15: Sacrifice and Atonement

This is the best news in the world: God invites humanity into relationship with Him. However, as God makes covenants with people, it creates a serious tension. After all, isn't it impossible for a holy God to stay connected to sinful people? At this point in the biblical storyline some important questions develop. Will God need to lower His standards? (Could He lower His standards even if He wanted to?) Will God's people be able to live sinless lives so they can enjoy God's presence? Of course, the answer to these questions is no. God would never and could never lower His standards or diminish His holiness. And since the fall, human beings are incapable of living sinless lives and enjoying God's presence on the basis of their own moral purity. So if God is going to bind Himself to human beings, something has to be done about the sin that inevitably enters the lives of the people of God. God's solution for the problem of sin is sacrifice. Most Christians today understand that when Jesus died, He was serving as a sacrifice on our behalf. What many don't understand, however, is the major role that sacrifice played in the Old Testament. Most Christians today understand that Jesus's death on the cross paid for our sins and allowed us to have a relationship with God. But we rarely consider that Jesus's death was the culmination of a larger story of sin and sacrifice that develops throughout the Old Testament. Only when we understand the Old Testament sacrifices can we see how the Old and New Testaments dovetail perfectly into one amazing story. Jesus didn't decide on a whim that the problem of sin could be solved by dying on a cross; the Old Testament sacrificial system demanded a sacrifice for sin, and Jesus offered Himself as the ultimate sacrifice on our behalf.

Q1 Explain what you already know about the Old Testament sacrifices. Have you ever thought of Jesus's sacrifice in light of the Old Testament sacrificial system? How so?

Sacrifice in the Unfolding Old Testament Story

Sacrifice is seen throughout the Old Testament. Think back to your study of Adam and Eve. As soon as they ate the fruit that God had forbidden, they felt ashamed of their nakedness and tried to cover themselves with leaves. God's response to this problem foreshadowed the way He would continue to deal with human sin: God made clothes for Adam and Eve out of animal skins. The text doesn't tell us much about the significance of these new garments, but think about it—where did those animal skins come from? Being careful not to read too much into it, we can make a simple observation: an animal had to die so that the shame of sin could be

covered. As soon as sin entered the world, God made a way to deal with that sin through sacrifice. The sacrificial method isn't fully developed or explained until we get to the book of Leviticus, but the unfolding story of the Old Testament does point to sacrifices being made prior to this point. One example from Abraham's life is particularly helpful in understanding how sacrifice works. In Genesis 22, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. At first glance, this request can appear cruel or even absurd. How could God ask Abraham to do such a thing? But as the story continues (and especially the larger story of the whole Bible) the beauty of this request becomes obvious. Keep in mind that God had promised to make Abraham's descendants into a great nation, and Isaac was Abraham's only descendant. Imagine the struggle that Abraham must have gone through. Should he obey the Lord? Wouldn't it make more sense to protect his son in order to pursue the promise that God made to him? Abraham decided to obey the Lord, trusting that God could do anything, including raise his son from the dead (Heb. 11:19). Abraham arrived at the place that God designated for the sacrifice, prepared the altar, and raised his hand to sacrifice his only son. But at the last moment, God stopped him and instead provided a ram for Abraham to sacrifice in place of Isaac. As amazing as this story is in itself, don't miss what it teaches us about the nature of sacrifice. First, it suggests that God could potentially accept a human sacrifice for sin—though He did not allow it to go to this point until the death of Jesus. And second, it shows us that God could accept a substitute—in this case, the ram was sacrificed so that Isaac wouldn't be. Of course, it's not until we see the sacrifice of Jesus in the New Testament that the significance of Abraham's offering becomes clear. Like many things in the Old Testament, Jesus's life, death, and resurrection takes these beliefs and rituals and displays them more beautifully and powerfully than anyone could have imagined.

Q2 Why was sacrifice an important theme in the Old Testament?

Sacrifice in the Law of Moses

We see occasional sacrifices throughout the first part of the Old Testament, but it wasn't until God gave the Law to Moses that animal sacrifices became an integral part of the life of Israel. The Law encompassed many things. It dictated their civil life and government, their moral behavior, and their religious and ceremonial practices. The Law was specific about when to sacrifice, what to sacrifice, and how to sacrifice. There were a variety of sacrifices or burnt offerings, and each type of offering served a different function. But in general, these sacrifices were designed to show gratitude to God, to demonstrate a contrite heart before God, and to

atone for sin. That word atone, or atonement, is significant theologically. An easy way to remember the meaning of atonement is to break it down like this: at-one-ment. Essentially, atonement is all about reconciling, making amends for what has gone wrong, and reestablishing peace where there was conflict. Atonement allowed people who were distanced from God because of their sin to once again enjoy being “at one” with God. So in addition to providing avenues for expressing love and gratitude for God, the Law of Moses gave the Israelites specific instructions for making atonement for sin. Animal sacrifices gave the Israelites a tangible way of showing their sorrow and desire to have their relationship with God restored. Sacrifices also provided a substitute that could be offered in Israel’s place. A proper understanding of sacrifice and atonement is so helpful for those of us who tend to do good works in hopes of making up for the wrong we’ve done. Just as the Israelites found atonement through the sacrifices, we must learn to put all of our hope in a sacrifice. The New Testament clearly explains that the sacrifice we must trust in was made by Jesus.

Q3 Summarize the role that sacrifices played in the way Israel related to their God.

A Graphic Reminder of Sin

One of the most striking features of the Old Testament Law is the blood. There seems to be blood splattered everywhere in Leviticus! It’s because blood was necessary for an effective sacrifice: “The life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life” (Lev. 17:11). Try to imagine yourself in ancient Israel. Like every other group of people on the face of the earth, your community is prone to sin. But on a regular basis, you are required to bring the appropriate sacrifices in order to make atonement for your sin and restore peace with God. Every time a sacrifice was offered (which was often), an animal would die, its blood would flow, and the blood would be splattered on the altar. Imagine standing there watching this. It would have been messy, bloody, and smelly. Every time you witnessed this, you would be reminded of the seriousness of sin and its awful consequences. You would see a graphic representation of what your sin requires, and you would be thankful that that lamb, goat, or bull died in your place. Even though we don’t need to make animal sacrifices for sin today, this Old Testament practice still gives us a vivid picture of the seriousness of sin.

Q4 How should the Old Testament sacrificial system put our sin into the proper perspective?

The Day of Atonement

We have already raised the question, “How can sinful humans live in proximity to a holy God?” The answer is found in the sacrificial system generally, but there is one event in the middle of Leviticus that cuts to the heart of this question: Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement (an event that Jews still celebrate today). Every year the Israelites would celebrate the Day of Atonement and God would atone for His people’s sins and enable them to dwell with Him.

Q5Read Leviticus 16. What stands out to you from reading this description of the Day of Atonement?

As we read through Leviticus 16, it is clear that God takes His worship very seriously. The chapter begins as God gave Aaron (Moses’s brother and the first high priest) very specific instructions on how to enter His presence. The rest of the chapter describes what is supposed to happen on the Day of Atonement. On this one day out of the entire year, one man out of all the Israelites (the high priest) was allowed to enter the Most Holy Place, the Holy of Holies, and stand before God on behalf of the people. The high priest was to take with him the blood of a spotless animal. Actually, three animals were involved in this ceremony. First, he was to sacrifice a bull as an offering to atone for his own sins, because he could not come into the presence of God on his own accord—no one, not even the high priest, is holy or perfect. Then the high priest would offer two goats. The first goat would be sacrificed, and its blood would be smeared on the cover of the ark of the covenant just as the bull’s blood had been. Picture the significance of this. Inside the Holy of Holies, God’s presence was looking down on the ark of the covenant, which contained a copy of the Law that Israel had broken through their sin. Then the lid (also referred to as the “mercy seat”) of this ark is smeared with sacrificial blood. This blood satisfied the wrath of God because a substitute was offered in place of the people who deserved His wrath. So instead of seeing the Law that was broken, God looked down and saw the blood of atonement. Essentially, this sacrifice died in place of the entire community of God’s people. Try to picture the intensity of this scene. Imagine waiting outside of the Holy of Holies as the high priest entered to make his offering on behalf of the people. Here was a sinful man entering into the very presence of Almighty God! Imagine the joy you would feel as the high priest safely emerged from God’s presence, a sign that the sacrifice had been accepted and your sins had been atoned for.

The priest would then take the second goat (the first goat had been sacrificed), symbolically lay his hands on the head of the goat to represent the sins of the people being transferred to this animal, and then release that goat to “bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area.” This was another powerful picture of what was happening with the sins of God’s people. Their sin was being removed, carried off to a remote location, never to visit them again. Their guilt and condemnation were gone. Keep in mind that as amazing as this feeling of joy over the cleansing of their sin must have been, it inevitably faded. This ceremony was to be repeated every year because Israel would not stop sinning. And the Day of Atonement was supplemented by an ongoing and detailed sacrificial system because Israel’s sin was constant. Sin is not an external problem; it runs through the core of each of us and continually manifests itself in a variety of ways. Dealing with sin was therefore an important and familiar part of the everyday lives of the Israelites.

Q6 What does the Day of Atonement teach us about the nature of sin and the reality of forgiveness?

The Problem with Animal Sacrifices

The need to constantly repeat these sacrifices points to a limitation inherent in the Old Testament sacrificial system. But that wasn’t the only problem. The effectiveness of these sacrifices was never based on the mere performance of a ritual. From the very beginning, it has been about the heart of the worshipper, not about the value of his or her offering. God said explicitly through the prophet Hosea, “I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (6:6). Probably the most startling picture of the shortcomings of animal sacrifice is found in the book of Malachi. In this short book, God spoke forcefully to His people about the uselessness of their sacrifices. They had kept up the outward forms and rituals of the sacrificial system, but their hearts were not behind it. Consequently, they were no longer offering God the best of their flocks; they were simply going through the motions. God said explicitly, “Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand” (Mal. 1:10). Surely God would rather have something than nothing. Even if what we offer Him is less than our best, He must be pleased that we are giving Him some consideration. Right? God actually said the exact opposite. He would rather someone shut the doors and prevent sacrifices from being offered at all than to have people making casual sacrifices.

Why? Because God is holy and His name is great: “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts” (Mal. 1:11). God is actually so offended by these false displays of piety that He threatens to take the dung from their sacrifices and smear it in their faces: “I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it” (Mal. 2:3). This is a vivid reminder that God takes worship and sacrifice very seriously—and so should we!

Q7 How should God’s emphasis on the heart of the worshipper affect the way we approach God in our worship and in our everyday lives?

The Ultimate Sacrifice

Everything we have been saying about the Old Testament sacrificial system finds its culmination in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The sacrifices that Israel offered on a regular basis laid the groundwork for the coming of Jesus. When He arrived, the full significance of the sacrificial system finally came into view. Take a minute to read Hebrews 9:11–10:25. This gives you an opportunity to apply what you just learned from the book of Malachi. Here is a way that you can worship God with excellence: Read this passage with all of your heart. Don’t just skim through it, but study it carefully, reverently, as an act of worship.

Q8 Read Hebrews 9:11–10:25. In light of what you’ve studied about the Old Testament sacrificial system and what you read in Hebrews, how does the Old Testament system of sacrifice and atonement help us to better understand the significance of Jesus’s death?

Q9 Spend some time in prayer. Ask God to affect your heart with the significance of the sacrifice that Jesus offered on your behalf. Ask God to break your heart over the sin in your life. Ask Him to give you the strength and motivation to identify and uproot that sin. Pray that your life would be the “living sacrifice” that Paul described in Romans 12:1. And most of all, thank God for sacrificing Jesus as a substitute for you.