

Lesson 10: The Story of the Sacrifice (49)

What did Christ's sacrifice accomplish? What was he doing on the cross? The answers to these questions are at the heart of Christianity, and so you can be sure that the doctrine of Christ's sacrificial atonement is target number one for the devil. You can be sure that all sorts of controversies will surround the meaning of this central event in Christianity. In fact, you can be sure that many of the most compelling answers given to the question "What was Christ doing on the cross?" will be compelling and true; they just won't be the whole truth. Did Christ die to demonstrate God's love for us? Yes! But is that all?

Today, we want to look at the storyline of sacrifice in the Bible, in order to understand this central moment in biblical history rightly. Remember, the fundamental premise of this course is that the Bible is a single narrative, a story that isn't fiction, because it's the revelation of God unfolding in time and space. And we're learning how to determine what to believe according to this storyline.

STORY OF SACRIFICE – IN SIX EPISODES

At the heart of the story of the Bible is the story of sacrifice. Ironically, this story begins with a colossal failure of self-denial. When Adam and Eve indulged their desire to be God's equal, they plunged themselves and the rest of us into a world under God's curse, a world in which sacrifice would now be the order of the day. As the narrative of Scripture unfolds, the need, nature, and effects of sacrifice are slowly revealed. To understand this clearer we're going to divide this storyline up into six episodes:

1) The first sacrifice is offered by Cain and Abel in **Genesis 4**. There's no mention of sin or blood with this sacrifice. The Bible calls it an offering, a gift, and the idea is one of tribute to a great King, and submission to his Lordship.

2) The next sacrifice recorded is in **Genesis 8**. After the Flood, Noah offers up a variety of clean animals as whole burnt offerings. It suggests the idea of a gift, and this gift has an effect on God. The Bible tells us that when *"The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma [of the sacrifice, he] said in his heart, 'Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.'"*

The sin that prompted God's judgment remained in the hearts of Noah and his children. But God promises to never again destroy all humanity.

3) God not only promises to never again destroy humanity, he promises to bless all nations. In particular, he promises Abraham a seed who would be a blessing to all. Then, interestingly, the Bible's next recorded sacrifice, which occurs in **Genesis 22**, when God speaks these shocking words concerning Abraham's seed: "Abraham, take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love... Sacrifice him." Incredibly, Abraham obeys. Once again, the idea seems to be that of tribute and Lordship. It all belongs to God, and he has the right to take it back. At the last second, God stops Abraham. The test of Abraham's devotion is over, but not the sacrifice. God provides a ram to be sacrificed in Isaac's place. It turns out that God will accept a substitute. What's more, he'll even provide that substitute.

4) Pharaoh refuses to release the Israelites. God promises to strike down the first-born male of every creature in Egypt. But the Lord promises to spare the firstborn of Israel if they take a year-old lamb without defect, sacrifice it, and smear its blood on the doorframe of their houses. God says that he will see the blood of the sacrifice, and pass over their homes, sparing them the judgment that Egypt faced. What's more, God says this sacrificial meal will be a sign that sets them apart, as God makes a distinction between Israel and the rest of world, consecrating them as his special people. That very night, Israel is spared because of the sacrifice.

5) Now up until this point, there have been less than a dozen instances of sacrifice recorded in the Bible. It doesn't seem to be a major theme. But that changes with the giving of the Law. An entire book of the Bible, **Leviticus**, is largely given over to detailing all the different sacrifices that Israel is to offer God. There are fellowship offerings and whole burnt offerings. But there are more, the most important of which are sacrifices to atone for sin and guilt. Now, all the pieces that had been slowly revealed come together.

- Only clean animals without defect can be sacrificed.
- Every first-born Israelite, who represents the nation as whole, must be redeemed with a sacrificial substitute.
- Prominent is the taking of life, the shedding of a blameless victim's blood.
- Again, the idea of a substitution is prominent: They we're told that if anyone brings a sacrifice, "He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf..." (**Lev. 1:4**) It's a way of saying, "This sacrifice stands for me; what's about to happen to it should happen to me, and it is taking my place."
- These sacrifices now begin and end every single day in God's temple, presented by priests who serve as intermediaries between God and his sinful people.
- There are additional sacrifices that mark the beginning of each week, each month, and each season.
- And at the pinnacle of this entire system of sacrifice was the Day of Atonement. The High Priest alone who takes the blood of the sacrifice into the Holy of Holies, and sprinkles blood on the mercy seat, the symbolic throne of God, to make atonement for his own sins and the sins of the people.

And that's where this theme in the Bible stops, or at least stalls. Century follows century, and nothing changes. No new sacrifices are introduced; the old ones are just endlessly repeated, day after day, week after week, year after year. And therein lies the problem. They obviously weren't getting rid of sin. In fact, they increasingly become a nauseating reminder of just how sinful the people remained. Repentance, not ritual is what God desired. But for Israel, repentance had vanished and all that remained was ritual. And so God banished the nation to exile. Without the Temple, there could be no sacrifice. If there is no sacrifice that God will accept, then God's people are as exposed to God's judgment as Egypt was on the night of the Passover, as Isaac was as he lay bound on that altar.

6) And then something incredible happens—a sixth sacrifice to point out this morning. God is true to His Word to Abraham. He will not accept a sacrifice from the hands of his sinful people, and so He provides one instead. He sends His Son, who takes on flesh, and then offers His own life, His own blood, as an acceptable sacrifice, as a substitute for His people—a people who belong not just to one nation, but to all the nations. There at Calvary, Christ fulfilled everything the OT sacrifices meant, and accomplished what they were unable to do. Through His blood, He made atonement for the sins of His people and reconciled

them to God. And to demonstrate that God accepted this sacrifice, He raised Jesus from the dead. So that starting now and continuing on into eternity, whoever repents of their sins and places their faith in Christ's sacrifice, is redeemed from slavery to sin and is free to live a life of tribute and praise to God.

PATTERNS IN THE STORYLINE (50)

That's the story of sacrifice. What I want to do now is briefly explore some of the patterns in the storyline. Then we'll consider how we take doctrine from the storyline. For the last several weeks, we've been saying that we don't learn what the Bible has to teach us simply by pulling out our favorite verses. We don't learn simply with word studies. We learn from how the story is put together.

- 1) The first pattern to notice is the pattern itself—the pattern of sacrifice. The technical terminology for this is typology. There's a type of something, then another, then another. God's telling us to fix our attention on this. The shedding of blood isn't something we think much about today, but the Bible is obviously interested in it. Why? What is it saying? Also, we noticed a crescendo with these types. First, with Abel, it was just the idea of thanksgiving. Then, with Noah, it was thanksgiving and pleasing the Lord. Then, with Abraham and Isaac, it was all this, but also the expressing of utter devotion and the idea of a substitute. Then, with Passover, it was a spotless lamb, the representative role of the firstborn Son, and the distinguishing of a people. Then, in Leviticus, it was a clear emphasis on atoning for sin. So, a pattern or type is repeated. But there's a crescendo as well.
- 2) But there's not just crescendo or continuity. There's discontinuity, especially when we get to Christ. The Levitical sacrifices were repeated endlessly, but Christ is the sacrificed once. The Levitical sacrifices were for one ethnic nation. But Christ was sacrificed for all nations.
- 3) One other pattern for us to notice this morning is that of promise/fulfillment. There's many promises I could highlight, like his promise to Noah. Let me highlight the promise to Abraham—that his seed would be a blessing to all nations. We know that this promise was fulfilled in Christ.

SYSTEMATIZING IT ALL (51)

Okay, what's the purpose in pointing out these patterns? They are instrumental in helping us to understand who Jesus is, what His sacrifice accomplished, and our need for his sacrifice. All these patterns point to Jesus, and help us understand Jesus. They set the context for His coming.

Over the years, some have suggested that Christ died primarily as an example for us, to inspire us to greater love for God. Others have suggested that Christ's death was merely a demonstration of God's hatred for sin. Others, a demonstration of his compassion and identification with sinners. These days, some are saying Jesus died simply to declare victory over sin and death. And we can point to verses in the New Testament which say all these things—that Jesus died as an example, to demonstrate God's hatred for sin, to declare victory over sin and death. Well, all those comprise *a part* of why Jesus died. They comprise a part of what's wrong with you and me. We do need someone to set a good example. We do need someone to identify with us in weakness and to defeat death. But let me try to offer a more well-rounded understanding of Christ's sacrifice based on this storyline and the patterns that we have observed.

1) The fundamental problem with the world and humanity is our sin and the guilt it incurs.

It's not death. It's not a broken relationship. It's not our need for love or an example of love. The fundamental problem is sin, guilt, and the wrath of God incurred. I'm talking about the need for sacrifice here. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve had no need to kill an animal and offer it to God. They were in a right relationship with a good and holy God. But the moment sin entered in, Adam and Eve's lives were forfeit because of sin and guilt. **Romans 6:23**, echoing God's words to Adam in **Genesis 2**, tells us that the penalty for sin is death. Sin came first; then death.

Here is the problem that sacrifice in the Bible is designed to solve. Our need is not just an inspiring example of love. It's not just a victory over the powers of darkness. It's not just a victory over death. Rather, there is an eternal and holy God who is justly angry with us for our rebellion, and we need a way to escape the penalty of his justice, because we cannot ever hope to bear that penalty ourselves. According to Scripture, what we need is a sacrifice.

2) Christ came to die as a substitute.

An effective sacrifice is a *substitute*. We saw God provide a ram as a substitute in the place of Isaac. We saw the Passover lamb slain in the place of the first-born. And we see it in the book of Leviticus, as the person lays his or her hand on the animal.

3) Christ came to die as a penal substitute.

The victim receives the penalty I deserved. The sacrificial victim doesn't just die; it's judicially executed in my place. Both the Old and New Testament are clear that on the cross, Christ died as a substitute, taking the punishment that his people deserved. So the prophet Isaiah foretold. Turn to **Isaiah 53**. Speaking of the Messiah, Isaiah says verses 4-6, "*Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.* ⁵ *But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.* ⁶ *All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.*"

Jesus said in **John 10:11**, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Jesus did not understand his own death as an example, or as a demonstration, or even as an open-ended general death with reference to nobody in particular. No, Jesus laid down his life as an effective sacrifice, a penal substitute for his sheep.

Paul said in **Romans 3:23-26**, "*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,* ²⁴ *and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,* ²⁵ *whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.* ²⁶ *It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*" And this passage leads us directly into the fourth point.

4) Christ came to die as a penal substitute to propitiate the wrath of God. (35)

Christ's sacrifice propitiates God's wrath. What do I mean by that? I mean simply that by enduring the penalty our sin deserves, an effective sacrifice actually satisfies the demands of justice, and so removes the reason for God's wrath against the sinner. If you think back to the story of sacrifice, we saw a suggestion of this in Noah's sacrifice. We also see it in the repeated reference throughout Leviticus that the aroma of a burning sacrifice was "pleasing to the Lord."

5) Christ came to die as a penal substitute to propitiate the wrath of God and make atonement for his people.

This turning aside of God's wrath leads to the other effect of sacrifice; an effective sacrifice atones for sin. We've already seen that the high point of the Jewish year was the Day of Atonement. So what exactly is atonement? The Hebrew word for atone means to "cover." The English word simply means to be "at one with," so a sacrifice, you could say, covers our sin and makes us "at one" with God. Having propitiated God's wrath, the sacrifice obtains forgiveness for the sin that caused God's wrath in the first place, and it removes the guilt that sin had incurred.

6) Christ came to die as an effective penal substitute to propitiate the wrath of God and make atonement for his people.

While the Levitical sacrifices were repeated endlessly, the book of Hebrews draws our attention to the fact that Christ was sacrificed once. So in **Hebrews 7:27**, "*He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.*" And again in **9:12**, "*He entered once for all into the holy places, nor by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.*" And again in **9:26**, "*For then he would have had to suffer repeatedly since the foundation of the world. But as it is, he appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.*"

The whole sacrificial system had only been a picture, a teaching aid, designed to lead us to Christ, and to recognize him when he appeared. Now that he was here, the picture was no longer needed. As the writer to the Hebrews says in **Hebrews 10:4**, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" But, he goes on to say, "we have been made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ." Jesus Christ's death on the cross turned aside God's wrath and satisfied it.

The good news of Christianity, is that on the cross, Jesus Christ accomplished salvation. He turned aside God's wrath. He made atonement for sin. The only question is, did he do this for you? Jesus said that he gave his life as a ransom for many. Are you among the many? Jesus said that he lays down his life for his sheep. Who are his sheep? They are those who listen to his voice, who respond to his call. John put it this way in **John 3:17-18**, "*For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.*"

O friend, Jesus Christ has accomplished redemption for everyone who listens to his call to repent and believe. What are you listening to? Which leads us to the final thing to consider today, and that's the *end* of sacrifice in the Bible. In a story that is so saturated with the repeated shedding of sacrificial blood, it cannot escape attention that sacrifice comes to an end at the cross. There's no further or other sacrifice to be given to pay for our sins before a holy God.

7) *We're saved by faith alone.* (36)

This is why the Bible talks about the necessity of personal faith in a crucified and risen Christ for salvation. It's not that faith itself is saving. It's that faith is the way you acknowledge Christ as your substitute. Like the Old Testament Israelite who laid his hands on the victim, so faith leans on Christ and trusts that when Christ died on the cross, he was dying in your place, for you. It's not enough to be born in a Christian family, or to be baptized, or to go to church, or anything else. No, by faith you must believe that Christ was sacrificed for you.

8) *We're saved by faith alone in Christ alone.*

It's not just that he's the best example of a substitute—he's the only substitute, for no one else has ever lived a perfect life. It's not just that his death approximates the judgment we deserve—it's that on the cross, Christ endured the holocaust of God's wrath against our sin, and exhausted it. He is the last sacrifice, because in reality, he is the first sacrifice and the only effective sacrifice that has ever or will ever be made. I really want you to observe the exclusivity of this sacrifice. There will be no second chances after death, no alternative means of getting to heaven. There is only one sacrifice that reconciles sinners to God, and so there is only one name under heaven by which we may be saved. O friend, you need a sacrifice, and his name is Jesus.

CONCLUSION—ONE MORE SACRIFICE? (53)

There is, however, one more sacrifice to observe. It's not one that gains salvation or adds anything to salvation. It's one that follows salvation. When Jesus calls a person, he calls him to pick up his cross and to follow him. Paul uses similar language when he says in **Romans 12** that as Christians we are to offer ourselves as "living sacrifices." What does he mean? Before the Fall, Adam and Eve were made in the image of God, their lives were a tribute, an offering of praise back to God. Ultimately, the end or purpose of Christ's sacrifice is that we might offer our lives back to God as sacrifices, not in payment for sin, but living sacrifices of praise to his glorious grace.

Christian, do you struggle with sacrifice? Do you find it hard to lay down your life in love for others, to love your enemy, to return kindness for insults, to let go of the riches of this world for the treasure of heaven? Consider that in all of this sacrifice, you are being conformed to the image of Christ as a living sacrifice. Jesus Christ, whose death was planned by God from before the foundation of the world, will for all eternity bear in glory the marks of his sacrifice. And more than anything else, it will be those marks that are the object of our eternal wonder, and adoration, and praise, for they are the marks of our salvation. That is the image to which you are being conformed, that is the destiny to which you are heading, an eternally living sacrifice of praise to the one who alone is worthy of praise, Christ, our Passover, the Lamb who was slain, but now lives forevermore.