

## **Craving Atonement**

**By David Feddes**

School kids can be like Aztecs.

Centuries ago the Aztecs ruled an empire in the area that is now Mexico. The Aztecs had a clever, advanced culture in some ways, but human sacrifice was a standard part of life. The Aztecs went to war on a regular basis to seize thousands of people as sacrifices for their gods. The Aztecs would take the captives to the top of a temple pyramid and torture them over a fire until their skin was blistered with burns. Then the priests would pull the victims away from the fire, still alive and in agony. The priests would lay each victim on a large stone block, cut open the chest, and rip out the beating heart. As one historian describes it, this was “a messy affair, with priests, stone, platform and steps all drenched by the spurting blood. The head of the victim was usually severed and spitted on a skull rack while the lifeless body was pushed and rolled down the pyramid steps. At the base of the pyramid, the body was butchered and, after being distributed to relatives and friends of the warrior who had offered the sacrifice, the parts were cooked and eaten,” sometimes in a sauce of peppers and tomatoes.

It’s awful to think such things really happened, and it may seem outrageous to compare school kids to Aztecs. But kids can be as eager as Aztecs to seek out victims, torment them, rip out their heart, and swallow them up. Some kids feel a need to pick on other kids until the victims are destroyed. Gang members and youthful thugs can be cruel, and they’re not the only ones. Even respectable students and star athletes can be involved in making life miserable for designated victims. Gangs are the most likely to use physical cruelty, but there are other, non-physical ways to torture a person, tear out her heart, and destroy her identity. Human sacrifice of the spirit happens when kids make others miserable. Cannibalism of the spirit happens when they nourish their own sense of self at the expense of others. Countless school-age boys and girls suffer mockery, rejection, and cruelty. The life and joy is drained out of them.

Why would kids be so cruel? Well, it seems to come naturally. Some unrealistic intellectuals have said children are born innocent and tribal peoples are noble. But the opposite appears to be true. Children and tribal peoples tend to be as cruel as anyone. From an early age, most kids have a mean streak. Even small toddlers bite, pull hair, and hit others. Brothers and sisters say and do things to hurt each other and to make each other look bad. Schoolmates target certain kids for constant, merciless taunting and torment.

Whatever it is that makes kids cruel, they aren’t just cruel to others. Often kids are cruel to themselves too. Many young people are mysteriously drawn to pain and self-destructive behavior. Some start smoking, fully aware that it harms them. Some use drugs and drink alcohol with almost suicidal determination. Some become sexually promiscuous, bringing on themselves degradation, heartbreak, and disease. Some drift into self-destructive eating disorders, such as anorexia—and the fact that anorexia can harm or even kill is part of the attraction.

Some submit themselves to painful tattooing, piercing, and body modification, relishing pain and disfigurement. Some young people cut themselves and say that watching themselves bleed makes them feel better. A 14-year-old boy said he wanted to pierce his tongue, nose, and more private parts. Asked about the reason, he said, “I don’t really know why. In the past I have found that by inflicting pain on myself I could release a lot of anger and emotion without hurting anyone else. For about 4 months I would say that I was addicted to pain, I would slash my arms with a razor or a knife every time I became angry.”

Kids also hurt and sacrifice themselves in less physical ways. The headmaster of a private school writes about bright students who somehow manage to fail classes. The students are gifted enough and the classes are easy enough that the students could get good grades with what they absorb in the classroom, with no study at all. But they still fail. They couldn't fail unless they wanted to—but apparently failure is what they want. The headmaster views this as a form of self-punishment. The students have the talent to succeed, but something tells them they don't *deserve* success, so they plunge further and further into failure. Pain has such a pull on some kids that they would rather fail than flourish.

### **Individuals Craving Atonement**

What causes cruelty to self and cruelty to others? At the heart of much cruelty lies a deep sense of unworthiness. This unworthiness, this guilt, might not be consciously recognized or put into words by those affected, but it controls them anyway. When someone sins, someone must pay. Someone must atone by suffering. Either I must suffer or someone else must suffer, but somehow there must be suffering. There must be payment through pain. There must be atonement. This craving for atonement drives sadism (savoring the pain of others) and masochism (seeking pain for oneself). This affects not just ancient civilizations or confused kids but grownups as well.

Atonement is a deep and basic need, and only God can meet this need. He provides atonement through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood” (Romans 3:25). “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24), the cross where Jesus suffered and died. Those who trust Christ's atonement are freed from the craving for atonement that drives them to inflict pain on others or on themselves. Jesus has already paid the price.

But those who don't know forgiveness and freedom in Christ's atonement are driven to seek atonement in some other way, by victimizing others, by becoming victims themselves, or by doing both. Even if theorists and therapists try to make us feel good about ourselves, even if we don't admit our guilt and don't have a conscious terror of God's punishment, our fear and guilt and craving for atonement still come out, often in the ways we inflict pain on ourselves and others.

We've talked about the cruelty of ancient Aztecs and modern youth, but what about the adults among us? Many married people mistreat and abuse their spouses and children. Abuse among unmarried live-ins is even worse. Why be so cruel to the people closest to us? The craving for atonement is a major factor. Abusers often project their guilt onto others and then punish them painfully, but the suffering of others cannot satisfy the abusers' craving for atonement. Meanwhile, an astonishing number of abused spouses and live-ins continue to take a beating. For some reason, they can't bring themselves to leave their abusers behind. And if they do leave the abuser behind and seek a new relationship, they often seem to have a magnet that draws them to another abuser. Why is this? Perhaps it's because they are using their own suffering and victimhood as a way to satisfy their craving for atonement.

Another form of self-punishment occurs among drunkards and drug users. Many addicts have a gnawing sense of unworthiness and a craving for atonement. Something inside says they don't deserve to be healthy and happy but deserve pain and misery. Drinking and drugging oneself into a miserable life and an early grave becomes a misguided way to pay for sin. This craving for atonement dominates not only addicted people but also people who are drawn to

addicts. Why do so many people who grew up miserable with an alcoholic parent end up marrying an alcoholic and continuing in misery? Why do people with alcoholic spouses stick with them and suffer unbearable things and cover for them? And why, if people break up with addicted spouses or live-in lovers, do they so often end up with another partner who is as addicted and messed up as the previous one? Victimhood attracts many people like an invisible magnet. They're driven by unworthiness and a craving to suffer and atone for their loved ones and themselves.

Some people simply can't bear to be treated well and to enjoy life. If they get a steady job with good pay, they soon provoke a showdown with their boss that gets them fired. If they have enough money to make ends meet, they gamble or chase foolish financial schemes till they're deep in debt. If their spouse is kind and faithful, they provoke their spouse almost as if they want the spouse to be cruel or adulterous. Such people *need* a crisis. They *need* things to go wrong for them. They *need* to punish themselves and at the same time blame someone else. They can't live with a normal, pleasant situation. They might not know what drives them, but the truth is that they crave pain and victimhood in order to atone for their unworthiness.

When people aren't cruel to others or to themselves in everyday life, they still may wallow in pain by plunging into entertainment that focuses on suffering. They watch soap operas with one sad story after another. They listen to music about abuse, torture, and shattered relationships. They watch movies about serial killers, cannibals, blood-sucking vampires, and monsters. They are drawn to blood and pain. Something in them relishes the suffering of others and relishes their own horror.

The urge to make someone else suffer or to make yourself suffer can produce dreadful results. Author J. Budziszewski tells a true story about a pregnant woman who found out that her husband had an affair with another woman. She was terribly upset. She didn't divorce him, but she was furious at him and wanted to make him suffer for his unfaithfulness. Her husband was eager for a baby, so she decided to abort their baby in order to punish her husband for his betrayal. Afterward, though, she felt worse about the abortion than she had felt about her husband's adultery. The baby's death was her choice, not his; the guilt of the abortion was hers, not his. So how did she respond? When she got pregnant again, she aborted the second baby too! She explained, "I wanted to be able to hate myself more for what I did to the first baby." Her guilty conscience and craving for atonement drove her to keep adding to her sin and suffering.

The ways individuals harm others and themselves are twisted and sad, but at the root of such warped things is something valid: the need for atonement. When somebody sins, somebody pays. Unless we count on the payment made by Christ, our craving for atonement will not be satisfied, and we will seek relief by inflicting pain on others or by plunging into pain ourselves. This is what happens when we don't rest in the real atonement God provides by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

### **Cultures Craving Atonement**

The craving for atonement drives not only individuals but entire cultures. It's no accident that many societies and religions without Christ have practiced ritual human sacrifice or other public spectacles of suffering and slaughter. Throughout history these horrors have been committed on a massive scale in many different parts of the world.

In Central America the Aztecs and the Mayans had the two most prominent cultures, and both Aztecs and Mayans sacrificed prisoners of war and butchered countless children. In South America, the Incas of Peru offered child sacrifices, and the Tupi of Brazil were cannibals. In

North America tribes such as the Pawnee, Muskogean, Natchez, Iroquois, Anasazi, and Huron—to name just a few—had similar customs. For example, according to a noted historian using eyewitness accounts, Hurons would take a man from a rival tribe, and they would take turns burning the captive's skin in different places. They would spend all night pressing red-hot hatchets and poking burning sticks into various body parts. Then they would gouge out his eyes, cut off his hands and feet with the victim still alive, cut off his head, and roast him for a meal. (I hate to describe such things, and believe it or not, I've left out the most sickening details.) African tribes and islanders of the Pacific also practiced human sacrifice and cannibalism. Politically correct intellectuals and moviemakers try to paint a rosy picture of what native peoples have been like without Christ. But reality has often been far grimmer.

The Middle East and Mediterranean world also had human sacrifice. The mighty civilization of Carthage sought success by sacrificing babies to its pagan gods. Before the Old Testament Israelites conquered Canaan, the pagan Canaanites tried to please their gods and goddesses by sacrificing their own children. Nations bordering Israel continued with horrible cruelty and human sacrifice, and there were times even in Israel and Judah when kings knew of the true God but turned away from him to other religions and burned their own children (2 Kings 16:3, 21:6). The people did the same, sacrificing "their sons and daughters in the fire" (Jeremiah 7:31).

Most of us, if we could trace our roots back far enough, would find people in our family tree who were involved in human sacrifice. In Europe Germanic tribes practiced human sacrifice until faith in Christ triumphed over paganism. Irish tribes sacrificed babies to their harvest gods and sacrificed prisoners of war to their war gods. They stopped only after St. Patrick brought the gospel to the Irish. Italians filled the stadiums of Rome to enjoy one bloodbath after another, slaughtering captives from other nations, forcing gladiators to fight each other. When Christianity began to spread, Roman emperors blamed Christians for almost anything that went wrong in the Roman empire and killed them in all sorts of horrible ways. But Christianity kept spreading, and eventually the killing in the stadiums ended.

In more recent times, human sacrifice has been less common as a religious ritual, thanks to the spread of Christianity. But anti-Christian ideologies have found other ways to blame and sacrifice people. The French revolution was anti-God and slaughtered countless people as a bloody sacrifice to produce a new and glorious society—which turned out to be nothing but a reign of terror. Hitler and the Nazis blamed Germany's problems on the Jews and slaughtered millions as a human sacrifice to produce a thousand-year Reich for the master race. Lenin and Stalin blamed Christians and capitalists for all Russia's woes and murdered millions in an effort to buy a new paradise with their blood. Mao blamed China's problems on everyone with any ability or property and wiped out millions of them. Pol Pot did the same in Cambodia.

These tyrants and terrorists were people who rejected Christ's atonement for sin, made someone else a scapegoat for their own evil, and then killed with bloody abandon. A case of this in our own time is Islamic extremism. Denying their own sinful nature and rejecting Christ's atonement, militant Muslims have an unsatisfied inner craving for atonement. They need to blame somebody and sacrifice somebody to pay for what's wrong with their society. They may blame the Jews, they may blame America, they may blame some of their own leaders, but they've got to blame *somebody* and make them suffer. These terrorists plunge into murder and suicide with wild abandon, thinking that such bloodshed pleases their god and opens the way to a new and better world. This is just one more example which shows that when Christ's atonement is not accepted, the social and political consequences can be severe.

## **Real Atonement**

The suffering and death of Jesus on a cross is not just a long-ago, far-way event. Atonement through Jesus' blood is not just a weird, primitive doctrine with no relevance for today's world. We've seen that faith in real atonement, or lack of it, has enormous personal and political consequences. Atonement through Jesus' blood is the only way for individuals to have their guilt canceled, their deep craving for atonement satisfied, and thus to be free of the need to inflict pain on self and others. Atonement through Jesus' blood is also a life-giving source of political freedom and sanity. The gospel of Christ crucified and risen brought an end to human sacrifice in one society after another throughout history, and still today faith in Christ's atonement protects against guilt, resentment, and class warfare, things that mark a craving for atonement and spawn tyranny and terrorism.

Inside every one of us, and at the heart of entire societies, is a terrible secret. We are all sinners at heart, guilty before God and unworthy of happiness. Something deep inside senses that we must suffer and bleed or that someone else must suffer and bleed. We feel that something has got to change, and that change must come through suffering. And it's true: we do deserve to bleed, and change can come only if someone suffers.

But the answer is not to bring pain on ourselves or to project our guilt onto others and heap all our cruelty on them. That's the ungodly attempt at atonement, but God's life-giving answer to our need for atonement is the blood of Jesus Christ. He was pierced for our sins (Isaiah 53:5). Jesus' blood poured out on the cross has the power to do what our own bleeding cannot do. His blood washes away sin and cleanses the conscience as nothing else can.

You might think sin isn't all that serious or that it's not necessary to have blood atonement in order for sins to be forgiven. But God says otherwise. The Bible shows that there's a law built into the very structure of the universe: when somebody sins, somebody pays. There is no such thing as a sin that is simply overlooked or forgotten. All sin has to be dealt with. That's the way God has decreed it. That's the way he has structured reality. When somebody sins, somebody must pay, and the payment must be suffering and death. Nothing can change that fundamental law of the universe. It is more certain than the law of gravity.

Every sin must be paid for, either with the life of the sinner or with the life of a substitute. We've discussed many ways people harm themselves and are cruel to others, driven by the unsatisfied craving to atone for their guilt. But no sinner can pay the full penalty for his own sin, and no sinner can substitute for another as payment for sin. Only someone who is perfectly sinless and deserves no punishment can be a suitable substitute for another.

As a perfect man, Jesus could take the place of other humans, and as the Son of God, he had the power to bear all the sins of the world. The Bible says Jesus "loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:2). It wasn't nails that kept Jesus on the cross; it was love that kept him there, as he provided the atonement we need in order to be forgiven and accepted by God.

In the eyes of God, the cross was really an altar. The blood streaming from Jesus' wounds wasn't just the draining of his physical life but also the offering of a spiritual payment to atone for the sins of the world (1 John 2:2). After that sacrifice, God never again required animal sacrifice, and, as always, he rejected any human sacrifice except the sacrifice of his own Son. Jesus' death is of infinite value. It's more than enough to pay for all your sins and mine and everyone else's. Jesus paid the price of sin once for all, and there never needs to be another sacrifice to pay for sin.

Just before Jesus died, he cried out, “It is finished” (John 19:30). That wasn’t just an expression of relief that death would bring his suffering to an end. When Jesus said, “It is finished,” he meant that he had finished doing everything necessary to make people right with God. He had lived a perfect life, had suffered in place of others and had given his blood to pay for their sins. In the Bible’s original language, the word Jesus used for “it is finished” was commonly used in the business world to mean “paid in full.” Nothing more needed to be done. Nothing more was owed. The penalty for sin was paid. Nobody else needed to suffer punishment.

“God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood” (Romans 3:25). Believe this good news. Believe that God accepts you in love for Jesus’ sake. Believe that Jesus’ blood pays for your sin and cancels your guilt. Let Jesus satisfy your deep inner craving for atonement. By faith in Christ’s atonement, be free from the dreadful drive to punish yourself. Be free from the urge to blame and punish others to make yourself feel better. Be free to rejoice in God’s love for you, and be free to love others.

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