

Part 2: Biblical Themes in the Old Testament  
H. God's Answer for Sinful Rebellion  
23. Sacrifice and Atonement

The lovingkindness of God, great as it is, does not contradict the biblical message that God is very angry at sin, and that he requires some sort of atonement to propitiate or satisfy his righteous anger. This is not because God is hard to get along with or because he has less than perfect love for his creatures. To the contrary, he bends over backwards, as it were, to accommodate himself to sinful humanity, for he does love us perfectly. Yet, he is also perfectly just and holy, and his attitude towards sin is a reflection of his unchanging standards. So, God is both just and merciful, both angry at sin and loving toward sinners.

The big question then, is "How can sinners, whom God loves, and yet whose sin He cannot abide, stand in God's presence without being destroyed by his righteous anger?"

We see the first hints of Scripture's answer to this question right after the original sin, when God did not let Adam and Eve suffer the immediate and full consequences of their action. That would have been death; how can you live if you turn your back on the giver of life? Adam and Eve were spared immediate death. Yet, there was the continuing problem of a broken relationship, and the problem of bearing the guilt and shame for their condition—a major problem for Adam and Eve and their descendants, but also one for God, because that wasn't how he had designed things to be. Nor could he just say, 'forget it' because his perfect justice demanded punishment for sin.

Instead of letting Adam and Eve die, however, God clothed them in the skins of a sacrificial animal, revealing this truth: "Only by the sacrifice of a substitute can one appear before God." But already then, God had in mind something more satisfactory and permanent than sacrificial animals; he had in mind the sacrifice of his own beloved Son, who would shift the blame for human sinfulness to himself and pay sin's penalty. Only that would make possible a repaired relationship between God and humankind. If the guilt and shame were removed, people would no longer have to hide in fear, but could again love and serve God as intended from the start.

But that would not be for many years, so along the way, God kept reinforcing the need for sacrifice, and the close tie between that and proper worship. We see this, for example in the story of Cain and Abel. Both brought offerings to the Lord; those of Cain were portions of the crops he had grown while those of Abel were the choicest portions of his best animals. But, God reacted differently to their respective offerings. "The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor."

It could be that the Lord preferred animal sacrifices to grain offerings. If so, Cain would have known this as well as Abel. Scripture implies, however, that the difference in how the Lord looked upon their offerings was due less to the type of offering each brought than to the attitude of each man. But, even if we don't know exactly what Cain did wrong, he himself knew. And God gave him the chance to put it right in telling him, "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?"

Later on, God would give more detailed instructions about the offerings his people should bring. And he would be more explicit too about the need for animal sacrifice in some of those offerings.

Noah evidently knew something of this, since one of his first acts after he left the ark, was to sacrifice certain animals and birds as a burnt offering to the Lord. And centuries later, Abraham, who was not only physically descended from Noah, but very like him in devotion to the Lord, was still offering animal sacrifices to God as part of his worship. But one day, God raised the stakes considerably. He said, *"Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about"* (Gen 22:2).

It had to have been a terribly difficult test for Abraham, as it would be for any father called to sacrifice his son. But what made it harder still was that Isaac was the key to the fulfillment of the Lord's promise of an everlasting covenant and many descendants. Without Isaac, Abraham had no future. Even so, Abraham was obedient, and was stopped from sacrificing his son only by God's intervention. Then, by divine coincidence, Abraham looked and saw a ram caught by its horns in a bush. He sacrificed it instead of his son as a burnt offering to the Lord.

A similar substitute sacrifice was provided for Abraham's descendants in the first-ever Passover celebration on the eve of their deliverance from slavery in Egypt. God was about to take the lives of Egypt's firstborn in answer to Pharaoh's hardhearted insistence that Egypt controlled the destiny of those whom the Lord had called his firstborn. To preserve his own people from the coming devastation, God commanded that perfectly healthy and sound year old lambs be sacrificed as substitutes for the lives of his people. *"The life...is in the blood,"* as the Lord later told Moses (Lev 17:11), *"and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar."* In accordance with God's instructions, the people smeared the blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses. Literally and figuratively, they were covered by the blood.

Atonement—or at-one-ment, if you separate the syllables—is the means by which two parties who are separated are brought together and made one. The atoning blood of the lambs meant that Israel didn't have to pay the price required of all who were not covered by it. The blood of the lambs atoned for Israel, allowed the people to be at-one with God.

It is important for us to understand why God went to such lengths to emphasize the vulnerability of his people to destruction and the need for bloody sacrifice to prevent it. It has to do with something we discussed before in the lecture on sin and its consequences—the truth about how far our sins separate us from the God who designed us for communion with him.

The separation is as great as that between life and death. God made that clear to Adam and Eve from the beginning (Gen. 2:17) in telling them that the day they denied their complete and utter dependence on him (by eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) was the day they would die.

God is life; to be apart from him is death. And that poses a great dilemma—for people, of course, but also for God, who still wishes to be merciful and restore the broken communion with himself that people so desperately need. Sacrifice and atonement are part of the answer, but these are better understood if the more we get the message of Leviticus, which addresses the issue of how a holy God and unholy people can get along together. It is no simple matter, for God cannot stand sin, while people are infected with sin through and through.

David was not thinking only of himself when he confessed that he had been sinful from birth, and even conception (Ps. 51:5). And there is something universal in Isaiah's claim (59:2) that "Your iniquities have separated you from your God." The apostle Paul makes this explicit and states the consequences in Rom 5:12, saying, "Death came to all people because all sinned."

God outlined to Moses the conditions by which people could have a continuing relationship with him. He said (Lev 19:2), "*Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy.*" But knowing that they would inevitably violate this command, God set down many regulations having to do with the sacrifices or offerings that people could make to God to get right with him again. There was a proper offering for every offense against God. But the most important was the burnt offering.

In the Burnt Offering the worshipper would acknowledge his guilt and take responsibility for his sin by pressing his hand on the animal's head while he confessed his sin. Then the animal would be killed and burnt whole on the altar as the ransom price for the guilty person. Also implied in the very act of sacrificing was a public statement of faith, and thanks for all God's blessings, as well as a promise to live according to God's will for the future.

For the most part, the people needed some assistance in making their sacrifices. It was not that they couldn't kill the animals themselves, but God wanted the sacrifices to be made at certain times, in certain ways, at a certain place (the tabernacle and later the temple), and by certain people (the priests). All of these requirements helped to highlight the seriousness of God's rules for correct worship and sacrifice.

According to the assumptions in Leviticus, only God is perfectly holy, which means that he alone is whole and complete, orderly, unconfused, perfect, etc. But by God's grace and instruction, certain common things could be made holy, i.e. they could be set apart for special service to the holy God. Examples are the animal hides, cloths, furniture, wooden poles, etc. that made up the tabernacle. And people were also especially consecrated for service to God. The men of the tribe of Levi were commissioned by God to build and care for the tabernacle and to facilitate the offering of Israel's sacrifices to God. And from the tribe of Levi, Aaron and his family were set apart to be the actual priests for Israel. They, as well as all the Levites, were supported by the rest of Israel so that they could concentrate on leading the people in the proper worship of God. Everything and everyone that was made holy was to be treated with special respect, for they represented God.

But it was possible for holy things to be profaned, i.e. to be made common (or unholy, which means pretty well the same thing). Except for God himself, of course, any holy thing could be made common. It was possible for the holy people of God to become common, just like all the other people of their world; that happened by their sin and neglect of God. It was even possible—horror of horrors—for the priests to become common or unholy, as Nadab and Abihu became, and paid the price for it. And it was possible for the tabernacle to be profaned, if for example the wrong people handled it, or dropped a piece of it.

So some of the rules of Leviticus were to prevent what God wanted to be holy from becoming merely common. And some of the rules were to cleanse and sanctify what had become common, so that it could become holy again. In fact this was the purpose of the whole sacrificial system. The people, who were regularly profaned by sin, were sanctified (made holy) by proper sacrifices.

The book of Leviticus contains many other details about preserving the relationship with God that Israel had received through his grace—details about clean and unclean food, utensils, and people, and how to purify those things that were not designated as permanently unclean. But in sum, what God had in mind for his people was a life rich with beauty and order and perfection—the very life for which he had created the world in the first place. This life was in marked contrast to the life lived by the idol worshippers of Israel's world, many of whom had a life of superstition and disorder and violence.

The life God had in mind was highlighted by the very arrangement of Israel's camp during their years in the wilderness. In the center of Israel's encampment, with three tribes on the north, three on the south, and three each on the east and the west, was the tabernacle—at the physical and spiritual center of Israel's life. If there were any gentiles or things or people which had become temporarily unclean, they were to be relegated to the periphery, outside of the camp of Israel.

The arrangement of the tabernacle itself also reflected the prescribed concern with holiness. The Outer Court marked the perimeter of the tabernacle in the center of Israel's camp and a spot where the priests offered sacrifices on behalf of the people. But there was an even more holy place inside of that—the Inner Court with access restricted to special representatives of the priesthood.. And at the back of this Holy Place, behind a curtain and containing the ark of the covenant representing the very presence of the Lord, was the Most Holy Place. Only the High Priest could enter here and only once each year, bearing the blood of the Atonement for his sins and those of people he represented (cf. Heb. 9:7).

To sum up what I've been saying, sin resulted in Adam and Eve becoming unholy and excluded from communion with God—under a sentence of death. And all of their descendants are likewise unholy and excluded from communion with God. We all remain under a sentence of death except for God's provision of sacrifice and atonement, by which he lays the punishment for our sin upon another, and decrees that the life taken is an atonement for sin and a new start for those covered by the blood.

It's important to see, however, that the animal sacrifices commanded for ancient Israel, were not enough to satisfy God's requirements. As Heb 10:4 says, "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." Rather, God, as it were, accepted those sacrifices as an interim arrangement until something better could be arranged. Paul tells us in Rom 3:25 that in his grace God left the sins committed beforehand, i.e. before Christ, unpunished.

That doesn't mean those previous sacrifices were unimportant. On the contrary, they served to highlight the gravity of sin and the huge sacrifice necessary to restore the broken communion between God and humankind. That was driven home to our spiritual ancestors every time they picked out the best of their livestock to bring to the temple as a sacrifice. But perhaps the best indication they had of the difficulties of finding atonement—for those who had eyes to see it—was the story, previously mentioned, of God's command that Abraham sacrifice his only son.

Scripture says that all this happened in the region of Moriah. There is some uncertainty about where this was, but some scholars believe that the spot is in Jerusalem at the temple mount, which is both the former site of Solomon's Temple and the area where Jesus was crucified. In fact, Jewish tradition had it that the precise location of that sacrifice was enclosed in that part of the temple known as the Holy of holies. So you can see why the Jews hold that place to be sacred, even after the last temple was destroyed in 70 a.d.

How impossible a dilemma Abraham faced. This is how John Calvin put it: "It was difficult and painful to Abraham to forget that he was a father and a husband; to cast off all human affections; and to endure, before the world, the disgrace of shameful cruelty, by becoming the executioner of his son. But the other was a far more severe and horrible thing; namely, that he conceives God to contradict Himself and His own word; and then, that he supposes the hope of the promised blessing to be cut off from him,... For what more could he have to do with God, when the only pledge of grace is taken away?" Calvin's Commentary on Genesis, 564

But as before, when he expected a child from his and Sarah' good-as-dead bodies, Abraham hoped for more than it seemed possible to hope for. Facing the prospect of the death of his son, he nevertheless followed God's command, and put everything on the line. For the sake of absolute necessity—the command of God—Abraham was willing to give Isaac up. He did not understand how the Lord would fulfill his promise, but neither did he hold the Lord responsible for making it clear before he would obey. Rather than looking to himself, his own judgment, and his own seed even if it had been given by God to ensure his future, Abraham looked to the God who called, sealed, partnered, and blessed him. And he obeyed.

Afterward—after God stayed Abraham's knife and provided a substitute—Abraham was again received God's blessing, which ended with these words: *Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.*

The most perceptive of Abraham's descendants understood that God was speaking of a special person, and not just the nation of Israel. But this became much clearer after Jesus' resurrection and the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost. In Acts 3, for example, the apostle Peter specifically calls Jesus the one who fulfilled the Abrahamic promise. .

Genesis 22:13-14 tells us that Abraham called the place of his test, *The LORD Will Provide*. And God did—twice—a ram as substitute for Isaac, and two millennia later, his one and only son as an atoning sacrifice for sin. Jesus was the Father's voluntary contribution for the sake of the world he loved. *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*