



Family Bible Lessons

Biblical Themes Lesson 3: Sacrifice & Atonement

Review and Introduction

In Lesson 1, we learned how Biblical Themes are threads that run through the whole story of the Bible and lead us to Jesus. The first theme we looked at was Image of God. We are all made in His image but have failed to reflect his image due to our sin. Jesus is the perfect image of God, who transforms our hearts so we can once again bear his image.

In Lesson 2, we looked at the personal commitments God made to different people in the Bible called covenants. All of them lead us to God's new covenant that he has made through Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection to all who would receive it.

In this lesson, we are going to explore a part of the Old Testament that might seem brutal to us – animal sacrifice. Maybe you are aware of this, but you haven't stopped to think why God would require such a thing. Watch BibleProject's video on Sacrifice & Atonement for a really good answer.

Video: Sacrifice & Atonement

Watch Sacrifice & Atonement (6 minutes) - https://youtu.be/G_OIRWGLdnw

Why Animal Sacrifices?

If you open your Bible at the beginning, it doesn't take long to find the first animal sacrifice. Genesis 4:4 tells us that Abel brought the firstborn of his flock as an offering to God and that God favored that offering. Genesis mentions different people at different times offering animal sacrifices for different reasons to God.

Animal sacrifices were part of ancient cultures dating thousands of years and were around before Israel (God's chosen people) ever became a nation. If you were one of Israel's neighbors (the Egyptians, the Canaanites, the Babylonians), you had a lot of gods to worship, a lot of gods to keep happy. Giving them some of your flock of animals (which was a way wealth was measured) was how you kept them happy. The problem was that you could never be sure which god might be angry with you at any given moment. Was it the rain god? Maybe it was the sun god. Whichever god it was, your crops didn't grow that year unless you gave them enough gifts to satisfy them.

But Yahweh, the one true God of Israel, was remarkably different. He didn't pick Israel because he wanted them to make him happy. He chose them and rescued them because he loved them. He wanted to be with them. The people of Israel did not return that affection. As Yahweh was giving Moses the covenant terms for his people, they turned their back on him and began worshipping a false god, a golden cow they had made. Their sin separated them from God. God tells Moses in Exodus 33:5, "If I dwell with you while you are living in sin against me, I will consume you." God is just; he doesn't let sin slide by or sweep it under the rug. If he dealt with the people as they deserved, they would be doomed to die before him. The story presents a conflict: how does this righteous God remain just and deal with the sin of Israel but also remain merciful and loving toward these stubborn people so that they aren't destroyed?

The book of Leviticus is the answer. He used the familiar system of animal sacrifice that the people could bring to the priests as an offering pleasing to Yahweh. But he made sure the people knew that he wasn't like the false gods of their neighbors. These animal sacrifices to Yahweh would give them something those gods never offered: forgiveness and the opportunity to dwell with his presence.

Read Leviticus 4:27-31 (ESV):

“If anyone of the common people sins unintentionally in doing any one of the things that by the LORD’s commandments ought not to be done, and realizes his guilt, or the sin which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female without blemish, for his sin which he has committed. And he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and kill the sin offering in the place of burnt offering. And the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar. And all its fat he shall remove, as the fat is removed from the peace offerings, and the priest shall burn it on the altar for a pleasing aroma to the LORD. And the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven.

What is going on here? Yahweh is saying that when an spotless animal's blood is offered in the place of a guilty sinner, his justice is satisfied. Forgiveness of sin is granted. He can have mercy on the sinning Israelite because atonement has been made for his sin.

What's Atonement?

According to Oxford English Dictionary, it is repairing a wrong or injury. The book of Leviticus was given because Israel had done something completely wrong and injured the heart of Yahweh. They had promised that they would not make any other gods and would love and serve Yahweh alone. They broke that promise 40 days later. That relationship with Yahweh needed repairing, and only he could provide a way for that to happen.

As the video showed, this animal sacrifice for atonement didn't just check a box for God. When the blood of the innocent was shed for the blood of the guilty, that sinner was purified in God's eyes. The relationship that was broken was restored. God could dwell amongst his people in his righteousness because the sin of the people had been dealt with.

The Day of Atonement

While God provided a way for sins to be atoned for individuals, he also called for a special day each year known as the Day of Atonement that would be for the entire nation. Leviticus 16:29-34 tells us what would happen on this day:

“This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work—whether native-born or a foreigner residing among you— because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the Lord, you will be clean from all your sins. It is a day of sabbath rest, and you must deny yourselves; it is a lasting ordinance. The priest who is anointed and ordained to succeed his father as high priest is to make atonement. He is to put on the sacred linen garments and make atonement for the Most Holy Place, for the tent of meeting

and the altar, and for the priests and all the members of the community. This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites.”

On this day, the people would do more than just offer a sacrifice. They would rest from all their daily work. They would deny themselves, meaning that they set themselves apart to think deeply about their sin and the righteousness of God. The high priest would enter the most holy place in the Tabernacle where God’s presence dwelt and offer up a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people. It was to be a part of their yearly rhythm to remember that they were a people that would fail God, and God was merciful, compassionate, and faithful to them. It would have been a solemn day, but a beautiful day of humbling themselves before Yahweh and calling out once again for their need of his mercy. He would respond with mercy and not the judgment they deserved.

So Israel had a regular way for individuals to be made right with God through animal sacrifice and a yearly holiday to bring his atonement even more into focus. That must mean they had a great relationship with God through their history, right? Unfortunately, not so much.

Sacrifice and Atonement Becomes Empty

It didn’t take Israel long after Moses passed from the scene to abandon Yahweh for other gods. He would turn his face from them and no longer provide protection until they humbled themselves again before him. This continued through the book of Judges until they finally decided that the problem was that they didn’t have a human king. To them, God’s way of dealing with sin wasn’t good enough. And while we have a marvelous example of a king in David who was after God’s heart, not many of the kings who followed him felt the same. They led Israel into false worship. They would, of course, look like they were still worshipping Yahweh. They would still bring those animal sacrifices. But they were just going through the motions. Seeing the death of an animal in their place was supposed to shake them awake to the consequences of their sin. Instead, they just lived sinful lives with no change. Yahweh’s prophets had some strong words for this, such as Amos 5:21-24:

“I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the peace offerings of your fattened animals, I will not look upon them. Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

The sacrifices had become empty because the hearts of the people were not true to Yahweh. And it was obvious because of the way they treated one another, especially those who were poor, broken, and outcast among them. Because the people refused to offer sacrifices that led to repentance, Yahweh allowed them to be taken into exile. Eventually, they would return to their land and even rebuild the temple and offer the sacrifices of Yahweh again. But their hearts were still impure.

A greater sacrifice of atonement was needed, one that would both purify and transform hearts.

Jesus, the Perfect Atoning Sacrifice

Jesus had a few titles attributed to him during his life: Son of man, Emmanuel, Messiah among them. But look at what John the Baptist calls him in John 1:29:

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

While Jesus would do incredible things in his ministry, John saw his ultimate purpose: to offer himself as the perfect lamb sacrifice. He would atone not only for all of Israel's sins but for the sins of the whole world. Jesus bore on himself the punishment for all of our sins. Not only was he the spotless lamb of God who died in our place, but he was the priest who interceded for the people, even as he was being crucified. Luke 23:33-34:

And when they came to the place that is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. And Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Just as the high priest went into the most holy place on the Day of Atonement, Jesus saw it as a priestly responsibility to pray for the people's forgiveness as he offered himself on the cross.

The writer of Hebrews helps all readers to understand the atoning work of Jesus for us in Hebrews 9:11-14:

But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

God's perfect justice for sin and his compassionate mercy for sinners meet in the blood of Jesus shed for us. And that atoning sacrifice doesn't just take care of our punishment; it transforms our hearts and minds so that we can serve the living God. As Philip Bliss once wrote in a hymn: "Guilty, vile, and helpless we; spotless Lamb of God was he. Full atonement, can it be? Hallelujah, what a Savior!"

Response

1. Your sin causes death. It destroys yourself, your relationships with others, and your relationship with God. And he doesn't ignore any of it. He will practice his perfect justice on you and all who sin against him.
2. Jesus' sacrifice atones for sin. The crucified and risen King Jesus has offered himself in the place of ruined sinners like you. His perfect sacrifice is pleasing to Yahweh. He can love you with all of himself. Turn from your sin and plead for God's mercy brought only through the blood of Jesus.
3. Jesus' blood purifies hearts. Jesus didn't die just so you could have a ticket to heaven. His death can bring you eternal life here and now. He can transform your heart so that you too can offer yourself to God as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). He can and will make all things new in you.

Review Questions with Your Family

These are designed to help children ages 8-18 to review before taking their individual Google quizzes.

1. Who offered the first animal sacrifice in Genesis? *Abel*
2. According to our lesson, which book of the Old Testament shows us how God can be both just and merciful with sinners like Israel? *Leviticus*
3. What word means “repairing a wrong or an injury?” *Atonement*
4. What holiday did Israel observe once a year where the high priest would offer a sacrifice for the whole nation? *The Day of Atonement*
5. Which month of the Jewish year did this holiday occur according to Leviticus 16? *The seventh month*
6. What did God command the people of Israel to do on this day? *Rest from their work*
7. Which prophet told the people of Israel that God “will not accept your sacrifices” because they didn’t repent from sin? *Amos*
8. What title did John the Baptist give Jesus? *The Lamb of God*
9. According to the video, what two rituals or practices help us remember Jesus’ atoning sacrifice? *Baptism and the Lord’s Supper*
10. According to our lesson, God’s perfect justice for sin and his compassionate mercy for sinners meet in the _____ of Jesus. *Blood*

Praying the Scriptures

One of the joys of reading the Bible is praying its words back to its Author. We encourage you to read the Bible passage below and make it your prayer.

Read Ephesians 1:7 (ESV):

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace.

Prayer:

Dear King Jesus,

Thank you for dying as the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice and atonement for my sin. I deserve only God’s judgment, but you have brought me his tender mercy and forgiveness. Your blood is my only hope to rescue me from sin, purify my heart, and transform me into a child of the living God. May I live all of my days with thanksgiving and praise for you and the riches of your grace. Amen.

Google Quiz

- Children in your family who are ages 8-18 can now take their Google quiz for this lesson.
- Parents, you should receive an email when each child completes their quiz, so you know it has been completed.
- Take the Google Quiz: <https://forms.gle/M7h2YBvm4TzzQkVr5>