

The Temple Background

Loving Our Magnificent, Invincible Savior

Sometimes you see a thing, as with a silhouette, more clearly by stark contrast with what it is not. The gospels show us the events that led Jesus to the cross on Good Friday. The writer of Hebrews interprets those same events by contrasting that Sacrifice at Calvary with the Temple sacrifices of ancient Israel which were still being practiced in his day. It helps to understand the Reality by gazing upon its “shadow.”

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near... For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Hebrews 10:1, 4 ESV

Worship and Sacrifice

If we aren't attentive to the Hebrew Scriptures, we might easily think of an Old Testament worship service as being like synagogue services which (then as now) are similar to our own—with their prayers, readings of scripture, homilies, and liturgical structure.

In fact, Biblical worship was radically different from anything we experience, so much so that we might find it revolting, even nauseating. Worship in the Old Testament was primarily an act of animal sacrifice. Why? Why the ritual slaughter of animals? Why the gruesome display of blood? Why was ancient Israel so involved with animal sacrifice in the first place?



Back to the Garden

We have to go back to the scene of the crime — the first crime—that of Adam and Eve's original rebellion against God's leadership. They had been warned that if they ate the forbidden fruit they would die. They disobeyed God, ate the fruit, and a very strange thing happened: they died, but they didn't die! The spirit within them died, as it “converted” into the “fallen nature” in them and in all of their children. But their bodies and souls didn't die right away. Instead, both body and soul came under the death-dealing influence of their (now) fallen nature. Unless God were to intervene, however, their bodies would eventually die, returning to dust, and their souls would also experience death, the everlasting death of hell. All of this from one act of rebellion!

What was God's response? Clearly, He delayed the punishment, but how? From the first moment of the Fall, God provided a covering for their sin. Blood was shed in the garden for Adam and Eve to have their “nakedness” covered by the skin of animals that God (apparently)



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sacrificed on their behalf. Was this initial sacrifice intended as a spiritual covering for Adam and Eve as well? This certainly seems to be the case.

Still in Need of a Covering

Atonement means “covering.” Our sins need to be covered so that God can look upon us without our sins getting in the way and “spoiling” the view, so to speak. This should hardly be surprising. When someone sins against us, unless we cover them with mercy by forgiving them, we are reminded of their sin each time they come before us. Without a covering we can’t “see” past their sin now that their sinfulness—their nakedness—has been exposed to us. Uncovered by mercy, we see them through the perpetual stain of that sin, not as they really are in their full potential as a child of light. God cannot turn a blind eye to sin. He doesn’t have one!

Why doesn’t God simply forgive people, as we do? There are two sides to this. We can “simply” forgive (as God now does), because the justice issue has already been fully “covered” by Jesus’ death on the cross. Once we are ready to let go our offense with a person’s sin, the underlying, necessary work of atonement, is already there for us to act upon. But atonement had to happen. No amount of forgiveness on our part could ever release a person from the sin debt they owed to God and to the created order, nor could it remove the interior defilement that even one sin caused within them. For instance, I have chosen to forgive Adam and Eve, but I’m not crazy enough to think that my forgiveness of them can undo the world-wrecking damage their one sin brought about. God will have to go deep and long on that one.

Israel and Sacrifice

Israel was well-schooled by the Lord in the necessity of sin being covered by an atoning sacrifice. They knew that sin was an extremely serious issue with the Lord: sin’s punishment was death for any “soul who sins.” God was holy, mighty and absolutely sovereign. He insisted upon sin-less obedience from His people. Yet, He was also merciful. God didn’t want anyone to die for their sins, so He opened the way of substitution: an animal could die in the sinner’s place. The lion’s share of the Law they received in the desert had to do with the sacrificial system, showing them how to atone for the laws they were going to break! That atonement almost always required blood. The writer of Hebrews summed it up this way:

[In fact] under the Law almost everything is purified by means of blood, and without the shedding of blood there is neither release from sin and its guilt nor the remission of the due and merited punishment for sins. Hebrews 9:22 AMP

This then, was the beginning of the sacrificial system, instituted by God through Moses, during the wilderness years. As they came into the Land, places of worship arose as reasons to celebrate the goodness of God proliferated. Sin proliferated too, requiring sacrifice to remove the guilt. Hence, throughout the Old Testament period we see the steady growth of the Levitical order and the labor of the Temple. Why all this shedding of blood? No people on earth had ever received such a fearful religious vision, guaranteed to perpetually fuel their altar fires:

- 1) They had been made terrifying aware of the absolute holiness of God.
- 2) They had been given the Law of God which laid bare their every sin.

A Very Bloody Covering

The Lord's chosen people were confronted with the awful reality of sin and its consequences—separation from God and eternal death. To make matters worse they knew that they were without excuse for any sin and that they had no other recourse than the means God had given them for covering their guilt. To put this in practical terms, let's remember that at the very moment Jesus was being crucified, John tells us that the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple. Consider for a moment how many lambs that may have been. Estimates are that the population of Jerusalem would swell to over 200,000 people during the high holy festivals of [Passover, Pentecost and Booths](#). At Passover one lamb was required to feed 10 men. You do the math.

Yet, Passover was only the “camel's nose in the tent.” There were morning and evening sacrifices; there were sacrifices appointed for every Sabbath, for every new moon, for every religious festival, for every first-born son, for every mother giving birth, and on and on. In addition to all of these appointed sacrifices there were the five voluntary sacrifices: the grain offering, the peace offering, the sin and trespass offerings and the burnt offering. Always the motive was a hope of having one's conscience relieved and one's life restored to fellowship and favor with God. Yet, as the endlessly repeated cycle of sin and sacrifice spun out of control, it reaped an ever-increasing harvest of death. Paul Johnson in his *History of Christianity* attempts to describe the scene of sacrifice at the Temple with these words:

Herod's fabric was elegant, modern, sophisticated—he had, indeed, added some Hellenic decorative effects much resented by the fundamentalist Jews who constantly sought to destroy them—but nothing could hide the essential business of the Temple, which was the ritual slaughter, consumption, and combustion of sacrificial cattle on a gigantic scale. The place was as vast as a small city. There were literally thousands of priests, attendants, temple-soldiers and minions. To the unprepared visitor, the dignity and charity of Jewish Diaspora life, the thoughtful comments and homilies of the Alexandrian synagogue, was quite lost amid the smoke of the pyres, the bellows of terrified beasts, the sluices of blood, the abattoir stench, the unconcealed and unconcealable machinery of tribal religion inflated by modern wealth to an industrial scale.

The Sacrifice of Christ

The author of Hebrews tells us that none of these God-ordained sacrifices could do what the worshipers hoped they would accomplish: It was "impossible" that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. The guilt remained, the deep root of the sin nature remained, and the sins remained, year after year. All this was because the Old Testament sacrifices were only instituted to provide a temporary covering—a mere “shadow” of reality, until better things could come with the final and full sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

The sacrifice of Christ was intended by God to bring to end the need for any further sacrifice. The last lamb that God's justice required offered Himself on the altar at Calvary. Did the Old Testament sacrifices end there? We know that they didn't. Animal blood kept flowing on the strength of centuries of momentum and the blindness of a misguided zeal. It would all, perhaps, have continued within Judaism to this day, but for the otherwise unfortunate tragedy of the Roman conquest of Jerusalem and final destruction of the Temple in 70 AD.



When the smoke cleared, the outlines of modern Judaism emerged in the form of synagogue worship completely displacing the former preeminence of the Temple. With the Temple destroyed its sacrificial rituals disappeared from the face of the earth. It would seem that the Lord took matters into His own Hands and somehow worked through the tragic events of the First Jewish Revolt to bring about the demise of a system His justice no longer required.

Explore More about Jesus

[Songs about Jesus](#) Most of the other religions of the world chant. It can get monotonous. We Christians can't help but sing our our praises. There have been literally thousands of worship songs written in praise of Jesus. This eclectic collection includes "Jesus, Lover of My Soul", "It's All about You, Jesus", "There Is a Redeemer", "In Christ Alone", "My Jesus, I Love Thee", and "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

[Scriptures About Jesus](#) Jesus, being larger than life, cannot be fully described by words on a page, even words that are divinely inspired. Nevertheless, both Testaments are filled with references to Him as the two men on the road to Emmaus discovered when Jesus interpreted "in all the scriptures the things concerning Himself." Here are a few passages to enhance your search, divided between His exaltation as Son of God and His humility as Son of Man.

[The Sacrifice of Christ: The Power of His Blood](#) According to the Lord's own instructions to Israel, the power of an atoning sacrifice is in the blood that is shed. Many moderns typically become squeamish at the thought of a bloody sacrifice and question its necessity. Being willing to shed that world view allows us to see through the lens of scripture what is in the Mind of our Redeemer. Knowing and believing what Jesus' Blood means can establish your faith like nothing else.

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[pdf Jesus: His Death and Resurrection \(x-page eBook\) \(272 KB\)](#)

Scriptures on Sacrifice

But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man. "Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image." Genesis 9:4-6 ESV

For the life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off. Leviticus 17:14 ESV



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For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies 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. Hebrews 9:13-14 ESV

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For over a decade Steve Evans and [Healing Streams](#) have been helping people recover inner peace and freedom through the free eCourse for healing, [Matters of the Heart](#). Through Forerunners4Him he has been showing how we can be saved for heaven and teaching the way to live a Spirit-filled life on earth. Go now to receive a completely free primer, [Getting to Heaven](#) and/or an introduction to [Living in the Spirit](#) at our website.



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