

§ 7. Doctrine of Christ

Lecture 9

Old Testament Sacrifices, Propitiation, and Expiation

We've begun our study of the atonement wrought by Christ. We saw last time that the predominant motif in the New Testament for the atonement wrought by Jesus' death is that of a sacrifice to God – a sacrificial offering. We began to look at the Old Testament background to the notion of sacrifice. We saw that in the Levitical sacrifices which were offered in the tabernacle and then later in the temple in Jerusalem that these sacrifices in general served twin functions. They would expiate sin. That is, they would cleanse or purify of sin. Then they would propitiate God. That is to say they would satisfy God's justice and wrath.

Let's look today specifically at propitiatory sacrifices.

At least some of the Old Testament sacrifices were clearly propitiatory in nature. A premier example is the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. This sacrifice was not originally intended for the expiation of sin. Rather, the blood of the lamb smeared on the doorframes of the Israelite homes served to shelter them from divine wrath and judgment as it swept over Egypt. In Exodus 12:13 the Lord says, "when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague shall fall upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt." Had they not offered these sacrifices then God's deadly judgment would have fallen on the Israelites as well as the Egyptians. But these sacrifices of the Passover lamb served to safeguard them from the wrath and judgment of God.

Propitiation is also in view in the various priestly sacrifices which were offered in the tabernacle and in the temple. The careful regulations that were prescribed for these sacrificial offerings should be understood against the background of God's striking down Aaron's sons for unlawfully offering sacrifices in the tabernacle precincts. These are described in Leviticus 10:1-2, 16:1:

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered unholy fire before the Lord, such as he had not commanded them. And fire came forth from the presence of the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord. . . . The Lord spoke to Moses, after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the Lord and died.

Here these prescriptions are laid down for offering these sacrifices appropriately.

God was conceived to be especially present in the tabernacle in the innermost sanctum – the Holy of Holies. Therefore he had to be approached with utmost care – care which was not observed by Aaron's sons. It was a dangerous business, frankly, having a holy God

dwelling in the midst of a sinful and impure people. We see this in God's warning to the people of Israel in Exodus 33:5:

For the Lord had said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, 'You are a stiff-necked people; if for a single moment I should go up among you, I would consume you.'"

The sacrificial system functioned to facilitate the juxtaposition of the holy and the unholy.¹ It did this not merely by purging the tabernacle and its paraphernalia of ceremonial impurity but also by propitiating God and so averting his wrath upon the people.

This is especially evident in the roasting of certain sacrificial animals where it is repeatedly said to produce "a pleasing odor" or "fragrance" to the Lord. We find this, for example, in Leviticus 1:9 where the smell of the sacrifices rises to God as a pleasing fragrance which implies that they help to cultivate God's favor. That was symbolized in the fragrance of the roasting of these sacrifices.

Both in the Passover sacrifice and then in these Levitical sacrifices we see the function that the sacrifices play in propitiating God and averting his wrath.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I am trying to understand if there is a ransom component of the atonement. Let me make it abundantly clear – I am completely against the ransom theory of the atonement. I don't want to have anything to do with it. I am distancing myself from that. But at the same time, it seems like there are parts of Scripture where there is an economic transaction made and God is satisfied. You see that in Ruth with the kinsman redeemer. But in the Old Testament, if you look at Numbers 3, there is an excess number of Levites – exactly 273 – and Moses says *give me money for these people*. I am just trying to understand if this somehow points to Christ's sacrifice in any way.

Dr. Craig: I think it does. We will talk about ransom later on. Remember I quoted (I think) last time Jesus' famous ransom saying in Mark 10:45 where he says *the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many*. Jesus himself confirms this ransom motif – a sort of payment that was used to buy slaves out of slavery or to buy back prisoners of war that had been taken by the enemy. Ransom also appears in these Levitical sacrifices. I didn't mention it, but in certain cases instead of bringing an animal sacrifice you could bring a ransom payment instead. This payment would stand in for the sacrifice and thereby achieve atonement. So ransom is also an element. But I think it is subsidiary to the motif of sacrifice which is much more prominent.

¹ 5:16

END DISCUSSION

Let's turn to the next subpoint which is expiatory sacrifices. Certain of the Old Testament sacrifices also served an expiatory function.

In the priestly system of sacrifices, the sacrificial offerings served to remove ceremonial impurity and/or moral guilt. For example, in Leviticus 5:10 we have the following promise which is repeated throughout the book: “. . . the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven.” The word that is translated here as “to make atonement” is the Hebrew word *kipper*. The word *kipper* has a range of meaning. It can mean “to ransom.” It can mean “to purge.” It can mean “to expiate.” But what is significant here in this promise in Leviticus 5:10 is the result. The person's sins are forgiven. The ritual sacrifice has removed his guilt.²

In his much acclaimed *Leviticus* commentary, Jacob Milgrom has the following to say,

Although the cult concentrates heavily on the purging of sanctuary impurity, it too recognizes that the ultimate source of impurity is human sin.”³

Sin must therefore be expiated. The continual purging and reconsecration of the altar

points to the singular function of the altar: it is the medium of God's salvific expiation of the sins of Israel. Therefore, not only does it have to be purged of Israel's sins; it must be a fit instrument for effecting expiation for Israel when sacrifices are offered up on it.⁴

While repentance is a necessary condition for forgiveness of sins, Milgrom says,

For the complete annulment of the sin, however, for the assurance of divine forgiveness (*sālah*), sacrificial expiation (*kippēr*) is always required.⁵

Kipper in its most abstract sense thus comes to mean “to atone” or “to expiate.” From Milgrom again,

The meaning here is that the offerer is cleansed of his impurities/sins and becomes reconciled, ‘at one,’ with God.⁶

That is on page 1083 of his *Leviticus* commentary volume 1.

These Levitical sacrifices were accompanied by a very telling hand-laying ritual. The offerer of the animal sacrifice was to lay his hand upon the head of the animal to be sacrificed before slaying it. The offerer would kill the animal himself, but before he did so he had to lay his hand upon its head. Leviticus 1:4 states this. The expression that is

² 10:00

³ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 1083-4.

⁴ Ibid., p. 1038.

⁵ Ibid., p. 377.

⁶ Ibid., p. 1083

used here indicates in Hebrew a forceful laying of the hand. One is to press his hand upon the head of the beast to be sacrificed.

Although Milgrom suggests that this “hand-leaning” ritual as he calls it was meant merely to indicate ownership of the sacrificial animal, I think such an interpretation is implausible and trivializes an apparently important feature of the ceremony. Somebody who brings an animal with a rope around his neck up to the altar with a knife in his hand is obviously bringing his sacrifice just as obviously as somebody who brings a bird or grain in his hand to offer for sacrifice. If there were any doubt at all, a verbal confirmation would suffice: *This is my sacrificial goat*, for example. Rather, this emphatic pressing of the hand, I think, is meant to indicate minimally the identification of the offerer with the animal he is about to slay. So the animal’s fate represents symbolically the fate that the worshiper would deserve. Death is the penalty for sin, and the animal dies in the place of the worshiper.

Notice this is not to say that the animal was punished for the worshiper’s sins. Rather, it is to say that the animal suffered the fate or the death that would have been the punishment for the worshiper if it had been inflicted on him instead. One isn’t saying that the animal was punished in the place of the worshiper. One is saying that the animal suffers the fate which would have been the worshiper’s punishment if it had been inflicted on him instead. The priest taking the blood of the slain animal and sprinkling it on the altar, whatever its exact meaning might be, indicates minimally, I think, that the life of the animal has been offered to God as a sacrifice to atone for the offerer’s sin.⁷

START DISCUSSION

Student: I just was reading through Leviticus lately and some of the uncleanness was for ceremonial things like maybe you touched a dead body or touched an unclean animal or had certain bodily discharges that you had no control over. In other words, things that we would say didn’t have a moral component. Do you want to comment on that, and why the need?

Dr. Craig: Yes. I indicated that the purpose of these sacrifices was to cleanse of either ceremonial impurity or moral guilt. The cleansing of the tabernacle itself (the tent) and its paraphernalia (the altar, the other things that were in the tabernacle) represents cleansing of ritual impurity and then reconsecrating the altar. As Milgrom said, the reason this needed to be done was that the altar needed to be a fit instrument, a pure instrument, upon which then sacrifices could be offered that would expiate the moral sin of the people. So the sacrifices did not simply cleanse of ceremonial impurity (they did that, that is true) but they also more profoundly cleansed of sin and brought forgiveness as we saw which was the ultimate source of the impurity.

Whenever Leviticus talks about making atonement for inanimate objects, it is talking about this cleansing of ceremonial impurity. But when it talks about people, it is talking about their moral guilt. Good question.

END DISCUSSION

Let's turn now to a discussion of the *Yom Kippur* sacrifices.

The expiatory ritual *par excellence* was the annual sacrifices on *Yom Kippur* – the Day of Atonement. This was performed on behalf of the whole nation, not just individuals, and it covered a whole range of sins that the personal sacrifices did not atone for. You can read about the *Yom Kippur* ritual in Leviticus 16.

This day featured an extraordinary ritual involving the presentation of a pair of goats, one of which was sacrificially killed and the other driven out into the desert bearing away the iniquities of the people which had been symbolically laid on the goat through a hand-laying ritual performed by the priest. I think these actions are best seen as two aspects of the same ritual rather than as two separate and distinct rituals. They are like two sides of the same coin. It is really one ritual with two aspects to it. Look at Leviticus 14:2-7 for a very similar ritual involving two birds which makes this, I think, evident. This is a ritual to be performed for the cleansing of skin diseases. In Leviticus 14:2-7 we read:

This shall be the law of the leper for the day of his cleansing. He shall be brought to the priest; and the priest shall go out of the camp, and the priest shall make an examination. Then, if the leprous disease is healed in the leper, the priest shall command them to take for him who is to be cleansed two living clean birds and cedarwood and scarlet stuff and hyssop; and the priest shall command them to kill one of the birds in an earthen vessel over running water. He shall take the living bird with the cedarwood and the scarlet stuff and the hyssop, and dip them and the living bird in the blood of the bird that was killed over the running water; and he shall sprinkle it seven times upon him who is to be cleansed of leprosy; then he shall pronounce him clean, and shall let the living bird go into the open field.

In this ritual, the blood of the slain bird cleanses the person of impurity while the release of the living bird symbolizes the removal of his impurity.⁸ I think the case of the two goats on *Yom Kippur* is parallel to this. The blood of the slain goat atones for sin; the goat driven into the wilderness symbolically declares the removal of their sins from them. If sin could be expiated simply by laying it on the living goat and driving it away into the desert, then obviously the whole ceremonial sacrificial system would be pointless. Rather a sacrificial death is necessary. As it says in Leviticus 17:11 (a key text): “For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life.”

The description of the *Yom Kippur* ritual differentiates between “mak[ing] atonement for the sanctuary, and . . . for the tent of meeting and for the altar” and “mak[ing] atonement for the priests and for all the people” (Leviticus 16:33). As I indicated, making atonement for inanimate objects means cleansing or purging them of ritual uncleanness, whereas making atonement for people is to expiate their sins. Leviticus 16:30 says, “For on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the Lord.” The sprinkled blood of the goat, along with the blood of a bull sacrificed by the priest, shall not only “make atonement for the sanctuary” but also “make atonement for himself and for his house and for all the assembly of Israel” (vv 16-17).

So the blood of the sacrificial goat atones for the sins and iniquities of the people, while the driving out of the other goat into the desert symbolizes the effectiveness of the sacrifice in removing their sins from them.

START DISCUSSION

Student: I have a question about more of a cultural one than dealing with the subject. Do they still do sacrifices like this anymore?

Dr. Craig: Jews do not because there is no temple. Given the destruction of the temple in AD 70 the sacrifices ceased. You see then the origin of rabbinic Judaism which involves a major reformulation of what Judaism is given that sacrifice can no longer be offered.

Student: Can you comment on the nature of this sacrificial system? It seemed to be that the people on a daily basis brought their sacrifices into the tabernacle or at least the courtyard of the tabernacle to be sacrificed. This pressing of the hand and so on seems to me to be a picture of transferring the sin to the animal in some sense. But then on an annual basis there was this special sacrifice where two goats were brought – one was sacrificed, one was taken outside the camp. It is almost as though their sins are piling up here in the tabernacle court. Then once a year they are taken out. Is that legitimate?

Dr. Craig: I think that is fair. The *Yom Kippur* sacrifices covered a range of sins that were not covered by the personal individual sacrifices. The *Yom Kippur* sacrifices are described as atoning for the sins, trespasses, and iniquities of the people, whereas the daily sacrifices were primarily offered for inadvertent sins that a person might undergo, but not the really serious sins that a person might commit.⁹ So you are right. There is a sense in which these serious sins are piling up and accruing and so once a year we need to have this cleansing of the tabernacle and the altar and the other paraphernalia, and then also the cleansing or atonement of the sins of the people.

Let me just say one other thing. You will notice I did not say that the hand-pressing ceremony in these daily Levitical sacrifices was a transfer of sin. In the *Yom Kippur*

⁹ 25:08

sacrifice you have a double hand-laying ceremony where both hands are laid on the scapegoat by the High Priest. There it explicitly says that the sins are laid upon the goat, and then he is driven out into the wilderness. With respect to the single hand-laying ceremony, it could have been that this meant that the worshiper's sins were transferred onto the animal that he was about to slay. But it doesn't say that explicitly. In order not to overstate my case, what I said is that minimally, I think, the hand-leaning ceremony indicates the identification of the worshiper with the animal that he is about to slay. It may be more than that. As I say, the meaning of these sacrifices isn't explained to us. We can only guess at them sometimes. It could well be that it involved the transfer of the sin of the worshiper to the animal to be slain. But because that is not entirely clear I defended a more modest claim.

Student: Couldn't the individual ones – the daily ones – be individual and then the *Yom Kippur* sacrifices be corporate?

Dr. Craig: That is a good question, but I don't think so. My impression is that the *Yom Kippur* sacrifices are not offered for corporate sins. Indeed, it is hard to even know what those would be. Maybe unbelief or hardness of heart or something. But things like theft or lying or adultery aren't corporate sins because those are committed by individuals. It is a more general sacrifice in that it is not offered on behalf of an individual worshiper. It is offered on behalf of the people. But I would say not for corporate sins. It is offered for the individual sins of all the people.

Student: It is my understanding – and correct me if I'm wrong – but early Judaism really didn't have an idea of what we would think of as heaven or spending eternity with God or anything like that. So I am curious – what did these early Jews see themselves as getting from having their sins expiated? Were they just hoping to avoid immediate judgment?

Dr. Craig: Yes! Remember I said that it was a dangerous business having this holy God dwell in your midst. These sacrifices enabled the juxtaposition of the holy and the unholy. This was the way that God could dwell with his people. He gave them this sacrificial system to make that possible by continual purging and reconsecration of the tabernacle and the altar and so forth. By expiation of their sins it enabled God to be in the midst of his people in that way, and it would bring forgiveness of sins. But you are quite right in saying that these were not done with a view toward obtaining eternal life.

Student: I guess I think of the sacrifices starting way back in the Garden of Eden with the sin there and the killing of the animals and taking the skin. Those animals would have had a very good relationship with Adam and Eve, and they saw the seriousness of the sin, that it really affected them to have those animals killed for the sin. I think as we move forward of, *Gee, I've sinned. Somebody go out in the corral and grab a sheep and we'll kill it*, that doesn't seem to have much of an affect on me that much. I know God doesn't

need that. I wonder if you could comment on what is the role of this? It seems like an easy way out actually.¹⁰

Dr. Craig: Really? I'm surprised you say that. As I studied the sacrificial system I've thought to myself, "What a lot of work!" This is really a lot of effort bringing your goat into the tabernacle and then killing it yourself and having to do this repeatedly over and over again. It seems to me to be . . .

Student: Is it just the amount of work, or is there something inherent in the taking of the blood of the animal that affects me.

Dr. Craig: Yes, there is. I quoted that from Leviticus 17:11 – the life is in the blood. So I've given you the blood on the altar to expiate for your sins. The slaying of these animals from the herd or from the flock did carry this strong message that death is the consequence of sin. But God is willing to take this animal's death in place of you. So it is a sobering reminder, I think, of sin and how serious it is.

Student: Do you think we'll have a sacrifice again in the end times with the new . . . ?

Dr. Craig: I don't think so. I find that inconceivable that after the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ for sins that God would revert to animal sacrifices again. Although I know I've heard some people suggest that.

Let me just say one last little comment. You are quite right in pointing out that the offering of sacrifices preceded the sacrificial system in the temple. Abraham and others offered burnt offerings to God. From my reading it seems that these burnt offerings that were offered to God preceded the Levitical system and they were adopted and taken up into the Levitical sacrificial system along with a number of other types of sacrifice. But we know very, very little about these pre-Levitical sacrifices that were offered. They are not explained at all. The ones that we know the most about are the sacrifices in the tabernacle and the temple, so that is the focus of our attention even though the burnt offerings were offered prior to their incorporation into the Levitical system.

Student: I think the sacrifice has something to do with what Jesus ultimately says, "the truth will set you free." Sin has a bondage power. Whether you are manipulated into being bound or you are bound due to your own choice or wrong concept, the sacrifice kind of reverts that bondage so that one is set to live out the abundant life God intended. Do you think that . . . ?

Dr. Craig: I certainly think that a bondage to sin and evil is a prominent biblical motif. I would relate it more to what was said earlier about ransom. I will say something about it later on. But the idea of ransoming someone out of bondage – you make this payment to set them free from slavery, to set the slave free, or to buy back the prisoners of war. This

¹⁰ 30:12

idea of redemption or ransom I think is closely related with the liberation from the bondage of sin, death, and condemnation.

Student: So the biblical definition of justice is an eye-for-an-eye and a tooth-for-a-tooth. So if man sins and the penalty for sin is death, the death of a bull or a goat isn't an eye-for-an-eye or a tooth-for-a-tooth, right? In Hebrews 10:4 it says it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. We talk about this being salvific but it is just covering, right?

Dr. Craig: It was provisional. I think that from a Christian perspective, looking back through the eyes of the atonement wrought by Christ, the author of the book of Hebrews is able to say these sacrifices were really ineffectual. They didn't really bring about sanctification of the worshipers.¹¹ This was achieved through Christ's sacrifice. But this was the provisional arrangement that God had made with his people until such time as Christ would come. In Romans 3 Paul says that God overlooked these sins previously committed, but now he has shown himself to be just and the justifier of him who has faith in Christ. I think Paul has the idea as well as the author of Hebrews that God in his forbearance overlooked these sins for a time until Christ came, and now these sins have been punished fully in Christ and God's justice discharged. So this was from a Christian point of view merely a provisional arrangement. But of course those who offered these sacrifices didn't know that. They were just doing what God had told them to do.

END DISCUSSION

With that we will bring our class to a close today. Next time we will now go back to the New Testament again in light of what we've learned about expiatory and propitiatory sacrifices and look at Christ as a sacrifice of expiation and propitiation.¹²

¹¹ 35:02

¹² Total Running Time: 36:58 (Copyright © 2017 William Lane Craig)