

Understanding the OT Sacrificial System [Slide 1]

I thought that in today's sermon I would step back from the details of the OT sacrifices to ask and answer some high level questions. What was the purpose of the OT sacrifices? How were people saved in OT times? What are some further lessons the OT sacrificial system teaches us?

[Slide 2] First, what was the purpose of the OT sacrifices? They actually fulfilled a number of purposes. The OT sacrifices were established not to save people, but rather to make them aware of their sin. Romans 3:20, which I have printed on your outline, says this about the purpose of the Law. Read. No one is declared righteous or justified by keeping the law, rather the law functions to bring knowledge to people of their sin.

Consider how the sacrifices would have been a constant reminder of sin. The tabernacle sat in the midst of the Israelite camp. Every day the Israelites would see people lining up with their sacrificial animal outside the tabernacle courtyard. They would hear the bleating of sheep and the bellowing of bulls. They would smell the animals burning on the altar. God's moral code told them what behaviors were sin and the daily sacrifices reminded them constantly of the need to remove the guilt and uncleanness of their sins.

However, the sacrifices could not deal with the peoples' root problem of having a sin nature. The sacrifices could never change the human heart. They could not give the people power to not sin. They could not blunt people's desire to sin. They could not make people better people. All the sacrifices could do was to remind them of their sin. Listen to what Hebrews 10:1-4 says. Read.

Verse 1 says that the sacrifices could not make perfect those who draw near. They could not make people holy or righteous. They could not help people stop sinning. More significantly, verse 4 says that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sins. The sin offering and guilt offering provided a temporary covering not a permanent cleansing. The sin offerings provided a temporary covering that kept people safe from God's immediate judgment. Because of the sacrifice, God would not come down and judge them right away for their sin, he would forbear with them until a more permanent solution occurred. Verse 3 states what I have already said about the purpose of the Law. The sacrifices reminded the people yearly of their sins, they kept the people conscious of their wrongdoing.

This is not a small thing: being reminded of my sin. The first step in solving any problem is to clearly identify the problem. My chief problem and your chief problem is not ignorance or lack of knowledge. Our chief problem is not those around us or those who raised us. Our chief problem is not lack of opportunity or even mistreatment by others. My chief problem and your chief problem is sin. The sacrificial system helped communicate the ugly reality of sin and that was a very good thing to do.

[Slide 3] The second purpose of the sacrificial system was to picture or foreshadow future spiritual reality. Hebrews 10:1 says that the Law was a shadow of the good things to come. It pictured future spiritual reality and we have talked a lot about that the last two weeks. For example, the whole burnt offering not only illustrated the truth that a holy God deserves our undivided loyalty, but also Jesus fulfilled that sacrifice by offering up all of himself as a sacrifice on the cross. We talked about how the grain offering taught that covenant with God is a two-way street where we give to God as well as receive. The peace offering foreshadowed the Lord's Table where God and man eat together to celebrate man's reconciliation with God. The

purification offering and the guilt offering foreshadow the death of Jesus on the cross not only paying the penalty for our sin but also providing for our complete cleansing from the polluting effects of sin.

So the OT sacrifices not only taught about sin, they also taught about forgiveness and reconciliation, the need for the shedding of blood, and the dreadful price someone or something has to pay in order to take away sin.

[Slide 4] This teaching function of the sacrifices was aimed at leading people to trust in Jesus Christ. Look at Galatians 3:24 on your outline. Read. A second purpose of the Law was to act as a tutor to lead people to Christ that they might be justified by faith in Jesus.

Think about how the sacrificial system led people to the realization that they needed to place their faith in Jesus. First, the Law was woefully inadequate to deal with the sin problem that it exposed. I've already told you that the guilt offering and the purification offering were for accidental or unintentional sins. It was also true that the sacrifice the High Priest made on the Day of Atonement was only for sins committed in ignorance. The Law made no provision for sins that you knowingly committed. So how many of you have only accidentally sinned in your entire life? You have never knowingly sinned. I know I'm guilty of intentionally sinning. How about you? Have you ever knowingly sinned? Well, if so, there was no provision for you to even have your sins temporarily covered.

Now consider the matter of accidental sins. How many sins do you commit each day? Let's be extremely generous and say it's only one sin a day. God's greatest commandment said that you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind. I bet all of us break the greatest commandment every day and let's say we do it unintentionally, we didn't set out to ignore God or shortchange him, but at the end of the day we realize that we didn't love God that day with all our heart and soul and mind. So, we owe God one guilt offering, one ram without defect each day. How sustainable a system is that? So the sacrificial system was not very workable for dealing with our problem.

Can you see how a person who was spiritually sensitive would be desperate to find some other way besides the Levitical sacrifices to find forgiveness? They would be looking for a better sacrifice that would cover all their sin. They would also be very open to anything that could help them change internally so that they wouldn't be so inclined to sin or that would give them power to resist temptation. They would probably be very interested in Jeremiah's prophecy of a New Covenant and the promises that went with it as Jeremiah records in Jeremiah 31:33-34. Read. The Law, including the sacrifices, was set up to help people realize they could not gain God's forgiveness or his cleansing by their own efforts. God designed the Law to teach people that they needed a Savior. As Paul explains the Law is a tutor that leads people to Jesus Christ so that they might be justified by faith in Jesus Christ.

[Slide 5] So, how were people saved in the OT? If they were not saved by the Law and if Jesus had not yet come and been crucified, how could people be saved? The answer is that people in the OT were saved the same way as people in the NT, by placing their faith in God and in his promise to them. What changes over time with God's progressive revelation is the content of the promise, but faith is always the means of salvation.

Let's begin with Genesis 15:5-6, which is on your outline. Read. God had made a covenant with Abraham in Genesis 12 which included a number of promises such as providing Abraham with a land, making a great nation of him, and finally blessing all the nations through him. That latter promise was fulfilled by Jesus Christ.

In this passage, Abraham still has no child of his own. God shows him all the stars in the heaven and promises that Abraham's descendants will be as numerous as those stars. Abraham believed God and his promise and God reckoned or declared Abraham to be righteous based on his faith. This is the earliest and clearest proclamation of salvation in the OT.

The apostle Paul refers to this example in Romans to prove that man is saved by faith and not by works of the Law because the Law did not even come into existence until about four hundred years after Abraham. Let's read Romans 3:28 and 4:1-3. Read.

Hebrews chapter 11 is a long chapter describing the faith of OT saints. It begins in verses 1-2 by saying, read. Men and women of the Old Testament gained approval from God by faith. Verse 6 says, "Read." Faith is necessary for anyone to come to God whether OT or NT.

What about the content of the promise? With God's revelation completed, we now know that the full content of the promise is that Jesus, God the Son, has died in our place and been raised and that if we trust in him he will save us. We have the full content of the promise, but that content was only progressively revealed over time. The OT saints would have gradually understood more of the content, but we can't know now exactly how much they understood.

But look at Hebrews 11:8-10. Read. Verse 10 says that Abraham was looking for the city which God planned and built. This is a reference to the new Jerusalem or heaven which we read about in Revelation chapters 21-22. So Abraham way back in his time had some kind of concept of Heaven. What did he understand about heaven and life after death? We don't completely know and there is no way for us to know fully what the OT saints understood about God's promise.

Verses 14-16 make it clear that Abraham wasn't the only one who had an understanding of heaven. Let's read those verses. Read. The OT saints may have understood more details about God's promise of heaven than we realize.

Finally, look at Hebrews 11:24-26 on your outline. Read. Moses considered the reproach of Christ of greater weight than all the treasures of Egypt. Wait a minute. How did Moses know about the Messiah? What did he know about the Messiah? I would have thought that Moses didn't know anything about the Christ, but evidently he did.

So, OT saints were saved the same way we are: by trusting in God's promise to provide in some way for their salvation. As time went on and the Old Testament prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah prophesied, the future became clearer that a Suffering Servant would bring healing through the stripes he received (Isaiah 53:5).

You might ask, "How did the death of Jesus Christ pay for the sins of the OT saints since he wasn't around when they sinned?" The same way his death pays for your sins even though he's not around today. God applies the death of Jesus Christ to past sins in the same way he applies it to future sins. God is outside of time. Time is not a problem for him. It was no problem for God to apply the death of Jesus to OT saints who trusted in God and his promise.

[Slide 6] I would like to conclude with some further lessons we can learn from the OT sacrificial system. First, sin causes death. Sin is ugly and destructive. How did the sacrificial system convey the ugliness of sin? Imagine all the animals that died to provide guilt or purification offerings or peace offerings. Think about the amount of blood spilled and poured on the altar. Listen to the screams and bleating and bellowing of animals led to the slaughter. Think of yourself taking the life of one of those animals, holding the knife to its throat and slashing, the death throes as the animal jerked and spasmed before it died, perhaps emptying its bowels and bladder as it lost consciousness. Not very glamorous is it? The sacrificial system displayed the full ugliness of sin.

Some people don't like all the talk of blood and sacrifice in Christianity. They don't want to hear graphic portrayals about what happened at the cross. We all would like to sanitize our sin, to make it less gruesome and graphic than it is. But we all need to be reminded of its ugliness, because we are tempted to sin by making it look good and appealing. When the serpent presented the fruit to Eve, the fruit looked desirable, not ugly.

[Slide 7] The second lesson of the sacrificial system is that the shedding of blood is necessary for forgiveness and cleansing of sin. Hebrews 9:22 says, "Read." The OT sacrifices pointed to the sacrifice of Jesus. They teach that there has to be the death of an innocent victim in order to receive forgiveness. The flow of blood also provides cleansing.

As a former biologist, I recognize the significance of why blood represents both life and cleansing. Blood has two main functions. First it brings oxygen and food to the cells of the body. It is the source of life for the body. In the small intestine the blood captures the food that the stomach has broken down and transports it to the rest of the body. In the lungs the blood collects the oxygen and transports it to the cells. Cells use the oxygen and food to live. Life is in the blood and when the blood leaves the animal, life leaves.

The second function of blood is to cleanse the cells of waste. The blood takes carbon dioxide to the lungs where you breathe it out of the body. Blood takes waste to the kidneys and liver which remove that waste and send it out of the body. The blood cleanses. God designed the sacrificial system to rely on blood to symbolize life and cleansing, because that is what the blood actually does in your body.

[Slide 8] The third lesson of the sacrificial system was that each of us needs a substitute to pay for our sin. In the sacrifices this reality was pictured by the offender having to provide the animal for the sacrifice, laying his hands upon the animal's head symbolically transferring his guilt to the animal, and then him killing the animal himself, dramatically illustrating that his sin killed that animal when it became his substitute.

All this prepared the people to understand how Jesus could be their substitute and pay for their sins. We moderns may find it a little odd that we gain our salvation because Jesus died in our place, but to those who grew up in the OT sacrificial system, this was just the way it was. It would have made a lot of sense to them.

A lot of people think today they can balance out any wrongs they commit by doing good things. That was never a means of removing the guilt of sin. So many good deeds did not remove your guilt or purify you. Only a blood sacrifice could make you acceptable to God. Today, only the blood sacrifice of Jesus on the cross can make you acceptable to God. Jesus made that sacrifice and you can have his death pay for your sins, if you will trust in him and call upon him to save you.

For those of us who are already believers, hopefully the sacrificial system will impress upon you that sin is seriously bad. It's not something to joke about or make fun of, to minimize or to ignore. It cost the life of Jesus. We should avoid it at all costs. [End in prayer.]