

The Last Sacrifice

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As we pass through life, we like to celebrate certain moments within it, milestones that indicate that something important has occurred. Sometimes, these milestones are firsts. In just a couple of weeks here, Zoë will be celebrating her first birthday, and my wife has been trying to figure out for months just what the party should be like.

However, it's just as common for us to celebrate milestones that are lasts. For example, even though it's nearly unimaginable to me now, I suspect that at some point in my life, I will succeed in paying off my mortgage, and most people, when they do that, will have a mortgage-burning celebration. Likewise, I can remember that when my dad retired from his job, his co-workers had a retirement party for him, not because they were so eager to get rid of him, but because they wanted some way to honor him and his decades of service in the FAA. Where a celebration of a first is a celebration of potential, the celebration of a last is a celebration of accomplishment. It's a look back at some achievement that we have attained, a recognition of all the hard work that has gone into it, and a look forward to what we will enjoy as a result.

All of these things are just as present in the spiritual realm. There too, we celebrate firsts and lasts. Whenever someone obeys the gospel and is baptized, we and the angels in heaven rejoice in the first steps of that new child of God.

We often don't recognize, though, that we celebrate a last even more frequently. Perhaps that's because none of us have ever seen the opposite. Our worship services are normally very peaceful occasions. None of us have ever had to hold an animal's head and look into its eyes as some religious worker slits its throat. None of us have ever worshiped God while overwhelmed by the stench of blood and urine and dung and burning flesh. We've never seen an animal offered because of our sin. This morning, then, let's ponder what it means that Jesus was the last sacrifice.

The Sin Problem.

These sacrifices, whether of some bull or goat or of the Son of God, were necessary because of the problem of sin. We learn what sin is from 1 John 3:4. The law here under discussion is of course not some human law, but the law of God. Whenever we violate that law, we sin. The sin could be something as enormous in our eyes as murder. It could be something as seemingly insignificant as a "little white lie." It doesn't matter. In God's eyes, that's still sin.

The result of sin is clearly laid out in Ezekiel 18:4. This is the effect that every sin has. The sinner comes under God's sentence of death. Sometimes, this death sentence is worked out in physical ways, as when the drunk driver wraps his car and himself around the big oak tree at the curve. In every case, though, it is a spiritual sentence of death that will at the least be carried out when we die. If we come to the day of judgment still bearing our own sins, God will carry out the death penalty Himself. He will condemn us to a miserable eternity in hell, forever cut off from Him and His love.

God is a just God, and He will carry out that sentence in every instance where His sense of justice requires it. On that great and awesome day, He will be moved neither by apologies nor by pleas for mercy. However, that's not the way that God wants things to be. He explains what He wants in Ezekiel 18:30-32. He will destroy every one of us if we force His hand, but He would much rather see us repent instead. Our death isn't necessary. In God's eyes, every soul in hell is a foolish waste. He will gladly receive us to Himself, as long as we cast away our transgressions first.

The First Sacrifices.

Of course, that's not something that we can just do for ourselves. In our human courts, we understand that even a true and complete repentance does not wipe away the guilt that arose from an earlier crime. No human judge will free a confessed murderer simply because he promises he won't kill anyone else in future. Even if we do repent to God, we still need some way to receive a pardon for the death sentence that our previous sins have already earned.

Under the Law of Moses, the Israelites could buy this pardon, at least temporarily, by making an offering for their sin. There were many sacrifices prescribed for sin under the Old Law, but we see one of the most important of these in Leviticus 16:15-16. Whenever an Israelite sinned and knew it, he was responsible under the Law for bringing an animal and offering it at the tabernacle or the temple personally. However, what happened to the person who sinned and didn't realize it at the time? If he never knew his sin, he would never repent, and he would eventually die in his sin. As the solution to this problem, once a year, the high priest would offer a goat for the sins of the people committed in ignorance, he would sprinkle the blood of the goat on the altar in the Holy of Holies, and purchase forgiveness for the people.

Underlying this, and every other sin offering of the Law, is the idea of the substitute. As we've already seen, God's law demands death as the penalty for sin. However, because God is merciful, He does not necessarily require that death to be the sinner's own. Instead, if the sinner will offer something, in the case of the Law a bull, goat, or sheep, and that animal is killed on the altar, God will accept its death in place of the sinner's death. Because a death has occurred, His justice is satisfied, and now the sinner can go his way free from guilt, until and unless he sins again.

For this sacrifice, not just any old animal will do. We see the nature of the sacrifice specified in Deuteronomy 17:1. The only offerings that God would accept were unblemished animals. This was necessary for two reasons. First of all, if an Israelite came trotting into the temple with some mangy old thing that was about to die on its own anyway, that wouldn't indicate much sorrow for sin or desire to repent. God wanted the best sacrifice His people could give. Second, for the sacrifice to work, the animal had to be everything the sinner was not—perfect, pure, without fault. An animal that deserved to live had to die in order for the sinner who deserved to die to go on living.

Of course, there's one obvious flaw to all of this. The Hebrews writer explains it in Hebrews 10:1-4. As we all know, a bull or a goat is not the same thing as a human being. They are incapable of moral reasoning, and they are incapable of sin. Even an unblemished animal is only physically pure, not morally pure. When we're comparing a goat to a human being, then, it's a clear case of apples and oranges. They aren't alike enough that one can die for the other.

Because it was impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin, there's a sense in which the Old Law, even though it was ordained by God, was nothing more than an elaborate charade. Year by year, all the god-fearing Israelites would show up with their sacrificial animals, year by year, the priests would take those animals and offer them precisely according to the requirements of the Law, and year by year, the worshiper would go home, reminded of his sin, sorrowful for it, but still not spiritually cleansed of the guilt of that sin. Next year, exactly the same thing would happen again. All of the thousands and thousands of animals killed never caused the forgiveness of even one sin. They couldn't.

The Last Sacrifice.

Clearly, if God's people wanted to be cleansed of those accumulated centuries of sin, they needed a better sacrifice. From time to time in Scripture, we read of people who attempted to offer human sacrifices for various reasons, but even though that gruesome expedient seems logical, there are several huge problems with it. First of all, under the Law of Moses, and indeed the law of Christ, human sacrifice is an abomination. If we grab some poor struggling person off the street and murder him, that doesn't wash away our sins. It only adds to them.

Second, such a sacrifice would still not be morally unblemished. Child sacrifice wouldn't help. Children aren't capable of sin any more than oxen are capable of sin. Moral reasoning is a capacity they haven't developed yet. Once they do develop that capacity as they grow to adulthood, they inevitably use it to sin themselves, and sacrificing one sinner to cleanse another from sin doesn't make any more sense than sacrificing a blemished bull or ram. The perfect sacrifice would have to be both willing and morally perfect, a sacrifice that none of us could provide for ourselves.

We learn about the perfect sacrifice God provided in Hebrews 10:5-7. All the bulls and goats weren't good enough, so God prepared a body for His only Son and sent Him to earth. Only Jesus could possibly fulfill the two criteria we set forth above. As David prophesies here, Jesus lived with one goal and one goal only—to carry out the will of God. He obeyed every requirement of the Law of Moses perfectly, and He was willing to be sacrificed if that was what would please God. This divine plan, set in motion before the foundation of the world, was the only thing that could save us.

When the hour came, Jesus did die, just as that divine plan required. In physical terms, this took place when He was crucified, condemned to death and killed even though He was guiltless of any crime or sin. In spiritual terms, we learn what this looked like from Hebrews 9:11-14. The priests of Israel offered their sacrifices in the tabernacle and the temple. Jesus, though, offered His sacrifice in the holy place of heaven, the spiritual reality that both the tabernacle and the temple were constructed to imitate. The earthly priests came with the blood of slaughtered animals. Jesus came with His own lifeblood, shed on the cross. The sacrifice of Jesus was incomparably better in every respect.

The Hebrews writer goes on to describe the effects of this sacrifice in Hebrews 10:8-14. First, the sacrifice of Jesus superseded all of the sacrifices of the Old Law. All of the slaughter of goats and calves has been replaced, simply because Jesus' sacrifice was so much better. I remember that when my parents first got the Internet, we had a connection through a dial-up modem. I used it all the time, because it was what I had, but it could take hours to download a simple patch for a computer game. Today, I would probably give up on a home Internet connection entirely before I went back to dial-up, simply because I've gotten used to cable modems and DSL, and those are so much better. Just like high-speed Internet made dial-up obsolete, the death of Jesus made obsolete all of the sacrifices that came before Him.

Second, the sacrifice of Jesus is effective for all time. The priests stood in the earthly temple day after day, year after year, doing the same thing, not making a dent in mankind's sin problem. Jesus' sacrifice, though, was different. Just like dropping the atomic bomb ended World War II, Jesus' offering of Himself ended the need for further sacrifices. It was so powerful, so perfect, that any additional sacrifice, from Jesus or anyone else, was unnecessary.

Third, the sacrifice of Jesus sanctifies us, and sanctifies us for all time. As is true for all of mankind, we too were dead in our trespasses and sins. We were headed for an eternity in hell, and we desperately needed a Savior. Because of His great love for us, Jesus agreed to be that Savior. As we are baptized into Christ, we are baptized into His death and washed in His blood. The greatness of His sacrifice is such that it erases all of our sins forever. We don't remember those old sins each week. They're gone. Instead, we gather to remember the one who took them away—our Lord Jesus.