

Atonement Sacrifices (Part 2)

THEOLOGICAL THEME: The sin offering represented the purification of the people before God. The guilt offering addressed the damage of depriving others of their rightful due, and it served to cleanse the offender's conscience.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* stands as one of the great tragic plays of all time. In the story, Lady Macbeth helped her husband murder King Duncan, and she ridiculed Macbeth for his pangs of conscience. Yet guilt eventually drove her insane.

In her most famous scene, Lady Macbeth sleepwalks and rubs her hands, carrying on a broken monologue about how Duncan's blood has stained her hands. She can find no cure for her guilty conscience, and she is dead by the end of the play. Shakespeare brilliantly explored any number of themes, but consider especially these questions: How can guilt be removed? Is it really possible to get away from a guilty conscience?

The Israelites knew the answer: atonement sacrifice. A guilty heart can be purified; a defiled conscience can be cleansed.



Voices from Church History

"I must act in a holy manner, not for reward or appearance, but because of God's nature. The Law continually reminds me that commandments are to be kept, not for their own sake, but for God's sake. I will be righteous then, because God's nature is such. His character determines my conduct."¹

—Jim Elliot (1927-1956)



What are some ways people try to cope with their deep feelings of guilt and regret?

In this session, we continue our study of Leviticus by examining the sin offering and the guilt offering, two mandatory offerings intended for God’s children to live in harmony with Him and with one another. The sin offering represented the purification of the people before God. The guilt offering served to “repair” the damage caused by sin and cleanse the offender’s conscience. These offerings pointed forward to Jesus Christ, whose work purifies our hearts, cleanses our consciences, and frees us to do good deeds for His glory.

1. We need atonement to purify our hearts (Lev. 5:1-13; Heb. 13:11-12).

The people of Israel received detailed lists of what constituted sin. When sin was deliberate, the punishment was severe. There were certain cases, however, when an Israelite might sin and only later become aware that he or she had violated God’s law. What was to be done when the conscience had been awakened? Because of the seriousness of sin, even unintentional sin defiled a person. It was to be dealt with precisely so that the sinner could be cleansed.



What do you see as the difference between intentional and unintentional sins?

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55. Moral Influence Theory of Atonement

According to this theory, Christ’s sacrifice should be seen as a demonstration of God’s love, a display that produces a change of attitude within humanity. This theory is part but not all of what Christ accomplished on the cross since it leaves out God’s wrath against sinners and His requirement of satisfaction for sin. Still, it does remind us that the cross is the greatest example of God’s love, and this love must provoke gratitude and praise on our behalf.

For the Israelites, the sin offering became the way for certain unintentional sins to be remedied. In the following passage from Leviticus 5, note how Yahweh begins with four illustrative cases in which a person sinned unwittingly:

¹ *“If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity; ² or if anyone touches an unclean thing, whether a carcass of an unclean wild animal or a carcass of unclean livestock or a carcass of unclean swarming things, and it is hidden from him and he has become unclean, and he realizes his guilt; ³ or if he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort the uncleanness may be with which one becomes unclean, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and realizes his guilt; ⁴ or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and it is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these;*

These four cases may generally be understood under the following categories:

- A sin of *omission*—for example, not testifying in court when one could have done so.
- A sin of *happenstance*—for example, touching something ceremonially unclean, whether animal or human (a carcass, a corpse, or excrement).
- A sin of *impulsiveness*—for example, making an oath that one later recognizes as wrong.²



Do you consider sins of omission or impulsiveness as equally sinful as deliberate acts of evil? Why or why not?



Can you think of a contemporary example in which a chance occurrence might result in committing a sin?

Further detailed instructions for the sin offering followed immediately in Leviticus 5. Note that economic status of the offerer was taken into account:

⁵ *when he realizes his guilt in any of these and confesses the sin he has committed, ⁶ he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat, for a sin offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin.*

⁷ “But if he cannot afford a lamb, then he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation for the sin that he has committed two turtledoves or two pigeons, one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering.⁸ He shall bring them to the priest, who shall offer first the one for the sin offering. He shall wring its head from its neck but shall not sever it completely,⁹ and he shall sprinkle some of the blood of the sin offering on the side of the altar, while the rest of the blood shall be drained out at the base of the altar; it is a sin offering.¹⁰ Then he shall offer the second for a burnt offering according to the rule. And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven.

¹¹ “But if he cannot afford two turtledoves or two pigeons, then he shall bring as his offering for the sin that he has committed a tenth of an ephah of fine flour for a sin offering. He shall put no oil on it and shall put no frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering.¹² And he shall bring it to the priest, and the priest shall take a handful of it as its memorial portion and burn this on the altar, on the LORD’s food offerings; it is a sin offering.¹³ Thus the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed in any one of these things, and he shall be forgiven. And the remainder shall be for the priest, as in the grain offering.”

Another essential Israelite ritual was the annual Day of Atonement ceremony, detailed in Leviticus 16. Included in the regulations was the requirement that the high priest was to “shall come into the Holy Place: with a bull from the herd for a sin offering” (Lev. 16:3).

The New Testament writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews clearly knew this passage about the sin offering on the Day of Atonement. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he believed it prefigured Jesus’ bloody death outside the gates of Jerusalem (Heb. 13:11-12; see also Lev. 16:27):

¹¹ For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.¹² So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.

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56. Governmental Theory of Atonement

According to this theory, the cross of Christ is the ultimate demonstration of God’s hatred for sin. Understanding the seriousness with which God takes sin, humanity is motivated to cease from sinning. While this view portrays Christ as suffering for us, it does not lift Him up as a substitutionary sacrifice for our sin.

The death of Jesus is like the sin offering on the Day of Atonement in these ways:

- The blood brought about cleansing.
- The sacrifice was “outside the camp.”

The death of Jesus was unlike the sin offering in these ways:

- “We have an altar” (Heb. 13:10) from which we may eat, unlike the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement from which none, not even priests, could eat. This means that we partake of Christ’s sacrifice by faith. We have a higher privilege than the Israelite priests did. It has been suggested that the Lord’s Supper, from which all believers partake, is the visual representation of “we have an altar.”³
- Jesus’ blood truly brought about the sanctification—setting apart as pure and holy—of His people. Yet the sprinkled blood of the sin offering cleansed from sin and ritual uncleanness only symbolically (see discussion of Heb. 9:13-14 in the next section of this study).

How does the sin offering inform your understanding that Jesus’ death has purified your heart?	How might you incorporate into your evangelism any insights from the sin offering of the Israelites?

2. We need atonement to cleanse our consciences (Lev. 5:14-19; Heb. 9:13-14).

¹⁴ *The LORD spoke to Moses, saying,* ¹⁵ *“If anyone commits a breach of faith and sins unintentionally in any of the holy things of the LORD, he shall bring to the LORD as his compensation, a ram without blemish out of the flock, valued in silver shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, for a guilt offering. ¹⁶ He shall also make restitution for what he has done amiss in the holy thing and shall add a fifth to it and give it to the priest. And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering, and he shall be forgiven.*

¹⁷ “If anyone sins, doing any of the things that by the LORD’s commandments ought not to be done, though he did not know it, then realizes his guilt, he shall bear his iniquity. ¹⁸ He shall bring to the priest a ram without blemish out of the flock, or its equivalent for a guilt offering, and the priest shall make atonement for him for the mistake that he made unintentionally, and he shall be forgiven. ¹⁹ It is a guilt offering; he has indeed incurred guilt before the LORD.”

Yahweh provided specific examples that called for restitution:

- Misuse of “any of the holy things of the LORD” (Lev. 5:15).
- “Doing...things that by the LORD’s commandments ought not to be done” (Lev. 5:17).
- Trespassing against a neighbor, through theft or deceit or oppression (Lev. 6:1-4).



What are some contemporary cases of wrongdoing that require restitution?

The requirement for these sacrifices was more expensive than for the sin offering. First, the only animal acceptable for the sacrifice was an unblemished ram (Lev. 5:15,18). Second, in instances in which the sinner had brought about financial loss—either regarding the things of God or the things of a neighbor (see the first and third bullet points above), the damage was to be repaid—but with a 20 percent penalty added.

The guilt offering was God’s way of making things all right when the conscience had been defiled, especially when a “dollar amount” could be attached to the damage done. (The urge to do this is evident in the account of Jesus and Zacchaeus the tax collector, who declared, “If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” Jesus commended him and declared that this promise provided evidence that “salvation has come to this house” [Luke 19:8-9].)

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57. Ransom Theory of Atonement

According to this theory, Christ’s atonement was a cosmic victory over sin, Satan, and death. Christ was the ransom payment necessary to release humanity from bondage to Satan’s kingdom. Some passages of Scripture speak of Christ as being a ransom for humanity (Mark 10:45), and many refer to His victory over sin, death, and Satan (Col. 2:15). The ransom theory at its best, however, does not see the ransom as being owed to Satan but as being offered to God.



Do you consider the guilt offering fair (that is, repayment of the damage, a 20-percent penalty, and sacrifice of a ram)? Why or why not?



How have you sought to make restitution in the past for damage you have caused?

Note the following passage from Hebrews 9, in which the author specifically dealt with the issue of how Jesus' bloody death relates to the conscience of a sinner who trusts in Christ:

¹³ 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, ¹⁴ 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.

In verse 13, the author referred to two different rituals performed by Israel's priests. First, "the blood of goats and bulls" was part of the annual Day of Atonement ceremony, when both kinds of blood were ceremonially sprinkled in the sanctuary as a means of cleansing it from any impurity that may have occurred over the course of the previous year (Lev. 16:14-15).

Second, the "ashes of a heifer" referred to the ritual for removing the impurity of those who had touched or even been near a corpse (Num. 19:1-22; especially 19:9,17-19). The elaborate ritual involved burning a heifer outside the camp, collecting the ashes, mixing them with water, and sprinkling them on people to remove their uncleanness. Yet in both instances the rituals dealt with outer realities, not with the inner conscience.⁴

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58. Satisfaction Theory of Atonement

According to this theory, the atonement of Christ satisfies every requirement for God to be able to forgive the failures of humanity. God has not been given the proper honor He is due; in His death, Jesus compensated for the failure to give honor by willingly going to the cross as the God-man to pay the price for humanity's sins.

Thus, in Hebrews 9:14, the author exclaimed “how much more” is accomplished through “the blood of Christ.”

Good works cannot save. Salvation in Christ brings people into joyful service to God. In Hebrews 9:13-14, the author showed that all three Persons of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; or God, the Messiah, and eternal Spirit) have brought about our full salvation. How much more than the Israelite sacrifices!

How does the guilt offering inform your understanding that Jesus' death has cleansed your conscience?	How might you incorporate into your evangelism any insights from the guilt offering of the Israelites?

Conclusion

The two offerings we have studied in this session have presented complementary understandings of what “blood atonement” accomplished, symbolizing cleansing from sin. The sin offering represented the purification of the people before God. The guilt offering addressed the damage of depriving others of their rightful due, and it served to cleanse the offender’s conscience.

As Shakespeare wrote in his drama, Lady Macbeth had no knowledge of how to be cleansed. Through the gospel, we have this wonderful knowledge. Receiving Jesus’ cleansing sets us free to do good deeds for His glory.

CHRIST CONNECTION: These offerings point forward to Christ, whose work purifies our hearts, cleanses our consciences, and frees us to do good deeds for His glory.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: God calls us to offer others the hope of purification and cleansing that comes only through trusting in Jesus Christ.

1. As sinners who have been purified through the sacrifice of Christ, how should we view “unclean” sinners in our society?

2. Apart from Jesus, what are some ways people try to alleviate a guilty conscience?

3. Write a prayer asking God to put people in your path with whom you can share the purification and cleansing available through faith in Jesus.

The Gospel Project®

Adult Personal Study Guide ESV
Volume 4, Number 2 Winter 2015-16

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www.lifeway.com.

Printed in the United States of America

The Gospel Project®: *Adult Personal Study Guide* ESV
(ISSN 2330-9393; Item 005573553) is published
quarterly by LifeWay Christian Resources,
One LifeWay Plaza, Nashville, TN 37234,
Thom S. Rainer, President. © 2015 LifeWay
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