

Biblical Theology Core Seminar Class 7: The Story of Sacrifice

What did Christ's sacrifice accomplish? What was he doing on the cross? The answers to these questions are at the heart of Christianity, and so you can be sure that the doctrine of Christ's sacrificial atonement are target number one for the devil. You can be sure that all sorts of controversies will surround the meaning of this central event in Christianity.

In fact, you can be sure that many of the most compelling answers given to the question "What was Christ doing on the cross?" will be compelling and true; they just won't be the whole truth. Did Christ die to demonstrate God's love for us? Yes! But is that all?

Today, we want to look at the storyline of sacrifice in the Bible, in order to understand this central moment in biblical history rightly. Remember, the fundamental premise of this course is that the Bible is a single narrative, a story that isn't fiction, because it's the revelation of God unfolding in time and space. And we're learning how to determine what to believe according to this storyline.

STORY OF SACRIFICE

And at the heart of the story of the Bible is the story of sacrifice. Ironically, this story begins with a colossal failure of self-denial. When Adam and Eve indulged their desire to be God's equal, they plunged themselves and the rest of us into a world under God's curse, a world in which sacrifice would now be the order of the day. As the narrative of Scripture unfolds, the need, nature, and effects of sacrifice are slowly revealed. I'm doing to divide this storyline up into six episodes:

1) Adam and Eve and their kids introduce the idea of Sacrifice in the Old Testament. In **Genesis 3:21** God provides animal skins for Adam and Eve. It displays an important link that will mark sacrifice: the anticipation that death and sin are physically linked. [NOTE: who provides the sacrifice?] Cain and Abel in **Genesis 4** offer sacrifices to the Lord. There's no mention of sin or blood with this sacrifice. The Bible calls it an offering, a gift, and the idea is one of tribute to a great King, and submission to his Lordship.). We see here the beginning of another great principle of sacrifice, much emphasized by the prophets, psalmists and wisdom writers, that the inward disposition of worshippers must be right if their 'outward' gift is to be accepted.

2) The next sacrifice recorded is in **Genesis 8**. After the Flood, Noah offers up a variety of clean animals as whole burnt offerings. It suggests the idea of a gift, and this gift has an effect on God. The Bible tells us that when

Genesis 8:20–22 (ESV)

²⁰ *Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar.* ²¹ *And when the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma, the Lord said in his heart, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done.* ²² *While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”*

The sin that prompted God’s judgment remained in the hearts of Noah and his children. But God promises to never again destroy all humanity. Sacrifice continues throughout the patriarchal age, and altars are recorded as having been built, or sacrifice as having been offered, by Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The gift offered is a basis for prayer, for calling on the name of the Lord (Gen. 12:8; 13:4; 26:25).

3) God not only promises to never again destroy humanity, he promises to bless all nations. In particular, he promises Abraham a seed who would be a blessing to all. Then, interestingly, the Bible’s next recorded sacrifice, which occurs in **Genesis 22**, when God speaks these shocking words concerning Abraham’s seed: “Abraham, take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love... Sacrifice him.” Incredibly, by faith Abraham obeys. Once again, the idea seems to be that of tribute and Lordship. It all belongs to God, and he has the right to take it back. At the last second, God stops Abraham. The test of Abraham’s devotion is over, but not the sacrifice. God provides a ram to be sacrificed in Isaac’s place. It turns out that God will accept a substitute. What’s more, he’ll even provide that substitute. [NOTE: Lev 17:11 cf. Gen 3:21 “I have given it”]

4) **Exodus 12** Pharaoh refuses to release the Israelites. God promises to strike down the first-born male of every creature in Egypt. But the Lord promises to spare the firstborn of Israel if they take a year-old lamb without defect, sacrifice it, and smear it’s blood on the doorframe of their houses. God says that he will see the blood of the sacrifice, and pass over their homes, sparing them the judgment that Egypt faced. What’s more, God says this sacrificial meal will be a sign that sets them apart, as God makes a distinction between Israel and the rest of world, consecrating them as his special people. That very night, Israel is spared because of the sacrifice. Building on the

sacrifice of the animal for clothing, the substitute for Abraham, with the Passover lamb we see how the sacrifice is a display of God's magnificent grace.

5) Now up until this point, there have been less than a dozen instances of sacrifice recorded in the Bible. It doesn't seem to be a major theme. But that changes with the giving of the Law. An entire book of the Bible, **Leviticus**, is largely given over to detailing all the different sacrifices that Israel is to offer God. There are fellowship offerings and whole burnt offerings. But there are more, the most important of which are sacrifices to atone for sin and guilt. Now, all the pieces that had been slowly revealed come together.

- Only clean animals without defect can be sacrificed.
- Every first-born Israelite, who represents the nation as whole, must be redeemed with a sacrificial substitute.
- Prominent is the taking of life, the shedding of a blameless victim's blood.
- Again, the idea of a substitution is prominent: There we're told that if anyone brings a sacrifice, "He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf..." (**Lev. 1:4**) It's a way of saying, "This sacrifice stands for me; what's about to happen to it should happen to me, and it is taking my place."
- These sacrifices now begin and end every single day in God's temple, presented by priests who serve as intermediaries between God and his sinful people.
- There are additional sacrifices that mark the beginning of each week, each month, and each season.
- And at the pinnacle of this entire system of sacrifice was the Day of Atonement. The High Priest alone who take the blood of the sacrifice into the Holy of Holies, and sprinkle blood on the mercy seat, the symbolic throne of God, to make atonement for his own sins and the sins of the people.

And that's where this theme in the Bible stops, or at least stalls. Century follows century, and nothing changes. No new sacrifices are introduced; the old ones are just endlessly repeated, day after day, week after week, year after year. And therein lies the problem. They obviously weren't getting rid of sin. In fact, they increasingly become a nauseating reminder of just how sinful the people remained. Repentance, not ritual is what God desired. But for Israel, repentance had vanished and all that remained was ritual. And so God banished the nation to exile. Without the Temple, there could be no sacrifice. If there is no sacrifice that God will accept, then God's people are as exposed to God's judgment as Egypt was on the night of the Passover, as Isaac was as he lay bound on that altar.

When God brings them back from Babylon, and the temple is rebuilt, sacrifices resume. But the people have not changed. Other things have changed, though. The Holy of Holies is empty. There is no mercy seat for the high priest to appear before and plead for forgiveness. There is just an empty room. Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, declares, “*‘Oh that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,’ says the Lord Almighty, ‘and I will accept no offering from your hands’*” (**Mal. 1:10**). Those are chilling words. If there is no sacrifice that God will accept, then God’s people are as exposed to God’s judgment as Egypt was on the night of the Passover, or as Isaac was as he lay bound on that altar.¹

[The practice of sacrifice in the life of Israel came under intense criticism from the prophets, beginning with the anonymous prophet of 1 Samuel 2:27–36, who denounced the profane behaviour of the sons of Eli. As already noted, the prophets also denounced the nation’s prevalent syncretism. Samuel told Saul that sacrifice, even when offered to the Lord, is far less important than obedience, and is a mere formality without it (1 Sam. 15:22–23). The other prophets speak similarly (Jer. 7:21–23; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21–27; Mic. 6:6–8). Multitudes of sacrifices, combined with a wicked life, are an abomination to the Lord, says Isaiah (1:11–17). The wise man says the same thing (Prov. 15:8; 21:3, 27). It is not surprising, therefore, to see in the period of the monarchy the beginning of the reinterpretation of sacrificial language in terms of attitudes and acts of devotion. The psalmists speak of thanksgiving and contrition as acceptable sacrifices (Pss. 50:13–15; 51:16–17). Isaiah speaks of the returned exiles being brought back by their captors as an offering to the Lord (66:20)²]

6) And then something incredible happens—a sixth sacrifice to point out this morning. God is true to his Word to Abraham. He will not accept a sacrifice from the hands of his sinful people, and so he provides one instead. He sends his Son, who takes on flesh, and then offers his own life, his own blood, as an acceptable sacrifice, as a substitute for his people—a people who belong to just one nation, but to all the nations. There at Calvary, Christ fulfilled everything the OT sacrifices meant, and accomplished what they were unable to do. Through his blood, he made atonement for the sins of his people and reconciled them to God. And to demonstrate that God accepted this sacrifice, he raised Jesus from the dead. So that starting now and continuing on into eternity, whoever repents of their sins and places their faith in Christ’s sacrifice, is redeemed from slavery to sin and is free to live a life of tribute and praise to God.

¹ Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry*, 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 157.

² R. T. Beckwith, “Sacrifice,” ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 756.

PATTERNS IN THE STORYLINE

That's the story of sacrifice. What I want to do now is briefly explore some of the patterns in the storyline. Then we'll consider how we take doctrine from the storyline. For the last several weeks, we've been saying that we don't learn what the Bible has to teach us simply by pulling out our favorite prooftexts. We don't learn simply with word studies. We learn from how the story is put together.

- 1) The first pattern to notice is the pattern itself—the pattern of sacrifice. The technical terminology for this is typology. There's a type of something, then another, then another. God's telling us to fix our attention on this. The shedding of blood isn't something we think much about today, but the Bible is obviously interested in it. Why? What is it saying? Also, we noticed a crescendoing trend with these types. First, with Abel, it was just the idea of thanksgiving. Then, with Noah, it was thanksgiving and pleasing the Lord. Then, with Abraham and Isaac, it was all this, but also the expressing of utter devotion and the idea of a substitute. Then, with Passover, it was a spotless lamb, the representative role of the firstborn Son, and the distinguishing of a people. Then, in Leviticus, it was a clear emphasis on atoning for sin.

So, a pattern or type is repeated. But there's a crescendoing as well.

- 2) But there's not just crescendoing or continuity. There's discontinuity, especially when we get to Christ. The Levitical sacrifices were repeated endlessly, but Christ is sacrificed once. The Levitical sacrifices were for one ethnic nation. But Christ was sacrificed for all nations.
- 3) One other pattern for us to notice this morning is that of promise/fulfillment. There's many promises I could highlight, like his promise to Noah. Let me highlight the promise to Abraham—that his seed would be a blessing to all nations. We know that this promise was fulfilled in Christ. First, there is a **connection between God's promise to punish sin through death, God's promise to rescue his people from the serpent, and the establishment of sacrifice**. Sacrifices offer a vicarious (experienced through another) fulfillment of God's promise to punish sin. But because they are vicarious, they accomplish the promised rescue, at least temporarily. Thus, sacrifice actually ties together multiple promises in Scripture. Second, **there is a connection between God's promise to Abraham—that his seed would be a blessing to all nations—and Christ's sacrifice**.

Christ fulfilled this promise to Abraham not just through his birth and ministry as a genealogical descendant of Abraham, but especially through his sacrifice. Therefore, the cross of Christ, and not merely his person, is a blessing to all nations and is at the heart of the good news of the gospel.³

SYSTEMATIZING IT ALL

Okay, what's the purpose in pointing out these patterns? **They are instrumental in helping us to understand who Jesus is, what his sacrifice accomplished, and our need for his sacrifice. All these patterns point to Jesus, and help us understand Jesus.** The set the context for his coming. The give us pre-interpretation, if you will.

Over the years, some have suggested that Christ died primarily as an example for us, to inspire us to greater love for God. Others have suggested that Christ's death was merely a demonstration of God's hatred for sin. Others, a demonstration of his compassion and identification with sinners. These days, some are saying Jesus died simply to declare victory of the fallen authorities, sin, and death. And we can point to verses in the New Testament which say all these things—that Jesus died as an example, to demonstrate God's hatred for sin, to declare victory over fallenness and death. Well, all those comprise *a part* of why Jesus died. They comprise a part of what's wrong with you and me. We do need someone to set a good example. We do need someone to identify with us in weakness and to defeat death. But let me try to offer a more well-rounded understanding of Christ's sacrifice based on this storyline and the patterns that we have observed.

1) The fundamental problem with the world and humanity is our sin and the guilt it incurs.

It's not death. It's not a broken relationship. It's not our need for love or an example of love. The fundamental problem is sin, guilt, and the wrath of God incurred.

I'm talking about the need for sacrifice here. Before the Fall, Adam and Eve had no need to kill an animal and offer it to God. They were in a right relationship with a good and holy God. But the moment sin entered in, Adam and Eve's lives were forfeit because of sin and guilt. **Romans 6:23**, echoing God's words to Adam in **Genesis 2**, tells us that the penalty for sin is death. Sin came first; then death.

³ Michael Lawrence, *Biblical Theology in the Life of the Church: A Guide for Ministry*, 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 158–159.

Here is the problem that sacrifice in the Bible is designed to solve. Our need is not just an inspiring example of love. It's not just a victory over the powers of darkness. It's not just a victory over death. Rather, there is an eternal and holy God who is justly angry with us for our rebellion, and we need a way to escape the penalty of his justice, because we cannot ever hope to bear that penalty ourselves. According to Scripture, what we need is a sacrifice.

2) Christ came to die as a substitute.

An effective sacrifice is a *substitute*. We saw God provide a ram as a substitute in the place of Isaac. We saw the Passover lamb slain in the place of the first-born. And we see it in the book of Leviticus, as the person lays his or her hand on the animal.

3) Christ came to die as a penal substitute.

The victim receives the penalty I deserved. The sacrificial victim doesn't just die; it's judicially executed in my place.

Both the Old and New Testament are clear that on the cross, Christ died as a substitute, taking the punishment that his people deserved. So the prophet Isaiah foretold. Turn to **Isaiah 53**. Speaking of the Messiah, Isaiah says beginning in **verse 4**,

“Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed...the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”

Jesus said in **John 10**, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” Jesus did not understand his own death as an example, or as a demonstration, or even as an open-ended general death with reference to nobody in particular. No Jesus laid down his life as an effective sacrifice, a penal substitute for his sheep.

Paul said in **Romans 3**, “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood...he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.” This brings us to the next lesson.

4) Christ came to die as a penal substitute to propitiate the wrath of God.

Christ's sacrifice propitiates God's wrath. What do I mean by that? I mean simply that by enduring the penalty our sin deserves, an effective sacrifice actually satisfies the demands of justice, and so removes the reason for God's wrath against the sinner. If you think back to the story of sacrifice, we saw a suggestion of this in Noah's sacrifice. We also see it in the repeated reference throughout Leviticus that the aroma of a burning sacrifice was "pleasing to the Lord."

5) Christ came to die as a penal substitute to propitiate the wrath of God and make atonement for his people.

This turning aside of God's wrath leads to the other effect of sacrifice; an effective sacrifice atones for sin. We've already seen that the high point of the Jewish year was the Day of Atonement. So what exactly is atonement? The Hebrew word for atone means to "cover." The English word simply means to be "at one with," so a sacrifice, you could say, covers our sin and makes us "at one" with God. Having assuaged God's wrath, the sacrifice obtains forgiveness for the sin that caused God's wrath in the first place, and it removes the guilt that sin had incurred.

6) Christ came to die as an effective penal substitute to propitiate the wrath of God and make atonement for his people.

While the Levitical sacrifices were repeated endlessly, the book of Hebrews draws our attention to the fact that Christ was sacrificed once. So in **Hebrews 7:27**, "He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself." And again in **9:12**, "He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption." And again in **9:26**, "Now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself."

The whole sacrificial system had only been a picture, a teaching aid, designed, as Paul says in **Galatians**, to lead us to Christ, and to recognize him when he appeared. Now that he was here, the picture was no longer needed.

As the writer to the Hebrews says in **Hebrews 10**, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" But, he goes on to say, "we have been made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ." Jesus Christ's death on the cross turned aside God's wrath and satisfied it.

The good news of Christianity, is that on the cross, Jesus Christ accomplished salvation. He turned aside God's wrath. He made atonement for sin. The only question is, did he do this for you? Jesus said that he gave his life as a ransom for many. Are you

among the many? Jesus said that he lays down his life for his sheep. Who are his sheep? They are those who listen to his voice, who respond to his call. John put it this way in **John 3**: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, but God’s wrath remains on him.”

O friend, Jesus Christ has accomplished redemption for everyone who listens to his call to repent and believe. What are you listening to?

Which leads us to the final thing to consider today, and that’s the *end* of sacrifice in the Bible. In a story that is so saturated with the repeated shedding of sacrificial blood, it cannot escape attention that sacrifice comes to an end at the cross. There’s no further or other sacrifice to be given to pay for our sins before a holy God.

7) *We’re saved by faith alone.*

This is why the Bible talks about the necessity of personal faith in a crucified and risen Christ for salvation. It’s not that faith itself is saving. It’s that faith is the way you acknowledge Christ as your substitute. Like the Old Testament Israelite who laid his hands on the victim, so faith leans on Christ and trusts that when Christ died on the cross, he was dying in your place, for you. It’s not enough to be born in a Christian family, or to be baptized, or to go to church, or anything else. No, by faith you must believe that Christ was sacrificed for you.

8) *We’re saved by faith alone in Christ alone.*

It’s not just that he’s the best example of a substitute—he’s the only substitute, for no one else has ever lived a perfect life. It’s not just that his death approximates the judgment we deserve—it’s that on the cross, Christ endured the holocaust of God’s wrath against our sin, and exhausted it. He is the last sacrifice, because in reality, he is the first sacrifice and the only effective sacrifice that has ever or will ever be made.

I really want you to observe the exclusivity of this sacrifice. There will be no second chances after death, no alternative means of getting to heaven. There is only one sacrifice that reconciles sinners to God, and so there is only one name under heaven by which we may be saved. O friend, you need a sacrifice, and his name is Jesus.

CONCLUSION—ONE MORE SACRIFICE?

There is, however, one more sacrifice to observe. It’s not one that gains salvation or adds anything to salvation. It’s one that follows salvation. When Jesus calls a person,

he calls him to pick up his cross and to follow him. Paul uses similar language when he says in **Romans 12** that as Christians we are to offer ourselves as “living sacrifices.” What does he mean? Before the Fall, Adam and Eve were made in the image of God, their lives were a tribute, an offering of praise back to God. Ultimately, the end or purpose of Christ’s sacrifice is that we might offer our lives back to God as sacrifices, not in payment for sin, but living sacrifices of praise to his glorious grace.

Christian, do you struggle with sacrifice? Do you find it hard to lay down your life in love for others, to love your enemy, to return kindness for insults, to let go of the riches of this world for the treasure of heaven? Consider that in all of this sacrifice, you are being conformed to the image of Christ as a living sacrifice.

Christian, Jesus Christ, whose death was planned by God from before the foundation of the world, will for all eternity bear in glory the marks of his sacrifice. And more than anything else, it will be those marks that are the object of our eternal wonder, and adoration, and praise, for they are the marks of our salvation. That is the image to which you are being conformed, that is the destiny to which you are heading, an eternally living sacrifice of praise to the one who alone is worthy of praise, Christ, our Passover, the Lamb who was slain, but now lives forevermore.

“saying with a loud voice, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”” (Revelation 5:12, ESV)

- Attention has often been directed to the fact that, after our first parents sinned, God clothed them with the skins of animals (Gen. 3:21), thus underlining the link between sin and death (*cf. Gen. 2:17; 3:3, 19, 22).
- The real reason was that Cain, unlike his brother, was an unrepentant sinner (Gen. 4:7; cf. 1 John 3:12). We see here the beginning of another great principle of sacrifice, much emphasized by the prophets, psalmists and wisdom writers, that the inward disposition of worshippers must be right if their 'outward' gift is to be accepted.
- Once introduced, sacrifice continues throughout the patriarchal age, and altars are recorded as having been built, or sacrifice as having been offered, by Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The gift offered is a basis for prayer, for calling on the name of the Lord (Gen. 12:8; 13:4; 26:25). The link with prayer continues throughout the OT, and when the temple is dedicated, Solomon requests that it may be the place at which prayer is answered (1 Kgs. 8); Isaiah describes it as a house of prayer for all peoples (56:7).
- The earliest communal function of sacrifice is to establish covenants between the Lord and his creatures. The covenant with Noah, which extends to humankind and animals (Gen. 8:20–9:17), the covenant with Abraham, which extends to his seed (Gen. 15), and the covenant of Sinai, between the Lord and Israel (Exod. 24), are all effected by sacrifice. In Genesis 15, the sacrifices are divided and the Lord passes symbolically between the pieces. In Exodus 24, the blood of the sacrifices is sprinkled both on the altar and on the people (vv. 6–8), and the representatives of the people are then admitted to a sacred meal (v. 11). The principle expressed by these sacrifices is that a covenant involves death, to atone for human trespasses (Heb. 9:15–20). They all take place before the establishment of the tabernacle and priesthood, though the third of them only just before.
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- The sacrifices on which it concentrates attention are not those of the temple but the atoning sacrifice of Christ and the spiritual sacrifices of Christians. In principle, the Mosaic sacrifices were now unnecessary.
- The writer's teaching on those sacrifices has its positive side (11:4, 17–19, 28), but his great concern is to point out their inadequacy except as types foreshadowing the Christian realities.⁴
- Many of the NT references to Christ's sacrifice as a fulfilment of OT types represent him as a lamb, an animal used for various sacrifices (burnt offering, peace offering, and sin or guilt offering). He is represented as the slain lamb of God, whose precious blood takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29, 36; 1 Pet. 1:18–19; Rev. 5:6–10; 13:8).
- His sacrifice has made true atonement; it cleanses the conscience and not just the flesh; and has introduced a new and eternal covenant.
- It follows that his sacrifice was not a merely outward act, still less a merely ceremonial act, but was as much an act of inward devotion as the spiritual sacrifices of his followers, indeed more so, he being without sin (Heb. 4:15; 9:14).

⁴ R. T. Beckwith, "Sacrifice," ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000)

- It is a mistake to think of Christ's sacrifice as no more than a figurative sacrifice. To do so is to take sacrifices of the OT sort as the norm whereas, according to the NT, they were simply types of the true sacrifice to come, which fulfilled them. Before one can have a house, one needs a plan, but what matters is not the plan but the house. The OT sacrifices provide providential categories for the interpretation of Christ's sacrifice, but it everywhere transcends those categories. For the blood of animals, we have the blood of the man Christ Jesus (Heb. 10:4). For spotlessness, we have sinlessness (Heb. 9:14; 1 Pet. 1:19). For a sweet smelling odour, we have true acceptability (Eph. 5:2). For the sprinkling of our bodies with blood, we have forgiveness (Heb. 9:13–14, 19–22; 1 Pet. 1:2). For symbolic atonement, endlessly repeated, we have real atonement, once for all (Heb. 10:1–10).