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Christ's Incredible Cross

By David Servant

TWO **The Cross Prefigured**

As a young Christian attempting to digest the Old Testament, I found myself somewhat disturbed by all of the references in the Pentateuch to animals being slaughtered and offered up to God. The whole idea of killing animals as a part of religious ritual seemed much too unsophisticated for the God I knew. Animal sacrifice appeared crude, even pagan.

I could only assume that in order to relate to the ancient Israelites, God conceded to accepting their own long-held pagan ideas. I imagined Him saying, “Well, if you insist on practicing such a crude religion, I’ll go along with it. It’s better that you offer up your animals to Me rather than to some idol.”

My interpretation, of course, was all wrong. God was not acquiescing to their long-held crudities. He, in fact, was the One who instituted the idea of animal sacrifice, first teaching it to Adam and Eve (as we will soon see). They in turn passed the concept on to their descendants, and God later dramatically reinforced the entire practice in the Levitical Law.

In this chapter, we’ll prospect the pages of the Old Testament for insights into the significance of animal sacrifices—all of which served to prefigure Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice for us on the cross.

Why Animal Sacrifices?

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament can be a bit puzzling if viewed only from an Old Testament perspective. But when we stumble upon two very significant verses in the New Testament letter to the Hebrews, the final pieces of the puzzle are set in their proper place. There the author informs us that “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” and “every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (Heb. 10:4, 11).

If the Old Covenant sacrifices couldn’t take away sins, we naturally ask, “Why then did God instruct the people of Israel to offer up animal sacrifices for their sins?” There are at least three answers to that question.

First, there was a real efficacy in the animal sacrifices, yet the benefits they provided were limited. Every animal that was sacrificed could provide only a temporary *covering* for sin and could not actually “take away sins.”

Second, the animal sacrifices were revelational. Through them, God continually taught His people that He is holy and righteous, and that His righteousness demanded that all disobedience be punished. The only way to escape rightful punishment for sin was by means of a substitute, transferring one's guilt to something that was innocent. By dying in place of the Israelite, that substitute endured the wrath the worshiper deserved, and God could justly pardon him.

This leads us to the third and most important reason for the animal sacrifices: Each sacrifice served to prefigure what Jesus would fully and perfectly accomplish on Calvary's cross. His sacrifice would not just *cover* our sins—His sacrifice would *take away* our sins forever.

Looking back, we can understand that if God is perfectly righteous, then the death of an animal could not possibly provide a perfect, eternal atonement for the sins of a human being. An animal dying for a person would be a grossly inadequate payment. Jesus Himself asserted that a man is of much more value than a sheep (see Matt. 12:12).

There were only two options available to a perfectly righteous God who is the moral Judge of the universe. In order for justice to prevail, either the guilty person must himself be punished or God Himself must become a man and take the punishment humanity deserved. In this way, the sins of mankind could be atoned for by a single sacrifice of infinite value, prefigured by millions of previous animal sacrifices. Thus we see clearly, as the author of Hebrews wrote, that the Law was only “a shadow of the good things to come” (Heb. 10:1). As a shadow, the Law was not the real thing and could “never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near” (Heb. 10:1).

The First Blood Sacrifice

God's revelation of animal sacrifice to Adam and Eve is easy to miss. We learn from reading Genesis 3:21 that after God pronounced His sentence upon the two transgressors, He then “made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.”

Knowing what the rest of the Old Testament teaches, it certainly does not seem unreasonable to conclude that God was teaching them that their guilt could be covered by means of the killing of an animal. God could have just as easily woven a satin tuxedo and silk gown for them, but He chose to clothe them with animal skins. Surely it was an object lesson. A substitute died so they could live.

Looking back, we can understand that the animals that died for Adam and Eve only prefigured the “final sacrifice.” That sacrifice would be the One whom God promised would “bruise the serpent's head” when the serpent bruised Him “on the heel” (Gen. 3:15), a prediction that pictures Christ's sufferings and triumph. We don't know how much Adam and Eve understood about the eventual saving work of Christ, but it seems that God taught them something about the blood sacrifice.

Further proof for this thesis is found just one chapter later in the book of Genesis. There we find earth's second generation, Cain and Abel, bringing their offerings to the Lord. Abel brought an animal sacrifice, and Cain brought an offering “of the fruit of the ground” (Gen. 4:3). We are told that “the Lord had regard for Abel and for his offering; but for Cain and for his offering He had no regard” (Gen. 4:4-5).

Where did Abel get the idea to bring an animal sacrifice to God, and why was only his offering accepted by God?

The letter to the Hebrews informs us that “by *faith* Abel offered to God a *better sacrifice* than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts” (Heb. 11:4, emphasis added).

Abel, unlike Cain, *could* bring his offering by faith because he was acting upon God's revealed will,¹ which he must have learned from his parents. Adam and Eve apparently taught their sons the concept of animal sacrifice and passed on whatever revelation they possessed concerning its significance.

In a sense, Cain came with the fruits of his own labor—his “works”—whereas Abel realized that he had no right to approach a holy God unless atonement was made for his sin. Cain exemplifies the one who comes to God self-righteously, and Abel as a sinner needing pardon. God accepted the sinner who came trusting that the sacrifice covered his sin—as he had been taught by his parents, who had been taught by God.

There are those who surmise that every blood-sacrifice ritual that has been practiced in primitive cultures could be traced to God's original revelation to Adam and Eve. In most cases, however, if not in all cases, the true meaning behind the ritual has become perverted. Rather than serving as an atoning substitute or a representative of the ultimate sacrifice of the cross, the idol worshiper views the sacrifice as a bribe to his god, or that he is feeding his god by means of the sacrifice. Those pagan concepts were certainly not what God taught Adam and Eve.

Passing It On

Theoretically, every person after Adam could have been taught about the blood sacrifice by his or her parents. According to the Genesis genealogy in my Bible, Adam lived to be 930 years old; thus, he personally could have taught his great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson, Lamech, the father of Noah.

To what extent the blood sacrifice was faithfully passed down, we don't know. However, by the time Noah was about 600 years old, it is possible that he and his sons were the only ones who still practiced it in truth. (And perhaps this is why Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord, as we know he certainly was not a perfect person; see Gen. 9:20-21.) It's difficult to believe God would have drowned anyone in the Flood who was faithfully offering up animal sacrifices to Him and trusting that his sins were being forgiven.

There is no doubt that Noah possessed a thorough knowledge of a pre-Levitical sacrificial system. In fact, we are caught by surprise when we read in Genesis that God commanded him to take into the ark seven of every “clean” animal and two of every “unclean” animal (see Gen 7:2). The distinction between clean and unclean animals was not in respect to the eating of them, for it was only after the flood that animals were eaten (see Gen. 1:29-30; 9:3). Thus it must have been a distinction made for the purpose of sacrifice.

It is also significant that the first thing Noah did upon disembarking from the ark was to offer one of every clean animal and bird to the Lord upon an altar (see Gen. 8:19-20). During the Flood that drowned all of humanity, Noah, no doubt, gained a fresh revelation of humanity's guilt and God's holiness, realizing even more the necessity of a substitutionary sacrifice. (We can easily understand why he didn't offer up any burnt offerings while on his wooden ship!)

Jehovah Jireh

The ritual of blood sacrifice was apparently passed down for at least ten generations after Noah because we find it being practiced by Abram (later named Abraham). Abram could have learned about the blood sacrifice *directly* from his great-great-great-great-

¹Faith in God can only exist where God's will is known; see Rom. 10:17.

great-great-great-great-grandfather, Noah, who didn't die until Abram was about 57 years old.

Regardless of who taught him, there are several references to altars that Abram built as he journeyed at God's instruction from Haran, through Canaan to Egypt, and then back to Canaan (see Gen. 12:7-8; 13:3-4, 18). Abram recognized that whenever he wanted to "call upon the name of the Lord" he needed to offer a sacrifice to Him first. He related to God through the blood sacrifice.

The concept of representative substitution is elucidated even more during Abraham's testing. God instructed him to journey about fifty miles to the land of Moriah and sacrifice his beloved son Isaac on a certain mountain that He would designate (see Gen. 22:1-4).

As they climbed the appropriate mountain, Isaac, who was unaware of God's full instructions, innocently asked his father, "Behold, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (Gen. 22:7).

Clearly, Isaac had been educated to understand the concept of animal sacrifice. Abraham prophetically replied to his son, "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (Gen. 22:8).

Then, having bound Isaac on the altar, Abraham raised his knife to slay his son until he heard God's voice commanding him to stop. Abraham had passed his test, proving his great love for God. We then read:

Then Abraham raised his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him a ram caught in the thicket by his horns; and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering *in place of his son*. And Abraham called the name of that place "The Lord Will Provide" [literally—*Jehovah Jireh*], as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the Lord it will be provided" (Gen. 22:13-14, emphasis added).

We read that the ram was sacrificed in Isaac's place. It served as his substitute.

Quite significantly, the place Abraham built his altar ("the land of Moriah") was just a short distance from the spot where Jesus would one day be crucified for the sins of the world.² Truly, God has provided for our salvation on "the mount of the Lord" by providing "for Himself the lamb" for the offering.

In response to Abraham's obedience, God made him a promise. As Abraham and Isaac stood not far from where the Savior would one day spill His blood, God promised Abraham that one of his descendants would bring blessing to *all* the people of the world (see Gen. 22:16-17). He was, of course, speaking of the Messiah—the One who would bless the people of the earth by providing a way to have their sins forgiven.

Without realizing it, Abraham and Isaac had just foreshadowed the drama of redemption. Just like Abraham, God would willingly give His beloved Son. Like Isaac, Jesus would willingly be the sacrifice. But unlike Abraham, God would follow through—judgment would fall and death would take place. And unlike Isaac, Jesus would actually die.

The Sacrifices of Job, Isaac, and Jacob

Although we don't know the exact date of Job's life, it is often assumed that it was during the time of the patriarchs. In the first chapter of the book that bears his name, we are told that Job practiced the blood sacrifice with religious devotion.

² See 2 Chron. 3:1. The temple mount in Jerusalem was on Mt. Moriah. Jesus was crucified just outside the gates of Jerusalem.

It is also clear that Job believed the burnt offerings were effective in obtaining pardon from God. We read of him offering sacrifices for his children for fear they had “sinned and cursed God in their hearts” (Job 1:5).

We also read at the end of Job’s story that God’s wrath was kindled against Job’s three friends because they had not spoken of God “what [was] right” (Job 42:7). Thus He commanded them to sacrifice seven bulls and seven rams as a burnt offering. Forgiveness could only be obtained through the blood sacrifice.

Isaac remembered well the lessons he learned from his father. After Abraham’s death, Isaac built an altar to the Lord in Beersheba and there “he called upon the name of the Lord” (Gen. 26:25). Isaac knew the proper way to approach God was through the blood sacrifice.

An incident from the life of Isaac’s son Jacob reveals that he, too, understood the significance of blood sacrifice. When Jacob became a changed man with a new name (Israel), he began his relationship with the Lord by erecting an altar in Shechem, naming it “El-Elohe-Israel,” meaning “God, the God of Israel” (Gen. 33:18-20). Jacob obviously knew that a relationship with God began with a blood sacrifice (see also Gen. 35:1, 7).

A New Beginning

Not only did the *man* Israel begin his relationship with God through a blood sacrifice, but the *nation* of Israel also practiced this ritual hundreds of years later.

On the very day of the Exodus from Egypt, God instructed the people of Israel to change their calendars (see Ex. 12:2). That day was to be the first day of the first month of the year, signifying Israel’s new beginning with Him. Their relationship would commence only by means of a blood sacrifice.

On that day God instituted the Passover, which prefigured, as did every other Old Testament blood-sacrifice, Jesus’ sacrificial death for all mankind. In the New Testament, Paul wrote, “For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7).³

On the tenth day of the first month, each Israelite family was to acquire an unblemished one-year-old male lamb or kid (sheep or goat) and keep it until the fourteenth day, when they were to kill it “between the evenings”⁴ and mark the doorposts and lintels of their homes with some of its blood. God promised to pass through the land of Egypt that night and kill all the first-born. But whenever He saw the blood-markings, the Lord would “pass over” that house (see Ex. 12:3-13).

There was a death in *every* household in Egypt that night—either the death of a first-born son or a death of an unblemished lamb. It was made very clear to the Israelites that their sons had been spared because the lambs had died. If you attempted to tell the Israelites that God is not a God of wrath, they would have laughed at you. They were spared the wrath of God because a substitute had died.

Foremost, Jesus’ death saves *us* from God’s wrath, which we all deserve. The apostle Paul wrote, “Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, *we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him*” (Rom. 5:9, emphasis added).

Notice, too, God’s choice of an *unblemished one-year-old* lamb (or kid). It wasn’t an old pig or donkey that was to be sacrificed—it was a little innocent-looking lamb, an animal that exemplified purity. Only something innocent could justly serve as a

³ Compare also John 19:31-36 with Ex. 12:46 and Num. 9:12, clearly marking Jesus as fulfilling the Passover sacrifice.

⁴ See Ex. 12:6. It is thought that the expression “between the evenings” means from the time the sun began to set (about three P.M.) until it did actually set, when, by Jewish time-keeping, the next day began.

sacrificial substitute for someone guilty. Jesus, the only sinless man, would be the only One who could rightfully serve as our sacrificial substitute.

After sacrificing the lamb or kid and marking their doorposts with its blood, the people of Israel were then instructed to eat it. In a physical sense, they became “one” with the sacrificial substitute. The lamb’s flesh became a part of their flesh.

This graphically illustrated the idea of representative substitution. Every Israelite could say that he had indeed received his rightful punishment because what had been killed was now part of him. He was united with the sacrifice.

So, too, as Jesus broke the bread at the Last Supper (which was a Passover meal according to the synoptic Gospels ⁵) He said, “Take, eat; this is My body.” (Matt. 26:26).

We have been united with the Sacrifice. The writer of Hebrews states that “we have become partakers of Christ” (Heb. 3:14). Paul wrote that we are now members of the body of Christ, that we are one spirit with Christ, and that we have been “crucified with Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27; 6:17; Gal. 2:20).

When Jesus died on the cross, every one of us who would believe in Him also died on the cross. As theologians like to say, Jesus’ suffering was *vicarious*. That means “endured by one person substituting for another.”

I like to think about this wonderful truth whenever I hear the old spiritual being sung, *Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?* The answer for everyone who has believed in Jesus is *Yes!* We were there, “in Christ.”

Our Passover Lamb

The Passover Feast was celebrated annually for fourteen hundred years before its fulfillment arrived in the person of Christ. When Jesus began His ministry, John the Baptist introduced Him as “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). This was His purpose for coming, and Jesus knew it. He came to earth as a man to die for the sins of humanity—to fulfill what every Passover lamb for 1,400 years only foreshadowed.

Just before His triumphal entry into Jerusalem Jesus proclaimed,

“The Son of Man will be delivered up to the chief priests and the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and will deliver Him up to the Gentiles. And they will mock Him and spit upon Him, and scourge Him, and kill Him, and three days later He will rise again....the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:33-34, 45, emphasis added).

Most significant is that, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus willfully walked to Jerusalem during the Passover Feast (of about AD 32) and was crucified *at the very time when thousands of Passover lambs were being slain*. Their blood and His blood were falling upon the earth simultaneously. He died as the Lamb of God, saving the world from its sins.

Is it any wonder that in the book of Revelation, Jesus is referred to twenty-eight times as “the Lamb”? We are told that the inhabitants of heaven sing a new song there, saying, “Worthy is *the Lamb that was slain* to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing” (Rev. 5:12, emphasis added).

Obviously those who worship in heaven (unlike many of us on earth) are not preoccupied with the latest theological “winds of doctrine.” Their minds are ever fixed on eternity’s most significant event, preordained from the foundation of the world and

⁵ See Matt. 26:17-18; Mark 14:14-16; Luke 22:11-15.

prefigured for centuries in millions of sacrifices: that moment in history when salvation was accomplished, that incredible day when Jesus the Lamb of God died on the cross for the sins of humanity.

God Continues to Make His Point

Our study of the prefiguring of Christ's cross in the Old Testament blood sacrifices, however, is still unfinished. God prepared for this culminating episode of history on a very grand scale. When the Lamb of God shed His blood on Calvary, it would be an event prefigured millions of times over and over again.

As if it weren't enough for God to teach the blood sacrifice to Adam and Eve 4,000 years before Calvary's fulfillment and then record its continued practice for at least twenty generations; and as if it weren't enough for God to instruct Abraham to sacrifice his son a few hundred yards from where Jesus would die; and as if it weren't enough to institute the annual Passover Feast 1,400 years in advance of its fulfillment; God then designed the animal sacrifice to be the hub of the Levitical Law, and thus central to every Israelite's life from cradle to grave.

The blood sacrifice was the only means of gaining or maintaining a relationship with God. The Law provided for daily, weekly, monthly, yearly,⁶ and occasional sacrifices, so that one could not live in Israel very long without gaining knowledge of the blood sacrifice.

When reading through all of God's instructions to Israel contained in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, I can't help but notice what seems to be a disproportionately large number of verses devoted to the sacrificial system. The lengthy instructions for the construction of the Tabernacle, the priests' vestments and their ordination and duties, the details of the various required sacrifices and their appropriate occasions all provoke the reader to ask, "Why was all this so important to God? Why would He instruct His people to build an expensive Tabernacle and then appoint certain people to dress in elaborate costumes just for the purpose of butchering animals every day?"

The answer is that God was once more impressing upon Israel's minds several of His attributes—primarily His holiness, justice, and love. God was teaching them that if they were to have a relationship with Him, it would be through the means of the blood sacrifice.

God was much too holy to have a relationship with sinners. Their sins separated them from God. But by means of a sacrificial substitute God could justifiably forgive their sins, and they could then enjoy His blessings. And of course, the entire Levitical ceremony was representative of what Jesus would one day accomplish once and for all upon the cross.

The Innocent Dying for the Guilty

Five different occasional offerings were prescribed in the first seven chapters of Leviticus—four of which call for the sacrifice of an animal: the burnt offering, peace offering, sin offering, and guilt offering. The four animal offerings differed in respect to the occasion and what was done with the blood and flesh after the sacrifice, but they all followed the same essential ritual. In particular, we will examine the sin offering, which the New Testament definitely teaches was a type of Jesus.⁷

⁶See Num. 28-29.

⁷Compare Heb. 13:11-12 and Lev. 4:12, 21. See also Rom. 8:3.

Depending on the person involved, there were slightly different rituals for various sin offerings. The ritual I will describe pertains to a sin offering that was offered for an individual as opposed to that being offered for a priest or for the entire community.

First, the worshiper presented an *unblemished* female goat or lamb at the entrance to the Tabernacle and laid his hands upon its head. At that point, the animal was designated as the worshiper's substitute. No doubt the laying on of hands represented the transfer of guilt from the sinner to the innocent animal.

The substitute was killed, and its blood applied to the horns of the altar of sacrifice. The priests poured out the remaining blood at the base of the altar. Then the fat of the animal was burned on that altar, and the remainder of the animal was eaten by the priests.

This entire ceremony painted a vivid picture of the innocent dying for the guilty, providing a way for a person to be justified before God. Some have wondered if even the burning of the animal's carcass was representative of the torments of hell that the offerer would have suffered without a sacrifice. Regardless, it was this offering through which God promised, "Thus the priest shall make atonement for him in regard to his sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven" (Lev. 4:35). This was the message of the sin-offering ritual.

The Day of Atonement

Of all the sacrifices prescribed by the Levitical Law, the rituals connected with the annual "Day of Atonement," known to us as Yom Kippur, depict the richest imagery. This ceremony unmistakably spoke of humanity's guilt, God's holiness and justice, and the mediating ministry of the blood sacrifice that was effective in covering sins. The New Testament clearly associates the Day of Atonement with Jesus' sacrifice.⁸

In order to understand the rituals performed on the Day of Atonement, we first need to understand something about the Tabernacle where the rituals were performed. Let's take a brief tour of the Tabernacle constructed by Israel according to God's instructions in the wilderness.

From the outside, an observer saw only the curtains of the Tabernacle court, which formed a rectangle with dimensions of about 150 by 75 feet. The single entrance into that court was through an opening on the eastern side.

Upon entering, the first object to meet the eye was the bronze altar of sacrifice. Approximately seven feet square and five feet high, it supported the fire used to burn the sacrifices.

Sitting directly behind the altar of sacrifice was the bronze laver, where the priests washed before offering a sacrifice or ministering in the Holy Place (a part of the Tabernacle proper).

Finally, in the center of the Tabernacle court stood the Tabernacle itself, an elaborately designed tent divided into two compartments. Inside, the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies were partitioned by a thick curtain.

The Holy Place contained the golden lampstand, the table of showbread, and the altar of incense. In the Holy of Holies resided the ark of the covenant: a gold box containing the tablets of the Ten Commandments, Aaron's rod that budded, and a sample of the manna fed to Israel for forty years in the desert. On top of the ark rested the mercy seat, which was overshadowed on both sides by two gold cherubim whose wings were outstretched over the mercy seat.

The priests continually ministered in the Tabernacle court and in the Holy Place as well. Entrance into the Holy of Holies, however, was strictly forbidden because God's

⁸ Compare Heb. 9:6-12, 24-28 with Lev. 16:11-15.

actual Presence dwelled there.⁹ The high priest alone was permitted to enter the Holy of Holies, and then on only one special day each year—the Day of Atonement.

The Scapegoat

Most of the instructions concerning the Day of Atonement are found in the sixteenth chapter of Leviticus.

On this most solemn day of the year in Israel, the high priest, after extensive preparation and with great caution, entered the Holy of Holies and sprinkled blood on the mercy seat for the sins of Israel.

Having first bathed himself, the high priest gathered the various animals to be used in the ceremonies that day. For himself and his household he selected a young bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. Then for the people of Israel, he took two male goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering. Later, lots were cast for the two goats to determine which would be designated as the sacrificial victim and which would be the “scapegoat.”

The high priest first killed the young bull for his and his household’s sins. Then, taking its blood, he entered the Holy of Holies. It was required that he also bring with him a firepan full of hot coals from the altar and two handfuls of finely ground sweet incense.

Upon entrance into the Holy of Holies, the priest spread the incense on top of the coals, thus filling the place with a fragrant smoke, “that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the ark of the testimony, lest he die” (Lev. 16:13). Only then could the priest sprinkle the blood of the bull upon and before the mercy seat. Now the priest was considered ceremonially clean and could offer sacrifice for the people.

After exiting, the priest sacrificed the first goat as a sin offering for the people of Israel. He then returned into the Holy of Holies and offered the blood of the goat just as he had done for the bull. Exiting once more, he applied some of the blood from both bull and goat to the altar itself. Thus atonement was completed for the holy place, the altar, and the tent of meeting, which apparently had become defiled by those who continually worshiped there.

Next, the “scapegoat” was brought, and the high priest laid his hands on its head in order to “confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel, and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; he shall lay them on the head of the goat.” (Lev. 16:21). This was an obvious transfer of guilt from Israel to the scapegoat.

It is interesting to note that the second goat was not killed like the first, but rather, was led away into the wilderness. Leviticus 16:22 comments: “And the goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness.” The Israelites could literally watch their sins being taken away to be lost forever. What a marvelous image!

Finally, the burnt offerings were sacrificed and burned on the altar, followed by the fat of the sin offerings. The remainder of the sin offering was burned outside the camp. God promised at the conclusion of His instruction concerning the Day of Atonement:

“For it is on this day that atonement shall be made for you to cleanse you; you shall be clean from all your sins before the Lord” (Lev. 16:30).

Satisfying God’s Justice

Clearly, the concepts of God’s holiness, justice, love, and the mediating ministry of the blood sacrifice were explicitly revealed in the ritual of the Day of Atonement. Keep in

⁹See Lev. 16:2.

mind that the high priest sprinkled blood on the *mercy seat*, which covered the tablets of the Ten Commandments contained in the ark of the covenant. The blood was brought into the presence of the law of God—the law that Israel repeatedly broke. Forgiveness could only come by means of a substitutionary sin bearer, and the Day of Atonement proved it.

It is with this ritual in mind that the author of the letter to the Hebrews wrote,

For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; nor was it that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood not his own. Otherwise, he would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, shall appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him. For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshippers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins....By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Heb. 9:24-10:4, 10).

The rituals of the Day of Atonement were fulfilled by Christ, whose work on the cross satisfied God's justice for all time. That's why there is no longer a need for any animal sacrifices.

We have by no means exhausted all that the Bible has to say on the subject of the blood sacrifice, but I think we have looked at sufficient scriptures to impress upon our minds the centrality of this subject in the Old Testament. Just as the author of Hebrews observed: "And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and *without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness*" (Heb. 9:22, emphasis added).

Most importantly, we should recognize every sacrifice offered during the time of the Old Testament served to prefigure the most important landmark of human history, the event foreordained from the foundation of the world—the death of Jesus on the cross.