

Atonement *in* Symbols: Part 1



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Gen. 3:21; 4:3–5; Lev. 17:11; Rom. 3:23; Eph. 2:11–13; 1 Pet. 1:18, 19.*

Memory Text: “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (*1 Peter 1:18, 19, NIV*).

Key Thought: To show how the Old Testament sacrificial system pointed to the sacrifice of Christ.

In the Bible the sacrificial system was established in order to illustrate how God was going to solve the problem of sin. At the center of the service was the blood of the sacrificial animal. The life of the animal was poured out so that the life of the repentant sinner could be saved. The animal was a symbol of Jesus, who would give His life in place of ours.

When repentant sinners brought their sacrifices to the Lord, they were acknowledging that they were sinners who deserved death. But they also were manifesting faith, trusting that the Lord would grant them forgiveness by accepting the life of the sacrificial victim in their stead. Assuming responsibility for our sin is indispensable (this is known as repentance and confession). Only those who, in the light of the Cross, see themselves as sinners in need of forgiveness and humbly find in Christ the Lamb of God that takes away their sin will experience cleansing.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 8.*

Atonement and Animal Sacrifices

How far back can we trace the origin of animal sacrifice in the Bible?

See Gen. 3:21, 4:3–5.

In the Bible, the sacrificial victim and the repentant sinner who brought it were identified with each other so closely that the life of the animal stood for the life of the person, and the animal's blood became a means of atonement (*Lev. 17:11*).

Read Leviticus 17:11. What is the important message of this text to us?

A lot of symbolism is found in the biblical sacrificial system. First, because the death of an animal stood for the death of the individual, the sacrificial act was an act of salvation, a manifestation of God's grace and love. He was willing to accept the death of another creature in order to preserve the life of humans and to continue fellowshiping with them. Second, according to the Bible, the life of an animal could not really atone for the life of a sinner; consequently, the death of sacrificial victims had a symbolic function only. It pointed beyond itself to the death of the Seed of the woman, Jesus, who would give His life as a ransom in place of many (*Mark 10:45*). Third, the killing of the sacrificial animal also illustrated the seriousness of sin and the costliness of forgiveness. Taking the life of an animal must have been very painful to Adam and Eve; probably to most Israelites, as well. The process helped them understand that sin is inseparable from death and that forgiveness is not the same as overlooking sin. The price God will pay for our redemption will be the "precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (*1 Pet. 1:19, NIV*).

At the moment sin entered into the world, God instituted a sacrificial system that had these symbolic and teaching functions. The first sacrifice that Adam and Eve offered was a wonderful explosion of hope in the coming Redeemer, a hope offered in the midst of the pain of guilt and death.

How seriously do you take the problem of sin? The answer can be found by how you answer the next question: How much suffering do you put yourself through trying to overcome sin? See 1 Pet. 4:1.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *1 Peter 1:18, 19*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: The sacrificial system was a visual reminder of the cost of sin.

Feel: Nothing material is valuable enough to rescue sinners.

Do: Show that our actions reveal our understanding of the cost of sin.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Repentance, Faith, and Blood (*Gen. 3:21; 4:3–5, 15*)

A As Adam shed the blood of the first lamb, he set in motion the slaughter of millions of innocent lambs. Adam’s example of performing the sacrifice wasn’t enough to convince Cain. Describe how Cain’s disobedience in the field mirrored Adam’s in the Garden of Eden.

B Cain resisted God’s plan of sacrifice. In spite of this, God protected him. What does this tell us about God? How far and for how long does His protection extend?

II. Covered in the Blood (*Lev. 17:11*)

Before Christ’s death, sin could be cleansed only by the killing of the lamb. Imagine Christ watching the sin offerings being made at the temple. Describe His possible emotions. What would you experience as you felt the warmth of the lamb with one hand and the cold steel of the knife in the other? Would the consequences of sin be more real to us if we had to kill a lamb as a sacrifice? How much more so should the image of the cross touch us?

► **Summary:** Sacrifice is necessary where sin is involved. We can never underestimate what even a “little” sin cost.

Sin and Impurity

The book of Leviticus deals, in detail, with the problem of sin and impurity, but it especially emphasizes the topic of purity/impurity or purification/contamination. Impurity is considered as damaging to the covenant relationship as a moral sin itself. The instructions concerning impurity have the purpose of motivating the Israelites to avoid anything that could contaminate them. The laws regarding purification instructed them concerning how they could be restored to a state of purity before the Lord.

There are several sources of impurity, some of which are unavoidable. For example, there is the contamination that a woman incurs during childbirth (*Leviticus 12*). In this case the contamination is the result of the blood discharge that accompanies the childbirth (*Lev. 12:4, 5, 7; see also Lev. 15:19–30 for another kind of uncleanness*). A man with a blood discharge was also considered unclean (*Lev. 15:1–15; see also vss. 16–18*).

In those cases the individual was a carrier, a contaminating agent; therefore, he or she was forbidden to contact anybody else or any holy thing. Obviously, the emphasis on washing and quarantine suggests a hygienic concern. But there was also a theological interest. The impure person was not allowed to come into contact with other people and was excluded from the sanctuary. “Impurity” thus becomes a metaphor to express a person’s alienation from God and others. In fact, impurity is usually associated with death. It is connected with dead bodies (*Num. 6:6, 7, 11*), diseases (*Leviticus 13, 14*), blood discharge (a way of letting life run away), and the emission of semen, which is the “seed” of life. The leper was totally impure and considered as dead (*Num. 12:9–12*).

The impure person was in the realm of death and could be removed from that place only through a cleansing ritual. Otherwise, he or she would be permanently separated from God and the rest of the people of God (*Lev. 15:31*). The biblical concept of impurity indicates that humans are almost in a natural state of contamination existing in an environment that is fundamentally unclean. They need cleansing in order to be free to approach the Lord. This cleansing was primarily possible through the blood of the sacrificial victim (*Lev. 12:8*).

Read Ephesians 2:11–13. Although the language of impurity is not used, how is the concept, as explained above, present in these texts? What kind of “impurity” do we face today? How can we be cleansed of it?

Learning Cycle

► STEP 1—Motivate

Symbols are aids to help illustrate ideas. Many Christian churches identify themselves with a cross. The United States flag has stars and stripes that immediately identify it as American. Pakistan, an Islamic country, uses the symbol of a crescent. The Swedish flag uses the colors blue and yellow, symbolizing the sky and the sun. In the Bible God uses a large number of symbols to illustrate the atoning work of Jesus. The early Christians used the symbol of a fish because the word for fish, *ixous*, was an anagram for the titles Jesus, Christ, God, Son, Savior. There are many symbols of Jesus in the Bible. Dominant among them is the symbol of a lamb.

Consider This: Consider *why* a lamb should be a symbol of Jesus. Lambs are gentle creatures. They are powerless and friendly, not aggressive or confrontational. They are not destructive.


In Scripture the lamb is associated with death, sacrifice, life, and cleansing. (See *John 1:29; Rev. 5:6; and the memory verse, 1 Pet. 1:18, 19.*)

► STEP 2—Explore

Bible Commentary

The lamb is the metaphor that most graphically identifies and illuminates the atonement of Jesus in the Old Testament. It is central in the story of Abraham and Isaac. God will provide a lamb for sacrifice (*Genesis 22*). In *Isaiah 53* Jesus is described as God's innocent Lamb who was led to the slaughter for the sake of others, and not for Himself (*vs. 6*). As you look at *Isaiah 53*, note the prevalence of the theme of substitution. We have sinned, and He, Jesus, paid the penalty for it. Notice how that theme permeates the chapter. Why is the concept of substitution so important to any true understanding of the plan of salvation?

In the sanctuary service, every day a lamb was offered, one in the evening and one in the morning. This service never stopped, no matter what festival was celebrated, be it Sabbath, the Passover, the Day of Atonement, or any other festival. In the sacrifice of the lamb there were

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The Sacrifices

Read Leviticus 4:3, 13, 22, 27. What do these verses tell us about sin and about who needs atonement for their sin? See Rom. 3:23, 5:12.

We can learn a number of lessons from these sin offerings.

First, the type of animal brought as a sin offering depended on the financial condition of the individual (*Lev. 5:7–12*), which showed that the Lord was sensitive to the financial situation of the people. For us, the point shouldn't be missed: Salvation through Christ is for all people, regardless of their status in the world.

Second, the sacrificial victim was expected to be unblemished, healthy, and without physical defects (*Lev. 4:3*). The sinner was defective and morally blemished, but the sacrificial victim that represented the Lamb of God wasn't.

Read 1 Peter 1:18, 19. What important aspect of Jesus was prefigured in those unblemished sacrifices, and why is that aspect so important to us and the plan of salvation? Rom. 5:19, 2 Cor. 5:21, Heb. 4:15.

Another important point to remember: The sin offering atones for both unintentional and intentional sin (*Lev. 5:1–5*) and ritual impurity (*Lev. 12:6, 7*). What's the moral lesson for us? It's that there was no sin that God could not forgive if the sinner repented from it. Moral and ritual impurity was symbolically removed from repentant sinners through the sacrificial blood. But, in fact, only the blood of Christ could cleanse from sin. The great news for us, prefigured in these sacrifices, is that no matter our past, no matter how badly we have fallen, we can, through Jesus, find restitution, healing, forgiveness, and cleansing.

It's easy, at times, to doubt your salvation. Maybe at times it's even good to question your standing before God. After all, there will be those who thought they were saved who, in the end, won't be (*Matt. 7:22, 23*). How can you find the assurance you need while, at the same time, not be presumptuous?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

two vital and important truths brought before the sinner who came to offer it before the priest.

1 The wages of sin is death. There is no escape from the terrible consequences of sin: It pays a wage, and the wage is death (*Rom. 6:23*). This is a terrible fact that should reveal just how devastating the problem of sin really is.

2 The death was not the death of the sinner; it was the death of the substitute, the lamb. The sinner went free, but the substitute died. These sacrifices were only symbolic; they did not effect any actual removal of sin (*Heb. 10:4*). After all, considering the devastating impact of sin on the world, how could the death of a lamb truly atone for it? It couldn't. Something greater had to happen. It did.

3 What the sacrifices symbolized, Jesus actually accomplished. He is God's Lamb in contrast to lambs offered by humans. He actually takes away the sin of the world (*John 1:29*). What does that mean, that He takes away the sin of the world? Why do we still struggle with sin? Why is sin still a reality in all of our lives?

Put the questions to the class. Is sin something concrete, like a book that can be picked up and moved from place to place? What do we mean when we say Jesus takes away our sin? How are we to understand this idea?

Removal of Sin/Impurity

What were the roles of the priest and the individual in the sacrifices depicted in the following verses? *Lev. 4:5–7, 28–31.*

Several rituals are important when seeking to understand the sacrificial offerings. When the repentant sinner brought the sacrificial victim to the sanctuary, the sinner placed a hand on the head of the animal and leaned on it. In the daily sacrifices the laying on of hands was associated with the phrase “be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him” (*Lev. 1:4, NIV*), indicating that the sinner fully identified with the sacrificial victim. The sacrificial victim was at that moment standing for him or her before God, bearing the sin of the individual.

The sacrificial victim was commonly killed by the individual, although there were exceptions (*Lev. 1:14, 15; 5:8*). This sacrificial act is especially meaningful when placed in the context of the state of guilt and alienation in which repentant sinners found themselves. Because of the violation of the covenant, sinners were heading toward death, but that death was actualized in the sacrificial victim, not in the repentant sinner, whose life was then spared by God. Sin and penalty cannot be separated from each other. The transfer of the one implies the transfer of the other. This found its fulfillment in Christ’s death on the cross, where our sin was transferred to Him and where He died the death that should have been ours.

Besides the laying on of hands and the death of the animal, another ritual was the bringing of the blood into the sanctuary, the means by which sin was brought there. In some cases it was sprinkled inside the tabernacle (*Lev. 4:6*), and at other times it was applied to the horns of the altar of sacrifices (*vs. 30*). When sin was not taken inside the sanctuary in this manner, sin was transferred to it through the priest. On those occasions he had to eat the flesh of the sin offering, thus bearing the sin of the people in his own person (*Lev. 10:17*). God was assuming responsibility for the sin of repentant sinners. This pointed to Christ’s high-priestly ministry on our behalf.

Think through the meaning of these sacrifices and what they were pointing to: Christ dying in our stead for our sins. How should the reality of His death impact our daily life? More important, how does that death impact it in your own case?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Jesus takes away our sins by taking responsibility for them. The consequences of sin is death (*Rom. 6:23*). Because He took the responsibility for our sins, Jesus had to die. It is the wonderful news of the gospel that by accepting Jesus' death in our place, we are free from the penalty that would otherwise be ours. We, all of us, deserved to be on the cross, not Jesus. In fact, He was the only human who didn't deserve to be on the cross. What lesson should we take away from that?

Note: There is a close connection between the meaning (*in Lev. 17:11*) of the life being in the blood and how the New Testament writers use the expression. (*Read Rom. 3:25, 5:9, Eph. 1:7, and Col. 1:20.*)

The universal power of the atonement of Christ's blood is brought out in the book of Revelation. " 'With your blood you have purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation' " (*Rev. 5:9, NIV*). The believers overcame him (Satan) by the blood of the Lamb.


► **STEP 3**—Practice

Thought Question:

The Desire of Ages, page 112, states that when John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the world's sin, he did not understand what he said, nor did his hearers. Ask the class, "Can you suggest reasons why many Christians today fail to grasp and experience the freedom from the burden of sin available through Jesus?"

This is an important question. Give the class time to reflect on the question. Make a careful note of the responses. They will be helpful to you when you come to the application of the atonement to our daily lives.

Consider This: Mass media, television, videos, magazines, DVDs, and audio books all have a strong element of violence in them. It is esti-

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Other Sacrifices

What was the function of the burnt offering? *Lev. 1:3–9, 22:17–22.*

In Leviticus the burnt offering is an atoning sacrifice, but other functions predominate. Because the sacrifice was totally burned on the altar and was accepted for the person, it represented total consecration to the Lord. It also was offered as a votive or freewill offering (*Lev. 22:17–22*). The votive offering was brought after a vow was fulfilled to express gratitude to the Lord. The freewill offering was an expression of personal devotion, thanksgiving, and joy.

What was the function of the peace/fellowship offering? *Lev. 7:12, 16.*

The peace offering could be offered as a thanksgiving offering, a votive offering, and a freewill offering (*Lev. 7:12, 15, 16*). This suggests that the sacrificial act was a joyful occasion (*1 Sam. 11:14, 15; 1 Kings 8:62, 63*). The fact that the Lord gave back the flesh of the sacrifice to the worshiper to eat it with relatives and friends in His presence (*Deut. 12:17, 18*) indicates that the sacrifice strengthened the covenant relation through communion with God and other Israelites (*Deut. 27:7, 1 Kings 8:63*).

What was the function of the meal offering? *Lev. 2:1–10.*

The meal offering was from the fruits of the land and was a recognition of God's gracious provision for His people. Everything belonged to God, but He requested that a small portion of it be brought by the people as an expression of gratitude (*Deut. 26:9, 10*). It was accompanied by the "salt of the covenant" (*Lev. 2:13, NIV*). Salt was used in the ancient Near East as a preservative and therefore was an appropriate symbol of the binding nature of the covenant (*2 Chron. 13:5*). The offering was an expression of the person's willingness to preserve the covenant relationship with the Lord.

In the Old Testament we find so many different offerings with complementary functions, while in the New Testament we find only one single sacrifice. What does that suggest concerning the nature and efficacy of Christ's sacrifice? What assurance can you take for yourself from this one sacrifice?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

mated that in one viewing there may be five to ten people killed, often violently. After constant viewings of seeing people being killed, how impressive will the death of Jesus appear? Is there a real danger that in exposure to repeated violence our sensitivities to the death of Jesus and the seriousness of sin may be lessened?

We cannot expect to drift into heaven on a cloud of pious thoughts. Life is serious. Salvation is free. Keeping it up to date for ourselves is vital. We have a heaven to win and a hell to avoid. We cannot sail a boat on yesterday's wind. Nor can last week's Christian experience substitute for today's.

► **STEP 4—Apply**

Ask the class if any one of them has a job they need to attend to: fixing a fence, painting a door, mending a broken chair, etc. There will always be some who are intending to fix something but failing to do it.

We cannot take this laid-back attitude to salvation. We must pay more careful attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. The King James Version says, "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?" (*Heb. 2:3*).

Ask the class members how they can organize their day in order to cultivate the application of the atonement in their lives and keep it fresh and up to date.

Note these helpful thoughts from Ellen G. White's *Steps to Christ*: "If Christians would associate together, speaking to each other of the love of God and of the precious truths of redemption, their own hearts would be refreshed and they would refresh one another."—Page 102.

"If we thought and talked more of Jesus, and less of self, we should have far more of His presence."—Page 102.

"The more our thoughts are upon Christ, the more we shall speak of Him to others and represent Him to the world."—Page 89.

Further Study: “The very system of sacrifices was devised by Christ, and given to Adam as typifying a Saviour to come, who would bear the sins of the world, and die for its redemption. Through Moses, Christ gave definite directions to the children of Israel in regard to the sacrificial offerings. . . . Only clean and precious animals, those which would best symbolize Christ, were accepted as offerings to God. . . .”—Ellen G. White, *Sons and Daughters of God*, p. 225.

“To many it has been a mystery why so many sacrificial offerings were required in the old dispensation, why so many bleeding victims were led to the altar. But the great truth that was to be kept before men, and imprinted upon mind and heart, was this, ‘Without shedding of blood is no remission.’ In every bleeding sacrifice was typified ‘the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.’”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, p. 932.

“Since the announcement to the serpent in Eden, ‘I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed’ (Gen. 3:15), Satan had known that he did not hold absolute sway over the world. . . . With intense interest he watched the sacrifices offered by Adam and his sons. In these ceremonies he discerned a symbol of communion between earth and heaven. He set himself to intercept this communion. He misrepresented God, and misinterpreted the rites that pointed to the Saviour. Men were led to fear God as one who delighted in their destruction. The sacrifices that should have revealed His love were offered only to appease His wrath.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 115.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 According to the third Ellen White quote above, Satan perverted the meaning of the sacrifice. In what ways could we be in danger of perverting the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice? What views of the Cross distort its meaning?
- 2 Unlike the Israelites, we don’t have daily physical reminders of the cost of sin; that is, we don’t live in the constant presence of sacrifice, as did the Israelites in the wilderness. In what ways, however, can we help keep the amazing death of Jesus in our behalf always before us so that we never forget what Christ has done to give us the hope of eternal life?
- 3 Explain in practical terms how you can consecrate everything you have to the Lord. What does that mean, and how can you do it?

Summary: God instituted the sacrificial system after the entrance of sin in order to remind people about the costliness of forgiveness and the future sacrifice of His Son. Different sacrifices were offered in order to expiate specific sins, to cleanse from impurity, and to express the deepest feelings of humility and adoration of the repentant sinners.