

Good (Friday) Questions...Why Did God Want Sacrifice?

Hebrews 9:11-22

March 21, 2010

Michael Carey

The preacher was known for his dramatic use of props. He pulled out a dirty glass and said, “This is your filthy life.” Then he took up a hammer; “This is God’s righteousness judgment; the holy God cannot tolerate sin; God’s wrath is poised to destroy sin.” For a moment, it appeared that he would smash the glass with the hammer. But at the last moment, he thrust a pie pan in the hammer’s path, smashing it, and declared, “Jesus Christ sacrificed himself, taking your place, absorbing God’s wrath, to save you from destruction.

A memorable illustration! Yet it raises more questions than it answers. It reminds us of our questions—our good (Friday) questions.

- Why would God want to destroy anyone? What about God’s love?
- Why does God need sacrifice?
- Even if my life gets saved, does it ever get clean?

We focused on the first question last Sunday by talking about the separation that exists between humans and God because of the way people have pushed God away. Honoring our freedom, God allowed this separation to happen. It has terrible consequences—sadness, suffering, and death. But God doesn’t want to destroy. God wants to heal, cleanse, and save.

Today we’re going to focus on the other two questions. To gain insight, let’s turn our attention to the Book of Hebrews. Hebrews is a written-out sermon which will help us understand how God provided the sacrificial system to atone for sins, then provided Jesus as *God’s once-for-all sacrifice*. Notice I said *God’s sacrifice for* all...

¹¹When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation.

¹²He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.

Prior to Jesus’ death, God’s people received forgiveness for their sins when the high priest went into the inner sanctum of Jerusalem’s Temple, the Holy of Holiness. Carrying the blood of the sacrificial lamb, God accepted the lamb’s death as a substitute for the people’s sins.

According to scripture, Jesus became the greatest high priest imaginable. After dying on the cross, he entered the *great and more perfect tabernacle...not man-made...not part of this creation*. We’re talking heaven; he entered the presence of the holy God. And instead of carrying the *goats and calves...he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption*.

So when God sent His Son to die as a sacrifice, God Himself suffered the loss. God Himself paid the price. If we were to make the preacher’s illustration more biblical, it would be better to show that the one who wielded the hammer inflicted the pain on Himself.

Our lives aren't smashed, and neither are they left filthy. The Triune God uses Christ's death to clean the glass. With the Son's broken body and split blood the Father washes the glass, and makes us a vessel of the Holy Spirit, so that we can overflow with grace. As Hebrews declares:

¹³The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. ¹⁴How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

We celebrate this great news each Sunday. The Great High Priest sacrificed His life for us, which doesn't just spare us; *it cleanses our consciences from acts that lead to death; so that we may serve the living God!*

This is great news, which is why we remember the day that Jesus died as "Good" Friday. Yet some of us still have our Good Friday questions. For years I asked myself, "Did something really happen on Good Friday, or was Jesus' death simply a dramatic way to say "I love you and I forgive you?" I kept coming back to the scriptures; despite their ancient context they speak with clarity. Let's keep reading; we're now at verse 15:

¹⁵For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

Before Jesus, God had called people into a relationship with Him, a covenant God made with Moses and the Jewish people. But the Law of Moses didn't fulfill God's desire for a complete relationship with people; the Law was a temporary arrangement to prepare God's people for their Messiah who would liberate them. To their surprise, the Messiah wasn't an earthly warrior, but fought evil as a willing sacrifice, because the way to free people from their captivity to evil was to pay Satan a ransom. The first "Chronicles of Narnia" movie illustrated this when Aslan the lion allowed himself to be killed on the altar as a substitute for his friend. Or in a more "real life" way, consider Clint Eastwood's character in the gritty movie "Gran Torino." When he discovered that he could no longer rescue his neighbors with violence, he realized that the only way to redeem them from evil was to surrender his life to violence.

Yet many of us still struggle with one last question. At the end of this section, verse 22 says *the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*

Why the shedding of blood? Why were animals sacrificed in the old covenant? Why was the sacrifice of Jesus necessary for this new covenant? Why did God have to make such a big deal over sin? Why couldn't God say "it doesn't matter?"

Because it *does* matter; it matters because *we matter* to God. If we didn't matter to God, our self-destructive separateness from his holiness would always result in our eternal death. But wanting reconciliation; God engages in costly love. Restoration and forgiveness - are by their nature very costly. They are costly in proportion to the offense.

Whether the people involved are celebrities or ordinary folks, the sin of adultery is so very costly. The one who has been betrayed can't simply say, "It's OK, it doesn't matter." It cuts to the core. No matter how attractive or famous the person, if your spouse is unfaithful, you hurt badly!

To bring about forgiveness, reconciliation, and full restoration is costly. It's costly to the offender. If the husband, he usually must go through the ordeal of counseling and make significant lifestyle changes to earn back her trust. And it's incredibly costly to the victim, she must work through her anger and make the effort to rebuild the relationship. Because it's so costly, estranged couples that open themselves to God's infinite grace are so much more likely to heal, forgive, and reconcile.

The prophets often portrayed sin as adultery against God. When describing idol worship, the Lord said through Jeremiah, *on every high hill and under every spreading tree you lay down as a prostitute (2:20b)*.

Our unfaithfulness offends our Creator; it has cut Him to the core. But refusing to abandon us to eternal death, the Father sent the Son to pay the price; to shed his blood, wash us clean...making us vessels to bear His Holy Spirit, and worship Him in glory.