

“God sent his own Son to be a sin offering” Rom. 8:3 *“The Lord makes his life a guilt offering”* Is. 53:10

The Tabernacle which Moses erected at God’s direction was a tent covered in skins and divided into two parts, the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place. It represented God’s dwelling place among the Israelites. It was set within an outer court marked off by a wall of screening material, and in the outer court of the Tabernacle stood the great brazen altar of sacrifice. The altar was situated at the entrance to the Tabernacle itself and its position indicated that there could be no progress into the actual holy dwelling place of God (and thus no real contact with God) without the offering of sacrifices. There were different kinds of sacrifice that were required to be offered on the brazen altar, and the nature of those sacrifices was revealed to Moses in great detail and had to be precisely adhered to. The reason for that was that God wanted to teach that he could only be reached through sacrifices of a quite specific nature and import. Those sacrifices were in fact prophetically designed to express exactly the different aspects of the ultimate sacrifice Jesus was to make. They were to be “types” of what was to happen on Calvary. These sacrifices numbered five in all, and all of them are important for any full understanding of what happened on the cross. They were the sin offering, the guilt (or trespass) offering, the burnt offering, the meat offering, and the fellowship (or peace) offering. Though having certain things in common, each one was quite distinct from the others in its intention. The sacrifice of Jesus is not fully comprehended if it is seen only (as it commonly is) as a sin offering, even though that aspect undoubtedly was the prime feature. Calvary presents us also with a burnt offering and a fellowship offering, features of great importance. However, the Sin offering was pivotal and the proper place to begin.

The Sin Offering (Lev 4:1 - 5:13).

“God sent his own Son to be a sin offering” Rom 8:3 *“Our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with”* Rom 6:6 ... *this priest offered for all time one sacrifice for sins”* Heb. 10:12

“God sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” 1 Jn. 4:10

The sin offering, burnt offering and peace offering were all offered daily before the Lord on the brazen altar. The sin offering was always the prior offering; the burnt offering and the peace offering had to be sacrificed on top of the sin offering, they could never precede it. In this way God made it clear that before he could receive any other kind of offering sin had to be dealt with, “atoned for” or removed. Thus the sacrificial system pointed immediately to man’s greatest problem- his sin – and the need for it to be dealt with.

The person making the sin offering began by laying hands on the sacrificial animal to indicate transference of his sin to the animal. There is no question at all that this is the meaning of the act; everything that happens to the animal after hands were laid on it indicates that it had become sinful, and was carrying the sin of the one who was making the sacrifice. There is clearly a substitution of the animal for the person. The animal was then killed (the appropriate end for sin), and its blood, representing its life, was poured out around the altar. Nothing else could be done with the blood for life belonged only to God and not to man. The sin bearer’s life had been taken and returned to God at the altar.

One of two things could then happen to the carcass of the animal. If the sacrifice was made either on behalf of the congregation (as on the Day of Atonement), or for a priest, the carcass of the animal was burned, but never on the brazen altar. It was burned outside the tabernacle court, the reason simply being that it was tainted with the transferred sin of the offerer, and nothing tainted with sin could be burned on the brazen altar before the Lord. God would not look upon such a burning, and it had no place near his dwelling. Only the fat of the animal was to be burned on the altar as a sign that God had received the offering. If an ordinary person (i.e. someone who was not a priest) made a sin offering then the carcass of their sacrificial animal would be eaten by the priests, not burned outside the camp. In either case, for priest or people, the offering was not burned “before the Lord” (on the altar) – it was sin tainted. It was not a “*fragrant*” or “*sweet smelling*” offering. It was necessary and received by God, but it was not something that God took delight in.

The importance of this in understanding the death of Jesus is clear. If Jesus was a “sin offering” then his body which was bearing the sin of the world was bound to be taken “outside the camp”, banished from the presence of God and “burned”. So quite literally Jesus’ body was taken outside the city, and at Golgotha it was “burned”. The burning, as he died on the cross was the burning up of sin, for he had literally “*become sin*”. The burning was of something utterly abhorrent to God, the burning of something by the wrath of God – the “fires of hell”. Burning and banishment from the presence of God is the punishment for sin. The sin offering must bear that punishment. This is what we see taking place at Calvary – Jesus the sin offering burning under the wrath of God, and banished from God’s presence. Much has been written on the hugely critical cry of Jesus, “My God, why have you forsaken me!” (Matt. 27:46), and many attempts have been made to minimize its meaning in the interest of theories which play down the consequences of sin, but the Old Testament “type” of the sin offering points unmistakably to the fact that in such a cry Jesus was expressing his moment of burning, his moment of banishment from the presence of his Father.

Great care was taken to choose for the sin offering an animal that was completely free of blemish. Quite clearly no animal could become an offering for sin if it already had imperfections. It is impossible to lay sin upon something or some one who was already tainted with it. Nothing could indicate more pointedly the perfection and innocence of Jesus. “*God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us*” (2 Cor. 5:21) is the way that Paul so clearly makes this point. Whilst the animal “*without blemish*” might be an approximation in reality for the purposes of a ritual, there could not be any approximation in the perfection of Jesus for the sacrifice at Calvary. He was in reality perfect. This perfection in the

nature of Jesus immediately implies, of course, that Jesus in his humanity could not, like us, have been born of two sinful parents; his birth must have been unique. Anyone born of natural parentage can never be perfect but always bears the mark of the blemish of sin. Thus the demand for perfection in the sin offering has profound implications for our understanding of the person of Jesus: he cannot be merely human as we know it. His birth by the operation of the Holy Spirit, leaving him free from any stigma of sin in his nature, is an important corollary of his being “offered for sin” and a powerful pointer to his divinity.

A range of animals could be used in the sin and guilt offerings. A bull, a goat, a lamb or even pigeons could be used. Whilst the range may reflect the importance of the person(s) whose sin was to be atoned for, it is better seen as a way of making provision for everyone to avail themselves of the sacrificial process., rich and poor. There is, of course, no distinction between rich and poor in the provision of Jesus as our sacrifice.

Thus the sacrificial system of the tabernacle first and foremost brought home the need for any person who wanted to draw close to God to confess and seek cleansing from sin. It taught that sin was something utterly abhorrent to God and could only be removed by another living creature taking it over and dying for it. Sin meant death, and death was avoided only through the substitution of another. God was willing to provide such a substitute, and for everybody. Here are the basic principles which underlay the death of Jesus. There could be no clearer “type” or analogy than this of the sacrifice of Jesus. No wonder that Paul and the other New Testament writers described the work of Jesus in language directly taken from the tabernacle sacrifices! The process of animal sacrifice may seem primitive, but the lessons being expounded were anything but primitive. At the very least it could be said that God, in using this sacrificial process, was taking something of the primitive behaviour of men and investing it with something profound and lasting. On the other hand it could be maintained that it is hard to see how any “type” of the death of Christ could be pictured by something which did not involve a sacrificial death.

The New Testament describes the work of Jesus in language taken directly from the Tabernacle sacrifices

The sacrificial system was in fact an essential complement to the moral Law which the Israelites also received through Moses. The Law educated the people in the nature of sin so that they could not plead ignorance to it. The sacrificial system, particularly in its foremost offering – the sin offering - spelled out the fact that something other than mere confession of sin was required in order for it to be properly dealt with. Sin could only be removed by something or someone taking the punishment for it, namely death. Thus the sacrificial system was not advocating some grotesque sacrifice to some wayward, petulant, deity who was simply displeased and needed constant propitiation; it was teaching the devastating consequences of sin for humanity, and pointing to the only way for forgiveness, the provision of a sin bearer who was a propitiation for the justifiable wrath of God. The sacrificial system was abhorrent, but the necessary death of Jesus was much more so.

The Guilt (Trespass) Offering (Lev. 5:14 - 6:7)

“The Lord makes his life a guilt offering” Isaiah 53:10 “He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him” Isaiah 53:5

Isaiah makes a clear prophetic statement that Jesus (the Servant of the Lord) would be a guilt offering (53:10 above). In 53:5 he points to the nature of the guilt offering – an offering in which Jesus “*bore our transgressions*”, in other words took away our actual and specific trespasses. In describing the guilt offering the book of Leviticus always associates it with a person coming to make a sacrifice because of some particular sin he has committed, and it is frequently also associated with payment of amends to any one defrauded by the sin. The descriptions of the sin offering proper on the other hand do not have any such focus on a particular transgression but deal with sin in general. This is the only differential we have between the sin offering and the guilt offering. Both are offerings for sin, and the guilt offering could be seen as a particular form of the sin offering. Both sacrifices follow the same pattern in their ritual.

The guilt offering indicates God’s readiness to address our particular sins

The suggestion has been made that whereas the guilt offering speaks of the need for our particular transgressions to be forgiven, the sin offering speaks of the need for each of us as a sinful person by nature to be forgiven. That certainly makes a comprehensive coverage of the sin problem in so far as it is both our very nature, not just our wrong deeds that need forgiveness and cleansing.

In so far as the sin offering speaks of our inner heart need to be free from sin it addresses the greater need, but the guilt offering indicates God’s readiness to address our specific and particular sins that make us feel guilty or distressed.

Paul, in Rom. 5:18 ff, speaks of Adam’s “trespass”, saying that “*the result of one trespass was condemnation for all*”. Paul sees Jesus, in making himself a guilt offering, as reversing the effect of Adam’s transgression. Jesus’ offering of himself was the “trespass offering” that atoned for the appalling trespass of Adam that brought so much prolonged pain to the world.

The Sin Offering and the Scapegoat on the Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement took place once a year when the whole Israelite community made confession and sought atonement for its rebellion and sin. The High Priest first entered the sanctuary area with a young bull for a sin offering. He offered the bull to make atonement for himself and his household before he proceeded with any other sacrifice. He took the blood of the bull and sprinkled some of it with his fingers on the front of the atonement cover and then in front of the atonement cover in the Most Holy Place. Then from the community he took two male goats for a further sin offering. He cast lots over the two goats. One lot was for the Lord and that goat on which it fell was sacrificed as a sin offering on behalf of the people. He took the blood of both the bull and goat and sprinkled it on the horns of the brazen altar and before the altar. Thus even the sanctuary itself had to be “atoned for” by the sin offerings.

Finally he took the other goat, which was still alive, laid both hands on it and confessed over it all the rebellion and sin of the community – so putting them on the goat’s head. He sent the goat away into the desert so that the goat would carry on itself all the sins of the community to a solitary place (a God-forsaken wilderness). Though not a “type” indicating the need for the death of a sin bearer, the sending away of the goat nonetheless strongly reinforced the fact that sin means banishment to a desert place. It underlines again the banishment Jesus experienced on the cross, the wilderness of his three hours of forsakenness.