

“Sacrifice”

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Mark 14.10-2; Psalm 50.1-6
March 17, 2024.
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Shortly after sin had entered the world and God had pronounced judgment on sin, we read the following in Genesis 3:21: “And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.”

God looked at their clothes and said, “Nope. That’s not going to work.” The clothes that Adam and Eve had made for themselves were not adequate covering to face the new fallen world in which they were now living.

Sin opened their eyes, but not in a good way. Sin laid them bare, left them feeling exposed. For the first time, they realized they were naked. So, they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths, single-piece garments. And ever since, the human race has engaged in an enterprise of self-covering that always falls short.

God knew that Adam and Eve needed something more substantial for covering. They needed something made by his hands, not their own. When we read Genesis 3:21, it is apparent that some animals died in order that the man and woman could be sufficiently clothed.

And this is the first hint of substitutionary atonement that we see in the Bible.

“Substitutionary atonement” is just a fancy way of saying that an innocent one died so that a guilty one could be covered. You see, covering sin is not simple, quick, and easy (like grabbing some leaves off a tree and sewing them together). Covering sin is costly, painful ... bloody. Sin produces suffering and death, so the cost of covering sin involves suffering and death. It involves sacrifice.

Did Adam and Eve think they could just sweep things under the rug, tidy up the disastrous mess they had made without any cost, without any price being paid? Do we think that? When we try to cover our own sin, we are engaging in a futile self-salvation

project. We are essentially saying, “I can atone for my own sin.” But this is a gross under-estimation of both the breadth and depth of sin’s devastation.

The death of the animals in Genesis 3 is the first biblical hint that atonement requires sacrifice. It points us forward to the ultimate sacrifice. Jesus Christ suffered and bled and died so that we could be adequately clothed—clothed in his righteousness. The blood of Jesus is our atonement, our covering. Just like Adam and Eve, we can’t cover our own sin. God must do that, and he has made that possible with the costly sacrifice of his own Son. In light of this: “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Is. 61:10).

Philippians 2 says this of Jesus Christ: “He made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death” (2:7-8) Not only was it a sacrifice for God the Son to take on human flesh, you might say that Jesus’ entire life was marked by sacrifice—giving up his rights and spending himself for the sake of others. From the beginning of his life, his feet were always walking toward the ultimate sacrifice of death on a brutal Roman cross.

This brings a question to mind: Why is sacrifice so central to God’s plan of redemption and reconciliation? Why couldn’t God just forgive people of their sins without sacrifice?

If you think about what it means to bring about reconciliation in a human relationship, you can see how sacrifice is always part of the process. Let’s say I offend you or hurt you in some way. If we are to reconcile our relationship, you will necessarily have to sacrifice. It will cost you something to forgive me, because you will have to absorb the pain of the offense.

You will have to sacrifice your right to be angry and move toward me with forgiveness. But I will have to sacrifice too. I will have to lay my pride on the sacrificial altar if I am going to move toward you with confession and repentance. The bottom line is that

without sacrifice there is no reconciliation. There is only hardness of heart and death of relationship.

In a very similar way, we must sacrifice in order to move toward God with confession and repentance. We must come to the end of ourselves, killing any sense of pride and self-righteousness.

But we are not the ones who move first. It is not our sacrifice that saves us. God's plan of redemption is primarily about his sacrifice, not ours.

Redemption is a term of value, so there must be a cost involved. To redeem means to buy back, to regain possession of something in exchange for payment. Because we are created in the image of God and he loves us, he considered us worth the cost of redemption.

However, the full cost of redeeming a human being is staggering. What does it cost to buy a person back from the realm of sin and death, from the reign of Satan? The cost is commensurate with the destruction that sin, death, and Satan have brought to humanity. The cost is beyond our ability to pay. No amount of sacrifice on our part would enable us to cover the cost. Thankfully, the full cost fell on Jesus. All of the curses of the Fall, most notably our sin and the resulting death, were placed on Christ. His sacrifice makes our reconciliation with God possible. Thanks be to God!