

ON SACRIFICE

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Jesus gave his life in sacrifice for our sins. How can we understand this sacrifice? The Torah demands that the Jews sacrifice animals to God in praise and thanksgiving, and in atonement. In what way does the blood of animals win forgiveness? Why would God demand that? It seems that his desire is that the people offer the best they have—give up their most prized possessions—as a sign of their repentance, their turning back to God. It's not a pay-off; it's a sign of humility and contrition.

The Christians say that the blood of animals accomplishes nothing. It merely foreshadows Jesus' willing sacrifice of his own life for the forgiveness of our sins. Several questions arise.

1. Did God not forgive sins before the death of Jesus? This does not seem possible since our knowledge of God, as he reveals himself to us in scripture, is that he is a loving and forgiving God by nature. And he tells the Jews in his covenant with them that he forgives them. He says this both in the Torah regarding sacrifice, and in the Psalms and elsewhere, regarding his love for his people. He puts their sins from himself as far as the east is from the west.

The Christians hold that in God's eternal present, it is the death of Jesus that wins God's forgiveness of our sins, before as well as after the crucifixion. Jesus' death is the only effective sacrifice. And so, working from the Christian belief, we are led to the main question:

2. In what way does Jesus' sacrifice win the forgiveness of sins? Let us consider that Jesus is God. That is, in Jesus, God creates himself as a creature. This creature, Jesus, willingly accepts death as a sacrifice to earn God's forgiveness of human sin. This raises two questions:

3. Does God's forgiveness have to be earned? There are two issues at play regarding divine forgiveness: human culpability, and God's absolute justice. Does God hold humans culpable for sin? We are weak and inclined to sin by our natures. Each of us is a battleground on which the cosmic forces of evil confront the cosmic forces of good—each force vying to win that weak gesture of our will toward one or the other. When we disobey and violate God's command of love, what could God expect of us? The best of us try always and fail often (Jesus excepted). Most of us try sometimes and fail miserably. – Does God not know this about us? Even having experienced our lives as Jesus, does he not know our weakness? Since he clearly *does* know this, what could he demand from us to satisfy his justice demands on us for our sins? And why?

If a young child offends its father by disobeying, the father spansks the child in punishment, as a way of training the child to obey. Corrective punishment seems justified—and God punishes us correctively for sin in our lives. Such punishment is built into the nature of the universe. But does the father also expect something else, some satisfaction of justice toward him by the child, some sacrifice on the child's part that will compensate for the act of disobedience? What could the child do to satisfy this demand of justice?

However, the Christians hold (and I suppose, the Jews as well) that this is precisely the case with God. God by his nature is absolutely just, and so he not only punishes sin correctively but also demands satisfaction of the sin. This satisfaction cannot come from humans since we possess no way of satisfying the demands of God's justice. So God himself must satisfy these demands. And so:

4. In what way does Jesus' sacrifice satisfy the justice demands of God? Justice requires that if you deprive me of something valuable, you must give me something else at least as valuable as that which I lost. What does God lose when we sin? He loses nothing of his own attributes. What he appears to lose is the satisfaction of his desire for unity in creation. His goal or purpose, expressed in Ephesians 1:10, is that all may be one in God, that all may be dedicated to accomplishing the will of God for them so that there may be absolute universal harmony. Sin delays or forestalls the accomplishment of this purpose. – Humans owe God this absolute universal harmony that he intends. But we do not—cannot—give it to him (participate in it) because of our weakness.

Does the cross satisfy this justice demand? Does it bring about absolute universal harmony? Clearly not. Jesus' presence on earth and his teaching (as in John 17) present this harmony as the goal. However, it is not Jesus' death, but his Resurrection and the promise of eternal life to all, which propels the Christian community toward the goal. So the cross appears to have no purpose. It brings about neither forgiveness (which has always been, arising as it does from the nature of God) nor the satisfaction of God's justice demand.

5. Then, what good comes from the cross? Why does Jesus sacrifice himself? The cross is the sacrament of God's love for us. In the Incarnation, God enters human life as the creature Jesus. The Incarnation expresses—and realizes—God's intimate love for us, his sharing in the vagaries of our lives, his sharing in our weaknesses and temptations. The Incarnation expresses the joy God takes in us. – The Crucifixion completes that sharing. Our God experiences the most frightening of human experiences—fear of death—and then undergoes a painful and unjust death as his sharing in the experience of death that we all must endure.

The Crucifixion, of course, is also the necessary prelude to the Resurrection, which is the foundation of our faith and hope.

But in its essence, the Crucifixion is the great statement of the extent of God's love for us. The Cross is how much God loves us. He loves us completely and unreservedly.

6. Why, then, does the scripture say that the cross is a sacrifice “for the forgiveness of sins”? We have come back to the central question, which is so difficult to answer. Why would God allow himself to be killed as an offering to himself? What would that accomplish? It does not accomplish the forgiveness of sin (which is always and eternally given by God, and so, was already accomplished when Jesus died) nor does it satisfy any justice demands of God.

In truth, the cross is not a sacrifice by humans to God. Rather, the cross is a sacrifice **by God to us**. Jesus gives his life into the hands of men. In his love, God in Jesus commits himself to us and surrenders himself to us. He does this, as above, as an expression of the love he has for

us. It is a constant and abiding love which is always merciful and always forgiving. The cross is “for the forgiveness of sins” in the sense that it expresses the great love of God for us—a love which has already forgiven us, forgotten the offenses, and is now open simply to receiving our faith and love. The cross says, Forget about your offenses against unity and harmony; come to me; give everything to me as I have to you.

The cross is a sign of joyful welcome. It only appears to be an image of death. In reality, it is an image of eternal love.

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