

NBC Devotional
December 8, 2021
“Sin and Atonement Part II: Affirmations from the 1st Testament”

I grew up in a different denominational network. My father was a pastor, relatively conservative in doctrine and practice, but he experienced the transforming power of the Holy Spirit in a way that surprised him and expanded his understanding. He began to preach and teach about how the Holy Spirit provided believers with the power to more fully live out their faith in Christlikeness.

When I attended an undergraduate Bible college, one of my professors challenged students with the somewhat radical argument that God was serious about calling people to righteous living. He provoked us with the rhetorical question, "Why would God ask people to do that which God knows full well they are completely incapable of doing?" The professor pressed us to consider that perhaps we are capable of that to which God has so consistently entreated His people.

These two thoughts – the power of the Holy Spirit, and God's earnest call to righteousness – hounded me in a religious environment which insisted that we will always sin, and we must sin, because of the fatal inheritance which has enslaved us. Our salvation from this hopeless state was Christ's substitutionary death on the cross, which appeased God's wrath and satisfied God's justice by having Christ penalized instead of us.

Once again, my professor in Bible college challenged my thinking with the assertion that if such doctrine were true, then John 3:16 should actually read, "For God was so angry at the world, that He sent His only begotten Son . . ."

I did not have a language to fully express the new ideas which began to form as a result of the influence of my father, and that influential professor. In the miraculous providence of God, that language was presented to me when my wife and I were introduced to the Church of the Nazarene. The doctrine of Holiness gave me words for what had hounded me for years.

The Lord brought affirmation for my new understanding through Nazarene colleagues, especially my friend Dr. Dan Powers and his work on "salvation through participation." I need only remind you of his profound exposition of "participation in the Divine nature" in our NBC chapel last month on November 3.

God's wondrous call to Holiness is not new with the New Testament; but finds great precedent in the Elder Testament. Though there is plenty of testimony of human corruption in the Old Testament, there is little compromise to God's call to right living and holiness. The dismal record of human sin does not seem to hinder at all God's unrelenting exhortation that His creatures, "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev 19:2; NIV).

I am convinced that God's call to holiness is not consistent with the assertion that we must inevitably sin only to be saved by the penal substitutionary death of Christ which averts God's wrath. . . . One of the supports for a penal substitutionary understanding of the Cross is the argument that the Old Testament sin offering, which Christ fulfills, was intended to be a substitute for the offerer. In contrast, however, there is no indication that a sin offering was intended to suffer, or to serve as substitute, on behalf of the offerer. In fact, there is significant

evidence asserting that animal sacrifices for ancient Israel were to be carried out in the most humane manner; thereby minimizing suffering on the part of the animal.

To understand the representative and participatory intention of the sin offering, we look to the prophets, and God's statement regarding the significance of blood in relation to atonement. The prophets were not critiquing the sacrificial system itself, but rather they condemned the hypocrisy of Israelites who participated in sacrifices without concern for what they represented.

Hear the word of the LORD, You rulers of Sodom;

Give ear to the instruction of our God, You people of Gomorrah.

“What are your multiplied sacrifices to Me?” Says the LORD.

“I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams And the fat of fed cattle;

And I take no pleasure in the blood of bulls, lambs or goats.

“When you come to appear before Me, Who requires of you this trampling of My courts?

“Bring your worthless offerings no longer, Incense is an abomination to Me.

New moon and sabbath, the calling of assemblies —

I cannot endure iniquity and the solemn assembly.

“I hate your new moon festivals and your appointed feasts, They have become a burden to Me;

I am weary of bearing them.

“So, when you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide My eyes from you;

Yes, even though you multiply prayers, I will not listen.

[Why?! Because . . .]

Your hands are covered with blood.

“Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; Remove the evil of your deeds from My sight.

Cease to do evil, Learn to do good;

Seek justice, Reprove the ruthless,

Defend the orphan, Plead for the widow.

-Isaiah 1:10-17

“I hate, I reject your festivals, Nor do I delight in your solemn assemblies.

“Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings,

I will not accept them; And I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.

“Take away from Me the noise of your songs; I will not even listen to the sound of your harps.

“But let justice roll down like waters

And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

-Amos 5:21-24

With what shall I come to the LORD

And bow myself before the God on high?

Shall I come to Him with burnt offerings,

With yearling calves?

Does the LORD take delight in thousands of rams,

In ten thousand rivers of oil?

Shall I present my firstborn for my rebellious acts,

The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

He has told you, O mortal, what is good;

And what does the LORD require of you

But to do justice, to love kindness,

And to walk humbly with your God?

Micah 6:6-8

The prophets make clear that the intended function of the sacrificial system was to represent the offering of one's own life to God through daily living in ways which honor God: goodness, justice, caring for the disadvantaged, justice, righteousness, justice, kindness, walking humbly with God! The prophets were not condemning the sacrificial system, which God Himself prescribed for Israel, but rather they were crying out for Israel to live up to what their sacrifices represented.

In the midst of chastising Israel for sacrificing to goat demons in Lev 17, the Lord repeats the command that no one should eat any blood. Then, in verse 11, God proclaims one of the reasons for this prohibition is because blood has been set aside as a symbol for atonement:

For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement. (Lev 17:11)

It is the blood "as life" which atones! Not "as death" does the blood atone; but "as life." This statement appears in the first chapter following the detailed instructions regarding sacrifices and

impurity in Lev 1-15, which culminate with the directions regarding the Great Day of Atonement in Lev 16. The statement in Lev 17:11 provides a foundational insight into the significance of offering the blood of a sin offering before the presence of God on the altar, in the holy place, and before the ark of the covenant. The blood of the animal represents, not a substitution for the offeror, but represents the very life of the offeror him or herself! Placing the blood, by the hands of the priest, before the presence of God serves as the commitment of the offeror to give their own life to God by daily living with goodness, justice, righteousness, kindness, and a humble walk with God. It is the very opposite of letting the animal die in my place so that I am off the hook for any sin I wish to commit or feel I must commit. In contrast, the animal represents me, giving my life to God daily in obedience and love. God's people are called to place themselves on the altar, just as Christ told his followers to pick up their own cross and follow Him! It can't be said any clearer than with Paul's exhortation in Rom 12:1:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

Yes, we are called to die to self, but LIVE for, and in the power of, Christ! It is not a matter of counting deeds (good or bad); it is a matter of living in relationship (walking humbly) with God, who came in Christ and provides all we need that we might live in participation with the Divine nature.

Dr. Thomas J. King, NBC Faculty Bible and Theology, and Director of Bible and Theology Core Program