

# **A Better Sacrifice**

**Scripture: Hebrews 10:1-18**

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Morning Service**

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People of God: In order to become a minister in the CRC, you need to have a university degree before you enter seminary. The question is often raised: What would be a good area of study before entering seminary? It's usually not theology or biblical studies since that is what you would get in seminary. Some argue a degree in management would come in handy, since there is more administrative work in the church than what people realize. Others argue for a degree in English, since preachers need to creatively use words. Others suggest psychology to better understand the problems of human nature.

But if the OT system continued to exist today, none of these subjects would be the most helpful to me. Instead, I would train to become a butcher. That's right. A butcher. That's because in the old covenant, the sacrifice of animals was a dominant feature in worshipping God. Every day animal sacrifices would be offered on the altar in the temple. There were so many sacrifices that the fire on the altar never went out. If I was an OT priest, my main task would be preparing the sacrifices for the altar, burning the sacrifices on the altar, as well as getting rid of the excesses afterwards. As a result, being trained as a butcher would come in very handy.

I don't know whether we can truly appreciate how bloody the old covenant was. With all of these sacrifices, there was a lot of blood. The blood wasn't just drained from the animals and thrown away. The blood was used as part of the sacrifice. The blood was sprinkled against the altar—or more accurately, the blood was hurled against the altar. Can you just imagine the scene? Blood all over the place. It might look like a scene from CSI.

Why all this blood? Well, blood in the Bible is the symbol for life.

Since life was sacred, the blood had to be treated with respect. That's why eating meat with blood still in it was forbidden. As a result, the blood of the sacrificed animals was very precious. Nearly every sacrifice involved the sprinkling or smearing of the blood on the altar or in the temple. The blood of the animal acted as a substitute for the life of the person. Leviticus 17:11 puts it this way: *For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.* Hebrews 9, verse 22, summarizes this all very clearly: *without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*

What I want you to understand is how extensive this system of sacrifices was. It was at the core of the worship of God. It was needed in order for a sinful people to come before a holy God. And yet it was inadequate. The opening verses of Hebrews 10 reveal the shortcomings of the old covenant with its sacrifices. The old system could not make the people perfect, nor were the people cleansed of their sin. They could not leave the temple after making a sacrifice, saying to themselves: "I am now completely right with God. I don't have to make another sacrifice for my sins." No, that wasn't the case. Instead they would have to come back, year after year. Imagine all that work to bring sacrifices and yet still not have your sins truly atoned for. What frustration! What an inadequate system!

The reason for this shortcoming, according to verse 4, is that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. The animals on the altar were to act as a substitute for the person. The life of the animal for the life of the person. But no animal can stand in our place. The life-blood of an animal cannot replace the life-blood of a person. Because we are created in the image of God, no animal can act as a substitute for us.

That's why the sacrifice of Christ on the cross was needed. Jesus himself became the perfect sacrifice, ending the OT sacrificial system. Jesus' sacrifice was laid, not upon an altar, but upon the cross. Fire was not the means of death, but the slow agony of crucifixion. But a sacrifice it was. The blood of Christ that began to flow during his interrogations continued unabated. The blood from the crown of thorns. The blood from the whip lashes. The blood from the nail pierced hands and feet. The blood flowed, when the soldier pierced the side of Jesus with a spear. The blood of Jesus stained the cross and the ground below.

Jesus was the perfect man. He was completely obedient to his heavenly Father. He could act as our substitute. His life-blood could be shed in the place of ours. His death could serve as an atonement for our sins. His sacrifice on the cross can truly lead to the forgiveness of our sins.

Christ's sacrifice is sufficient. No further sacrifice is needed. What

took place on the cross never has to be repeated. The suffering and death of Christ is all what we need. It is the final sacrifice, once and for all. As a result, the author of Hebrews describes our great priest as sitting down. The priests of the OT never could rest from their duties. Every day they had to get up, stand by the altar and offer the same sacrifice--day after day. But Christ could sit down. That's an indication of a completed work. It's like coming home after a hard day's work. Finally, you get to sit and rest. But of course the next day you have to get up and go to work again. That's how it was for the priests of the OT. But Christ's work in terms of being a sacrifice was completed on the cross. Jesus could truly say on the cross "it is finished."

And so when you compare the sacrifice of Christ to the sacrifices of the OT, Christ's sacrifice is far superior. It's the contrast between the blood of bulls and goats versus the blood of Christ. It's the contrast between the endless sacrifices day after day versus the one and only sacrifice. It's the contrast between a covenant which was not able to produce the desired results versus a covenant which is able to achieve its desired goals. The comparison makes it very clear. Christ's sacrifice is far superior.

In today's society such talk about sacrifice and blood sounds very alien and strange. It sounds like stories of primitive tribes who offered human sacrifices in order to appease the wrath of the gods. Richard John Neuhaus tells the story of an educated woman who tells him, "I think I am ready to be a Christian. I have no doubts about God and I completely agree with the Church's moral teachings... I am a little embarrassed to say it, but my problem is with the cross. Why Jesus had to die, this whole business about sacrifice and blood, I just don't get it. I suppose that's a pretty big problem, right?"

Right. Because the sacrifice of Jesus is central to our faith. Take it away and you no longer have the Christian faith. Why do we need this better sacrifice of Christ? It goes back to the problem of sin and the necessity of justice. As Neuhaus explains, "Justice requires that satisfaction be made; we were and we are in no position to make such satisfaction. Jesus Christ actively intervenes on our behalf; he freely takes our part in healing the breach between God and humanity by the sacrifice of the cross."

In some ways, the scene of the cross is very primitive. Primitive, in the sense that it reveals the core of human nature. It reveals the ugliness and the wretchedness of our sin. This is what our sin has led to: the death of the Son of God. At the same time, the cross reveals the core of the divine nature: God's love. God so loved us that he was willing to sacrifice his Son, to bear our sin and guilt. God was willing to experience death itself, so that we

might be freed from chains of death. That's God's love at work.

On this Friday, which we call good, we are called to look upon that sacrifice of Christ on the cross. We must look to the cross and be able to say: Christ died for me. Christ acted as my substitute. Christ's body was given as a sacrifice for my sins. Christ's blood was shed instead of mine.

This section of Hebrews ends with the reassuring words, *and where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin*. We today no longer offer any animal sacrifices. The shedding of blood has come to an end. Because a better sacrifice took place upon the cross. It's the only sacrifice we will ever need. Once and for all, Christ paid for my sin. That's what makes this Friday Good.