

—The Atonement of Christ, Lesson 6—

Old Testament Ritual and Symbolism (cf. *The Atonement* by Lorraine Boettner)

- I. When we consider the elaborate OT system of sacrifices, offerings, rituals, and ceremonies, we must remember that that was an age of symbolism and typology. Israel had just been released from Egyptian slavery and very few of them could either read or write. God therefore made allowance for their limitations and adapted the manner of His revelation to their capacity to receive by giving them the gospel message in pictures. A visible representation was provided through which the essentials of the way of salvation were kept constantly before their eyes.
 - A. The priestly and sacrificial system was designed primarily to center the attention of the people on the coming Messiah and to teach them that *there was a way of pardon and access to God*. Being OT shadows of NT realities, the priesthood and rituals were not essential to the existence of the church but *its passing redemptive-historical form* and were to be observed only up until the One whose coming they foretold had accomplished His work. The types were only in place until the arrival and work of Christ, the antitype.
 - B. This is why the NT definitively states that the blood of bulls and goats had no power to take away sins. They were appointed by God to reveal the people's need and to point to God's provision for them, Heb 10.1-7.
 - C. What did the ceremonial system of ancient Israel teach concerning the atonement?
 1. Atonement for sin was made by the sacrifice of an animal. The animal had to be perfect, spotless, and without blemish. The shedding of its blood taught that the life of an innocent, holy thing was given to cover the confessed guilt of the sinful, Lev 17.11; cf. Gen 3.21.
 2. The person bringing the animal to be slain thereby confessed himself to be deserving of death but petitioned God that in His mercy He would accept instead the death of a substitute.
- II. The Day of Atonement
 - A. Once a year the doctrine of atonement was exhibited more fully than it was possible in the individual offerings.
 - B. Two goats were brought to the priest.
 1. In the death of the first, the people were taught that the penalty for their sin was laid on and suffered by—their legally accepted and appointed substitute, Isa 53.6; 1Pet 2.24.
 2. In the sending away of the second goat, the people were taught that their sins were carried away, Ps 103.12.
 3. Thus the two goats constituted a single offering and taught them both their need for and God's provision for the *propitiation and expiation* of their sins, which was required for their acceptance before God as righteous. Once graciously granted on God's part, the priest was to pronounce the Lord's benediction on the people, Num 6.24-26.
- III. The Tabernacle and its Ritual
 - A. Here the mystery is solved as to how God can dwell with sinful man and how sinful man is enabled to come into the presence of a holy God. The tabernacle was a tent pitched about 2/3 of a mile outside the camp. The people had to come out of the camp to get to God. This taught them that they must come out of the world with its sinful ways and practices to dwell with God, 2Cor 6.16-18.
 - B. Surrounding the tabernacle was a court enclosed by curtains in order to show that God's dwelling is separate, holy, and shut off from the world and sin.
 - C. Upon entrance, the first thing seen is the altar of burnt offering. It's the largest and most prominent piece of furniture in the entire enclosure. No priest could enter the tabernacle without first placing a sacrifice upon the altar.
 1. This made clear that sinners have no access to God without an atoning sacrifice. Not only the glory within the veil, but the showbread, the light, and the privileges of the altar of incense

- are all closed to the sinner until a sacrifice is offered, Pr 15.8. This forcefully teaches us that before a sinner can taste the heavenly bread of fellowship, see the heavenly light of truth and favor, or pray acceptably to God, he must be truly repentant and avail himself of the atonement provided in Christ, the Lamb of God, Mt 11.27; Jn 1.18.
2. The tabernacle thereby declared that God can be approached only through Calvary, Jn 14.6.
- D. The fire on the altar was first kindled from heaven and was thereafter never allowed to go out, symbolizing the perpetuity of the atonement. The altar was the people's meeting place with God. Even the vilest and most unclean could approach God if he came by sacrifice, 1Tim 1.16; 2.5-7.
- E. The animal used for sacrifice was a domestic animal. It was not the sinner's gift to God, but his representative and substitute required by God for his approach. The man laid his hands on its head and confessed his sin over it, thus signifying the transfer of his guilt to it. This effectively testified to the sinfulness of sin, its fatal consequences, and the need for atonement before God can be approached. Yet it also testified that God has provided an atonement—a way back to Himself for all who will use it.
- F. After the altar stands the laver, halfway between the altar and the tabernacle. It was filled with water and was used by the priests to wash their hands and feet before they entered the tabernacle for service.
1. As the altar represented *justification* and the putting away of sin by pardon so the laver represented *sanctification* and the acquiring of holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord, Heb 12.14; Ps 24.3-4.
- G. The tabernacle proper was a tent divided into two parts, the *Holy Place* and the *Holy of Holies*.
1. Approaching the tent we come to a curtain, representing Christ, who's the door. Engraved on the curtain are cherubim, recalling the cherubim stationed at the entrance to Eden, the Garden-Sanctuary of God. By his sin, man's still barred from the presence of God; but by resorting to the atoning blood of the Man Christ Jesus (on the altar), the sinner can approach, Lk 16.2-3; Eph 1.6; 1Tim 2.5.
 2. Inside the tabernacle are three articles of furniture.
 - a) On the right is the golden candlestick, the only source of light inside. It typified Christ who is the only spiritual light in a world of darkness.
 - b) On the left is the table of showbread, or bread of the presence, a table holding twelve loaves and representing the communion and fellowship of the soul in the worship of God. The bread also typified Christ as the bread of life that came down from heaven.
 - c) Midway between the candlestick and table stood the altar of incense which typified the merits of Christ upon which our prayers are brought acceptably before God. The strict prohibition of God against using the formula for this incense for private use symbolized that nothing but the merits of Christ will avail for our salvation and that for us to trust to our own works or to anything else but Christ's blood and righteousness, is offensive to God and brings death to the soul.
- H. At last, we come to the Holy of Holies, God's dwelling place among men. It was a perfect cube in measurement, which recalls the vision of the people of God in Rev 21.23-25 when perfect fellowship with God is restored.
1. The only article of furniture was the ark of the covenant in which was held the Ten Commandments. Over the ark was a mercy seat, a gold cover with two cherubim facing each other. They symbolized the presence and unapproachableness of God.
 2. The mercy seat was God's seat and it was over the law of God symbolizing that while God's Kingdom is founded on holiness it's also a Kingdom in which He's pleased to exercise mercy, Ex 34.6-7.
 3. Once a year the High Priest took the blood from the sacrifice and sprinkled it seven times over the mercy seat, thus covering or blotting out the broken law, thereby making atonement first for himself and then for the people, Lev 16. When God looked down toward His Law,

over which rests His throne, and which called for the execution of the penalty upon every transgression, His eye rested first on the sprinkled blood of atonement. This atoning blood covered His people's sins and served to reconcile them to Him. Thus we're taught that we can draw near to God, not by our own good works and law-keeping, but only through His mercy which forgives our transgressions against His Law.

4. *If we could only gain access to God by keeping the Law, then the tables of the Law would have stood at the threshold. But the arrangement of the tabernacle by God, instead of teaching us: "Keep the law and God will let you in," teaches us: "Come in through Christ and, through His atonement, God will forgive your law-breaking and give you grace for law-keeping." The NT statement of this truth is in Eph 2.8-10.
5. The veil separating the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies represented the human nature of Christ by which He opened a way for us into Heaven, Heb 10.19-20; Mt 27.51. The rending of the veil by the death of Christ signified that God was leaving His earthly dwelling and that all legal and ceremonial worship was at an end. The way to God was open for sinners to draw near to Him by Christ, Heb 7.25; 10.19-22.

I. Notice finally that the tabernacle furniture was arranged in the shape of a cross. The design was hidden by the veil until the hour when Christ died and then the veil was torn by God Himself. Then, standing at the brazen altar and looking toward the ark, the cross stood out clear and distinct.

1. Thus as the OT worshipper passes along the path of worship in the tabernacle, he beheld the work of Jesus stamped in shadows on all that he did.
2. The rituals and ceremonies were like the moon's shining in the night, not with any light of its own but with the reflected or borrowed light of the sun, foreshowing the Son of Righteousness. And when the reality appeared and accomplished the work to which the types and ceremonies of Judaism had pointed, the types disappeared, as the petals fall away when the fruit appears or as the moon and stars fade out when the sun breaks upon the horizon.

IV. Christ the Fulfillment of OT Ritual

- A. The OT looked forward to the same sacrifice to which we look back. The trail of sacrificial blood that appears just outside the gates of Eden (Gen 3.21) leads infallibly to the cross of Calvary, where Christ appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself, Heb 9.26.
- B. Christ was Himself the Priest who made atonement for us, Heb 9.11-12; 2.17; 5.6; 7.24-28. When the whole race was shut out from God by its sin, God was pleased to choose the Israelites as a priestly nation, to appoint Levi as the priestly tribe, to appoint the family of Levi as the priestly family, and finally narrow down the choice still further to appoint a succession of individuals from this family as a type of the great High Priest, Jesus Christ. Yet, to show that Christ's atoning work was not another shadow but the reality itself, He arose from the unending, immortal order of Melchizedek.
- C. The death of Christ was the sacrifice of God offered for our sins, Heb 9.26; 1Cor 5.7; Jn 1.29; Eph 5.2; Lk 22.19; Mt 26.28; Heb 13.11-12; 1Cor 15.3; Eph 1.7. Isaiah 53.4-12 set forth the vicarious atonement of the coming Messiah in graphic language.

V. Thus the Old and New Testaments join together in perfect harmony, the former being prophetic while the latter is descriptive, of Christ's person and work.

- A. Whereas the *Edenic*, *Abrahamic*, and *Davidic* covenants foreshadow the Person of Christ and *who* the Redeemer and Curse-Reverser will be, the *Mosaic* covenant foreshadows His work and *how* He'll reverse the curse and bring about the redemption of God's elect.
- B. And in the development of the Church, the transition from the Old to the New was as natural as the transition from the bud to the flower, which Christ signaled when He said on the cross, "*It is finished*," Jn 19.30, and then after His resurrection, "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations*," Mt 28.18-20.