

## “Why Does God Need A Sacrifice?”

**Question: “If God is so great and so merciful, why does He need or require a sacrifice to forgive sin?”**

### **Introduction**

In a way, the Gospel can be summarized in one simple phrase: Christ. Died. For. Our. Sins. Each one of these words is full of meaning and in explaining the biblical significance of each one, we gain a fuller understanding of the Gospel. At the heart of the Gospel is the substitutionary atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As our substitute before a holy God, Jesus gave Himself as the sufficient sacrifice to redeem sinners from the penalty of their sin and satisfy the righteous demands of a holy and just God.

For centuries, this is what the Church has taught because it is the main and plain teaching of the Holy Scriptures. However, there are many challenges today to the idea of the substitutionary atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. A common one, especially among Muslims, is, “Why does God require a sacrifice in order to forgive sin? He can do anything, including the forgiveness of sins, just by deciding to do so.” However, it is not just Muslims who are asking this questions. Some who ask it are Christians who want to understand the Gospel and the mission of Christ in a deeper way. Others are curious about why one man can die in the place of another? Still others, especially in an age where Yahweh is accused of being a “blood-thirsty tribal god”, want to dismiss the whole idea of the necessity of a blood sacrifice at all. This latter group seek to call into question the very nature and justice of god and claim that such a view of sin and sacrifice is a logical absurdity and an offense to our human sensibilities.

In this short lesson, we will take the time to present a logical response to these questions. We will look at some biblical texts, think about the nature of God and the nature of man, and come to see the inherent coherence and consistency of the biblical view of salvation. Though not every aspect of these questions will be addressed, we will have the beginning of a good response to these challenges, which are growing in popular culture and thinking.

### **I. The Heinousness of Sin.**

The first thing that we need to underscore as we think about this issue is how awful sin is. Though it often seems trivial and unimportant to us, in the eyes of God, sin is a loathsome and terrible thing. Sin, biblically speaking, is the ultimate act of treason against the Holy One who is the Creator of all things. Since a correct view of sin leads to a correct view of salvation, it is important for us to review how terrible and disastrous sin is before moving on in our discussion to this important question.

- A. Sin is rebellion against God (Ps. 2:2, 10-12; 1 Sam. 15:22-23).
  - 1. This rebellion is active and deliberate against God.
  - 2. It may be rebellion against God’s ruling over our life, or willfully neglecting the law of God (Is. 1:28; Hos. 14:9; Rom. 2:23; Josh 7:15).
  
- B. Sin is offensive to God and His holiness (Is. 59:1-13).
  - 1. He has given His Law and He expects obedience to it (Exod. 34:5-7).

2. Sin is saying, “I know better than God.” It is listening to the voice of the Serpent saying, “Did God really say?”
  3. Sin is a rejection of His authority and His Lordship over what He has created.
  4. Sin robs God of glory and praise that is due His Name.
- C. Sin is evil.
1. We all have a sense of good and evil, right and wrong.
  2. It is decision to do what ought not to be done or not to do what ought to be done (Rom. 1:18-32; 1 John 3:4; Gen. 3:1-6; Jam. 4:17).
  3. “Sin is any failure to conform to the moral law of God in act, attitude, or action” (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 490).
- D. Sin is destructive (Rom. 3:23).
1. It brought suffering, rebellion, and death in to the world.
  2. It ruins lives, steals human dignity, and bruises relationships, bodies, lives, families, and societies (Rom. 1:18-32)
- E. Sin disqualifies us from being in the presence of God (Is. 59:2; Rom. 3:23).
1. The holy eyes of God cannot look upon and approve of sin (Hab. 1:13).
  2. Sin separates us from the original relationship we had with Him (Gen. 3:23-24).
- F. Sin deserves punishment (Rom. 6:23; 1:18-32).
1. The wages of sin is death.
  2. The punishment of rebellion and disobedience keeps social order and a sense of rhythm and justice in the world.

## II. The Holiness of God

The holiness of God has (at least) two meanings for us to understand. One, His holiness means that He is completely without stain, blemish, blame, weakness, sin, or imperfection. He is holy, complete, pure, and perfect in His nature. Two, His holiness means that He is separated, or distinct, from His creation. He is unlike anything else and there is nothing in His creation that compares to Him. Therefore, any discussion of how to deal with sin and the holiness of God needs to take into account that God stands alone in this matter. Sin against God is unlike sin against any other creature in the universe.

- A. God cannot look favorably upon sin (Hab. 1:13; Ps. 5:4).
  1. He sees everything, including the evil that we do (Prov. 15:3).
  2. This does not mean that God does not look upon sin or that sin can never be in His presence. For example, Satan is often seen as being in His presence (Job 1-2; Zech. 3:1-5).
  3. What it does mean, however, is He cannot and does not approve of sin.
- B. God is holy by nature. His holiness is not something that He decreed or created (Is. 6:3; 1 Pet. 1:15-16; Rev. 4:8).
  1. In the Scriptures, whenever someone catches a glimpse of the true nature of God, they fall down in fear and cry out: “Holy, holy, holy!” (Is. 6:3).

2. He cannot just wipe away sin because His nature will not allow it (Josh. 24:19).
  3. His very nature recoils against sin and wickedness (Is. 5:24; Ezek. 36:23).
- C. His holiness requires wrath – and His judgment – against sin (Rom. 1:18ff).
1. Wrath is His right and holy reaction against sin (Ps. 9:7-8; 11:16).
  2. His holiness requires judgment against all that is unholy (Ps. 96:13).
  3. God cannot set aside wrath as if it were a capricious part of His nature. He is wrathful by nature because He is holy by nature (Is. 37:23).
  4. We would not want a God who would wink at sin and think that it is not that bad (Ps. 97:2).
- D. Blood needed to be shed to cover the wickedness of sin (Heb. 9:22).
1. The sacrificial system of the Old Testament originated in the holy mind of God.
  2. The life is in the blood, and thus the shedding of blood means that life is given for life (Lev. 17:11, 14; Heb. 9:22).
  3. The idea of substitution comes from very early in the biblical record.
  4. These sacrifices did not actually forgive sin or take it away. They only covered them. Their role was to point to the greater sacrifice that would come in Christ, whose blood and sacrifice alone could truly atone for sin.

### **III. The Mercy and Love of God**

Though God could not and would not violate His holy nature and the requisite justice that flows from it, He also desired to act from His love and mercy to bring about the solution to the sin of man. God went to great lengths to display His mercy and love to sinners, who deserved neither. “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn. 4:10).

- A. God loved the world and desired to redeem a people for Himself (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 5:8).
1. In eternity past, God decreed a covenant within the Holy Trinity to bring about the redemption of sinners (Eph. 1:3-14).
  2. This plan has been revealed step-by-step over time and through the prophets.
- B. God Himself put into motion the plan for forgiveness.
1. He appeared to His people and sent prophets to communicate His message and how to be at peace with Him.
  2. There are hints at the necessity of blood sacrifices from early on in the Scriptures (Is. 53; Heb. 9:6-7).
  3. The Law, with all of the sacrifices and offerings that compose it, was God’s way to cover sins, offer forgiveness, and keep His people in communion with Him (Gal. 3:23-29; Heb. 9:13-14).
  4. The Law was NEVER the way to obtain salvation, it was given to keep people in fellowship with Him (Heb. 10:1-14).
- C. Animals and offerings were a shadow of what was to come (Heb. 10:1-14).
1. The various offerings and sacrifices were given to provide for a variety of needs that sinners had before God – peace, guilt, purification, fellowship, etc.

2. All of these sacrifices, offerings, and gifts pointed to the bigger picture of how God brings about redemption through His Son. Jesus is the fulfillment of each and every sacrifice, offering, law, act of obedience, requirement, etc. (Heb. 7:18-28; 9:27-28; Matt. 5:17-18; 1 Cor. 5:7; etc.)
  3. The Book of Hebrews (and others) shows how to understand the Old Testament in light of the New Covenant in Christ.
- D. God desires to keep His people in fellowship with Him. Thus, provision made through confession of sin, repentance, turning back to God, and the offering of sacrifices of praise.

#### **IV. The Justice of God**

Being a God who is perfectly holy and also perfectly loving, it might seem that God is in a conundrum. How can He hold up both attributes while also providing for the forgiveness of sinners? How can a holy God forgive sin and still be holy? How can a loving God punish sin and still be loving? The answer is found in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is found at the cross. As one song says, “We worship at your feet, where wrath and mercy meet.”

- A. The law must be followed (Ps. 119:89).
  1. The Law flowed from God’s holy nature (Rom. 7:12).
  2. God did not invent a system of morality. His revelation in the Law reveals what morality is (Deut 32:4).
  3. The Law is good, holy, right, and true. It is not something that is to be despised. Rather, it is to be respected and followed (1 Jn. 5:3; Rom. 8:4; Gal. 5:14)
- B. Sin must be atoned for. It cannot simply be overlooked.
  1. Without the shedding of blood, there can be no forgiveness of sin (Heb. 9:22).
  2. God’s honor has to be restored somehow.
  3. The brokenness, separation, confusion, and rebellion that sin causes needs to be overcome and dealt with.
  4. It would be unjust, unholy, and unloving for God to overlook sin.
- C. God sent His Son, who came willingly as a sacrifice for sin (2 Cor. 5:21)
  1. He was the perfect spotless lamb (1 Cor. 5:7; Jn. 1:29).
  2. He lived in perfect righteousness and perfect obedience (1 Cor. 1:30; 1 Pet. 3:18).
  3. Jesus had authority over His life, to lay it down and to take it up (Jn. 10:17-18).
- D. God guards His justice and declares the justice of others in His Son. Rom. 3:21-26 is one key passage that summarizes this whole concept. This passage, in the words of Martin Luther, is “the chief point, and the very center of the Epistle, and of the whole Bible.” In other words, he sees it as the most important passage in the Bible. Look at how this passage summarizes the Gospel:
  1. Righteousness comes from God in Christ.
  2. All are sinners and deserve death.
  3. Christ was the propitiation to satisfy the justice of God.

4. Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone.
5. God, by giving His Son, can both declare the believing sinner justified and remain just in His nature because sin has been atoned for and His wrath has been satisfied. Thus, He is “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

**V. The Dignity of God**

Having seen all of these attributes of God and how they contribute to our understanding of the Gospel, we see that the requirement that a sacrifice for sin must be offered upholds the dignity of God as Creator, Judge, and Savior.

- A. His honor must be recognized at all times.
  1. Sin takes honor away from God.
  2. That loss needs to be overcome.
  3. The perfect sin sacrifice of Christ restores God’s honor.
  
- B. He is worthy of holiness.
  1. It is not arbitrary for God to require holiness from those He created.
  2. As image-bearers, human beings are to reflect and represent God to the rest of creation.
  3. If we want to be in the presence of God, we must become like God as He is.
  
- C. He is not arbitrary in the demand for justice and a sacrifice.
  1. This is the logical conclusion of all that we have discussed thus far.
  2. By His nature He requires, holiness, righteousness, and perfect obedience.
  3. Where sin is present, it must be dealt with in a way that is consistent with the nature and demands of God.

**VI. The Dignity of Man**

What is often missed in the discussion of sin, atonement, and salvation is that the dignity and responsibility of man must be maintained in the process of redemption. Man is the one who has sinned against God. As a result, he is guilty, shamed, separated, and broken. A sacrifice for sin is required to restore man’s position before God. The substitutionary atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ is the means by which God’s honor is restored, man’s responsibility is recognized, and forgiveness and reconciliation can take place.

- A. We are held accountable for our actions.
  1. Each person will appear before God in judgment (Mt. 25:31-46; Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:11-15).
  2. God will not overlook the wrongs that we have done (Exod. 34:5-7).
  
- B. Humans sinned; not God.
  1. In our rebellion, we dishonored God. Therefore, we need to do what is necessary to restore that honor.
  2. As Creator and Judge, God is right to require a sacrifice from us, and tell us what the acceptable conditions are of that sacrifice.

- C. We, as humans, pay the price for human sin – in Christ (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 3:18; 1 Jn. 2:2, 4:10).
  - 1. However, in ourselves, we were not able to give to God all that He requires to acquit us from our sin and guilt.
  - 2. Perfect obedience and righteousness were required for our forgiveness.
  - 3. Jesus came and through both his active and passive obedience, He alone was qualified to be the perfect and acceptable sin sacrifice.
  
- D. The God-Man safe-guarded the dignity of God and of Man by His life, death, resurrection, ascension, and enthronement (1 Tim. 2:5).
  - 1. As God, He represented us to man.
  - 2. As Man, He represented us to God.
  - 3. As Man, He could die in the place of men.
  - 4. As God, He could pay the price that God required.

**Appendix: Doesn’t God oppose human sacrifice? What about the sacrifice of Jesus?**

In light of the discussion above, a follow-up question could then be posed: but isn’t the death of Jesus a human sacrifice, something that God opposes? While there is a seemingly logical question, it is not one that does harm to the biblical revelation on the subject.

**I. Yes! God does oppose human sacrifice.**

- A. Such a practice is detestable to God (Deut. 12:31; 18:10).
- B. It was often connected with sorcery and divination (2 Kgs. 21:6).
- C. God warned His people against such things (Deut 18:10; Lev. 20:1-9).

**II. Jesus was not a human sacrifice, per se.**

- A. Jesus was a man, but He was more than a man. He was the God-Man (Jn. 1:1, 14).
- B. His sacrifice was voluntary in nature and not mandatory. He personally did not need a sacrifice for sin (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 3:18; Jn. 10:17-18).
- C. Jesus sacrificed Himself to God the Father. In the covenant agreement of the Trinity, The Father sent; the Son offered; the Spirit sanctified (Jn. 7:33; 1 Jn. 4:10; Rom. 5:8; Heb. 9:14.)