

**God On The Cross:
PRECIOUS LAMB**

**Leviticus 16:6-15, 20-22
Hebrews 9:11-22**

*Jesus' death on the cross
was a sacrificial atonement.*

A sermon preached by
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On January 8, 2011, outside a grocery store in Tucson, Arizona, a troubled young man named Jared Lee Loughner opened fire, killing six people and injuring 13 others. He shot and severely injured U.S. Representative Gabrielle Giffords. When he turned his gun toward 75-year-old Mavanell Stoddard, her husband, 76-year-old "Dory" Stoddard, stepped in front of her and took the bullet. He was one of the six killed that day. He sacrificed his life for his wife.

The next week, at the memorial service for Dory, his friends remembered that he didn't just become a hero during that tragic shooting. For years he had lived with the character of a hero; his last act was consistent with the way he had always lived. His pastor said, "Dory Stoddard ... didn't die a hero, he lived a hero. He completed his heroic act of kindness one final time with his wife, Mavy." Dory's son Dale, one of four sons, recalled that the retired construction worker was a selfless family man known as "Mr. Fixit." Flanked by his three brothers, Dale said, "He was always helping someone, someone who was hurting, someone who needed some care or just a gallon of gasoline. Guys like my father are rare."¹

We know what it means to make a sacrifice. We honor those who give part or all of their lives for a greater, nobler good. We often speak of soldiers who give the ultimate sacrifice for their country. A parent will sacrifice for a child, working two or even three jobs and doing without luxuries to put the kid through school. A woman will sacrifice the pleasures of family and children to pursue a career.

A sacrifice is an act in which something of value is given up to obtain or to preserve something of greater value. Sacrifices by definition cost something.

During Lent, we are focusing our thoughts on the crucifixion of Christ, calling it "God On The Cross." We're trying to illuminate in a deeper way what the cross means. What does it accomplish? How does it work? Today we want to look at the cross—the death of Jesus—as a sacrificial atonement. Last week we talked about atonement as the process by which God puts us back in a right

relationship. We called it “at-one-ment.” The cross is a sacrifice that puts us back in a right relationship, “at one” with God.

To understand the death of Jesus as a sacrifice, we have to get in a totally foreign frame of mind. This understanding of the cross grew out of the sacrificial culture of Judaism in the Old Testament. We don’t do animal sacrifices any more. We don’t like blood. Unless you’re a hunter, you never kill animals for food. We like animals. We think animals have rights!

We don’t even really like the idea of sacrifice—giving something up to get something better. Just give us the better now! We like it quick and easy. Don’t talk to us about time and energy and pain and discipline to achieve some long-term goal. Just let me cash in my lottery ticket today.

To understand the meaning of the cross, just put all that modern stuff aside, and let’s go back in time, to the time of the Old Testament, when God required animal and grain sacrifices to atone for sin. Several ideas are important here. First of all, sin costs something. Sin breaks fellowship with God. Sin offends the holiness of God. Something has to be done to make it right.

Second, God supplies the remedy for sin. God gives commands about what to do. Make sacrifices. Kill these certain animals. Do this with their blood. Burn the flesh. Offer the grain. Simple stuff. It just sounds weird to us.

But it actually made great sense at the time. The sacrifices God commanded set the Hebrew people apart from the pagans tribes all around them. Those guys were sacrificing their children and doing fertility rituals with temple prostitutes. God wanted none of that! The sacrifices God wanted were an expression of the covenant relationship between God and the people. It kept them together. It paid for sin. It was grace.

And these sacrifices were a preparation for a greater sacrifice that was coming when God would give his only Son.

So fast forward to the New Testament. The Book of Hebrews talks a great deal about Jesus as sacrifice. Like the ancient Hebrews had a priest who would offer the sacrifices to God, Jesus became the great high priest for all humankind for all time. But look! Jesus is not only the priest; he is also the offering. Jesus makes the sacrifice of going to Jerusalem to confront his enemies; he is sacrificed by his enemies on the cross; then he becomes the sacrifice that pays for the sins of the world.

This is a better sacrifice than the animals in the Old Covenant. Jesus is the Son of God, not a goat. Jesus is perfect, not like the priests of old, who were sinners like everyone else. The old sacrifices had to be offered over and over again, daily in the Temple. But the sacrifice of Jesus was “once and for all,” Hebrews says, one time, good for every sinner on the planet who ever has or ever will live.

So we don't have to feel guilty or insecure or anxious any more. In fact, we can live with confidence in the grace of God and assurance that Jesus has paid the price for our sins. Hebrews says, “*We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever.*”² And “*Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.*”³

That is encouraging news!

There is one other image out of the old sacrificial culture that relates to Jesus. In Leviticus 16, God commands Aaron, the first high priest and brother of Moses, to offer two goats. One was to be sacrificed in the usual way to atone for sin. But the other goat was destined for the wilderness. Aaron was to lay his hands on the head of the goat and confess all the sins of Israel. Then the goat, carrying all the sins of

Israel, would be taken out into the desert and set free. So not only were the sins paid for, they were symbolically taken away and released.

The old English translations call this second goat the “scapegoat.” We still know about scapegoats, don’t we? A scapegoat is an innocent person who is blamed for the wrongs of others. We see it all the time: in crime, in politics, in all kinds of human interactions.

Jesus is never specifically referred to as a scapegoat in Scripture, but he functions as a scapegoat on the cross. Not only does he pay for our sins through his sacrifice; he takes our sin upon himself. Because he loves us so much, he takes himself out into the wilderness of pain and humiliation, and by his grace we are set free.

One other difference between the Old Testament sacrifices and the cross of Christ. The animals were powerless. They couldn’t help what happened to them. They were weak and helpless before their killers.

But don’t ever look on the cross of Calvary as a sign of weakness. It is a remarkable sign of power. Jesus was not helpless. He chose the cross because he loves us. God got on the cross in his Son’s body to demonstrate how far God would go to put us back right. The cross is not a reaction to evil, like God got painted into a corner and had to figure a way out. No, the cross is God acting consistently with God’s nature as it had been from the beginning—to offer God’s self sacrificially and graciously to his covenant people. As priest and author Fleming Rutledge put it, “True power is best seen in a life willingly offered as sacrifice for the sake of others.”⁴ On the cross God displayed God’s power by transforming a sign of horror and humiliation and cruelty into the ultimate sign of grace and love and atonement—once and for all.

In that sacrifice, we get two blessings: our sin problem is remedied, and we see the way we are supposed to live.

On December 7, 1988, the worst earthquake in the history of Soviet Armenia claimed 55,000 lives. Susanna Petroysan had gone with her

daughter to the fifth floor apartment of her sister-in-law about 11:30 in the morning to try on a dress. At 11:41 a.m., the quake struck, leveling the nine-floor apartment building. Susanna found herself buried deep in the rubble with a concrete slab 18 inches above her body. But there was air, and her four-year-old Gayaney was next to her. She couldn't stand up, but she could move from side to side. When Gayaney got hungry, Susanna managed to find a jar of blackberry jam still intact, and she fed her daughter. But that only lasted two days. Then her daughter began to complain, "Mommy, I'm thirsty. Give me something to drink." Susanna had nothing to give.

Because of the dark, Susanna lost track of time. Because of the cold, she lost feeling in her feet and legs. She began to lose hope. "I was just waiting to die," she said. Off and on she would sleep fitfully, but not for long, and usually awakened by her daughter crying, "Mommy, I'm so thirsty."

At some point in that eternal night, Susanna had an idea. She remembered a television program about an explorer in the Arctic who was dying of thirst. His comrade slashed open his hand and gave his friend his blood.

She said, "I had no water, no fruit juice, no liquids. It was then I remembered I had my own blood."

Her groping finger, numb from the cold, found a piece of shattered glass. She sliced open her left index finger and give it to her daughter to suck.

A few drops of blood weren't enough. "Please, Mommy, some more. Cut another finger." Susanna has no idea how many times she cut herself. She only knows that if she hadn't, Gayaney would have died. Her blood was her daughter's only hope.

The blood of Jesus Christ is our only hope, not in a literal sense, but in the sense that the blood is a symbol of the life to be found in Christ. The blood of Jesus is our only hope for life, salvation, and atonement. It is a real and true hope.

On the eighth day of being buried alive, rescuers broke through the concrete slab, and Susanna and Gayaney were reunited with her husband and son who had been desperately trying to find them. In the hospital, being treated for her injuries and exposure, the tests showed that Susanna was two months pregnant.⁵

How can we get our mind around the magnitude of sacrifice that some people are willing to make? At best those are only temporary. But God made a sacrifice that is effective not for one or two, but for all people, you and me included, and for all time. How can we respond to that? What do we do?

There's not much we can do. It's already been done. The sacrifice is complete. Often we talk about steps you can take or things you can do to respond to what God has done. Not today. Today I just want you to let the mystery wash over you. Try to absorb the magnitude of God's love and grace. Feel the gratitude and humility well up inside of you. Be amazed! Give thanks! Worship! Just worship!

In the Book of Revelation, the saints gather around the throne of God, and in the midst of the elders there is a Lamb who was slaughtered. It's Jesus. John describes the scene:

Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels surrounding the throne and the living creatures and the elders; they numbered myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, singing with full voice,

“Worthy is the Lamb that was slaughtered to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!”

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them, singing,

“To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever!”

And the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the elders fell down and worshiped.⁶

What happened on the cross changed the world. It changed me. It changed most of us. It helps to understand it historically and theologically, and we are going to continue to do that until Easter and beyond. But in the end, it is too much. It is too wonderful. We just have to fall on our knees before the God who lives and reigns and say, "Honor and glory and blessing and thanks be to our God forever and ever!" Amen!

¹ Adapted from Tim Gaynor, "Tucson remembers shooting victim who died shielding his wife," Reuters (1-16-11).

² Hebrews 6:19-20.

³ Hebrews 10:19-22.

⁴ Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 2015), 274.

⁵ Max Lucado, "Bold Love." <http://www.upwords.com>.

<http://www.prechit teachit.org/articles/detail/a-mother-who-gave-her-blood-for-her-daughter/>, <http://sterlingwords.blogspot.com/2012/05/mom.html>.

⁶ Revelation 5:11-14.