

the Scapegoat

For as high as the heavens are
above the earth,
So great is His lovingkindness
toward those who fear Him.
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our
transgressions from us.

Psalm 103:11-12

THIS IS MY YEAR FOR READING THROUGH THE BIBLE. Traditionally I have alternated between this and a more topical, or at least less-structured study, for my early morning time with the Lord. Every other year I read through God's word, usually in chronological order, for this is the best way to grasp the cohesive narrative of Scripture, how the Spirit-breathed chapters flow in a symphony of crescendoing truth from "In the beginning God..." (Genesis 1:1) all the way to "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen." (Revelation 22:21).

A favorite part of the journey is through Genesis and the first half of Exodus, for it is a story rich in personality, conflict, love, deceit, treachery, and grace. Hollywood could not improve the plot. It is a riveting narrative that holds the reader from each chapter to the next. But, I confess, once God hands down the Ten Commandments, and page after page goes into excruciating detail about His requirements for the sojourning Hebrews, it can be a bit of a tough slog.



Modern sensibilities are appalled by the bloodbath that is the step-by-step procedure God outlines for the ritual sacrifices to be offered to Him. Verse after verse, chapter after chapter detail how innocent beasts—bulls, sheep, goats, even birds—are to be slaugh-

tered and their blood spilled upon the altar to atone for sins both corporate and personal.

The Lord God, Yahweh, is painfully specific in His commands for each sacrifice, such as these for the prescribed sin offering:

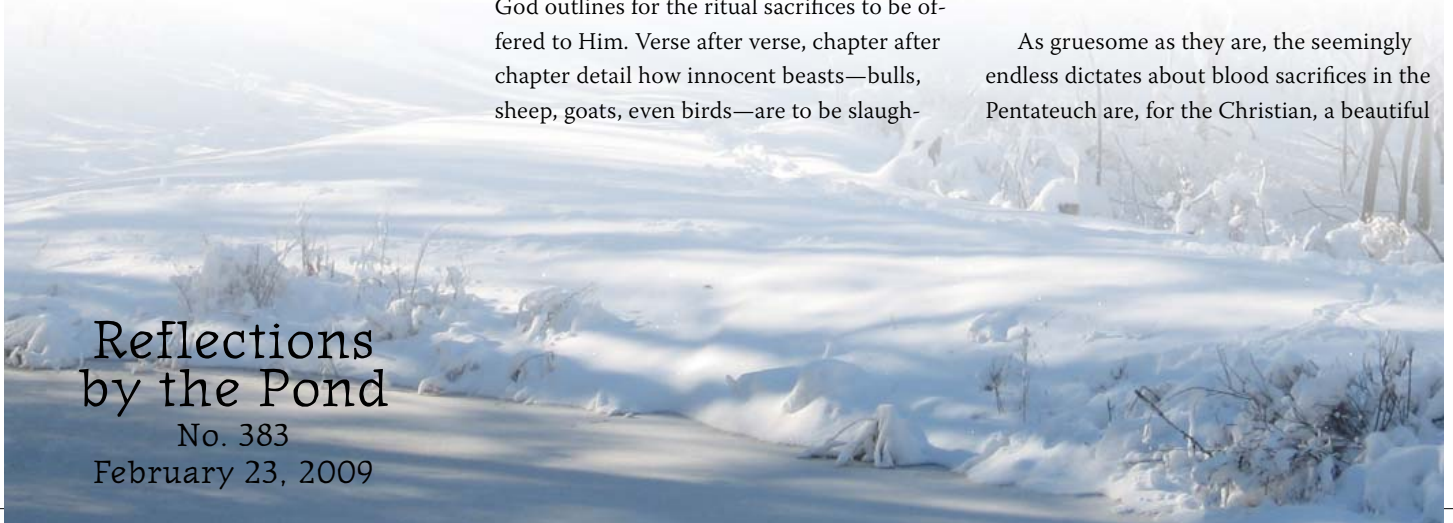
"Then the anointed priest is to take some of the blood of the bull and bring it to the tent of meeting, and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle some of the blood seven times before the Lord, in front of the veil of the sanctuary. The priest shall also put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense which is before the Lord in the tent of meeting; and all the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering which is at the doorway of the tent of meeting. He shall remove from it all the fat of the bull of the sin offering: the fat that covers the entrails, and all the fat which is on the entrails, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, which is on the loins, and the lobe of the liver, which he shall remove with the kidneys (just as it is removed from the ox of the sacrifice of peace offerings), and the priest is to offer them up in smoke on the altar of burnt offering. But the hide of the bull and all its flesh with its head and its legs and its entrails and its refuse, that is, all *the rest* of the bull, he is to bring out to a clean place outside the camp where the ashes are poured out, and burn it on wood with fire; where the ashes are poured out it shall be burned."

Leviticus 4:5-12

As gruesome as they are, the seemingly endless dictates about blood sacrifices in the Pentateuch are, for the Christian, a beautiful

Reflections
by the Pond

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O Love, Thou bottomless
abyss,
My sins are swallowed up
in Thee!
Covered is my
unrighteousness,
Nor spot of guilt remains
on me,
While Jesus' blood, through
earth and skies,
Mercy, free, boundless
mercy, cries.

Johann Andreas Rothe

picture of two elements of vital importance to our faith. Every drop of blood spilled upon an altar in the Old Testament represents the blood Jesus Christ shed on the cross for our salvation. And the sheer, monotonous repetition of the slaughter under the law demonstrates how different life is under His once-for-all sacrifice of grace.

This morning, reading in Leviticus, I came upon a passage that is seldom visited by modern believers.

"He shall take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the doorway of the tent of meeting. Aaron shall cast lots for the two goats, one lot for the Lord and the other lot for the scapegoat. Then Aaron shall offer the goat on which the lot for the Lord fell, and make it a sin offering. But the goat on which the lot for the scapegoat fell shall be presented alive before the Lord, to make atonement upon it, to send it into the wilderness as the scapegoat."

Leviticus 16:7-10

Ah, here is a beautiful, if earthy picture of the defining essence of Christ's ministry.

John the Baptist referred to Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Not just the *sins*, plural, the itemized transgressions of the individual, but sin itself. The burden of sin. The penalty of sin. The guilt of sin. For those who believe, Jesus' death upon the cross broke the power of the sin nature that has been a part of humanity since Adam and Eve listened to the lies of the serpent. Jesus paid the price, once and for all time, for that sin. He bore it upon Himself, thus removing the necessity of repeated blood sacrifices upon an earthly altar.

"Then he shall slaughter the goat of the sin offering which is for the people, and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, and sprinkle it on the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat."

Leviticus 16:15

The first goat is the picture of Jesus on the cross, paying the ultimate price for our sin. But it is the *second* goat, the "scapegoat," that so caught my attention this morning.

"When he finishes atoning for the holy place and the tent of meeting and the altar, he shall offer the live goat. Then Aaron

shall lay both of his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the sons of Israel and all their transgressions in regard to all their sins; and he shall lay them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man who stands in readiness. The goat shall bear on itself all their iniquities to a solitary land; and he shall release the goat in the wilderness."

Leviticus 16:20-22

What grace! John the Baptist said that Jesus "*takes away* the sin of the world." Jesus—not a goat, but the spotless Lamb—does not just remove our sin and take it upon Himself, but He takes it *away* from us. Far away. To the wilderness. To the moon. To another galaxy. So far away it is "as far as the east is from the west."



Far too often the believer claims the forgiveness of our gracious Lord, but keeps that forgiven sin close by, thinking that remembrance will be a deterrence. We think that if we keep recalling the transgression it will produce in us an aversion, a disgust for the wrong committed. But that stratagem rarely produces the desired result.

Satan loves to exploit our memories. He is wily, and an opportunist. One of the more effective tools in his kit is the ability to use the remembrance of a sin to *reproduce* the same sin in our lives. And thus the cycle—the vicious, frustrating, demeaning cycle—continues.

The Lord wants us to remember, instead, what *He* does with confessed and forgiven sin—and for us to do the same. Confess it. Accept His forgiveness. Then send that memory of sin to the desert. Consign it to a withering, parched death stumbling about in the wilderness. See it fall to the scorched ground and die.

See that sin lying there dead in the sand. Dead. Forgotten. Gone.

