

Sins, Goats, and Lambs

Acts 10:34a, 37-43
Psalm 118
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-9

What did one lamb say to the other lamb? “After ewe.” Since that is the only lamb joke I know, I guess I’ll continue with my sermon on “Sin, Goats and Lambs.”

The sacrifices of goats and lambs held a very special place in ancient Judaism. These sacrifices were ways to experience God’s forgiveness and remember His mercy. Two of the most important Jewish holy days, the Day of Atonement (a.k.a. Yom Kippur) and Passover, included animal sacrifices. These animal sacrifices can teach us some very beautiful things about the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and about His Divine Mercy, which we celebrate today.

One of the most important aspects to the celebration of the Day of Atonement had to do with goats. In the Book of Leviticus, the Israelites were instructed to cast lots over two goats.

Taking the two male goats and setting them before the LORD at the entrance of the meeting tent, he shall cast lots to determine which one is for the LORD and which for Azazel. The goat that is determined by lot for the LORD, Aaron shall bring in and offer up as a sin offering. But the goat determined by lot for Azazel he shall set alive before the LORD, so that with it he may make atonement by sending it off to Azazel in the desert.

-Leviticus 16:7-10

The first goat, the one designated “for the LORD,” was sacrificed and its blood was sprinkled in several places throughout the Temple in atonement for the people’s sins. The second goat, referred to as the “Azazel,” or “scapegoat,” was prayed over by the high priest.

When he has completed the atonement rite for the sanctuary, the meeting tent and the altar, Aaron shall bring forward the live goat. Laying both hands on its head, he shall confess over it all the sinful faults and transgressions of the Israelites, and so put them on the goat's head. He shall then have it led into the desert by an attendant. Since the goat is to carry off their iniquities to an isolated region, it must be sent away into the desert.

-Leviticus 16:20-22

As Christians, we understand these two goats to be a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ. The first goat shed its blood as an offering for the sins of others, while the second goat, though innocent, took the sins of the guilty upon itself as the scapegoat. Similarly, Jesus Christ took the sins of the world upon Himself and offered His Blood for the forgiveness of our sins. This is made very clear in the letter to the Hebrews, which says—

[Christ] has appeared at the end of the ages to take away sin by his sacrifice. For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God.

-Hebrews 9:26b, 13-14

Another really important Jewish holy day that included animal sacrifices was Passover. The Passover sacrifice was a male lamb, one year old and perfect, without any blemish. Each family or group of families would bring one lamb to the court of the Temple at three o'clock on the eve of the Passover, or at 2pm if the Passover fell on a Friday, to be sacrificed. One of the priests participating in the sacrifice would catch in a cup the blood from the lamb and it would then be sprinkled upon the altar of the Temple. The lamb would then be properly prepared by the family to be eaten as part of the Passover celebration. At the time of Jesus, there would have been hundreds of thousands of lambs that would have been sacrificed each year in Jerusalem in preparation for the Passover.

Some Scripture Scholars have suggested that at the very hours of Jesus' crucifixion and death, Jerusalem would have been filled with the bleating of the hundreds of thousands of lambs being sacrificed. Whether this is true or not really isn't important. What *is* important is that the early Christians clearly understood the significance of Jesus' death happening at the time of the Jewish Passover. They understood Jesus Christ to be the new and eternal Paschal Lamb who was slain for the forgiveness of our sins.

In addition to the numerous Old Testament prophecies about the future Messiah being like a lamb, the New Testament is full of references to Christ being the final Paschal Lamb.¹ In the Gospel of John, when John the Baptist saw Jesus coming, he proclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, he explained that, "Our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7b). Peter also understood Jesus to be the perfect paschal sacrifice when he wrote, "You were ransomed from your futile conduct... not with perishable things like silver or gold but with the precious blood of Christ as of a spotless unblemished lamb" (1 Peter 1:18-19). The book of Revelation continues this theme by using the image of the Lamb for Jesus Christ.²

Our celebration of God's Divine Mercy today is a celebration of God's *elaborate* mercy! Beginning thousands of years ago, God taught His people about mercy through imperfect goats and lambs. Then, in the fullness of time, God taught us about *perfect* mercy through the eternal Scapegoat and the perfect and eternal Paschal Lamb, Jesus Christ. The joy of our celebration today is that there is no longer a need for us to offer endless sacrifices of sacrificed animals. Instead, Jesus instituted the perfect memorial of His one, eternal sacrifice on the cross—the Eucharist.

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISE:

- ✚ Read Hebrews 9:24-28. What feelings get stirred up in your heart as you read these words about Christ's sacrifice? Share those feelings with Him.

¹ See Genesis 22:8 and Isaiah 53:7 for two of the most popular references.

² See Revelation 5:6, 8, 12-13; 6:1, 16; 7:9-10, 14, 17; 12:11, 13:8; 14:1, 4, 10; 5:13; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:9; 21:14, 22-23; and 22:3