



Gospel / Life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 13: The Sin Offering as a Pattern for Christian Life (2)

Recap...

In last week's consideration of the sin offering as a pattern for Christian life, we gave consideration to the matters of personal confession of our own sinfulness and personal confession by faith of God's saving work in Christ. Confessing our sins and believing in Christ for us is much like the Israelite offerer's taking the lamb, placing his hand on its head and cutting the animal's throat.

Confessing sins and receiving forgiveness go together very closely. It is not that confessing sins is the prelude or the condition of receiving forgiveness. In fact, we really only confess our sins when we see how great is the forgiveness that is promised to us in Jesus Christ. Apart from forgiveness we could never really face our sins. The only confessed sins are forgiven ones: we can only acknowledge how terrible our sins are and what judgment they deserve when we are sure that God our Father is gracious to forgive us completely because our sins have been fully borne by Christ, and the judgment due them has been fully worked out on the cross. This is what the risen Lord Jesus makes clear to us when he brings the gospel home to us.

Making intercession for sinners

As we have seen previously, the average Israelite came with the sin offering maybe three or four times a year. These were costly sacrifices, and could not be offered every day or week. Between these occasions, the people of Israel could be sure of the forgiveness of God because on their behalf, the priests were offering sacrifices every day. Generally these were burnt offerings, but they also included sin offerings.

The priestly ministry also involved union and identification with the people, and the bearing of their sins, and this was expressed symbolically in the robes that the high priest was to wear. Exodus 28 gives instructions for these robes: they were to include a breastpiece, an *ephod*, a robe, a tunic, a turban and a sash (Ex. 28:4) made out of gold, and blue, purple and scarlet woollen yarn, and fine linen. All of these materials and colours indicated the holiness of the LORD in various ways.

The ephod was like an apron or pinafore, which covered most of the robes underneath. The two halves of the ephod were joined at the shoulders by two large buttons of onyx stones set in gold. Each stone had six of the names of the twelve tribes of Israel carved into them. They were to be a memorial before the LORD: when the priests stood before the LORD, they presented not only themselves, but also the whole nation, and He would remember them. (See Ex. 28:6-13.)

The breastpiece was a square garment worn on top of the ephod. There were four rows of precious stones on the breastpiece, three different stones in each row. Each

stone had engraved in it one of the names of each of the twelve tribes of Israel. (See Ex. 28:15-30). Again this was so that Israel would be there as a continuing memorial before the Lord (28:29). In particular, the priest wore this garment when he was seeking the Lord's will on a matter: he was not to seek his own benefit, but rather to seek the blessing and will of God for the whole people.

The turban had a large gold disc in the front of it, inscribed with "Holy to the LORD". When the high priest wore this garment, he would "bear the guilt involved in the sacred gifts that the Israelites consecrate" and by the wearing of the turban, those gifts then were accepted by the LORD. (See Ex. 28:31-38.)

Being clad in these garments, the priests were symbolically shown to be spiritually representative of the people. The ministry of the priests was not personally oriented, but always had in mind the whole of the people of Israel. What they did, they did on Israel's behalf and for Israel's benefit. They, by being given over to the worship of God as their prime duty, were doing for Israel what Israel could not do themselves.

This whole ministry of the priests on behalf of the people was an *intercessory* ministry. The word *intercession* has come to mean basically *prayer*, but it is a word with richer and fuller connotations, even as it includes prayer. Intercession and mediation are in close connection. A mediator is one who stands as the link between two parties: he represents the interests of the parties to each other. The priests were mediators in that they stood before the LORD on behalf of the people, and they stood before the people on behalf of the LORD. The *intercessory* nature of this mediation was that, in representing us to the LORD, the priests were *completely identified with us*. The Hebrew word for intercession in Isaiah 53:12, "For he bore the sins of many and made intercession for sinners", has the idea of coming alongside or underneath a person and taking up the weight of the load that he or she is carrying. The priest is a mediator not at a distance, but very close: he identifies himself so closely with the parties that his personal interests diminish and all that matters are the interests of the parties he represents.

The priesthood in the Old Testament was only a shadow that was given to prepare us for the coming of Jesus Christ who is the fulfilment of all that was indicated by it. (This is the message of Hebrews, especially 4:14-9:18.) The passage above in Isaiah 53 stands as a summary statement at the end of this most moving of songs in description of the suffering servant of God, a prophecy fulfilled in the atoning, sacrificial death of Jesus Christ. The servant suffers greatly, receiving rejection from humanity, and from the hand of God deep affliction and punishment. Looking at him, the human race may have thought him to be suffering for his own sins, but no!:

Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way,
and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all...

...he poured out his life unto death and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sins of many and made intercession for the transgressors. (Isa. 53:4-6, 12b)

Jesus acted as priest for us, identifying himself with us so completely that our sins became his, our situation became his. When he made intercession at the cross, he confessed and owned our sins before the Father, he owned and loved the Father's holiness, he bore the judgment of our sins. He did so with us, beside us, underneath us, carrying the awful, crushing, piercing weight that was destroying us.

Implications for us who share the royal priesthood in Jesus Christ

Throughout the New Testament, it is made clear that the church, those who have been claimed by Jesus Christ, reconciled to the Father, cleansed through faith in Jesus' blood, and sanctified by the gift of the Holy Spirit, now are a royal priesthood in the world. That is, we have come to have a share under and in the great high priestly ministry of the risen Lord Jesus. Primarily this priesthood is expressed in the proclamation of the gospel to the ends of the earth, to all nations, tribes and tongues. We will look more at this later in our studies when we consider the burnt offering.

For now however, it will be good for us to consider what it means for us to be an *intercessory* community of people. By calling us a royal priesthood, the writers of the New Testament force us to consider our relationship to those around us. We stand in a mediatorial way between them and God. In particular, as priests to God for the world in which we live, we represent them in worship before God our Father. As with Israel, we have a worship to offer God on their behalf when they are not able to worship Him. As they are strangers and aliens from the kingdom through unbelief, they are not able to offer even the most basic worship. As representatives of God to them, we must of course call them to repentance and faith; but as their representatives towards God, we must stand under their situation and do what we can for them.

This means that we can adore God for them when they do not adore; we can thank God for His many gifts to them when they do not thank Him; we can make prayers for them for their needs and difficulties; and we can confess their sins to God when they cannot confess them. We pray and worship for them *as though we were them-as-Christians*. Our faith in God is regarded by Him on their behalf, and He acts for them on the basis of our trust in His goodness and grace. Like the men who brought the paralysed man to Jesus, whose faith Jesus saw and honoured (Luke 5:20), so through our faith blessing comes to those who cannot move themselves towards God.

In James 5:13-16 there is instruction about prayer for healing, which is connected with forgiveness of sins. Each of us is urged to pray for our situation. In sickness though, the elders are to be called for, and through the prayer of faith the sick person will be made well. It is not clear whether this faith is the faith of the person who is ill, the elders or both. More, James adds that if there is sin somehow at work in this situation of illness, then in and by this prayer of faith, forgiveness breaks through.

This has a remarkable effect on our relationship with those for whom we intercede. Such a view of our prayer for them sees us primarily as alongside them doing for them what they cannot do, rather than in an adversarial position towards them, critical of what they do not do.

Praying comes then from deep identification, and there can be no deep identification without deep love. Such love is the same love, poured out upon us by the Spirit of God, as moved Christ to identify himself with us in the cross. Paul prays in this deep identification in Romans 9:1-3, where he prays for his fellow Israelites who had to that point rejected Jesus their Messiah. He says:

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brother, those of my own race, the people of Israel.

Let us make prayer for ourselves, that we be filled with the fullness of the love of Christ, the love of the Father, and so be brought to full love for those among whom He has placed us.