

Aim of lesson

To increase our understanding of Jesus' sacrifice by contrast with those required by the law given through Moses, to show that sacrifices are still required today and to understand how close to God the new covenant has brought us.

Bible background

Leviticus 4; Hebrews 10

Preparation required

The concepts in this lesson are hard to grasp, even for adults. It is important, however, to help the young people to come to understand the relevance to them of the sacrifice of Christ. As Galatians 3:24-25 points out, the law of Moses is a 'schoolmaster' or 'was put in charge' to bring us to Christ. One virtue in a study of the law is to bring us closer to Christ, to help us to understand what he has done for us and to emphasise where we stand now in relation to God.

You should look carefully through the students', and these, notes, and think how much of it your group will be able to understand, and how best to communicate with them.

Since there is a lot of material, you will also need to decide whether to spend one week or two thinking about it. Whatever you do, you must explain how relevant, and important, this is to us.

Suggested outline of lesson

Introduction

Since this is a rather abstract subject it may be difficult to get the young people 'into' it, and the introduction is important. Explain what the lesson is about, and how you intend to approach the subject.

Start by asking the class if they can think of things in the Old Testament that looked forward to the sacrifice of Christ. They should be able to think of

- The animal skin provided in the garden of Eden
- The passover lamb
- The other sacrifices

Don't be surprised, or express disappointment, if they stare at you blankly. How would you have responded when you were their age? Gently tell them about these things.

Ask them if they can think of any references in the New Testament linking Jesus and the law of Moses, listing them in the students' notes. They may think of these (though they probably won't know where they come from, and you may be advised to take a concordance to help them to look up passages they have thought of):

- John 1:29
- 1 Corinthians 5:7
- 1 Peter 1:18-19

The Passover

These references demonstrate that Jesus was akin to the Passover lamb whose blood, daubed around the door-frame of the Israelites' houses, spared their lives. The Passover protected the partakers from death and signalled their release from the bondage of Egypt and was the first event in their new life together as God's people. It preceded the giving and learning of God's law. In fact the passover lamb was not a sin offering - it was a statement of obedience and of trust in God's salvation.

Sacrifices under the law

The offerings for unintentional sin were as follows:

- for the priest: a young bull - Leviticus 4:1-12
- for the whole Israelite community: a young bull - Leviticus 4:13-21
- for a leader or prince: a male goat - Leviticus 4:22-26
- for an ordinary member of the community: a female goat or lamb - Leviticus 4:27-31

It may help to imagine the feelings of an ordinary, devout Israelite bringing the best of his flock, perhaps many times a year, to the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, then raising his hand to slay it, without seeing any apparent benefit from these sacrifices made continually, and without the honour of a close relationship with God. (The ark and the covering glory of God would have been invisible under its coverings in the Most Holy Place).

These were sacrifices made for unintentional sin. Note that there were no sacrifices for murder, adultery, premeditated theft, in fact for any sin that was a conscious rebellion against God. For these things, even when they involved only something as apparently trivial as picking up sticks on the Sabbath day, there was only the death penalty - being excluded from the nation was effectively the same thing. Look at Numbers 15:27-36.

It is also true that although the law provided a way of forgiveness for sins, it did nothing about our human nature. 'The law made nothing perfect' (Hebrews 7:19).

The Day of Atonement

The closest that the people came to being completely reconciled to God was on the Day of Atonement, when all the sins of all the people were removed (Leviticus 16:30, 34). On this occasion the sacrifices offered were a bull for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering, then one of two goats as a further sin offering (Leviticus 16:3, 9). The other goat was the 'scapegoat' who carried, symbolically, the sins of the people into the wilderness and might therefore have been identified with Christ. Here again there is a difference. The goat did not die, and just as it lived on in the wilderness, so did their sins. There they waited until one would come who would suffer 'outside the camp', to forgive not only the sins of those who would come after him, but finally to take away the guilt of those who had gone before. (Hebrews 9:15)

If the young people are able to absorb this level of detail, talk through what the High Priest had to do on the Day of Atonement.

In the letter to the Hebrews the writer states clearly that the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sin (see Hebrews 9:12-13; 10:3-4, 11).

A Perfect Sacrifice

What was required was a different sort of sacrifice, one that had the following features:

- it was a personal self-sacrifice, in the form of a sinless, perfect man
- it was a death, or a spilling of blood
- these things were done by a 'High Priest' - someone who was able to help all those whom he represented

Because of these things the sacrifice of Jesus was sufficient to deal with sin once and for all, to remove the curse of death from over us.

What then can we learn from the law of Moses?

In the first place the ordinary Israelites' offerings represented a real sacrifice - the animals offered were young and in perfect condition, therefore, valuable. The prophet Malachi later rebuked the people for offering to God animals that were old or sick, therefore, worthless (Malachi 1:7-8).

Secondly, the person offering the sacrifice had to identify himself with the animal offered by first laying his hands upon it and then killing it with his own hand (Leviticus 1:4-6).

Since Christ himself was a sacrifice the other aspect of our sacrifice is identification with him. Ask the class for their ideas on this subject. The first area of identification is a general one and involves sharing in Christ's sufferings (see Philippians 3:10) through, eventually, Christ living in us. The other specific action of identification is through baptism where we identify particularly with his death and resurrection (Romans 6:1-10).

Christ - representative not substitute

It is worth making this point clear, without labouring it. Jesus did not die instead of us, so that the price of our sins is paid in advance. What happened in his death was that he made it possible for us, by identifying ourselves with him, to be saved.

Our relationship with God

The arrangements under the old covenant can help us to understand better what Jesus accomplished for us under the new. For the most part the ordinary Israelite's relationship with God under the first covenant was remote. Although as we have seen, he killed his own sacrifice and laid his hands on it, he then handed it over to the priests at the entrance to the tent of meeting. The priests then offered it to God on his behalf inside the courtyard where the ordinary Israelite was not permitted to go.

By contrast, the emphasis under the new covenant is the believer's closeness to God. Read Hebrews 10:19-22 with the class and then look at the diagram of the tent of meeting in the students' notes.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews tells us that we have come into the very presence of God in the most Holy Place, something only the High Priest was permitted to do once a year under the first covenant. The gateway in the Outer Court was furthest from God's presence over the ark.

Ask the class for their thoughts on how someone might move from the entrance to the Most Holy Place. These are the things that needed to be done:

- a sacrifice had to be offered on the altar for the believer's sins - this Jesus has made for us, a perfect sacrifice that does not have to be continually offered
- being washed with water in the laver, which corresponds to baptism of the believer in Jesus and the effectiveness of his sacrifice
- the Holy Place was entered, with the altar of incense, representing a close relationship with God through prayer
- entry into God's presence itself because Jesus' sacrifice has destroyed once and for all the barrier between God and his people.

Relevance to our lives

The requirements under the law of Moses sometimes seem remote and irrelevant these days and the Old Testament is often criticised by non-Christians. It is good to understand how it teaches us how good God is in providing his Son for us.

Prayer

Ask the young people to write their own prayer thanking God for allowing Jesus to die for us.

Other suggestions for activities

- Christ's followers are still asked to make sacrifices of various kinds - 'living sacrifices' as they are termed in Romans 12. Lesson 22 in Part 1 of The Way of Life deals specifically with the practical aspect of self-sacrifice. If the young people have not done this exercise they could read Romans 12:1-20 and list the aspects of self-sacrifice mentioned.
- Other passages, like Hebrews 13:15-16 and Psalm 50:14-15,23 refer to
 - » a sacrifice of praise
 - » a sacrifice of sharing with others
 - » a sacrifice of giving thanks, praise and obedience
- The Psalmist (Psalm 50:7-13) makes the important point that the only thing which is truly ours to give to God is our sincerely expressed thanks - in other cases we are only giving back to God the things he has given to us.