

Propitiation and the Red Heifer

By Ron Bailey

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“For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” [Heb 9:13,14]

Introduction

This is an extract from some posts made by Ron on www.sermonindex.net about a conversation he was having with someone else in another forum. Follow so far? Good, here is how Ron introduces the subject:

In my conversations on another forum I was talking to a gentle Calvinist who genuinely wanted to know what I thought. His question was 'if God has been propitiated, and that propitiation was for the 'whole world', in its fullest sense, how can God remain angry with the sinner whose sins have already received atonement? Good question, I thought.

I have prayed a little and thought a little, and this was my reply. There will be some nuances you will miss because you haven't seen the rest of the conversation, but I think this will stand on its own feet so here we go...

The Red Heifer

The red heifer [Num 19 & Heb 9:13] was a unique application of the Sin Offering found in Lev 4 & 6. In the sin offering, the sinner identified himself with an animal by laying his hands on its head, after which the sinner slaughtered the animal. The slaughtered animal was entrusted to the priest who divided it up into parts. The blood was sprinkled on the altar, the inwards were set apart for sacrifice, the remainder was burned *outside the camp*. Hebrews sees Christ's death as a permanent fulfilling of this sacrifice. The sacrifice was immediate, the atonement was immediate, the forgiveness was immediate. [Lev 4:26, 31, 35]

But God made special provision in the sacrifice for those times when there was need but the apparatus of the sacrifice was not available. I presume this is why we have this sacrifice in Numbers, rather than in Leviticus. The scenario is everything packed up and ready to go and a sudden need for a sin offering. What do you do? You can't erect the tabernacle and rekindle the altar fire. The answer was a pre-fabricated sacrifice known as the red heifer. I am not being frivolous when I say it was an instant-coffee kind of a sacrifice.

This is how it worked. At an earlier time a sin-offering had been sacrificed. Its blood sprinkled before the tabernacle. [Num 19:4] As the heifer was being burned, some extra ingredients were added to the flame. Finally someone would gather up the ashes of the red heifer and preserve them safe, outside the camp. This sacrifice was then 'on hold' until it was needed. When someone (seems most likely that priests were in mind) sinned the second part of the process kicked in.

The ashes of the heifer were placed in a receptacle and running water was added. [the Hebrew idiom for this in Nu 19:17 is 'living water'.] The addition of the living water reconstituted the sacrifice. It was ready for instant use. The liquid of this reconstituted sacrifice, being the equivalent of the blood that was originally sprinkled outside the tabernacle, was then sprinkled on the 'sinner'. The offering is now effectual.

My understanding is that this is the pattern of Christ's sacrifice. The sacrifice is made, God is propitiated, but the blood must be sprinkled on the individual for the atonement (sin-covering) to become effectual. In the case of the red heifer we might have a time interval of several months in between the sacrifice made, God propitiated and the sinner receiving his cleansing. We can also envisage the scenario in which a sinner chose not to avail himself of the provision that was available for him. So with Christ, the sacrifice is made, God is propitiated but the sinner cannot come into the presence of God until he has been blood-sprinkled. Redemption was accomplished (I believe) for all, but is only applied to those who avail themselves of the provision.

It may be significant that the Hebrews reference is linked with that phrase 'through the eternal Spirit'. *"For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?"* [Heb 9:13,14] The effect of Christ's sacrifice was 'captured' 'in the Spirit'. It is not the letter or the objective facts that save, but the addition of the 'Living Water' (which John says is the Spirit). So the Spirit comes to 'reconstitute' (just a metaphor) what Christ accomplished and to apply it to me personally. As a result of the sprinkling I am joined to the place of the original sacrifice and what He did becomes mine.

One last comment. The word propitiation in the KJV translates two connected words. The word *hilasmos* is used in John's first letter

1 John 2:2 *And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.*

1 John 4:10 *Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

The second word, *hilasterion*, is more correctly the 'place of' propitiation.

Romans 3:25 *Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation **through faith in his blood**, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;*

Hebrews 9:5 *And over it the cherubims of glory shadowing the mercyseat ; of which we cannot now speak particularly.*

Note: mercyseat in Greek is hilasterion, the place of propitiation

God has provided the *hilasmos*, propitiatory sacrifice, that is done and can never be repeated or added to. But to avail ourselves of His great provision we must come to the *hilasterion*, place of propitiation (the cross), where *faith in his blood* will make all the benefits of that propitiation mine. Redemption is thus accomplished and applied, 'though the application may be hundreds of years after the accomplishing. And there is that remaining possibility that if we do not have 'faith in his blood' the redemption will never be applied.

A wider view

I know that many scholars would say that the NT propitiation is a translation of OT atonement and that we should not think in terms of God being placated. However, although the Septuagint gave a ready made vocabulary of Greek words in a Hebrew context, I prefer to retain some feeling of 'appeasement' but not in any crude pagan fashion.

Let's take a wider view. Propitiation is price paid to remove the offense; it is God-facing as many sacrifices were. "When I see the blood I will pass over you". The shed passover blood was daubed on the door posts and lintel for God's benefit. He needed to see the blood. I know we are talking in anthropomorphisms, but so does Exodus at this stage. All sacrifices have this element, they are God-facing. It is God who needs to be satisfied of their appropriateness. The Day of Atonement sacrifice was actually so that God could remain among His people. In this sense that was God-facing too. But when we think in terms of the people we are not counting sins in the Day of Atonement; this was for all their sins. It was a sacrifice which covered all eventualities, whether an individual's sins were many or few; it was for the sins of the whole of Israel. We do not have an individual mapping of single sins to the Day of Atonement sacrifice.

In a similar way we do not have a simple mapping of individual sins to the red heifer. Whatever sins the sinner committed he discovered that a sacrifice had already been made which covered them. BUT for him to benefit personally that all-including sacrifice had to be applied to his unique personal condition for him to benefit personally. AND if we think this through, that one sacrifice was effective for individual sins of many individuals. I am presuming that not all the ashes were used for one application. If the ashes, reconstituted with living water, are not applied he will die, even though God has been propitiated and his sins atoned for. Because the cleansing of his sin must be joined to the sacrifice and this is effected by the sprinkling of the living water. If he remains unsprinkled, for him, the sacrifice is in vain. In Christ too, there is no individual mapping of single sins to His sacrifice, but as we come we find they were all covered; He is the Propitiation. For the next sin, and this next, there is still only the once for all Propitiation.

The benefits of God having been propitiated are not applied until appropriated. Christ's sacrifice will be 'in vain' for many. I am linked to His propitiating work through the Living Water of the Spirit. From the moment of the link I receive all the benefits of God having been propitiated. The Propitiation for the whole world is in place, the blood is shed, the sacrifice accepted, all that is necessary now is that the individual receives the personal sprinkling that will link him to all that God has already accomplished.