

## WHY THE BLOODY SACRIFICIAL SYSTEM?

At first glance, there are many things about Christianity that seem impractical, or even eccentric. One example is the presence of graphic violence and gore, especially in the Old Testament. People wonder, “How could a loving God be involved in such tales?” To make matters worse, God was not only involved in this violence, he prescribed much of it. The bloody sacrificial system outlined in Leviticus contains detailed instructions for slaughtering animals, skinning them, and burning their flesh “as a pleasing aroma to the Lord.” Pleasing!?! Imagine if such practices were a part of church today. Clearly, the people of that era simply weren’t as civilized as we are now, right? Has God changed? Did he used to have more of a dark side?

Even though it seems harsh and unsophisticated to our generation, the toughest part to accept is the fact that God directed it. While people and cultures might have changed over the years, God hasn’t. There’s no doubt that these practices actually happened. So why would God approve them, much less institute them?

Drastic times require drastic measures. And while God created a world that wholly good and perfect, something went terribly wrong. Humans sinned. And that prompted God to take extreme action. Although he couldn’t compromise his holiness by accepting sin and evil, he could take steps to destroy sin and free us from its tyranny in the process. The practice of atoning sacrifice was implemented to deal with the transgressions of sinful people whom God longed to restore.

The concept of sacrifice was common in the ancient world. Stories of people offering sacrifices to their god(s) abound in virtually every culture of the ancient Near East. The Bible itself presents a long history of the practice going all the way back to Cain and Abel. So there was nothing strange about people giving gifts of food or animals to the gods they worshipped. But with the emergence of Israel as a nation, God himself established the sacrificial system in a new and profound way. Though God had saved Israel from slavery and given them a Law to live by, he knew that they would continue to sin against him. Because God is holy and just, he could not simply ignore their sin, but needed to judge it (we wouldn’t ask a jury to ignore murder!). Thus, when people disobeyed God, he permitted them to offer sacrifices as a temporary measure to address the penalty of their sin. Sacrifice wasn’t for his benefit, but theirs.

The primary purpose of a sacrifice was atonement, which means, “to cover.” Accordingly, the blood of a sacrifice covered the sin of a sinner such that God accepted the death of an animal as the penalty, rather than exacting it from the sinner. A sacrificial animal needed to be perfect, and the sinner laid hands upon the animal symbolizing a confession of sin and transfer of guilt. Repentance and the disposition of one’s heart were crucial. A sacrifice made with insincerity was detestable to God (Proverbs 21:27).

Sin is serious business. It caused the death of our direct relationship with God. And it causes many lesser forms of death every day. So it's only fitting that the solution provided by God bears such graphic overtones. The blood and carnage serve as metaphorical reminders of the spiritual and relational carnage that results from all sin. And it may seem extreme to us now, but it portrayed once and for all the gravity of sin in this world. Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the sacrificial system was that God included it in his Law to Israel in the first place. Despite his warnings and protection, God knew the Israelites would continue to disobey him. Thus the sacrificial system was not so much a demonstration of his judgment, but an act of his mercy.

Initially, God allowed the death of an innocent animal to take our place. But this required constant maintenance, with careful accounting for each sin and close attention to the requirements for each offense. As it turns out, this system of continual sacrifices wasn't permanent. It was a temporary measure put in place to foreshadow a once-and-for-all solution. And so it's no wonder that when John the Baptist, a Jewish prophet, first set his eyes on Jesus, he made a statement that no Jewish person would have missed. "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29 TNIV).