

THE NEED TO CONFESS

by Ray C. Stedman

In the book of Leviticus, the five great offerings specified there set forth for us so clearly and helpfully the basic needs of our humanity, needs which God has built into every one of us, and how these needs can be met -- the only way in which they can be met. We come to the fourth of these offerings this morning, the sin offering. Here we come face to face with a question which is evident everywhere in the world, which very few people ever seem to attempt to answer. The question is: Why does man fear and avoid God?

I do not think that I need to produce much evidence to convince you that it is a fact that everywhere man avoids, if he can, the person -- and even the thought -- of God. Have you ever noticed how difficult it is to interject into a conversation any reference to God? -- unless of course you do it in blasphemy, then you can get by without any trouble. But if you try to suggest something nice about God, then a stillness falls upon the group, a restlessness occurs. People do not want to talk about God.

Now, why is that? Why is this such a painful subject to so many? This past couple of days many of us attended the Creation Science Seminar here. We heard two outstanding and capable scientists speak about the tremendous scientific veracity of the Bible. It was a great time. I enjoyed it thoroughly and learned a lot. I had always thought that I was somewhat current on this subject, but I must confess that I learned a great deal I hadn't known before as Dr. Morris and Dr. Gish talked to us.

One of the things that impressed me most was the clear evidence which emerged in their lectures that many scientists scrupulously avoid attributing anything in nature to God. They will do almost anything to avoid having to say that God did something in the natural world. Isn't that strange?

In fact, as these men brought out, there are reputable scientists of good standing who have careful scientific minds but who will actually come to the point of inventing absurdities in order to avoid saying that God did something. They told us about one prominent scientist right here in the Bay Area who obviously has been impressed with the lack of evidence in the fossil record to support satisfactorily Darwin's theory of evolution. And so in order to explain the lack of transitional forms between the major kinds of animals he has actually proposed seriously that, for example, somewhere along the line a reptile laid an egg and a bird was hatched from it. He calls this the "hopeful monster mechanism." This was proposed in all seriousness to the scientific world simply as an attempt to avoid saying that a Creator was involved.

Why is this? Why do men so avoid and fear even the subject of God -- even men who otherwise are honest and reputable, men of integrity. Well, the answer, of course, is that men suffer from a terrible sense of guilt.

You remember that in the garden of Eden Adam and Eve at first were walking in full fellowship with God. There was no fear in their hearts toward God. In the cool of the evening God would come and walk with them, and they were in perfect communion. Then they made the choice to obey the Tempter's voice instead of God's. The first sign of the effect of that disobedience was that they hid from God when he came to walk in the garden. And man has been hiding from God ever since because he has a deep sense of guilt in his life. Guilt always alienates. It always divides and severs a relationship. This is why men everywhere, universally, have this sense of restraint and of fear toward God.

In the sin offering we are coming to the way God deals with that problem. As a part of the introduction I would like to point out again that the order of the offerings is very significant.

This fourth offering comes only after the first three, which have dealt, as we have seen, with the basic needs of men for love (the burnt offering), joy (the meal offering, representing the response to love), and peace (the peace offering). Love, joy, and peace. Those are the basic needs of human life. Without them you cannot function properly as a human being. You know that. You have searched desperately for these things yourself.

And as we pointed out last week, it is no accident that in the listing of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23, the very first three provisions made by the Spirit of God are love, joy, and peace, in that order.

Only after these does God begin to talk about sin and trespass, the next two offerings.

Here he is dealing with another basic requirement of humanity. We need not only the positive virtues of love, joy, and peace, but having them we then need to begin to act as responsible individuals, to deal in a responsible way with life around us. That is what we learn in the guilt and the trespass offerings. We are now called upon to act responsibly toward God, toward life, and toward the world around us -- our fellow man.

But again I call your attention to the fact that God does not start talking to us on that theme. It is true that all of these offerings were fulfilled in one act in the life of Jesus -- his death on the cross. All of them point to that. From the death of Jesus, as the fulfillment of these offerings, flow to us love, joy, peace, forgiveness -- all the blessings of these five offerings. But when we think of the death of Christ we almost invariably think of the sin and the trespass offering. The forgiveness of our sins is what we are concerned about. But that is not where God starts! It is very helpful to see that he is not talking to us about our sins.

That is the way we Christians sometimes do it. We talk to people about becoming Christians and the first thing we say is, "You're a *sinner*! You need to be *forgiven*!" And sometimes we thunder away with hell-fire and damnation at people in order to get them "under conviction," under guilt about their sins. It is true that God wants to talk to man about his sin. Man can never solve his problems until he solves that problem. But that is not where God starts. He starts by talking about love and joy and peace. He provides that first and then he says, "Now let's get at the heart of the problem which is separating us." Isn't that marvelous?

That is why, in the story Jesus told of the prodigal son {Luke 15:11-32}, when the son comes back from the far country and his father spots him on the horizon the father runs to meet him with his arms wide open. He flings his arms around his returning son and cries out with joy. And the boy stutters and stammers and tries to speak the words he has been memorizing all the way home: "Father, I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants," {cf, Luke 15:19}. But the father won't even wait for that. He starts shouting, "Bring forth the robe and the ring and the calf, and let's make merry!" {cf, Luke 15:22-23}. Because, you see, the father recognized him as his son, before he began to deal with him about his problem. The son had to make his confession eventually, but that isn't where the father started.

This is why, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul cries out, "Because *you are sons*, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" {Gal 4:6 RSV}. Now, we sometimes would like to turn that around. We'd like to say, "Because God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, you are sons." But that is not the way Scripture puts it. It says that *because you are sons* in Christ, i.e., you have come to God, therefore he gives you love and joy and peace. And on that basis, and after your experience of it, he wants to talk to you about the problem of alienation in your life.

That is our introduction to the sin offering.

Let's look at it together now as it is found in Chapter 4 of the book of Leviticus. As we have seen in each of these offerings there is a certain set of distinctive ceremonies, distinctive requirements, for each offering which mark it as different from the rest, and by which it points out with beautiful accuracy some important aspect of the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Since he is the fulfillment of all these offerings, they all point to him. This fact will help us greatly in understanding what Christ is ready to do, and has already done for us, right now.

The first distinctive of the sin offering is that it provided for both public and private sin. There were offerings available for those who had sinned as a group, and those who had sinned as individuals. You find this clearly delineated in this chapter. When it was offered for the sin of a group, or a public individual representing a group, then the offering always had to be a male. When it was an individual sin, the animal was a female. Verses 1-3:

And the Lord said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, if any one sins unwittingly in

any of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done, and he does any one of them, if it is the anointed priest who sins, thus bringing guilt on the people, then let him offer for the sin which he has committed a young bull without blemish to the Lord for a sin offering." {Lev 4:1-3 RSV}

And, again, in Verses 13-14:

"If the whole congregation of Israel commits a sin unwittingly and the thing is hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they do any one of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done and are guilty; when the sin which they have committed becomes known, the assembly shall offer a young bull for a sin offering and bring it before the tent of meeting;" {Lev 4:13-14 RSV}

In the case of a ruler or king, the requirement is given in Verses 22-23:

"When a ruler sins, doing unwittingly any one of all the things which the Lord his God has commanded not to be done, and is guilty, if the sin which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring as his offering a goat, a male without blemish," {Lev 4:22-23 RSV}

But then when the common people sinned as individuals, Verses 27-28:

"If any one of the common people sins unwittingly in doing any one of the things which the Lord has commanded not to be done, and is guilty, when the sin which he has committed is made known to him he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female without blemish, for his sin which he has committed." {Lev 4:27-28 RSV}

In verse 32 another provision is made:

"If he brings a lamb as his offering for a sin offering, he shall bring a female without blemish," {Lev 4:32 RSV}

So once again the distinction is made between the male, as the symbol of the ruler or the dominant one -- i.e., man in his right to have dominion over all things, as always symbolized by any functionary, any government official (a priest, a ruler, a king, etc.), or the whole group together -- and the female, as the symbol of the common person, the individual acting on his own, who is therefore in a relationship of support, of undergirding or following.

There were also provisions made in the sin offering for people who could not afford large animals like the bull or a goat or lamb. We have these in Chapter 5. They also apply to the trespass offering. Verse 7:

"But if he cannot afford a lamb, then he shall bring, as his guilt offering to the Lord for the sin which he has committed, two turtledoves or two young pigeons, one for a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering." {Lev 5:7 RSV}

Still further provision is made in Verse 11:

"But if he cannot afford two turtledoves or two young pigeons, then he shall bring, as his offering for the sin which he has committed, a tenth of an ephah of fine flour for a sin offering; he shall put no oil upon it and shall put no frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering." {Lev 5:11a RSV}

So even the very poorest had a way out of the guilt of their lives. That was God's provision for them. Even if they could not afford any animal, they could bring a handful of flour. But they were to put no oil on it, because oil is the symbol of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit-filled life. Nor were they to put any frankincense on it, because that is the symbol of the heart dedicated, fully yielded, to God. This is a sin offering, and so they could be represented in it only by the handful of fine flour alone. But provision was made for all alike.

Now notice a second distinction of the sin offering. In several of the verses we have already read you notice that the sin was said to be unwitting. That is, an individual had sinned unknowingly. This is the paramount distinction of this sin offering. You see, it is dealing not with acts of deliberate evil, which all of us commit from time to time, but it is dealing with the nature which prompts those acts, and which always takes us by surprise.

Haven't you noticed that? Most of us, if we were asked our private opinion, would have to say that we are pretty nice people. Most of us have a fairly good opinion of ourselves. We acknowledge that we do still have a few minor problems, yes, a few peccadillos which, if we merely had the proper motivation, could be taken care of with but slight effort on our part. That is true, isn't it?

But every now and then something happens which surprises us, and we act in a way we didn't expect. Some situation catches us unaware and all of a sudden we do the very thing that we never thought we'd do. Does that ever happen to you? Don't nod your head, you'll give yourself away! It has, hasn't it? We come to the sudden and shattering realization that there is evil in us deeper than we had realized. That is what the sin offering is talking about -- this kind of surprising sin which catches us off guard, this unsuspected depth of evil in us.

I was talking a few weeks ago with a young man who was telling me about his early days as a young bridegroom. He wasn't yet a Christian. He and his wife had a terrible time. They argued and fought constantly and it was a horrible first year. On one occasion, in the midst of this, he lost his temper completely, drew back his fist, and hit her a resounding blow right between her eyes, knocking her to the floor. This appalled him because he had been brought up with the code that no man ever hit a woman, that to do so was the sign of ultimate cowardice. He had always despised anyone who would ever hit a woman.

He said that he went out for a walk after this sudden display, walked up and down, and struggled and struggled with it. He had to face the fact that he was that kind of man, that he was the kind of man who, if he got angry enough, would hit a woman and knock her down. He said that it was the sudden realization of the depth of his depravity which made him turn at last to God and ask for help. And that is when he became a Christian.

Now that is what this offering is talking about -- that kind of evil, embedded in us, part of our nature, which takes us by surprise because we may fancy that we had gotten rid of it, or did not even possess it. Many people are troubled by the doctrine of original sin. They laugh at it, ridicule it, because they don't understand that this is what it is talking about -- the terrible capacity within us to act suddenly in a way which we never realized was possible, the fact that given the right circumstances some evil in us will come welling up and take us all by surprise. It is there. No matter how much we might wish to talk ourselves out of it, it is there!

Dostoevski, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, tells a fable about a very wicked woman who died. The devils took her to hell and threw her into the lake of fire. Her guardian angel was very puzzled as to how he might do something to help her. So he thought through her whole life to see if he could find at least one good thing that she had done which he might present before God. Finally he went to God and said, "Once a beggar came by when she was weeding her garden, and she pulled an onion out and gave it to him to eat." God said to the angel, "All right, then you go down and get that onion and hold it out to her in the lake of fire. Tell her to take hold of it, and if you can pull her out with that onion she can come to Paradise."

So the angel took the onion, went down to the lake of fire, and held it out to the woman. She grabbed hold and he began to pull. He pulled and pulled and, sure enough, he began to pull her right up out of the lake. She was almost completely free when some other sinners around her, seeing that she was about to escape, grabbed hold of her ankles so as to be pulled out with her. At first the onion held, and they too began to be pulled out. But the woman became very angry and cried, "This is my onion, and you're not going to go out with me!" And, as she kicked them loose, the onion broke and she fell back in and she is burning there to this day. That is a graphic illustration of the very thing to which this offering is addressed. Even in moments of triumph there is that taint, that evil, in every human heart. That is what the sin offering is dealing with.

The third element of distinction about the sin offering is most remarkable. It concerns what was done with the blood.

Remember that, in the previous offerings, just as in the sin offering, blood had to be shed, a death had to occur, but all the blood of the animal was poured out at the foot of the altar. But something unusual was always done with the blood of the sin offering, Chapter 4, Verses 4-7:

"He shall bring the bull to the door of the tent of meeting before the Lord, and lay his hand on the head of the bull, and kill the bull before the Lord. And the anointed priest shall take some of the blood of the bull and bring it to the tent of meeting; and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle part of the blood seven times before the Lord in front of the veil of the sanctuary. And the priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense before the Lord which is in the tent of meeting, and the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering which is at the door of the tent of meeting." {Lev 4:4-7}

What a strange requirement! The blood of the sin offering had to be sprinkled seven times before the Lord and, in the case of the offering for the anointed priest here, had to be put on the horns of the altar of incense which stood in the holy place right in front of the veil which guarded the holy of holies, i.e., right before the presence of the Lord. Now the same thing was required if the whole congregation sinned, as specified in Verses 15-18. But in the cases of the offerings for a ruler or for an individual the blood was put on the horns of an altar, but in these instances on the altar of the burnt offering, which was in the outer court. Verse 25:

"Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering [not of fragrant incense], and pour out the rest of its blood at the base of the altar of burnt offering." {Lev 4:25 RSV}

The same in Verse 30:

"And the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering, and pour out the rest of its blood at the base of the altar." {Lev 4:30 RAV}

So there was a difference in the requirement, depending upon the importance of whoever had sinned. If it was an extremely important individual, such as the anointed priest, or if it was the whole congregation, the blood actually had to be put on the altar right in the very presence of God. But if it was a ruler or an individual it was put on the altar a bit further removed -- in the outer court where the offerings were usually burned.

What is the significance of this? Well, it is obvious that a special emphasis is being placed upon the blood. It is to be put in a visible place, and in a place which is obviously connected with God. It is to be recognized openly as being on the horns of the altar before the Lord. And the individual for whom the offering is being made is to be able to see the blood there. That is the point. In other words, there is to be an understanding on the part of the one who sinned that this blood has now covered his sin, forgiven it, and before God it is acknowledged to be forgiven. And when he understands that, then his own conscience can be at rest.

This is very important!

As a pastor I find many people coming to me who have never seen that God accepts the death of Jesus fully on their behalf. They are always troubling themselves about some terrible degree of sin they have committed, and which they think God, for some reason, is not able to forgive. They do not see the blood on the horns of the altar. They have not seen clearly that it has been put there. As a result, they torture themselves endlessly with guilt. But God is trying to make very clear that there is a way to be free of guilt. And once the blood is there on the altar, it provides an absolute way out. There is no guilt left! "He shall be forgiven," the Scripture says -- not only of the sinful acts (that is what the trespass offering is for) but of the guilt of his very nature. A division is made between what we are now and what we once were in Adam. When once we come to Christ a break occurs, and that nature which once was ours is no longer ours. That is why in Romans 7, regarding his sinful actions Paul says, "It is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me," {Rom 7:20 RSV}. That is what this offering is teaching. It teaches us that this is the only way that man ever has of being free from his nagging, hidden, inward sense of guilt which alienates him from God.

Men are always trying to find their own ways to be free of guilt. Some try to forget it. Most are trying simply to avoid the whole subject. They don't want to think of their guilt. But you remember how David said he felt when he tried that. These are his words from Psalm 32:

**When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away
through my groaning all day long [It affected him physically].
For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. {Psa 32:3-4}**

This is what unacknowledged guilt will do. It will dry up your life, will reduce it to a shallow, superficial level of living in which you have to be caught up endlessly in some diversion in order not to think about your relationship with God. And forgetting will never work either.

Well, psychologists tell us that there are other ways you can do it. You can blame your environment. Or can blame your ancestors, or your glands, or something else for your sin. As long as you can put the blame on someone else then you can live with your guilt. Psychiatry and psychology often suggest this as the way to handle guilt. I ran across a quotation on this subject from Dorothy Sayers which is so well put that I want to share it with you. I hope you will pay it careful attention because it is very illuminating as to this supposed "way out." She says:

One of the really surprising things about the present bewilderment of humanity is that the Christian church now finds herself called upon to proclaim the old and hated doctrine of sin as a gospel of cheer and encouragement. The final tendency of the modern philosophies, hailed in their day as a release from the burden of sinfulness, has been to bind man hard and fast in the chains of an iron determinism. The influence of heredity and environment, of glandular makeup and the control exercised by the unconscious, of economic necessity and the mechanics of biological development, have all been invoked to assure man that he is not responsible for his misfortunes and therefore is not to be held guilty. Evil has been represented as something imposed upon him from without, not made by him from within. The dreadful conclusion follows inevitably that as he is not responsible for evil, he cannot alter it. Even though evolution and progress may offer some hope of alleviation in the future, there is no hope for you and me, here and now.

Then she says,

I well remember how an aunt of mine, brought up in an old-fashioned liberalism, protested angrily against having continuously to call herself "a miserable sinner" when reciting the litany. Today, if we could really be persuaded that we are miserable sinners, that the trouble is not outside us but inside us, and that therefore by the grace of God we can do something to put it right, we should receive that message as the most hopeful and heartening thing that can be imagined.

She is absolutely right! If you don't take this way out then there is no other way to escape the guilt of sin. It keeps coming back, haunting you, living with you, sleeping with you, turning your moments alone into times of fear and loneliness. And there is no way out, no exit from this prison, except by the blood of Jesus Christ. That is the only way out.

I was in a group discussing this the other day, and a young woman said, "I don't like these messages and meetings which always end up making people feel guilty. Isn't that what the gospel is all about, that man is not guilty?" The answer is: "No, that is not what the gospel is all about!" The gospel is that man is guilty, but that there is a way out! God has laid the guilt on Another! Another has bought it, Another has borne it for us. And that Other has perfectly settled it, so that the guilt of our nature is already dealt with before God. And at that place there is a release -- and no place else.

There is one final distinctive about the sin offering. It is in the way the fat and the meat of the offering were handled. Verses 8-12:

"And all the fat of the bull of the sin offering he shall take from it, the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins, and the appendage of the liver which he shall take away with the

kidneys (just as these are taken from the ox of the sacrifice of the peace offerings) and the priest shall burn them upon the altar of burnt offering." {Lev 4:8-10 RSV}

All the inward organs and their fat were to be offered to God, just as in the peace offerings. But now listen to the rest:

"But the skin of the bull and all its flesh, with its head, its legs, its entrails, and its dung, the whole bull he shall carry forth outside the camp to a clean place, where the ashes are poured out, and shall burn it on a fire of wood; where the ashes are poured out it shall be burned." {Lev 4:11-12 RSV}

The entire rest of the bull was to be taken clear outside the camp, not to the altar of the burnt offering but clear outside the camp, where it was to be burned. You find this again in Verses 20-21:

"Thus shall he do with the bull: as he did with the bull of the sin offering, so shall he do with this; and the priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven. And he shall carry forth the bull outside the camp, and burn it as he burned the first bull; it is the sin offering for the assembly." {Lev 4:20-21 RSV}

So here is another strange requirement. No one was to eat of this offering. In fact when the blood was offered in the holy place then the bull or other offering had to be taken and burned outside the camp.

What is the meaning of that?

Here again we have one of those remarkable symbols which capture life exactly the way it is. For what this requirement is saying to us is that all the inward richness of life, all our inner life as believers in Jesus Christ, is acceptable to God. The fat and the kidneys and the organs within, all the inward life, is God's and is perfectly acceptable to him. But there is still something wrong with the outer life -- the body. It is still unredeemed, you see. It is still subject to sin. It is still to be rejected. That is why in the New Testament we are told that the body is still the seat of the flesh, and therefore it must die.

Experience confirms this. Christians die just as do non-Christians. Our bodies are yet unredeemed. They are not resurrected. If this were not true then the moment a person became a Christian not only would his spirit be made alive and his soul saved but his body would also be transformed, glorified. But, you see, our bodies are still in that unrestored state along with the rest of the world. That is why we have to go outside the camp.

The book of Hebrews makes this very plain to us. It says that this is what happened to Jesus. In Chapter 13, Verse 10, we are told,

"We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate [he went outside the city of Jerusalem to be crucified and to this day the mount of Calvary is outside the Damascus gate of Jerusalem] in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore let us go forth to him outside the camp, bearing abuse [or reproach] with him [not for him]. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come." {Heb 13:10-14 RSV}

In other words, though our inner life, our thought life, our inner nature, is now changed and acceptable to God, nevertheless we are still in the world. We still have to live under its reproach, under its rejection, just as Jesus did. We are to bear that reproach with him, recognizing that there is still a part of our life which has not been changed yet. But that is why we look forward to the resurrection as the completion of God's work for us. How beautifully all this is described in the sin offering. And there outside the camp we are to take the place which Jesus took, that of humility and rejection before the world. This is a blow to our pride. We don't like it there. But our Lord is there. So the exhortation comes to us that we are to go outside the camp.

The great truth of the sin offering is that God has dealt with our nature of evil. We are no longer linked to it.

We are no longer what we once were. Therefore, as persons in Jesus Christ, we stand basically and fundamentally accepted before God, absolutely favored in his sight.

St. Augustine was a great reprobate before he became a Christian. He lived a rather wild and dissolute life. When he became a Christian things became different.

One day he was walking down the street of the city and one of his old girl friends spotted him. She knew who he was and called out his name, "'Gustine!" He turned and saw who was calling him. And gathering his robes around him he began to run.

She yelled to him, "'Gustine! 'Gustine! Why do you run? It is only I!" And he stopped in his flight long enough to turn around and say, "I run because it is no longer I."

That is what the sin offering is telling us. In Christ we are no longer what we once were.

Prayer:

Thank you, our Father, for this marvelous truth taught in both Old and New Testaments alike, that there is a way out of our guilt, a way out of our alienation, that we no longer need to be far off from you. We need not fear you. You are not a severe God; you are our heavenly Father, loving us, receiving us, and because we are sons, sending forth the Spirit of your Son into our hearts. But help us to be honest, Lord, about our guilt, and not try to avoid it but to know that there is no way out unless we acknowledge it. We must acknowledge it, but then we are free from it. We thank you for that, in Jesus' name, Amen.

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