



QUESTION:
“Why did God require the shedding of
the blood of innocent animals



This is the question asked by someone for whom the Old Testament laws commanding animal sacrifices constitutes a serious obstacle to faith in the Bible and, ultimately, to the Christian Gospel. I suggest that we might also acknowledge that it is a question that many Christians would struggle to answer convincingly.

The letter I received describes them as ‘*innocent* animals’, but the use of the word ‘innocent’ in this context is emotive, inappropriate and therefore unhelpful. I say this because such words as ‘innocence’ and ‘guilt’ have to do with morality; with ‘good’ and ‘evil’, ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. But animals do not possess this moral awareness.

In “*The Diary of a Country Parson 1758-1802*”, James Woodforde, an Anglican vicar, records that one of his greyhounds stole and ate a neighbour’s joint of meat and, therefore, that evening he *hanged the dog*. That was over 250 years ago, and I am sure that we would not react in that manner today, because we realise that the dog was not aware of acting wrongly and, therefore could not be accused a moral fault and did not deserve such a punishment. For this reason I have left the word ‘innocent’ out of the discussion.

Let me now ask this question. *Is it ever permissible to shed animal blood?* And, if it is, under what circumstances?

I think you will agree that the answer must be, ‘*Yes it is permissible.*’ After all, we shed the blood of animals because most people eat meat! Consequently, for the vast majority the shedding of the blood of animals does not constitute a problem. We think that the *act* is justified by the *purpose* it serves.

Of course shedding the blood of animals for so-called ‘sport’ is a different matter, and I would agree that the wanton, needless and unnecessary killing of animals is wrong.

But, let us take this to a higher level.

Our culture also apparently considers it even right to shed *human blood*, because at this very moment young men have been sent by the government to places like Iraq, for the express purpose of shedding the blood of *fellow human beings*; and the blood of many of these young men themselves, has already been shed as the result of this war. It is true that, at the present time, there is a strong swell of public opinion against continuing the war, but the objection is not to the shedding of human blood, but to a war that seems to be unending, and which many now regard as difficult to justify

Generally speaking, when it comes to waging war, the majority of the population think the *act* is justified by the *purpose* it serves, so that, if a conflict is represented by the politicians as a ‘*just*’ war – (as it invariably is!) - they are ready to accept the shedding of human blood, believing it to be justified by the end in view.

In the same way, the shedding of animal blood in Old Testament times has to be considered *in the light of the purpose it served*. (This also applies to the death of Jesus Christ; but that is a question for another time).

To understand WHY God commanded animal sacrifices we need to understand why we have the Bible.

- We know that the ‘Bible’, from the Greek ‘-*ho byblos*’, ‘the Book’, is really a collection of 66 books, written during a period of at least 1500 years, by about 40 different writers.

And yet this 'Divine Library', as Jerome called it, has only one theme. From beginning to end, it is the story of God and Man. It describes how the harmony and fellowship that existed between God and Man, at the beginning, was lost, and how God planned to make possible mankind's redemption and restoration.

- ❑ In the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis – ('Genesis' = 'Beginning') – we have an account of 'Creation', which tells how, out of 'chaos', God brought order, bringing every living thing into existence and finally creating Man.
- ❑ Now, whether we accept these chapters as a literal account, or as a 'stylised' or 'symbolic' story, is unimportant at the moment. What *is* important is that we understand that the order of Creation, as described in the Book of Genesis, is absolutely and completely in harmony with Science, from 'the 'First Day' through the 'Seventh Day', and the description of the creation of every living thing, from simple plant life-forms, through to the many forms of animal life, is scientifically accurate.
- ❑ We next read of what has been called 'The Fall' – how the first human beings, Adam, - (his name means 'Man') - and the 'Woman'- (whose name, Eve, means 'Life' or 'Life-giving') – lost their fellowship with God, because they disobeyed Him.
- ❑ The story of 'Adam and Eve and the eating of an apple' has been ridiculed by people who have probably never actually read that chapter for themselves. If they had read it, they might have been able to understand it, and they would have learned that no 'apple' is mentioned!
- ❑ Genesis ch.3, simply tells us that, although God had placed the first human couple in an ideal environment – a real 'paradise' – no conditions of occupancy had been laid down, and they needed to realize that they were dependent on God for their existence and for everything they possessed, and were therefore, also, answerable to Him for the way they behaved.
- ❑ The Bible tells us that, when God created Man, He gave him free will; that is, the ability to make decisions for himself. God could have created a 'Man' who did and thought what is right because he was 'programmed', like a robot, to behave in the way his creator intended. Such a creature would always obey God's will. But this would not have pleased God, because God desires obedience out of love, not because of compulsion.
- ❑ But! – and this is an important point – when you give a person the freedom to choose, you must be prepared to accept that he may not choose what you want him to choose! So it was in the garden in Eden. (Notice, also, that the Bible speaks of a garden *IN* Eden, not the Garden *OF* Eden).
- ❑ God gave the first human beings the right to eat the fruit of every tree in the Garden, but He placed a prohibition on just *one* tree in 'Eden'. They may not eat the fruit of that one tree on pain of death, if they disobeyed Him, and the manner in which they responded to this prohibition would reveal whether they would submit to His will, or deliberately assert their own will and disobey Him.
- ❑ Well, we know what happened. They disobeyed God and were banished from 'Eden'. Their sin of disobedience broke their relationship with Him. The word 'death' always means 'separation' and indicates separation in one form or another. They immediately 'died' spiritually, in that they lost their fellowship with God, and the process of physical death began in their bodies.
- ❑ But the story does not end there. Read Gen. 3:15 and you will see that, besides imposing punishments on all those involved in this first human sin, God promised redemption

when He declared that the time would come when 'the Seed of the Woman' would defeat 'the Serpent', and make possible forgiveness and restoration to God. The Bible is the record of the plan that God worked through the ages, to bring His promised 'Scheme of Salvation' to fulfilment. Read Galatians 4:4-5, where this is summed up in two verses.

Perhaps, at this juncture, I should say something about 'the shedding of blood', so that we may see its place in God's plan.

First, we should understand that, from the very beginning, God has regarded ALL blood, both human and animal, as sacred. The Bible makes this very plain. In Gen. chapter 9: 3-6, we learn that the first human beings were 'vegetarians' – *not* meat-eaters! However, there came a time when God gave human beings the right to eat '*whatever lives*', but with one prohibition. Read the passage!

Now notice, two further facts revealed in those verses.

1st The use of blood *for food* was forbidden; '*For the life is in the blood*'. Blood is the symbol of life, so that even the blood of animals is sacred and must be treated reverently.

2nd God imposed the death sentence for wilful murder. Later He declared that the Hebrews, (whom He had chosen to help to bring His plan of salvation for man, to fulfilment), must never accept any 'satisfaction', that is, any payment, for the life of a murderer.

A murderer could not be 'redeemed' – 'bought back'. He could not buy his pardon for the sin of murder (*Numbers 35; 31-32*) '*He shall surely be put to death*'. Why was that? See the next verse, v.33. "*Blood defiles the land...*"

There are many more passages of scripture which make it clear that God did not/does not regard the shedding of *any* kind of blood lightly, and which means that when He required animal sacrifices He had a serious purpose in mind.

Let me prove this.

We know that in the religion of the Old Testament, God commanded both offerings and sacrifices.

Offerings were the expressions of gratitude and thanks to God, for blessings received, and they were usually – (with a few special exceptions) – bloodless offerings.

Sacrifices were the animal sacrifices already mentioned, and these were offered as a sign of repentance for sin committed by the sacrificer, and these sacrifices necessarily involved the shedding of blood.

But, here are points we should notice, because they reveal the seriousness and importance of these animal sacrifices.

1. When a 'sinner' was required to bring an animal sacrifice in 'atonement' for his sin, the sacrificial victim had to be an animal *that he himself had nurtured and reared*, and not some animal bought from a dealer in the market place. It must often have been the case that the animal he brought for sacrifice was one for which he had developed an affection and which he valued highly, and this, naturally made its sacrifice all the more painful.
2. When he brought the animal for sacrifice, he understood that the animal was to become his *substitute*, bearing the penalty, which his sin deserved.
3. Furthermore, he was not allowed merely to hand over his sacrificial victim for the priest to kill and prepare for sacrifice. The Law of God required that the offender *himself* slay

the animal in the prescribed manner, and only after it had been killed did the priest take over and proceed with the ritual of atonement.

You can appreciate, I am sure, how distressing it must have been for the guilty person to have to kill his own sacrifice. But these requirements of the Law made him realize, as perhaps he had never realized before, the seriousness of sin and the high cost of atonement.

And here is another interesting point.

When the carcass of the sacrificial victim had been handed over to the priest it was dealt with in a solemn and regular fashion. It was not treated lightly, or carelessly cast aside as though it were worthless. First, special parts of the carcass were taken to be burned on the Altar of Sacrifice, as a Sin Offering, or a Guilt Offering to God. Then, the priests themselves accepted a designated part of the animal, as their 'right', according to the Law. And, finally, the rest of the flesh was returned to the worshipper, so that he could share the joy of his reconciliation to God in a celebratory meal with his family and friends.

It goes without saying that, although in the course of time, the blood of many thousands of animals must have been shed at the Tabernacle and at the Temple that replaced the Tabernacle, it would be quite wrong to suppose that the sacrifices were wanton, purposeless or meaningless.

Every time a guilty person offered an animal in sacrifice, he was saying, in effect, "*I confess that I am guilty and deserve to die, I repent of my sin, and I offer this animal as my substitute.*"

Now coming over to the New Testament.

The Old Testament religion, with its sacrificial system, was preparatory, instituted to serve until, *'in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under law, to redeem those who were under law, that we might receive the adoption of sons'* (Gal. 4:4-5)

We learn from Hebrews 10:4 that animal blood could never take away the guilty of Man's sin, so that, in Old Testament times, there was no true forgiveness for sin, because an animal in the place of a man just will not suffice! The lesser can never effectively take the place of the higher. This means that the sacrifices offered under the Law of Moses did not provide forgiveness; they only provided a 'covering' until the time should come when God's own Lamb – Jesus Christ – would 'take away the sin of the world' (John 1:2).

Notice what this statement means.

Jesus Christ, God's own Lamb took away 'sin' – not 'sins'. He dealt with the *principle* of sin, which, from Eden, had affected both Mankind and the natural world, or the 'creation', as Paul calls it in Rom. 8:22. He took away the sin 'of the world' – not merely the sin of the Jewish race, but of *all* mankind in *all* ages.

In preparation for the sacrifice of Jesus, God's Lamb, the sacrifices were important because they taught the Jews how serious sin is, in the eyes of God; and how costly is our redemption.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews sums this up in one definitive sentence in Heb.9: 22, *"..Without the shedding of blood there is no remission (of sins)."*

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