

LESSON 23: JESUS THE FINAL SACRIFICE

Instruction for Faith Educators

For Basic Level / Age 8	:	Cover points 1 to 6
For Intermediate Level / Age 11	:	Cover points 1 to 10
For Advanced Level / Age 14	:	Cover points 1 to 13

Revision from previous lesson:

In the previous lesson, we learned about the reasons why Jesus was sent to be with God's chosen people, the Jews, and yet He was rejected by them. Ultimately, they demanded that He be punished for a crime that He did not commit, and he was brutally executed by crucifixion. In this lesson, we will learn about why Jesus allowed Himself to be violently killed in this manner.

Current lesson:

1. Read Matthew 26:36 to 27:50, the account of Jesus' passion (i.e. suffering), crucifixion, and death.
2. The question of why Jesus gave His life in this manner may cause confusion for some people. The way to understand the torture and death of Jesus is to understand the religious life of His own people, the Jews.

The Messiah (from the Hebrew word *Mashiach*, which means "the anointed one"), Jesus Christ, came at a specific time in human history, and He was born into a specific race of a particular tribe. He was Jewish. And this was because God had revealed His plan of salvation to the Jews first of all, in order that through the Jews His salvific plan might be made accessible to all other nations.

It was also to these Jews that God revealed a system of sacrifice in order for humanity to reconcile with Him when sin had separated them from communion with God. Ancient Israel had a complex system of sacrifice. They had five kinds of sacrifices: the burnt offering, the meal offering, the peace offering, the sin offering, and the trespass offering (Leviticus 1-7). Each of these sacrifices was an age long foreshadowing of the coming sacrifice of the Messiah. Every sacrifice pointed to Him and was uniquely fulfilled in Him.

3. *Yom Kippur* and *Pascha* were both sacrifices known by the Jews as *qorbanot* (plural for *qorban*). The element that both these sacrifices had in common was the shedding of blood, since it was only by the shedding of blood that atonement was made (Leviticus 17:11; Hebrews 9:22). In other words, both the sacrifices offered during the *Yom Kippur* and the *Pascha* were blood sacrifices. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was the fulfilment of the Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) and the Passover (*Pascha*) for the ancient Israelites.
4. **The Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*)**. During the time of Jesus, this Day of Atonement was such a significant day, it was quite common for Jesus and His people to nickname it

“The Day”. *Yom Kippur* was, quite simply, the day when the ancient Israelites offered atonement for their sin of the previous year.

(The word “atonement” may sound rather technical and confusing, but try to think in terms of how our sins separate us from God, and how through the offering of sacrifice we can be once again “at one” with God. Put these two words together, and you get the word atone.)

A more detailed description of the ceremony performed at Yom Kippur can be found in the 16th chapter of the book of Leviticus in the Old Testament. The high priest who had been selected for that occasion would have to sacrifice a bull for his own sins and the sins of all the other priests of Israel. He would then take the blood of this bull and bring it to the Ark of the Covenant upon which the glory of God (*shekinah*, Hebrew) dwelt. This Ark of the Covenant was located in the most private room of the Temple called the Most Holy Place or the Holy of Holies. He would have to sprinkle the blood of the sacrificial bull onto the top portion of the Ark (it was called the Mercy Seat). This was a rite that had to be performed only once a year.

Next, the people would have to bring two goats or lambs before the high priest. Through the drawing of lots, one goat was to be selected as an offering to God, and another selected to be the scapegoat. Similarly, the blood of the goat that had been sacrificed would have to be brought into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled onto the Mercy Seat. The blood of the two animals, the bull and the goat, were then mixed and sprinkled and smeared onto the altar of sacrifice.

As for the other goat known as the scapegoat, the priest would lay his hand on its head and confess over it the sins of Israel, as it were, transferring the sins of the people over to the goat. The goat would then be led out to the desert and pushed over a cliff. (Now you know where we get the concept of the scapegoat from!)

5. In the letter to the Hebrews, we are told that Jesus is the Great High Priest who has offered Himself as the perfect and permanent sacrifice, thus shedding His blood for the atonement of all our sins. This renders it unnecessary for any more animals to be sacrificed.

Hebrews 9:11-15: “But now Christ has come, as the high priest of all the blessings which were to come. He has passed through the greater, the more perfect tent, not made by human hands, that is, not of this created order; and he has entered the sanctuary once and for all, taking with him not the blood of goats and bull calves, but his own blood, having won an eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkled on those who have incurred defilement, may restore their bodily purity. How much more will the blood of Christ, who offered himself, blameless as he was, to God through the eternal Spirit, purify our conscience from dead actions so that we can worship the living God. This makes him the mediator of a new covenant, so that, now that a death has occurred to redeem the sins committed under an earlier covenant, those who have been called to an eternal inheritance may receive the promise.”

This passage from the letter to the Hebrews tells us that Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest, has sacrificed His own dear blood for all people, this being a sacrifice that transcends time and is good for all eternity.

6. But our Sacred Scripture speaks not only of a connection between the goat chosen as a sacrifice for God in the Hebrews. It also points out a connection between Jesus and the scapegoat. Saint Paul's second letter to the Corinthians says, "For our sake he made the sinless one a victim for sin, so that in him we might become the uprightness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21). Just as the sins of the people of ancient Israel were transferred over to the scapegoat, so too have our sins been transferred to Christ. And just as the scapegoat in the Old Testament was made to bear the brunt of Israel's sins, our Lord Jesus too had to bear the burden of our sins upon Himself.

The difference between Jesus and the scapegoat though, is that the scapegoat was merely a means for the sins of the people to be moved around and transferred, whereas Jesus Christ took the weight of all the sins of the world upon Himself and atoned for these sins on the cross without passing the buck to anyone else.

7. **The Passover (*Pascha*).** The annual celebration of the Passover is related to the deliverance of the ancient Israelites from slavery in Egypt in 1250 BC. Because of a life-threatening famine, Jacob and his sons (together with their families) had moved from Canaan to Egypt to be taken care of by his eleventh son, Joseph. Joseph had been sold years before that as a slave to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officers.

After experiencing a period of utter prosperity under the leadership of Joseph who was assistant to the Pharaoh, a new Pharaoh took over the prosperous Egyptian kingdom and began to force the Israelites into slavery. This brutal exercise of enslavement went on for several hundred years. But as the Israelites cried out to God for divine assistance, Scripture tells us in Exodus 2:24, "God heard their groaning; God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob". And He delivered them from slavery in Egypt.

In a dramatic plot twist that one would be able to read from the book of Exodus, God sent Moses to deliver His people from slavery in Egypt. Initially, although Moses performed nine signs to demonstrate God's demand for the Israelites to be released from bondage, Pharaoh was less than convinced. Finally, God commanded Moses to have each family prepare a one-year-old, male, unblemished lamb, and to have it slaughtered at noon. The blood of the lamb was to be painted onto the door posts and lintel of the house. In the evening, the family would eat the lamb's roasted flesh together with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. That night, the Angel of Death would "pass over" the homes protected by the blood, but the homes which were unprotected by the blood would have the lives of their firstborn children taken. Many Egyptian homes lost their firstborn that night, including the Pharaoh himself. As a result of this tenth plague, the Israelites were released from slavery in Egypt.

Upon their deliverance, God had commanded for the Israelites to commemorate this event each year through the Passover celebration which began with a sacrificial meal of the paschal lamb followed by the seven-day Feast of Unleavened Bread. The term "Passover"

speaks of how God “passed over” or “skipped” the houses of the Israelites during the final of the ten plagues of Egypt in order to save His people from slavery.

8. Now, having understood the historical context of the Passover, we turn our attention to what Sacred Scripture demonstrates about Jesus the Messiah. The Bible, both the Old and the New Testaments, definitively point to Jesus as the final fulfilment of the Passover sacrifice.

The Old Testament prophets constantly used the image of the “lamb of God” to describe the Messiah. Isaiah, for example, prophesied as follows: “Ill-treated and afflicted, he never opened his mouth, like a lamb led to the slaughter-house, like a sheep dumb before its shearers he never opened his mouth” (Isaiah 53:7). This image presents two dimensions. The first dimension is that of the Messiah being the suffering servant, and the other one is that of the Messiah being the sacrificial lamb to atone for the sins of the world. Much later on, in Acts 8:26-35, we see how the Apostle Philip (when speaking to the Ethiopian eunuch about this exact passage) identified Christ as the one who fulfilled this prophecy in Isaiah 53:7.

In the Gospels, we also see how Jesus is specifically described as the “lamb of God” fulfilling both the roles of the sacrificial offering and the suffering servant. When John the Baptist saw Jesus coming at the River Jordan, he proclaimed without any hesitation, “Look, there is the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

In Matthew 20:26-28, Jesus Himself, upon prophesying regarding His passion, His death, and His resurrection for a third time, said, “...anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”.

9. Matthew 26:17-30 also demonstrates how it is that Jesus is a fulfilment of the Passover sacrifice. In the Upper Room, Jesus celebrates the Passover meal with His disciples. During the Passover meal, the participants at the meal had to drink four cups of wine (intermittently) throughout the meal. There would be rituals to follow in between each cup. In this narrative, we see the institution of the Eucharist taking place after the second cup of wine, followed by the partaking of the third cup of wine (which, in this case, becomes the Eucharistic Chalice). But Jesus makes a strange comment at this point, saying that he was not going to drink wine anymore until He drank it with His disciples in His Father’s kingdom. Typically, they would have to drink the fourth cup after the singing of the hymn in order to complete the celebration; but no fourth cup was consumed that night.

In Matthew 27:33-34, we see that Jesus continues to refuse wine that is offered to Him at the cross just before His crucifixion. However, in John 19:28-30, knowing that His mission was complete, Jesus asked to drink the sour wine, the fourth cup, in order to mark the completion of the Passover sacrifice, and thus concluded, “It is consummated” (many modern translations render these words as “It is finished” or “It is completed”).

These passages show that the Passover celebration was completed only after Jesus drank the fourth cup when He hung on the cross. He chose to drink the fourth cup at that point because the lamb had already been slaughtered as a sacrifice. In this instance, He was that long-awaited Lamb of God. All other lesser lambs that came before Him were pointing to Him and awaiting His coming and fulfilment.

10. This understanding of Jesus as the “lamb of God” becomes even more apparent in the Passion Narratives of the Gospels.

In the Gospel of John, Pilate sentenced Jesus to death on the day of preparation for the Passover at noon, or “the sixth hour” (John 19:14-16), which was precisely the hour during which priests commenced their slaughtering of Passover lambs in the temple.

After the crucifixion of Jesus, John 19:31-36 recorded that they did not break any of Jesus’ bones in order to fulfil what was stipulated in Scripture. This corresponds with Exodus 12:46 and Numbers 9:12 which stipulate that none of the Passover lambs’ bones were to be broken. The soldiers had initially intended to break the legs of crucified criminals in order to cause premature suffocation. However, by the time they came to Jesus, He was already dead. One of the soldiers pierced a lance into Jesus’ side in order to make sure of this.

Exodus 12:22 prescribes that a hyssop branch was to be used to sprinkle the blood of the lamb on the lintels and posts of the doors of the Israelite houses. Again, in John 19:29, we see how Jesus is demonstrated as that sacrificial lamb: “A jar full of sour wine stood there; so, putting a sponge soaked in the wine on a hyssop stick, they held it up to his mouth.”

Inevitably, it is truly the belief of every Christian who takes his Holy Scripture seriously that Jesus was indeed crucified, and that His crucifixion was effective as a sacrifice for the atonement of the sins of the world. Saint Peter our Apostle himself exhorts us, “For you know that the price of your ransom from the futile way of life handed down from your ancestors was paid, not in anything perishable like silver or gold, but in precious blood as of a blameless and spotless lamb, Christ” (1 Peter 1:19). This ransom was paid by the very Christ who loved us by “giving himself up for us as an offering and a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2).

11. It would be revealed later on that this saving work of Jesus Christ was not just good for Israel but for all humanity (Matthew 28:16-20).
12. Even though every Mass that we celebrate in the Church today is a sacrifice of the Passover, we no longer slaughter animals for each sacrifice. This is because Jesus is already the final fulfilment of the sacrifice required for the atonement of our sins. We also do not execute Him again and again at each Mass, for the sacrifice of His passion (suffering) and crucifixion and death was already good once and for all, its effects were more than sufficient and were everlasting. At each Mass, the priest continues to offer a sacrifice based on the same work that Jesus had done.

From the Roman Missal:

“Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the Almighty Father.”

“May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of His name, for our good and the good of all His Holy Church.”

13. But at the Mass, we who worship the Lord also offer ourselves as sacrifices together with Jesus. This is the very command of Saint Paul, who said, “I urge you, then, brothers, remembering the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you, as sensible people” (Romans 12:1).



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