

Forgiveness of Sins Under the Old Covenant

Study Notes by Shane Scott

Introduction.

1. The Bible teaches there is a sharp distinction between the covenant with Israel and the new covenant with the church.
2. Failure to understand this distinction is the source of many denominational errors (instrumental music, infant baptism, tithing).
3. At the same time, understanding this distinction opens a set of questions regarding forgiveness of sins under the Law of Moses.

Discussion.

I. Some Basic Propositions

- A. The New Testament clearly teaches that Jesus' death, and not the animal sacrifices of the Law, is the only basis for forgiveness of sins.
 1. The inefficacy of the Law (Heb. 9:9; 10:4).
 2. The complete sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice (Heb. 9:26).
- B. At the same time, the Old Testament clearly teaches God forgave sins during the era of the old covenant.
 1. Various sin offerings in Leviticus (4:20, 26; 5:10, 13, 16, 18; 6:6-7; 19:20-22).
 2. Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple (1 Kings 8:30, 33-34, 35-36, 37-39, 46-50).
 3. Specific statements in the psalms (32:1-2; 85:1-2; 103:10-12).

II. Harmonization of Bible Teaching

- A. Key disclaimer! We must remember that ultimately this is *God's* "problem."
 1. "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mark 2:7).
 2. "Who can fully and satisfactorily answer this question? The fact is clearly and categorically stated by the Spirit...But until we can estimate aright the exceeding sinfulness of sin and the just claims of the Divine Government on the sinner, I am inclined to think that all our speculations on this matter must fall short of a true and full solution of the question" (Robert Milligan, *Hebrews*, 268).
- B. One possible resolution: "*Sins under the Old Covenant were rolled forward.*"
 1. Suggested that sins were postponed year by year, constantly recorded, until finally Jesus could nail these

sins

at the cross.

2. Drawn from Hebrews 10:3 (“there is a reminder of sins year by year”).
3. Criticism of this interpretation: not explicit language of Scripture. Further, the “reminder” was the reminder on the Day of Atonement.
 - a. Not the explicit language of the text.
 - b. The “reminder” was the reminder of sins at the Day of Atonement. Despite the daily (Ex. 29:38-46), weekly (Num. 28:9-10), and monthly offerings (Num. 28:11-18), on the Day of Atonement the people had to confess their sins of the past year (Lev. 16:30).
 - c. Seems to minimize the direct statements of “forgiveness.”
- C. A suggested explanation: *the sins were forgiven at the time God declared them forgiven, but in view of the cross.*
 1. The NT teaches that Jesus’ death was “retroactive,” benefit those under the old covenant (Heb. 9:15).
 2. Further, the Bible teaches that God had this plan in mind before creation (1 Peter 1:19-20).
 3. Just as we can be forgiven *now*, because of Jesus’ death centuries before our sins, the Israelites could be forgiven *then*, because of Jesus’ death centuries after their sins.
 4. We must not confuse the *means* of forgiveness with the *basis* of forgiveness.
 - a. The *basis* of forgiveness of all sins for all time is the death of Jesus. Nothing inherent in the blood of animals (or the waters of baptism) could remove sins.
 - b. The *means* of forgiveness may change over time, though the central means in the Bible has always been faithful submission to God’s conditions.
 5. “The animal sacrifices of the law were not able, in themselves, to erase man’s guilt (Hebrews 10:4), but the offering of those sacrifices was an act of faith—faith in the redemption God promised. Even though the Christ was only dimly seen in the law itself, the promise of His coming was already strongly established and continued to be even more clearly foretold during the rest of the Old Testament period. The faith exercised by people when they offered the sacrifices God called for was ultimately faith in God’s chosen Redeemer” (Bob Waldron, “The Law—‘Till the Seed Should Come,’ *Christianity*, March/April 1992, p. 19).

III. The “Faultiness” of the Sacrifices of the Law

- A. The sacrifices of the Law had an important purpose.

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10:1-4).
1. They served as a "shadow," pointing the way to the basis of salvation, the death of Christ (Heb. 9:13).
 2. They sanctified for the "cleansing of the flesh" (Heb. 9:13), allowing the worshipper to approach God through the tabernacle.
- B. But the sacrifices of the Law had weaknesses.
1. Its sacrifices could not "make the worshipper perfect in conscience" (Heb. 9:9).
 2. This is due to the fundamental difference between animal sacrifices and Christ's sacrifice.
 - a. Under the Law: offered by sinful man, using ignorant creatures.
 - b. In Christ: He offered Himself in the spirit by His own will (Heb. 9:14; 10:4-10).
 - c. "The old sacrifices, being fleshly in nature, could cleanse only the flesh; the new sacrifice is able to cleanse the conscience because it belongs by nature to the domain of eternal spirit. In other words, the author conceives the sacrifice of Jesus as that which is essentially spiritual. It was not simply a blood-shedding, with no expression of spirit. It was a free, willing sacrifice of a person" (Neil Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today*, p. 171-172).
 3. This weakness is why the sacrifices of the Law had to be offered constantly (Heb. 9:25-26).

IV. Some Related Questions

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- A. What was the status of the OT faithful dead before the cross?
 1. Some have argued they were denied access to paradise then.
 2. Seems hard to square with Bible teaching about Abraham's justification by faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:1-3; James 2:22-23).
 - B. Was John's baptism really for "forgiveness of sins"?
 1. Scripture explicitly says so (Mark 1:4).
 2. I think it is best to see him as a transitional figure, bridging the gap between old and new.
 3. What about re-baptism? The dividing line seems to be Pentecost (Acts 19:1-6).
 - C. What about the thief on the cross?
 1. He lived before the new covenant took effect (Heb. 9:16-17).
 2. Jesus had authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:10; Luke 7:48).

Conclusion.

1. To some extent this is a timing issue, and we must not subject eternal God to the same restrictions of time we finite creatures face.
2. "That no sin was ever forgiven absolutely, without the blood of Christ, is of course conceded, and so also no debt was ever paid absolutely by a mere paper currency. But nevertheless we know that thousands of obligations have been practically cancelled by notes...He too, so to speak, issued in the meantime a sort of promissory notes, based on the infinite value of the blood of Christ, which he knew was to be shed in due time" (Milligan, p. 257).