

CHAPTER 9

The Problem of Sin

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I. General

Knowing what sin is and what its consequences are is vital to understanding God's relationship with humankind and to appreciating the need for Jesus Christ's mission. It also helps us not to sin by: clarifying what sin is (which this chapter does in general terms); and providing great motivation to avoid sin.

What Sin Is

Sin is breaking God's law

Whoever sins is guilty of breaking God's law, because sin is a breaking of the law. 1 JOHN 3:4 GNT

All wrongdoing is sin

Doing wrong is always sin ... 1 JOHN 5:17A NCV™

Not doing what we should do is sin

So whoever knows what is good to do and does not do it is guilty of sin. JAMES 4:17 NET

Sin Is against God

Sin is action against God

[MOSES, TO THE ISRAELITES:] *If anyone sins unintentionally by breaking any of the LORD's commands, he is guilty and must pay the penalty. ...* ¹⁹It is a repayment offering for *the sin he committed against the LORD.* LEVITICUS 5:17, 19 GNT

Sin is rebellion against God

[DAVID, TO GOD:] Drive them out of your presence because of *their many sins and their rebellion against you.* PSALMS 5:10B GNT

Thus, sin is hated by God

For I, the LORD, love justice and hate robbery and sin. ISAIAH 61:8A NET

The Role of the Priests

God designated Aaron and his descendants as priests

[GOD, TO MOSES:] And you, *bring near to you your brother Aaron and his sons with him from among the Israelites, so that they may minister as my priests – Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, Aaron's sons.* EXODUS 28:1 NET

[GOD, TO MOSES:] *And the priesthood shall be theirs by a statute forever. Thus you shall ordain Aaron and his sons.* EXODUS 29:9B ESV

When God made his covenant with Israel, he instituted the Aaronic or Levitical priesthood as an integral aspect of the covenant law, in particular in regard to the regulations concerning the people's relationship with himself.

The priests made the offerings for people when they sinned, to make atonement for them

And the priest shall make atonement for him [a person who had sinned] *with the ram of the guilt offering before the LORD for his sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven for the sin that he has committed.* LEVITICUS 19:22 ESV

The high priest made atonement yearly for Israel as a whole

“The priest who is anointed and ordained to act as high priest in place of his father is to make atonement. He is to put on the linen garments, the holy garments, ³³and he is to purify the Most Holy Place, he is to purify the Meeting Tent and the altar, and he is to make atonement for the priests and for all the people of the assembly. ³⁴This is to be a perpetual statute for you to make atonement for the Israelites for all their sins once a year.” LEVITICUS 16:32-34A NET

The Day of Atonement was to be observed once each year, for the high priest to cleanse the nation as a whole of all sin. It was the most important observance of the OT rituals, the only time the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place.

Note that the Most Holy Place was where the ark of the covenant was kept. The ark contained the stone tablets on which were written the Ten Commandments, the basis of God's covenant with Israel. The ark signified God's presence amongst the Israelites.

The sinner laid hands on the offering, signifying it as a substitute

He must lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf. LEVITICUS 1:4 NET

This practice appears to have signified that the animal was a substitute for the sinner. Moreover, it may also have signified the transfer of the person's sins to the animal (cf. Leviticus 16:21-22).

The Blood of the Offerings

The blood of the offerings for sin featured in making atonement

Then the high priest must bring some of the blood of the bull to the Meeting Tent, ¹⁷and that priest must dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle some of the blood seven times before the LORD toward the front of the veil-canopy. ¹⁸He must put some of the blood on the horns of the altar which is before the LORD in the Meeting Tent, and all the rest of the blood he must pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the Meeting Tent. ¹⁹“Then the priest must take all its fat and offer the fat up in smoke on the altar. ²⁰He must do with the rest of the bull just as he did with the bull of the sin offering; this is what he must do with it. So the priest will make atonement on their behalf and they will be forgiven. LEVITICUS 4:16-20 NET

As this passage illustrates, the blood of animals sacrificed as offerings to make atonement for sinners featured prominently in the instructions given for presenting the offerings. The reason was the correlation of blood with life (as discussed in the following subsection). The blood signified the life of the animal, given as a substitute for the life of the sinner (as reflected in the previous subsection).

For the life of a creature is in its blood

[GOD:] ... for the life of every living thing is in the blood. So I myself have assigned it to you on the altar to make atonement for your lives, for the blood makes atonement by means of the life. LEVITICUS 17:11 NET

Blood sustains life and so is often correlated with life.

Sin Is Universal

All people have sinned . . .

All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. ROMANS 3:23 CEV

All fail to measure up to a standard compatible with God's glory.

. . . No one is righteous before God

[DAVID, TO GOD:] Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no living person is righteous in your sight. PSALMS 143:2 ISV

People in fact have a sinful nature

And those who belong to Christ Jesus have put to death *their human nature with all its passions and desires.* GALATIANS 5:24 GNT

Sin Has Intrinsic Ill Effects

Sin brings spiritual defilement

They became filthy because of what they did. PSALMS 106:39 GW

Sin results in separation from God

[ISAIAH, TO THE PEOPLE OF JUDAH:] But your sinful acts have alienated you from your God; your sins have caused him to reject you and not listen to your prayers. ISAIAH 59:2 NET

Sin brings spiritual death

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] When you were spiritually dead because of your sins and because you were not free from the power of your sinful self, God made you alive with Christ, and he forgave all our sins. COLOSSIANS 2:13 NCV™

Spiritual death involves being cut off from God – “dead to God” – without his Holy Spirit, who brings spiritual life.

Sin also brings enslavement to sin

Jesus answered them, “I tell you the solemn truth, everyone who practices sin is a slave of sin. JOHN 8:34 NET

Sin Brings God's Anger and Death

Sin makes one subject to God's anger

Actually *all of us were like them and lived according to our natural desires, doing whatever suited the wishes of our own bodies and minds. In our natural condition we, like everyone else, were destined to suffer God's anger.* [EPHESIANS 2:3](#) GNT

Here Paul refers to how all people have lived sinful lives, making them subject to God's anger.

Sin results in physical death

Therefore, just as *sin entered the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, so death spread to everyone, because all have sinned.* [ROMANS 5:12](#) ISV

People may experience God's wrath and judgment for sin in various forms during their lifetime, but common to all is the judgment of physical death. Note that the verse makes reference to death initially coming as a consequence of Adam's original sin.

Sin brings the prospect of eternal "death"

[PAUL, TO BELIEVERS:] So what benefit did you then reap from those things that you are now ashamed of? For *the end of those things is death. ...* ²³*For the payoff of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* [ROMANS 6:21, 23](#) NET

Particularly in view of the contrast with "eternal life" (v. 23), "death" (vv. 21, 23) appears to primarily refer to or at least encompass what is sometimes referred to as eternal "death". Because of his justice God demands that unforgiven sin be punished with eternal "death" or destruction, involving eternal separation from God in hell. A complementary reason for this "death" is that sin makes separation from God necessary, because of his holiness.

Pray for persecuted Christians

II. The Law's Provision for Israel's Sin

See also: *I. Jesus Christ and the Law's Diminished Role*, p. 114

In the law on which his covenant with Israel was based, God made provision for atonement to be made for anyone who sinned, and so for the sinner to be forgiven. This allowed the Israelites to remain in their covenant relationship with him, providing that they did not actually give up following God and his laws, as per the terms of the covenant.

The NT contains numerous references to the Mosaic Law's provision for Israel's sin. An understanding of what this provision involved enables us to more fully comprehend why Jesus Christ came and the significance of his work. For many of the concepts involved in Jesus Christ's work have their origin in the law's stipulations for making offerings for atonement for sin. These aspects of the law actually foreshadowed – and would be superseded by – what Jesus Christ would do and implement.

Offerings for Atonement for Sinners

An animal was offered to make atonement for one who sinned

If any person sins unintentionally, then he must bring a yearling female goat for a purification offering. ²⁸And the priest must make atonement for the person who sins unintentionally — when he sins unintentionally before the LORD — to make atonement for him, and he will be forgiven. [NUMBERS 15:27-28](#) NET

Atonement is where God accepts such an offering of a living being as a substitute for the life of a person who has sinned – the person's life otherwise being required as punishment. As such, God accepts the sacrifice as payment for the person's sin. The result is that sin is taken away – and so the sinner is forgiven, pronounced righteous and reconciled to God.

Animals brought as offerings were to be without defect

If this person [who had sinned] brings a lamb as his offering for sin, he must bring a female that has nothing wrong with it. [LEVITICUS 4:32](#) NCV™