

Question:

Yes, the dramatization "hit home" and made me shudder to think an innocent animal was given to atone for a person's wrong-doing to God. The animal did nothing wrong. The person bringing the animal had to be able to afford to do this -- so there was a cost to the individual.

And it makes me shudder to think a person would be put to death for my behavior against God. Yet that happened! I have heard this many, many times before. And yet it struck me as something I have never realized the true horror of it all. And worse, the man was God's Son - Jesus- who suffered for my wrong doing. Jesus didn't do anything wrong -- it was me. But Jesus paid the cost.

It seems like the human animal "gets off" with little cost other than the need to repent and ask for forgiveness. What is the cost here? What is MY cost? ...To change? To walk away from sinning? To seek God's will and follow His law? Is this the cost?

This question is exquisitely expressed. It captures the essence of the point of atonement. In the OT the worshipper did have a cost—the animal that was sacrificed came from their own wealth. Costly indeed.

But the atonement was still far more valuable because the animal was the substitute for the people. No person's life could be compared to the worth of the animal. So grace was extended both in the willingness of God to accept a substitute and in not requiring the full penalty—as costly and as horrifying as that sacrifice was.

After the cross, there is no other payment for our sins. Christ alone atones completely for our sins. Jesus paid it all, as the hymn says. We cannot contribute to the payment for our sins. The only payment would be our death. And that's what God wants to prevent with the death of his own son. Grace is always free. Costly for God, not for us. You cannot pay for a gift. Otherwise it's not a gift. And that's what grace is—a gift.

So maybe it's a bit of a technicality, but our "cost" seems to imply such a payment. It is hard to accept a gift—especially such an overwhelming one. Our instinct is almost always to say we don't deserve it. And that's the point. We don't.

Having said that and wanting to emphasize the Amazing Grace of God, it must also be said, that what God is doing is to restore us to a condition like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Their creation was a pure gift to them. But God owned creation and them. God required their obedience. It was not a payment for his gift, but a necessity for doing his will, existing in concert and fellowshiping with him. Again, I compare that with my children. They were the fruit of our love, and their lives were a pure gift to them. But they had to obey their parents. The two went together, not as a transaction, like a payment, but as a condition of their existence.

So I believe it is with us and God. He made us and owns us. We belong to him. He redeemed us and bought us back for himself. So we are twice his. Consequently, we return to the condition of doing his will because we belong to him doubly, not to pay him back. It's a response instead of a bill to be paid.

I believe that's what the Apostle Paul means when he writes Romans.

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.² Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will. Romans 12. 1-2.

We cannot pay the cost of our atonement. We do not owe God anything more or less than we owed him from creation—to do his will on earth as it is done in heaven. That's what Jesus teaches us to pray for and to do.

The the old hymn "Rock of Ages" captures these thoughts well:

1. Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee;
let the water and the blood,
from thy wounded side which flowed,
be of sin the double cure;
save from wrath and make me pure.

2. Not the labors of my hands
can fulfill thy law's commands;
could my zeal no respite know,
could my tears forever flow,
all for sin could not atone;
thou must save, and thou alone.

3. Nothing in my hand I bring,
simply to the cross I cling;
naked, come to thee for dress;
helpless, look to thee for grace;
foul, I to the fountain fly;
wash me, Savior, or I die.

4. While I draw this fleeting breath,
when mine eyes shall close in death,
when I soar to worlds unknown,
see thee on thy judgment throne,
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
let me hide myself in thee.

