**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**LEVITICUS-005. THE SCAPE GOAT by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited ..."*

*Leviticus 16:22*

The import of the remarkable treatment of this goat does not depend on the interpretation of the obscure phrase rendered in the Authorised Version for the scapegoat. Leaving that out of sight for the moment, we observe that the two animals were one sacrifice, and that the transaction with the living one was the completion of that with the slain. The sins of the congregation, which had been already expiated by the sacrifice, were laid by the high priest on the head of the goat, which was then sent away into the wilderness that he might bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited (v. 22). Nothing depends on the fate of the goat, though, in after times, it was forced over a precipice and so killed. The carrying away of expiated sin, and not the destruction of unexpiated sinners, is the meaning of the impressive rite, and, had it been possible, the same goat that was sacrificed would have been sent into the desert. As that could not be done, an ideal unity was established between the two: the one sacrificed represented the fact of expiation, the one driven away represented the consequences of expiation in the complete removal of sin. The expiation was made within the veil; but a visible token of its completeness was given to help feeble faith, in the blessed mystery of the unseen propitiation. What was divided in the symbol between the twin goats is all done by the one Sacrifice, who has entered into the holiest of all, at once Priest and Sacrifice, and with His own blood made expiation for sin, and has likewise carried away the sin of the world into a land of forgetfulness, whence it never can return.

The clear meaning of the rite is thus obtained, whatever be the force of the difficult phrase already referred to. Scapegoat is certainly wrong. But it may be questioned whether the Revised Version is right in retaining the Hebrew word untranslated, and, by putting a capital letter to it, marking it as a proper name (for Azazel). The word occurs only here, so that we have no help from other passages. It seems to come from a root meaning to drive away, and those who take it to be a proper name, generally suppose it to refer to some malignant spirit, or to Satan, and interpret it as meaning a fiend whom one drives away, or, sometimes, who drives away. The vindication of such an interpretation is supposed to lie in the necessity of finding a complete antithesis in the phrase to the for Jehovah of the previous clause in verse 8. But it is surely sacrificing a good deal to rhetorical propriety to drag in an idea so foreign to the Pentateuch, and so opposed to the plain fact, that both goats were one sin offering (v. 5), in order to get a pedantically correct antithesis. In the absence of any guidance from usage, certainty as to the meaning of the word is unattainable. But there seems no reason, other than that of the said antithesis, against taking it to mean removal or dismissal, rather than a remover. The Septuagint translates it in both ways: as a person in verse 8, and as sending away in verse 10. If the latter meaning be adopted, then the word just defines the same purpose as is given more at length in verse 22, namely, the carrying away of the sins of the congregation. The logical imperfection of the opposition in verse 8 would then be simply enough solved by the fact that while both goats were for the Lord, one was destined to be actually offered in sacrifice, and the other to be for dismissal. The incomplete contrast testifies to the substantial unity of the two, and needs no introduction, into the most sacred rite of the old covenant, of a ceremony which looks liker demon-worship than a parable of the great expiation for a world's sins.

The question for us is, What spiritual ideas are contained in this Levitical symbolism? There is signified, surely, the condition of approach to God. Remember how the Israelites had impressed on their minds the awful sanctity of within the veil. The inmost shrine was trodden once a year only by the high priest, and only after anxious lustrations and when clothed in pure garments, he entered with sacrifice and incense lest he die. This ritual was for a gross and untutored age, but the men of that age were essentially like ourselves, and we have the same sins and spiritual necessities as they had.

The two goats are regarded as one sacrifice. They are a sin offering. Hence, to show how unimportant and non-essential is the distinction between them, the lot is employed; also, while the one is being slain, the other stands before the door of the Tabernacle. This shows that both are parts of one whole, and it is only from the impossibility of presenting both halves of the truth to be symbolised in one that two are taken. The one which is slain represents the sacrifice for sin. The other represents the effects of that sacrifice. It is never heard of more. The Lamb of God taketh away the sins of the world. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us.

**I. The perfect removal of all sin is thus symbolised.**

Notice

**(a**) the vivid consciousness of sin which marked Judaism.

Was it exaggerated or right? The same consciousness is part of all of us, but how overlaid! how stifled!

That consciousness once awakened has in it these elements--a bitter sense of sin as mine, involving guilt; despair as to whether I can ever overcome it; and fearful thoughts of my relation to God which conscience itself brings.

**(b)** The futility of all attempts to remove these fears.

False religions have next to nothing to say about forgiveness. Sacrifices and lustrations they have, but no assurance of absolution. Systems of philosophy and morals have nothing to say but that the universe goes crashing on, and if you have broken its laws you must suffer. That is all, or only the poor cheer of Well! you have fallen, get up and go on again! So men often drug themselves into forgetfulness. They turn away from the unwelcome subject, and forget it at the price of all moral earnestness and often of all happiness; a lethargic sleep or a gaiety, as little real as that of the Girondins singing in their prison the night before being led out to the guillotine.

It is only God's authoritative revelation that can ensure the cure, only He can assure us of pardon, and of the removal of all barriers between ourselves and His love. Only His word can ensure, and His power can effect, the removal of the consequences of our sins. Only His word can ensure, and His power effect, the removal of the power of evil on our characters.

**(c)** Still the question, Can guilt ever be cancelled? often assumes a fearful significance. Doubtless much seems to say that it cannot be.

**(i)** The irrevocableness of the past.

**(ii)** The rigid law of consequences in this world.

**(iii)** The indissoluble unity of an individual life and moral nature, confirmed by the experience of failure in all attempts at reformation of self.

**(iv)** The consciousness of disturbed relations with God, and the prophecy of judgment. All this that ancient symbol suggested. The picture of the goat going away, and away, and away, a lessening speck on the horizon, and never heard of more is the divine symbol of the great fact that there is full, free, everlasting forgiveness, and on God's part, utter forgetfulness. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow. I will remember them no more at all for ever.

**II. The bearing away of sin is indissolubly connected with sacrifice.**

Two goats were provided, of which one was offered for a sin offering, indicating that sacrifice came first; then the removal of sin was symbolised by the sending away of the second goat. There is an evident reference to this sequence in the words without shedding of blood there is no remission. The two goats represent Christ's work; the one in its essence, the other in its effect.

The one teaches that sacrifice is a necessary condition of pardon. Forgiveness was not given because the offerer confessed his guilt or because God was merciful, but because the goat had been slain as a sin offering. There is deep spiritual truth for us in this symbolism. We do not need to enter on the philosophy of atonement, but simply to rest on the fact--that the only authority on which we can be sure of forgiveness at all indissolubly associates the two things, sacrifice and pardon. We have no reason to believe in forgiveness except from the Bible record and assurance.

Was the Mosaic ritual a divinely appointed thing? If so, its testimony is conclusive. But even if it were only the embodiment of human aspirations and wants, it would be a strong evidence of the necessity of some such thing as forgiveness.

The shallow dream that God's forgiveness can be extended without a sacrifice having been offered does not exalt but detracts from the divine character. It invariably leads to an emasculated abhorrence of evil, and detracts from the holiness of God, as well as introduces low thoughts of the greatness of forgiveness and of the infinite love of God.

**III. The bearing away of sin is associated with man's laying of his sins on the sacrifice appointed by God.**

We have seen that the two goats must be regarded as together making one whole. The one which was slain made atonement ...because of the uncleannesses of the children of Israel, and because of their transgressions, even all their sins, but that expiation was not actually effective till Aaron had laid his hands on the head of the live goat, and confessed over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, ...and put them on the head of the live goat, and sent him away into the wilderness. The sacrifice of the slain goat did not accomplish the pardon or removal of the people's sins, but made it possible that their sins should be pardoned and removed.

Then the method by which that possibility is realised is the laying hands on the scapegoat and confessing the sins upon it. The sins which are actually forgiven, by virtue of the atonement made for all sins, are those which it bears away to the wilderness.

This answers, point for point, to repentance and faith. By these the possibility is turned into an actuality for as many as believe on Christ.

Christ has died for sin. Christ has made atonement by which all sin may be forgiven; whether any shall actually be forgiven depends on something else. It is conceivable that though Christ died, no sin might be pardoned, if no man believed. His blood would not, even then, have been shed in vain, for the purpose of it would have been fully effected in providing a way by which any and all sin could be forgiven. So that the whole question whether any man's sin is pardoned turns on this, Has he laid his hand on Christ? Faith is only a condition of forgiveness, not a cause, or in itself a power. There was no healing in the mere laying of the hand on the head of the goat.

It was not faith which was the reason for forgiveness, but God's love which had provided the sacrifice.

God's will is not a bare will to pardon, nor a bare will to pardon for Christ's sake, but for Christ's sake to pardon them who believe. Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world. Dost thou believe on the Son of God? Through this Man is preached the remission of sins.