

## Lesson 9

- Old Testament sacrifices
- To Egypt
- Ascended into heaven

## Lesson 9a

### Old Testament sacrifices

In the Old Testament we read a lot about sacrifices. Because they were of great importance in Old Testament times, we will look at them in this lesson. In lesson 7c we discussed the purpose of sacrifices. In this lesson we will go a bit further and focus on a few of the important sacrifices.

#### God wants to relate to sinful beings

In the bible we read how man has become unfaithful to God. Nevertheless, God does not turn his back on man. Again and again, He reaches out to him and shows his desire to help him. Although God hates sin, He wants to be involved with sinful people. He even wants to live among them.

First He comes to live with man in the tabernacle\*, a tent the Israelites made according to God's instructions and later in the temple\*. In both the tabernacle and the temple God is present in a special way.

How is it possible for God, who hates sin, to live with sinful people? Does He not mind sin that much after all? Can He brush it aside as something irrelevant? No, indeed not.

When God comes to live with the Israelites, his attitude to sin is unmistakable. He shows that sin is so bad it even deserves death. He can only live with them once their guilt and sin have been forgiven.

#### Visible teaching

God made himself visible through sacrifices. He required that every day animals had to be sacrificed at the tabernacle or the temple. Every day blood had to be shed. The blood would remind the Israelites of death. It showed them that everything was not all right between them and God. God had said:

*'Cursed is the man who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out'*

Deuteronomy  
27:26

Anyone who did not keep God's law in every aspect was cursed; he deserved the death penalty. And because it is impossible for any man to keep God's law in every aspect, every Israelite deserved the death penalty.

However, God wanted to save the Israelites from their punishment. He decided that animals could take their place in sacrifice.

When someone would bring a sacrifice, he had to put his hands on the head of the animal that was to be killed. This way he identified himself with the animal and he would be reminded that he should really have been killed rather than the animal.

God lived with his people. Nevertheless, everyone who looked at the tabernacle or the temple would be reminded that it was not due to the goodness of the Israelites. It was only possible because God had forgiven their sins. The Israelites deserved death just like everyone else. Only because God was satisfied with the death of animals were they able to live in a relationship with Him.

#### The difference with other religious sacrifices

The Israelites were not the only ones to bring sacrifices. Many other nations also sacrificed to their gods. Even today there are nations who bring sacrifices to their gods. However, there was a big difference between the sacrifices of the Israelites and those of the other nations. The difference was the reason behind the sacrifices. Other peoples brought sacrifices to persuade their gods into good humour. Their philosophy was: if we take care of our gods and please them with many sacrifices, they will take care of us. They wanted to get something done from their gods.

Things were different for the people of Israel. They did not bring sacrifices to please God or to get something done. They did not need to because God loved them. He had already adopted them as his children. He took care of them like a father.

The sacrifices of the Israelites served a different purpose. They served to teach the people. By means of the sacrifices,

God wanted to teach the Israelites that they were dependent on his forgiveness. They had to know that a good relationship with Him was only possible because He was willing to forgive their sins. The sacrifices showed that it was not a natural thing for God to live with his people, but that it was only possible because of God's love.

The sacrifices also taught the Israelites that they could not decide for themselves how they would relate to God. They had to go by God's rules. Just like a king decides how his subjects can relate to him, God made rules for his people about how to relate to Him.

### The meaning of sacrifices

The different sacrifices the Israelites were to bring all reflected something of the relationship between God and the people who belonged to Him. The most important sacrifices were:

- The burnt offering (Leviticus 1)

Someone who brought a burnt offering expressed that he wanted to give his life to God and serve only Him. He would put his hands on the head of the animal as if to say, in the same way as I give this animal to God, I want to give myself over to God. Then the animal would be killed and burnt on the altar by the priests\*.

Everyone could take an animal to the tabernacle to have it sacrificed as a burnt offering. Besides, the priests would bring a burnt offering every morning and every evening in the name of the whole people of Israel, to confirm that they indeed were the people of God and that they wanted to live the way God asked from them.

- The fellowship offering (Leviticus 7)

Someone who brought a fellowship offering showed that he was grateful for the good relationship between him and God. When a fellowship offering was made, an animal was killed and part of the animal was burnt on the altar and in that way given to God. The priests and the person who brought the

sacrifice would eat the other part of the animal. As it were, they shared a meal with God.

- The sin offering (Leviticus 4,5)

With a sin offering someone could ask God for forgiveness for a certain sin. The person who would make the offering would put his hands on the head of the animal before it was sacrificed as a symbol of shifting his sin over to the animal. The animal then received the punishment that was really meant for the sinner who would go without punishment. His sin was forgiven.

The blood that was shed in every offering reminded the Israelites over and over again that they did not have a right to be in a relationship with God. It was only possible through the forgiveness of their sins.

### The Priests

God had decided that the Israelites could not bring the offerings themselves. Only the priests could do so. They were in a special way in God's service and worked in the tabernacle and the temple. They were all men from the same family, the family of Aaron\*. No one else could become a priest. They were assisted by the Levites, who were descendants of Jacob's son Levi.

Why could offerings only be brought by priests and why could only the descendants of Aaron become priests? Again God wanted to teach the Israelites something.

God wanted to live with his people. However, because of sin there was a great distance between Him, the holy God, and the sinful people. For this reason one family, the family of Aaron had to be especially consecrated to God. They held a special position amongst the Israelites. There were very strict rules for the men of this family in order to be able to do their service in God's holy place. They had to live by a special set of laws and regularly bring sacrifices for themselves and their sins. Otherwise their sins would be in between God and them

## Old Testament sacrifices

when they would be sacrificing for the Israelites. God only chose the family of Aaron to show that not just any man could come into the service of the holy God.

### The value of sacrifices

The Israelites had to bring sacrifices. Not because God needed the sacrifices. The people were not to think that God would be under any obligation towards them because of their sacrifices. In Psalm 50 God says:

*Psalm 50:9-13*

*'I have no need of a bull from your stall  
Or of goats from your pens,  
For every animal of the forest is mine,  
And the cattle on a thousand hills...  
Do I eat flesh of bulls  
Or drink the blood of goats?'*

God does not need anything from man. Everything belongs to Him. He had no need for sacrifices. God was not so much concerned with the sacrifice in itself. He was concerned about the heart of the person who brought the sacrifice. We see this from the rest of Psalm 50:

*Psalm 50:14-15*

*'Sacrifice thank-offerings to God,  
Fulfil your vows to the Most High,  
And call upon me in the day of trouble;  
I will deliver you, and you will honour me'*

The Israelites had to bring their sacrifices to God to show Him their love and their willingness to obey Him. The sacrifices served to express their guilt and their desire for a restoration of their relationship with God. Also, through their sacrifices they could show their gratefulness for everything God had given to them.

### Jesus, the perfect sacrifice

As we saw in lesson 7c, God did not mean for the bringing of sacrifices to last forever. All those offerings that were made

day after day, year after year, showed the need for another sacrifice. A perfect sacrifice that would restore the relationship between God and man forever. Jesus Christ brought this sacrifice. When He died on the cross, He took the place of sinful men and paid for their guilt before God. After that ultimate sacrifice, no more animals needed to be killed.

### Questions

1. However valuable a sacrifice was, it could be of no value to God. Explain. Look up Psalm 50 and Genesis 4:3-5, which we looked at in lesson 3b.
2. Can you explain why the bible calls Jesus the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world? (John 1:29)
3. We no longer sacrifice animals to God. Does that mean we never need to make any sacrifices to God? Look up Romans 12:1-2. Can you explain what is meant in this text?

## To Egypt

### Lesson 9b

#### To Egypt

Jacob has had to live abroad for twenty years to escape from his brother's revenge. When he returned to Canaan, he was still afraid of Esau, but God made sure the encounter was peaceful. Esau had forgiven Jacob' deceit.

#### Jacob in Shechem

After his encounter with Esau, Jacob and his family go to Shechem, a Canaanite city. He buys a plot of land and with his family he settles down. Finally, the future nation has its own place in Canaan. Jacob builds an altar in Shechem to show the inhabitants of the city that there is only one God: his God. However, this does not mean that Jacob's family worships God alone. His wives and sons have idols, which shows their lack of trust in Jacob's God. Jacob's sons often act as if they are on Satan's side rather than people who belong to God. One example is when they cowardly kill a whole city of diseased men as a revenge for the rape of their sister Dina by a man from that city.

#### To Bethel

After their sons have committed this crime, God tells Jacob to leave Shechem and move to Bethel. This is the place where, years ago on his flight from Esau, Jacob had had a dream in which God encouraged him and promised him his blessing. After the dream, Jacob had promised God that if he would return safely to Canaan, he would serve God as his God and worship Him in that place. Jacob has forgotten all about that dream and only when God reminds him, he remembers. Only then he also does something about the worship of idols in his family. He tells his wives and children to get rid of their idols and only worship the true God. As a sign of the new start they all have to change into clean clothes. When everyone has done so, they leave.

When they arrive in Bethel, Jacob builds an altar for God. And just like when he first came to Bethel, God appears to him. He repeats his promise that Jacob will bring forth a great nation and that the nation will possess Canaan.

#### The sons of Jacob

Unfortunately, there is not a lot of change in Jacob's family after they have moved to Bethel. His sons – the fathers of the future nation – still act as people who have nothing to do with God. Some of them marry Canaanite women, who do not believe in God. Reuben sleeps with one of his father's wives. One of the others goes to a prostitute after his wife has died. Increasingly, Jacob's sons become like the Canaanite people rather than people who are on God's side.

Their behaviour towards their brother Joseph is another sign of their wickedness. Joseph is the son of Rachel, the wife Jacob loves. His father prefers him to his brothers and that causes his brothers to hate him. It gets worse when Joseph has some odd dreams and tells his brothers about them. In his dreams his parents and brothers bow down before him and pay him their respects.

Jacob's sons come up with a plan to get rid of Joseph. Initially, they want to kill him, but eventually they decide to sell him as a slave to a caravan that happens to pass by. They tell their father that a wild animal has killed Joseph. To prove their story they show him Joseph's garment covered in the blood of a goat. Jacob believes their story and is inconsolable.

#### Joseph the slave

Read: Genesis 39

The bible tells us in great detail what happens next to Joseph. He is brought to Egypt and sold to a man named Potiphar who has a high position at the Egyptian court. Potiphar soon trusts Joseph to such an extent that he makes him in charge of his whole household and all his slaves.

Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph. When Joseph ignores her, she accuses him of rape and he is sent to prison without any form of trial.

His situation seems hopeless: an imprisoned slave in a foreign country. However, God continues to take good care of him. Joseph wins the favour of the head of prison and gains a good position despite his imprisonment.

### Joseph the prisoner

In prison, Joseph meets two servants of the Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. God has given him a gift to be able to explain the meaning of certain dreams. When the two servants of Pharaoh have had strange dreams, he is able to explain to them the meaning of their dreams.

Two years later, the Pharaoh has an upsetting dream. He sees how seven beautiful, fat cows that are grazing on the banks of the river Nile, are being devoured by seven ugly, thin cows. Then he also sees how seven beautiful, full ears of corn are being devoured by seven thin and dry ears of corn. No one can explain the meaning of the dream to Pharaoh. Until one of the servants, who had been in prison, suddenly remembers Joseph. He tells Pharaoh about the foreign prisoner who can explain dreams and Pharaoh calls Joseph before him.

God enables Joseph to explain Pharaoh's dream. He tells Pharaoh that the dream is a warning that after seven years of abundance, there will be a famine for seven years. Pharaoh is impressed with the explanation and the advice that Joseph gives him and gives him the highest possible position in the country. Joseph is made in charge of the whole of Egypt, only answerable to the Pharaoh.

### Joseph the ruler

The famine of Pharaoh's dream becomes a reality, but Egypt is prepared. Under the leadership of Joseph, enough food has been piled up to be able to survive for years. The famine does not stay in Egypt but stretches out to Canaan. There is so little food in Canaan that the sons of Jacob come to Egypt to buy food. In Egypt they have to come before Joseph, who is not a

slave but the ruler over all of Egypt. Jacob's sons do not recognise their brother. This gives Joseph a chance to test them and as he does so, he can tell that they regret what they have done to him and have become changed people.

### God's intention

When Joseph tells his brothers who he is, they fear for their lives. They fear that he will take revenge. However, Joseph assures them that they do not need to be afraid. God has used their wicked deed in his plan. He wants to save his future nation from starvation. If this has been God's intention, would Joseph be allowed to take revenge?

The Pharaoh makes it possible for Joseph's whole family to come over to Egypt. He gives them a fertile and separate piece of land close to the river Nile. This way God not only saves his future people from starvation but also from the dangerous environment they live in. In Canaan Jacob's offspring was under the constant temptation to worship other gods or marry people who worshiped other gods. In this separated piece of land that temptation is not as strong.

### Oppression

In a few centuries, Jacob's family in Egypt grows into an enormous nation. They are called 'Israel', after the name that God once gave to Jacob.

After many years, a new Pharaoh, who has not known Joseph, becomes king over Egypt. He is worried about the size of the people of Israel. He fears that a time will come when the Israelites will be powerful enough to drive out the Egyptians from their country. He is determined to prevent this from happening. Therefore, he forces all Israelite men into slavery and makes them do heavy labour. Moreover, he gives an order that all Israelite baby boys that are born have to be killed.

## To Egypt

### Moses

Read: Exodus 2:1-10

2:1 *the house of Levy*: the man is a descendant of Jacob's son Levy

2:6 *Hebrew*: Israelite

An Israelite man and woman who have a baby boy are forced to throw it in the river Nile. If they do not do so themselves, the Egyptians will do it for them. However, the couple in our text manage to hide their baby boy for three months. When it becomes impossible to hide him any longer they decide to put him in a basket on the Nile and hope someone with good intentions will find him.

When an Egyptian princess finds the basket, she takes pity on the baby. She decides to adopt the baby but wonders how she can feed it. A girl comes up to her and tells her that her mother might be able to feed the child for a couple of years. The princess agrees to this idea and so the boy is able to spend his first few years at home with his family.

When is a few years old, his mother brings him to the palace and he is adopted by Pharaoh's daughter. She calls him Moses.

### Moses' flight

Moses stays at the Egyptian court until he is forty years old. He receives excellent education. When is grown up however, he chooses his own people despite his Egyptian upbringing and with that also the God of his people.

When he sees an Egyptian slave driver hit an Israelite labourer, Moses becomes furious and kills the Egyptian. Pharaoh hears what Moses has done and wants to kill him. However, Moses manages to escape. He flees to the country of Midian. There he meets a woman whom he marries. For the next forty years he works for his father-in-law as a shepherd.

### Moses' mission

Read: Exodus 2:23-3:14

3:1 the mountain of God: the mountain Horeb, or Sinai, is called the mountain of God because on that mountain God will later give his laws to the Israelite people.

While Moses spends forty years in Midian, the situation for the Israelites in Egypt does not improve. They cry out to God for help. God remembers the covenant He has made with them and does not ignore their cries. He promised Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that their descendants would possess the land of Canaan. He now wants to fulfil this promise.

One day, when Moses is tending his father-in-law's flock, he observes something strange. He sees a bush that is in flames but does not get burned up. He does not immediately realise that it is the angel of the LORD, God himself, who is appearing to him. But then God speaks. He warns him not to come any closer and to take off his dirty shoes – a sign that Moses needs to be purified before he can come before God. God tells Moses to bring the Israelites out of Egypt to Canaan. He has to persuade Pharaoh to let Israel go. God guarantees success as He tells Moses that together with all the Israelite people he will come back to this same place to thank and worship Him.

Moses asks God: '*Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your fathers has send me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" Then what shall I tell them?*' At first sight, this might seem a very strange question. Don't the Israelites know God? However, the question is less strange than it seems. In that time, names were of much greater importance than they are now. A name\* was an indication of someone's personality. When Moses asks God for his name, he really asks Him: 'What can we expect from you?'

God tells Moses then that his name is Jehovah (In Hebrew it really is 'Yahweh'). This is not a new name. We have seen this name before in Genesis, but now God makes the true significance of his name known. It means: 'I am who I am':

- I do not change: you can count on Me
- I am faithful: I do what I have promised
- I am here for you: I will save you

The name Jehovah is a summary of who God is to his people: a faithful and saving God.

### Questions

1. a. What made Jacob and his family move to Egypt?  
b. Why did God lead the circumstances in such a way that Jacob's family was forced to move to Egypt?
2. a. Where is Jacob buried? Look at Genesis 49:29-32 and 50:12-14. 49:29 *I am about to be gathered to my people: I am going to die.*  
b. Why would he have wanted this?
3. How is what happens in Exodus 1 related to Genesis 3:15?



## Lesson 9c

### Ascended into heaven

In this lesson we will discuss the sixth article of the Apostolic Creed that says that Jesus is 'ascended into heaven and, and sits on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.

#### The ascension

Jesus Christ has conquered death. When He rose from the grave He had a body that was no longer mortal. This means that He is still alive today. Why then can we not meet Him now, two thousand years later?

The reason is that He no longer lives on earth. Forty days after his resurrection, the Son of God returned to where He came from, heaven. As the Creed says, He '*ascended into heaven*'. After Jesus' resurrection, many of his followers have been able to meet Him. They have been able to talk with Him, to eat with Him and to touch Him. All those people, more than five hundred, were eyewitnesses of the fact that Jesus was alive and that it really was Him.

Jesus truly lived again. However, it was not God's intention for Him to continue his work on earth as He had done before his death. Obviously, his followers would have wanted that. They were overjoyed that they had Jesus back and did not want to lose him again. However, immediately after his resurrection Jesus had said:

John 20:17

*'Do not hold on to me ... I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God'*

The mission that Jesus had come to fulfil on earth had been completed. Jesus had finished his task. His bodily presence on earth was no longer necessary. He was now needed somewhere else. For this reason He left his followers behind after having convinced them that He was alive and having given them their last instructions. In the presence of his eleven special followers, Jesus ascended into heaven. His disciples

saw how He left and were astonished. They could not tell where He was going. A cloud took Him from their sight. As the disciples continued to stare at the sky, wondering where Jesus had gone, all of a sudden two men dressed in white appeared next to them. They were angels. Jesus sent them as messengers. The angels asked the disciples: 'Why are you looking at the sky? Jesus has been taken from you and has gone to heaven. But in the same way that He has left He will return to the earth one day'.

#### Witnesses

That Jesus went to heaven this way is a miracle that many people find hard to believe. Jesus has mockingly been called the first spaceman. However, there is no reason to believe that the ascension has not happened. Eleven people were witnesses of the fact that He left the world as a living man. They could not see where He went but two angels were able to tell them first hand where He had gone. They had been witnesses of his arrival in heaven.

God knows that at times it can be hard for us to believe and He always makes sure there are eyewitnesses to testify to what He has done. A large crowd was present for example when Jesus died. It is indisputable that Jesus died. We can also be sure that He came to life again. People have seen Him, touched his body and eaten with Him. Now, at his Son's ascension, God again provides witnesses. We can therefore be sure that Jesus did ascend from earth to heaven.

#### The ascension: a triumph

The ascension was a very special occasion for Jesus. As the Son of God, He had had to humiliate himself deeply in order to save us. He had had to suffer severely to the point of death. Now the time had come for Him to return to his Father. His Father took Him back with Him. The ascension was a happy occasion, a suitable reward for the work that Jesus had done. It restored Jesus to the honour that He deserved.

In the bible Paul compares Jesus' ascension with the triumphant entry of a king after battle. Jesus had fought a battle on earth. On the cross He had done what no man had ever been able to do: He had '*disarmed the powers and authorities*' (Colossians 2:15). In other words, He had defeated Satan and his servants.

Jesus' victory was followed by a triumph taking Satan as his captive. Paul tells us that Jesus on his triumphant entry into heaven gave gifts to man. He gave them apostles\*, prophets, evangelists\*, pastors\* and teachers: people with the gift to tell others about Him, people who could support their fellow-believers in their faith.

Jesus made sure that his followers were equipped to continue without Him. He made sure that the work of God's salvation would not come to a halt but rather that it would go on in full force.

### Jesus sits at God's right hand

After his ascension Jesus can take his place at the right hand of God. This signifies a place of honour at the side of his Father.

However, Jesus sitting at God's right hand signifies more than that. It means that Jesus is given a position of power.

God the Father, the King of heaven and earth, reigns over everything that exists. After the ascension Jesus takes on an important role in that reign. He has become King with his Father. God the Father gives Him unlimited power over heaven and earth and the authority to reign in his name. You could say that after the ascension God the Father reigns by means of his Son.

Jesus did not return to heaven to sit back and relax. He went to continue his work. Heaven is the centre from which Jesus reigns over heaven and earth and guides history until the moment that He will return to the earth.

### What do we gain from the ascension?

What does it mean for us that Jesus is in heaven? Why is it important to us? The bible shows us that the fact of Jesus'

ascension is of great importance to us. To list just a few reasons that we should be glad about the ascension:

- Jesus can defend us in heaven.
- Jesus' ascension to heaven is a guarantee that we will go to heaven.
- Jesus sends us the Holy Spirit from heaven.

We will now look into these three points.

### Jesus defends us

Someone who has to go to court because he has committed a crime can hire a lawyer to defend him. Such a lawyer will do everything to avoid punishment for his client. He can for example call on the circumstances to explain why his client committed a crime or he can try and prove that his client cannot possibly have done the crime.

To God all men count as criminals. However respectable our lives might seem, everyone deserves the death penalty. However, whoever believes in Jesus Christ has a wonderful lawyer: Jesus himself. He pleads our case before God. He defends us.

Romans 8:34

*'Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us'*

It is not like Jesus tells his Father that we have not committed a certain sin. Neither does He bring circumstances into account. He does not say: 'This man has had such a difficult childhood, how can he be expected not to commit these sins?' No, Jesus does not deny our sins. Nor does he deny our guilt. But He points to his own work. He reminds his Father that He has paid for our sins with his own suffering and death. He has been punished for our guilt. For that reason God can let us go free.

## Ascended into heaven

1 John 2:1-2

*'But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning\* sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world'*

It is therefore of great importance to us that Jesus is now in heaven. Whoever believes in Jesus has the best lawyer anyone could wish for. His defence always leads to absolution. This does not mean that God will condemn no one. The bible is quite clear on that point. Anyone can receive absolution but only when they turn to Jesus Christ.

John 3:18

*'Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name\* of God's one and only Son'*

### Jesus' ascension is our guarantee

The bond between Jesus Christ and the people who believe in Him is very strong. The bible compares this relationship with the relationship between the head and the body. A head and a body belong together. They form an unbreakable unity. In the same way Jesus Christ and the people who believe in Him belong together. Jesus is as it were the head and the church the body.

From this comparison we see that Jesus Christ cannot do without the church. This is a great comfort for the people who believe in Him. Jesus might have gone to heaven but that does not mean that they have lost Him forever. On the contrary, He, the head, belongs to his body. The fact that He went to heaven gives the believers a guarantee that they will go to heaven one day.

Just before Jesus was arrested, He spoke at great length with his followers. He told them not to be concerned once He would have gone:

John 14:2,3

*'In my Father's house are many rooms ... I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for*

*you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am'*

Jesus makes sure there will be a place in heaven for those who believe in Him. Anyone who believes in Him can live in heaven after he dies because whoever believes in Jesus, belongs to Him.

### Jesus sends us the Holy Spirit

We saw earlier in this lesson that Jesus gave away gifts on his ascension. We have not yet discussed the greatest gift that He gave: from heaven Jesus sent his followers the Holy Spirit. He had announced this just before He was arrested:

John 16:7

*'But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you'*

From the words of Jesus we know that it is better for us that Jesus has gone to heaven. Because He went to heaven He could send us the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, whom is called 'counsellor' here, came to earth soon after Jesus' ascension and He still is here. He will never leave us.

### Questions

1. Why did Jesus not stay on the earth after He rose from the death?
2. What does it mean that Jesus sits at God's right hand in heaven?
3. Jesus is our lawyer. Can you explain what that means?