

As It Is Written

In John 8:31 Jesus advances His famous, if somewhat puzzling phrase, "*if you are my disciples then truth will set you free*". Free from what? As we learn a few verses later, Jesus is referring to sin.

So, what exactly does this mean? Some two-thousand years post resurrection, all of us continue to sin. Sin manifestly continues to hold sway over us which raises the question - how exactly are we free from sin? How does accepting the truth of Jesus's teachings set one free from sin? The first clue comes from a colleague of Martin Luther, Philipp Melanchthon who wrote, in the Augsburg Confession, that repentance is the key to salvation and that knowledge of the moral law was necessary to produce the contrition to which God would graciously respond. I can't help but think Melanchthon had Leviticus 17:11 in mind. I think it might be worth our time to take a closer look at this verse: Here's the NIV's translation:

*For the life of a creature is in the **blood**, and **I have given it** to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life (emphasis in red).*

(NOTE: the antecedent of the indefinite pronoun, 'it' (in blue), is the aforementioned blood)

A straightforward reading of the NIV's translation correctly teaches us that God considers blood an essential requirement for atonement. But, is that all there is? Are we to come away from this verse knowing that blood is essential to a proper sacrifice? The Hebrew paints a much different picture –one that Luther and Melanchthon would understand 2000 years later. Let's look a little closer. Of the seven English Bibles I consulted¹ only the NET Bible renders the Hebrew phrase, **וַאֲנִי נָתַתִּיו** (*va'ani nətattiv*), correctly. Here's the NET's translation:

*For the life of every living thing is in the blood. So, **I, myself, have given** it to everyone on the altar to make atonement for your lives, for the blood makes atonement by means of the life (emphasis in red).*

Notice the difference. In the other Bibles, *va'ani nətattiv* is translated as "*I have given*" while only in the NET's translation is it more accurately rendered as "*I, myself, have given*".

¹ Specifically, the RSV, KJV, NAB, NAU, NET, NIV, and NKJ translations.



Is this significant? In Hebrew to repeat the subject of a sentence, as in this verse, is to call attention to the subject of the sentence, over and above the action or the object of the action. In other words, the emphasis is on God as giver, not what God gave, i.e., blood as the currency of atonement. This is not unlike English. When we want to emphasize *'who'* does something, we might say, *"I, myself, took out the garbage."* In other words, I want everyone to know that I took out the garbage, not someone else disposed of it, or that the garbage was simply taken out. Had the latter been the case, I would have written simply, "I took out the garbage." In Lev 17:11 the emphasis is clearly on God the giver, not just what He gave.

Thus, while it is true that blood sacrifice is for the purpose of making atonement, the larger, more important teaching is that God gave us the process in the first place. In other words, Holy Scripture wants us to understand that, important as atonement is, it is even more important to know who gave us this process -- God!

In Lev 17:11, then, God reveals to us that the sacrifice we *'give'* to God is, from God's perspective, nothing more than the means by which He may express His grace to us in the form of forgiveness. We see this reflected throughout the Gospels and the other books of the New Testament. Throughout all the narratives, songs, poems, and histories of the Bible, God is shown as providing sinners with the means to achieve forgiveness in the first place. Hence, Paul's teaching in Rom 5:8, *"But God demonstrates His own love for us in this way: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* In God's incarnation, death, and resurrection He not only sacrifices Himself, but does so using the means He specified in the first place.

To be free from sin, then, is simply to know that God, through Jesus' death and resurrection, has provided us with the means by which we can gain forgiveness and restore our relationship with Him. It is like the loving parent who knows his child will fail from time-to-time, but nevertheless stands ready to forgive (provided the child learns his lessons and repents... but that's another article). In exactly the same way God manifests His grace; a grace that frees us to flourish in spite of our failings.

Now, go and study