

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 of 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 so we are bold to ask, how exactly 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. Let's 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** it¹ to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.*

(NOTE: the indefinite pronoun, 'it', refers to the blood.)

A straightforward reading of the NIV's translation correctly teaches us that God considers blood to be an essential requirement for atonement. But, is that all there is? Where does God's grace enter into the picture? A more literal translation of 17:11 than that of the NIV (as well as the RSV, KJV, NAB, NAU, NET, and NKJ translations) is illustrative and 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 consulted 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.*

Notice the difference. In the other Bibles, *va'ani nətattiv* is translated as "*I have given*". Yet, in the NET's translation it is more correctly (and literally) rendered as "*I, myself, have given*".

¹ Grammatically, the antecedent of 'it' could be either "the blood" (*bəddam*) or "the flesh" (*habbasar*). Both referents are masculine. However, because the pronoun is in closer proximity to 'blood' than to 'flesh', the correct choice is the "the blood".



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 or that the garbage was simply taken out. Here the emphasis in Lev 17:11 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 forgivenessⁱ. We see this reflected in the New Testament, not only the Gospels but its other books as well. Throughout all of the biblical text one of its most common themes is God providing sinners with the means to achieve forgiveness – hence, St. 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 having sinned does not preclude eternal life. 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

ⁱ Walter Kaiser has this to say about this verse:

"The principle of a vicarious substitutionary atonement observed in this passage receives its highest expression in the death of Jesus Christ on the cross at Golgotha. [As a result] it is possible for those who have offended God, and who are thus worthy of death, to receive atonement and reconciliation with God because of the lifeblood of Christ, offered on our behalf as a reconciling means (see Rom 5:9-11). So strong is the proposition that the blood makes atonement that Heb 9:22 lays it down as immutable: "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (NIV). Thus, in the NT view, [this verse] anticipated and foreshadowed the one and only perfect sacrifice that was to come in the death of Christ (Kaiser, Walter, "New Interpreter's Bible, Vol 1", p. 1120.