

GARGOYLE GAZETTE



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Recently, I heard a talk by Bishop Fulton Sheen entitled “The Denial of Sin,” in which he argues the biggest problem with society today is not sin itself, but the denial of its existence. A major theme of this talk is the question of how to remove sin and the cost of redemption, which is stated in Hebrews 9:22, “Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin.” He reveals a pattern in Scripture that shows us just how God works to cover our sin. Firstly, “God does something”, meaning, he intervenes in some way. Secondly, “it is done vicariously,” man does not suffer for his own sins, but God accomplishes it through other means. And thirdly, there is a “shedding of blood.”

The first example he gives of this is Adam and Eve. In the garden, their sin caused them shame, and they recognized their nakedness. This was suffering enough for Adam and Eve



The Sacrificial Lamb by Josefa de Ayala (ca. 1630-1684)

to feel the weight of their actions change the very way they viewed themselves and each other, and they sought to cover themselves. God intervened, and in one of the last verses

of the account of the fall, often overlooked, we read in the third chapter of Genesis, verse 21, “the Lord made tunics of skins for Adam and his wife, and clothed them.” God intervened, an animal was used, and there was a shedding of blood, so that their shame would be covered.

This pattern is closer to the surface in the story of Abraham and Isaac. God’s commandment is harsh, in order to test the faith of Abraham. Bishop Sheen comments that “in this day and age, we say ‘obedience must be rational.’ Rational? What was rational about God’s command to sacrifice his son? But Abraham obeyed.” When they arrive at the place of sacrifice, Isaac says, “Where is the lamb?” And as we know, at the moment of sacrifice, God stops Abraham. God provided a ram, whose blood was shed instead of Isaac’s. The same pattern comes to light.

The theme becomes even more potent in the story of the first Passover in the book of

Exodus, when the one-year-old, unspotted lamb's blood was shed to protect the Israelites from the angel of death. Not a single Israelite died in the effort to acquire freedom from the Egyptians. God did it instead with a lamb.

And in the book of Numbers, the Israelites are in the desert, detaching from the habits and customs they adopted in Egypt, rekindling their relationship with their one true God. Yet they still struggle to trust and they still have a sin problem. As punishment for their rebellion in the desert, they are bitten by snakes. God tells Moses to model a serpent of brass, just like the serpents who stung the people, and hang it in a tree where all can see. Each person who sees the serpent will be healed of the poison.

Bishop Sheen says, "Now there's absolutely nothing in looking at a brass serpent that will cure a snake bite. Nothing. All these things in the Old Testament were done in figure." The obedience that God calls us to often perplexes human wisdom, and even rends the human heart, as it did for Abraham. We can imagine the slew of rationalizations in Abraham's mind upon hearing the commandment. One can imagine the fears of what others would think of him if he followed through. The cost of obedience for Abraham was weightier than that of the Israelites in the desert wounded by snakebites. They had less to lose in taking the step of faith to look at the serpent in the tree. They were in the desert. Who was there to mock them for their faith in something that seems almost ridiculous? But we who view the Cross today in search of salvation, amidst a world that punishes and mocks us for it, understand the cost of obedience to faith. Bishop Sheen says that "these things were done in figure," meaning that they were shadows on the wall, reflecting back an image rather than true reality. But the figures all become real in the Crucifixion, signified by the tearing of the veil at the moment of the piercing of Christ's side.

In the gospel of John, Jesus says to Nicodemus, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." Bishop draws the parallel as he says, "So our Blessed Lord on the cross looked as if he were full of the poison of sin, because he took our place, and our sins upon him. But as there was no poison in the brass serpent, so there was no poison of sin in the person of Christ. And all who look upon him will be healed."

Why did Jesus die on the cross? Why is it said that he "died for our sins?" Though I have been a Catholic my whole life, I am still confounded by the Crucifixion. Though I have firsthand received the Lord's redemption in my life, I am challenged with the necessity of Christ's death. But these stories from the Old Testament answer the question for me, which answer is summed up in Hebrews 9:22, "Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sin." John the Baptist points to Christ says "Behold, the Lamb of God. Behold Him who takes away the sins of the world."

"The Denial of Sin" is part of a series called *A Retreat for Everyone*, produced by the podcast Bishop Fulton Sheen Remastered, which has many of his talks available for listening.