

Sacrifice

Opening Hymn: #187 — Jesus Paid It All

2 Chron. 29:31 [Hezekiah speaks] Now ye have consecrated yourselves unto the LORD, come near and bring **sacrifices** and thank offerings into the house of the LORD. And the congregation brought in **sacrifices** and thank offerings.

The word “sacrifice” in its various forms appears 230 times in the King James Old Testament. We know, of course, about offerings from Cain and Able, Noah after he left the ark, and even Abraham’s willingness to offer up Isaac his most precious possession. But the first occurrence of the word “sacrifice” is in Gen. 31:54, “Then Jacob offered sacrifice upon the mount.” The Hebrew word here as well in our opening verse from 2nd Chronicles is Strong’s #2077, *zeh’-bakh*, and means a slaughter, by impl. a sacrifice (the victim or the act). It is translated: offer (-ing), sacrifice.

The Companion Bible says this verb means *to slay* [and offer up]; *hence to offer what has been slain; to sacrifice*. As a noun it is “the proper word for a victim, *slain* and offered. The Hebrew name for altar (*mizbeah*) is derived from the same root and denotes *the place of slaughter*.”

Today nobody would define the word *sacrifice* in terms of slaughtering something, but that’s exactly what it meant in Old Testament times. So let’s think a little about why there’s so much emphasis on the sacrificial offering of animals, of what possible value it had to God, and what kind of sacrifice pleases him today. It might also be well to think about what we’re doing that in any sense of the word constitutes sacrificing.

The Formal Institution of Sacrificing

Leviticus specifies in great detail what kind of animal sacrifice was required, under what circumstances, and how it was to be made. Why was this so important? Since the Bible makes it clear that the blood of bulls and goats has no real value, why should God ask the Israelites to do something that was useless?

First, such laws provided a constant reminder that no matter how hard they tried, everyone was constantly falling short of God’s righteous requirements and had to do something to regain God’s favor. Just saying “I’m sorry” was not enough.

Heb. 10:3 But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year.

Second, animals represented wealth. Parting with an animal cost the sinner something. So although one could obtain forgiveness, it was not free.

However, **WE** see something more. We see a picture of something that was yet future:

Heb. 9:22 Almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission.

The first Passover celebrated in Egypt clearly shows the idea that salvation from death can only occur if a sacrifice takes place. It pictured the death of a perfect, innocent victim, which would truly bring atonement for a world of sinners. But of course Israel never saw it this way. They knew only that if they followed the rules and gave God what he wanted, they could go back to their daily business.

Today we'd say that "they just didn't get it." God didn't want their sheep, their goats, and their bullocks. Balaam, for example, thought that's exactly what God wanted:

Num. 23:1,2,4 And Balaam said unto Balak, Build me here seven altars, and prepare me here seven oxen and seven rams. And Balak did as Balaam had spoken; and Balak and Balaam offered on every altar a bullock and a ram. (vs. 4) And God met Balaam: and he [Balaam] said . . . I have prepared seven altars, and I have offered upon every altar a bullock and a ram.

In other words, "I have given you a lot of those bullocks and rams you love so much, and now I was wondering if you might do a small favor for me!"

One reason a specific formula for animal sacrifices was given in Leviticus was so the people would not think the more costly an offering, the more surely God must accept it. If that argument is taken to its extreme, one offers sons and daughters because it is the most valuable thing one has. This idea first occurred among the heathen nations, and was eventually accepted by Israel too, even though they were specifically told by God not to do it:

Deut. 12:30,31 [Don't say to yourself...] How did these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Thou shalt **not** do so unto the LORD thy God: for every abomination to the LORD, which he hateth, have **they** done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters [the most valuable thing they had] they have burnt in the fire to their gods.

Jer. 32:35 And they . . . caused their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire unto Molech; which I commanded them not, **neither came it into my mind**, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.

When one thinks only about the sacrificial animal as such, it is easy for those looking to get by cheap to conclude that since it is going to die anyway, one might just as well offer a less-than-perfect specimen:

Mal. 1:8 (NIV) When you bring **blind** animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice **crippled** or **diseased** animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you?

Can you imagine how confused they must have been when God told them he really had no interest in animal sacrifices at all?

Isa. 1:11 To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the LORD: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats.

So what's the lesson? What kind of sacrifice does God expect from us? How can we avoid the mistakes that were made by fleshly Israel?

Sacrifices Today

Psalms 40 is a wonderful recitation of what the Lord has done for us. Verse 6: "Sacrifice and offering thou didst **not** desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou **not** required." Once again we see that God has no interest in "things." And we know that because our "ears have been opened."

What does that mean? There are two explanations:

#1: This is the only place where the Hebrew word is translated "opened." In nearly every other place it is translated "digged." It describes what was done to a slave who did not want to be set free, who wanted to serve his master for life. Exod. 21:6 says "his master shall bore his ear through with an awl and he shall serve him forever." (However, the Hebrew words for "digged" and "bore" are quite different, and "boring with an awl" occurred on an ear's outer rim not within the ear itself. [Barnes p. 1303])

#2: "Digged" means to clean out, to excavate, which is what mothers think children should do to their ears when they can't hear what's being said to them. "This people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing . . . But blessed are . . . your ears for they hear." (Matt. 13:15) A similar text is Isa. 50:5, "The Lord God hath opened mine ear and I was not rebellious." (However, this "opened" is not the same Hebrew word as in Psa. 40:6.)

But whether you prefer the "servant for life" or the "ears that hear" explanation, this psalm makes it clear that because of "opened ears" there is a change of behavior:

Psa. 40:8-10 I delight to do **thy will**, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart. I have 1) preached righteousness in the great congregation: lo, I have not refrained my lips, O LORD, thou knowest. I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart; I have 2) declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation: I have not concealed thy lovingkindness and thy truth from the great congregation.

The one with opened ears is **not** doing his own will, he **is** doing the will of God, e.g., preaching righteousness and declaring God's faithfulness and salvation. That is what God desires.

Giving one's will means giving one's self. When Aaron and his sons went through the ritual we call the consecration of the priesthood (Lev. 8), they laid their hands on animals, and these animals were slain. The laying on of hands pictures that what was to happen to these animals should be seen as though it were happening to them. They were really offering themselves in sacrifice, which means to be slain.

Rom. 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a **living sacrifice**, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.

There is a cartoon in the Dawn's shipping department. It shows a character climbing down off a huge altar. The caption reads: "The problem with a living sacrifice is it keeps crawling off the altar!"

When the animal was slain, it absolutely ceased to have a will of its own. So if we have sacrificed ourselves, we must have no will of our own. This is what sacrifice means from God's standpoint. It is not about giving God "things," for we read:

Acts 17:25 (NIV) [God] is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else.

Psa. 50:10,12 For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. . . . the world is mine, and the fulness thereof. (vs. 5) Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice.

The rich of Jesus' day thought that giving God things would please Him. But they were not looking at it from God's point of view:

Luke 21:1-4 (NIV) As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. I tell you the truth, he said, this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.

It seems that the more one has, the harder it is to be pleasing to God. The richer and more prosperous the kings of Israel became, the less pleasing they were to God. The young man who claimed to have kept all the commandments from his youth was too rich in this world's goods to obtain true riches:

Mark 10:21-23 Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. And he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved: for he had great possessions. And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!

This young man was unwilling to become a sacrifice—a living sacrifice—because he could not “slay” himself, could not give up his will like a sacrificial animal.

The Example of Jesus

Heb. 8:3 (NIV) Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one [Jesus] also to have something to offer. [10:9,10] Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” . . . And by that will, we have been made holy through the **sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ** once for all.

Jesus sacrificed his body by giving up his will to do the will of his Father. This was his consuming desire; it was a “living sacrifice” and it eventually resulted in his physical death. “My food, said Jesus, is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work.” (John 4:34) We may not be a high priest like he was, but we are priests:

1 Pet. 2:5 (NIV) You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be **a holy priesthood**, offering spiritual* sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

We are a holy priesthood. We were told that priests offer both gifts and sacrifices. Jesus offered himself, and as we look at every detail of his life, we see that everything he did was to please his Heavenly

* Although Bro. Russell frequently said *spiritual* is not in the oldest manuscripts, every translation I checked, even the *Diaglott*, includes it without a marginal note of any kind.

Father, not himself. What are we offering? It's easy to say that because we made a consecration, we have also given ourself. But have we? Let's take a slightly different look at the parable of the sheep and the goats. Even though its primary application is to the end of the Millennial Age, its principles have universal application:

Matt. 25:34-36 Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand [the sheep], Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: For I was an hungered, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. [when telling the goats they never did these things. the goats act surprised—vs. 44] Then shall they [the goats] also answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungered, or athirst, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not minister unto thee?

It is one thing to say that God has no pleasure in sacrifices for sin, that God does not need nor desire "things." But does that mean that since we are free from the law (oh happy condition!) we are free to do as we please? Surely not! Why were the goats destroyed? They, like the sheep, professed love for the Lord. They call him Lord. But they haven't done a thing to demonstrate their professed love. And that is what seals their doom.

From time to time we hear warnings that there may be some **future** great persecution that will come upon the last members of the church to test us severely. I first heard such warnings 50 years ago during the second World War. And it is quite possible that there will be some great persecution. But at the same time, there is a great danger in concentrating our attention on an unknown future: it blinds us to the trials we are having now. And what might these be? Our tremendous collective prosperity that takes us away from doing the Lord's will and from sacrificing ourselves.

When was the last time you fed the hungry? When did you last take in a stranger or give clothing to someone in need? When did you last visit someone who was sick? Have you ever visited someone in prison? The goats say they would have done all these things for the Lord, but in fact they never did it to one of the "least of these." What do we really sacrifice? If you were to answer for others, you might list all kinds of things that they do not consider a sacrifice. They might say it's fun, far more satisfying than anything else they do. Someone once said a sacrifice was when you did something you really didn't want to do. If you don't want to visit the sick or those in prison, it's no surprise that you stay busy with other things and somehow never get around to doing what you don't want to do.

In our opening hymn we sang, "Bring a willing sacrifice." You've probably heard that if it's not a willing, enthusiastic sacrifice, it isn't worth anything. I'm not so sure. An enthusiastic worker in the Lord's vineyard once said (and I paraphrase), "At the start of my Christian walk, everything was a sacrifice. But I did it anyway, and I learned. Now near the end of my walk, I'm finding that nothing is a sacrifice!" Perhaps if you are not willing to visit the sick, you should do it anyway. Eventually you may find it is no sacrifice at all. There are even those who speak enthusiastically of their service to those in prison.

John 12:25 He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

Do you love your life? Look back on it so far and ask whose will you've been following. If you have been doing your own will, then you are not a living sacrifice.

When a Jew wished to sacrifice, he selected an animal and killed it. But Jesus did not select an arbitrary victim. He gave himself to be killed. But today sacrifice is much like the gentleman who graciously observed that he had given his nephew to the war and stood ready to sacrifice his brother-in-law as well! We, however, are expected to sacrifice OUR wills—e.g., time, talent, means, influence—not the wills (time/talent/means) of others. We don't own our spouses, children, parents, ecclesia.

The principle that we must sacrifice what is ours and not what belongs to others is nicely illustrated by David:

2 Sam. 24:22 And Araunah said unto David, Let my lord the king take and offer up what seemeth good unto him: behold, here be oxen for burnt sacrifice, and threshing instruments and other instruments of the oxen for wood. (vs. 24) And the king said . . . Nay; but I will surely buy it of thee at a price: neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the LORD my God of that which doth cost me nothing. So David bought the threshingfloor and the oxen . . . and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.

When Saul was caught red-handed with the best the Amalekites had even though he had been told to destroy everything, he says it's not his fault, but even if it was, it was for a good cause:

1 Sam. 15:13-15 And Saul said unto Samuel, Blessed be thou of the LORD: I have performed the commandment of the LORD. And Samuel said, What meaneth then this bleating of the sheep in mine ears, and the lowing of the oxen which I hear? And Saul said, They [not me!] have brought them from the Amalekites: for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen, **to sacrifice** unto the LORD thy God; and the rest we have utterly destroyed.

Sacrifice? Of what cost nothing? God is supposed to be pleased that the people offer in sacrifice Amalekite sheep and oxen? Not likely. Saul's complete lack of understanding about sacrifice resulted in his rejection. Samuel's words ring out to us today:

(vs. 22) And Samuel said, Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in **obeying** the voice of the LORD? Behold, **to obey** is better than sacrifice.

Jer. 7:22,23 For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices: But this thing commanded I them, saying, **Obey my voice**, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you.

So this is the "bottom line." God doesn't want "things" from us, he wants obedience:

Prov. 23:26 My son, give me **thine heart**, and let thine eyes observe my ways.

If we give our heart to God, there are definite actions that will follow to demonstrate the sincerity of that claim:

Prov. 21:3 (NIV) To **do what is right** and just is more acceptable to the LORD than sacrifice.

Heb. 13:15-16 (NIV) Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a **sacrifice of praise**—the fruit of lips that confess his name. And do not forget to **do good** and to **share with others**, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Hosea 6:6 For I desired **mercy**, and not sacrifice; and the **knowledge of God** more than burnt offerings.

So we do not buy our way into the kingdom by contributing what has only been given to us by God. However, I'm reminded of a funny story. Seems a preacher was warning his flock against the Bible Students: "In our church we all tithe, but if you get involved with those people it won't cost you 10%; it will cost you everything you've got!" Upon hearing this one of our number observed: "Our movement might be better off with the 10%!"

One of the scribes asked Jesus which was the most important commandment. Jesus answered and the scribe repeated what he heard:

Mark 12:33 (NIV) To love [God] with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself, is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

"Another form of service frequently not discerned by the royal priesthood is the opportunity of renouncing our own ways or plans, our own methods or preferences, and in the interests of peace accepting instead the plans, the preferences of others—where it is merely a matter of personal preference, and where we believe the Lord will be as willing to have the matter one way as another."—Manna April 24; R3266

May we all in the days and weeks that lie ahead, offer up sacrifices that are pleasing to our Heavenly Father.

Closing Hymn: #54 — Once For All

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