

What The Sacrifices Mean

They Are Intended For Us

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Most of us are at least somewhat familiar with the Old Covenant sacrificial system. We probably have a picture in our minds of endless numbers of bulls, sheep, goats, and turtle doves led to an altar and slaughtered, creating huge amounts of blood. And for some reason, maybe unknown to many of us, this was considered to be an act of worship. We are also aware that some of these sacrifices were not bloody. Some of those offerings consisted of cereal grains and fruits, and the giving of these too was considered an act of worship before the God of heaven and earth.

Some of those sacrifices were totally burnt upon the altar, while others were partially burned and shared with others, and it was commanded that some offerings were not to be offered solely but had to be accompanied with other offerings.

Now all of this probably presents a rather confusing picture to most of us, and I think that we are probably glad that this system has been set aside. I think that we probably would not want to be bothered with it, or maybe bothered is not the right word but confronted by it, because overall, it might make a pretty gruesome picture for most of us city born-and-raised people. But let us be reminded of something that we know but maybe do not think of often, and that is everything in this Book has been designed for our good. And it is part of the wisdom that God has planned from the very beginning and therefore we are to learn from it.

Let us begin with just a brief reading of three scriptures, that some of which you are probably familiar with. First in Romans 12, verse 1. All of these scriptures have the word sacrifice involved within it.

Romans 12:1 I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable [or spiritual] service.

Now flip forward to Philippians 4, verse 18, where Paul writes,

Philippians 4:18 Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God.

This was a gift from the people in Philippi to the apostle Paul, who was in prison at the time. And he received it, and from what he received, he discerned that this caused these people a considerable sacrifice to do what they had sent to him.

Now let us look at another one in Hebrews the 13th chapter. And a good portion of the material in chapter 13 involves the altar and we have things there that belong only to the Christian, and it says in verse 15,

Hebrews 13:15-16 Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. But do not forget to do good and to share with such and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

Now, I said just a bit earlier, that everything that God does is for those of us who are under the New Covenant. And Paul confirms this in the book of Romans in chapter 15 and in verse 4. You do not have to turn there, I will just read it to you.

Romans 15:4 For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.

God did not waste a considerable portion of His Book on something meaningless to His children. Now the literal slaying of an animal may be archaic, but the principles that are involved within it are as up to date as today, and we might be able to even use some of them today. And it was made, that is, this wisdom given, for everyone who makes the New Covenant with God. Now, reading this verse lets us know very plainly that it was for our understanding that those sacrifices were done. Of course, those people benefited to some degree, but we get the real picture that God intends for us.

The sacrificial offerings probably began with Adam and Eve, but the first recorded one is made by Cain and Abel. And Abel's sacrifice was better and accepted because he followed God's instructions. Cain brought what would maybe normally be considered a very fine offering to God. But he did not follow God's instructions to the letter, as Abel did. And so Abel is commended in Hebrews 11 that his sacrifice was accepted because of his faith.

Now, what do the offerings represent? And most especially the burnt offering, which we are going to consider just briefly. The sacrifice of an animal is in some ways very much similar to the sacrifice of giving an amount of money, as we are going to be doing today. But with the sacrifice of an animal, there was a closeness in a relationship with a living thing that is very much missing when we give an amount of money in a check. Now, there are people who very frequently make a trip to a gravesite to make an offering to the deceased loved one. Now, I do not know anything about these people's theology, but their loving devotion to the remembrance of that dead person eloquently touches on a facet of what the offerings represent.

When the average Israelite made an offering of an animal, and maybe most especially the Passover lamb, but also to some extent, a bull, a goat, for one of the other offerings, he did not just run out to a large herd in a field and choose whatever seemed good to him. You and I reach into our wallet, get out a check, and it is just the next check number up. We have made sure there is money in the bank. But is there really an emotional attachment to a piece of paper with ink on it? Now, there might be some. A lot depends upon the sacrifice that is involved in that offering.

Now every history of those ancient people shows that the average family's holdings of animals was very small. The Israelites who offered an unblemished animal as a sacrifice was giving of an animal that was bound to the family. It was almost like a member. It is very likely that the animal carried a name similar to what we do with our dogs and our cats. It is also true the family had a bundle of experiences with that animal. It was not only valuable to the family, it was to some measure *dear* to them.

Well, I experienced a little bit of this when we had our sheep. I did not give those five sheep names. But I knew them. There were little differences in each one of those sheep. And I have told you the experience I had when they escaped out the fence, walked down the railroad tracks, and then the neighbor called up and said, "Hey, Mr. Ritenbaugh, your sheep are down here." And this was on a Sabbath day.

What was I going to do when I got down there and found out that they were scattered all over the woods? Well, I remembered something from the Bible. I spoke to them, and believe it or not, they gathered around me. And then without a leash or anything, I was able to lead them back along the railroad track, worried that at any moment a train was going to come down there. And then I had to get them up a very steep embankment to get into the place where they escaped.

They put their nose through and the first thing you know, all five of them were through, and that first sheep by that time must have weighed about 100, 125 pounds and I had to wrestle her up the bank and through the hole. And it was not easy. All the while up there, I was worried I was breaking the Sabbath, trying to save my sheep with all that exertion that I was making. But once I got her through, the others helped themselves to get up and all I had to do was steady them.

Now that is what I mean. When they made an offering, they were offering someone, a sheep, yes, just an animal, but that animal had a certain amount of character that they recognized, personality traits, and it was almost like offering somebody in the family.

Go with me back to Leviticus 1, verses 3 through 5. This is concerning the burnt offering.

Leviticus 1:3-5 "If his offering is a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it of his own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the Lord. [So the person making the offering had to choose the animal. And it had to be without blemish, meaning the best of what he had.] Then he shall put his hand on the head of the burnt offering [it is still

alive], and it will be accepted on his behalf to make an atonement for him. [The laying on of hands, in this case, on the sheep's head, was a transference so that the animal symbolically became the man making the offering.] He shall kill the bull [or the sheep or whatever it was] before the Lord; and the priests, Aaron's sons, shall bring the blood and sprinkle the blood all around the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of meeting."

He did not kill that animal with a single gunshot to the wound to the head. No, he killed it with a knife. He had to slit the animal's throat. And maybe the animal gave a bit of a scream. I do not know. They can feel pain. And to some degree they know you.

My sheep knew me. They followed me because I was their shepherd. They would not have followed another one, another shepherd; they would follow me because they recognized me as the one with whom they had a relationship. And now in the sacrifice, the positions are reversed and the animal becomes symbolic of the man who knows when he slit that lamb or bull's throat, that thing looked at him with those big brown eyes and gave him a sense of guilt. It must have been charged with emotion.

So, what was he doing? Symbolically, he was cutting his own throat in the giving of an offering. So the offering of the animal represented the offering of the self to God. I hope you understand that the offerings were not focused on death. They were focused on the giving of a life. And that is why Paul said that we must be a living sacrifice, alive and yet sacrificing our life in our relationship with God.

Now in Galatians, the second chapter, verse 20, Paul wrote this. And he did this because our Savior sacrificed Himself in our behalf. And so he says, regarding himself, and this should apply to you and me as well,

Galatians 2:20 I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.

Paul was saying there, I have given up my life. I am a living sacrifice. Now what God calls upon us to do is actually much more difficult in reality, because the last thing that human nature wants to do is to totally give itself up. It will fight tooth and toenail, and so frequently deceives us into thinking that we are going the right way, trying always to constantly persuade us to take it easy. You can discipline, you can control yourselves later, have fun. Do what you feel you need to do right now.

Now the standards that we are to meet are exceedingly high, and we will rehearse them here in Luke the 14th chapter and verses 26 and 27. And it is because of this, that before we baptize anybody, we go through these verses so that they have at least had a witness to them before they actually dedicated their life to Jesus Christ as to the high standards of sacrifice that we are called upon by our Savior to meet. He says in verse 26,

Luke 14:26-27 "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple."

Those standards are about as high as any human being can meet. He has to put Jesus Christ and loyalty to Him and submission to Him higher than his own family and himself. That is the *giving* of a life, not just taking it in death. In a way, by comparison, brethren, taking the life in death is easy. We have to sacrifice as a living being the rest of our life.

In Luke the 10th chapter we will finish in verses 25 to 28.

Luke 10:25-28 And behold, a certain lawyer stood up and tested Him, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And He said to him, "What is written in the law? What is your reading of it?" And so he answered and said, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind,' and 'your neighbor as yourself.'" And He said to him, "You have answered rightly; do this and you will live."

Well, perhaps you will reflect on this in the future and when you make an offering that you will remember a little bit of this, that the Old Testament sacrifices did not focus on dying, they focused on the giving of a living life. And so it goes on and on until we die. In a way it is no wonder to me that Jesus complimented the widow who gave her two mites. And those two mites, it says very plainly, were "all that she had." I mean, that is all. There was no welfare in those days unless the family met it.

She gave everything she had. She did it in a moment of time, of course, but it must have taken a great deal of thoughtful concentration for her to give up what she did. So, let us all remember that we are a type of that animal who gave its all.