

What Should a Christian Sacrifice?— and Why?

"I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God." Romans 12:1 NAS

Why should a Christian need to sacrifice if Jesus already gave the ultimate sacrifice of his life? Why should a Christian need to sacrifice anything—since God is very rich and has stores of blessings ready to pour out on His children who have faith?

If a believer has already given up drugs, smoking, drinking, swearing, stealing—what more could be asked? Is sacrificing our sinful habits what God is asking us to do? Sinful habits could hardly be considered a sacrifice "holy" or "acceptable." What kind of "living sacrifice" is God accepting?

Before the Temple—a Tabernacle

When Moses went up the mountain, he not only came down with the Ten Commandments, but also instructions for building a Tabernacle and conducting a system of sacrifices. This Tabernacle was originally used as a moveable Temple which was dismantled and constructed again and again as the camp of Israelites moved through the wilderness for forty years.

First a priesthood was consecrated—with animal sacrifices! Then every year the Day of Atonement with its sin offerings made the people acceptable to God for the year ahead. During the year the Israelites could come to this Tabernacle and offer their personal sacrifices—expressing thankfulness, commitment to God, sorrow for their sins. Even after they came into the Land of Promise, the Tabernacle was in use at Shiloh (north of Jerusalem) for 369 years before the Temple was built. Archeological evidence in that place today confirms the location of the Tabernacle.

Finally, King Solomon built a Temple in Jerusalem where sacrifices were to be made. It functioned like the Tabernacle—only on a much grander scale—for hundreds of years. Although the Babylonians destroyed the first Temple in BC. 606, it was rebuilt after the 70-year desolation. And in our Lord's day, Jesus who taught in Herod's Temple never criticized the animal sacrifices—only the abuses that accompanied the preparations for worship.

Why Animal Sacrifices?

Why did God ask for animal sacrifices? The Apostle Paul unlocks the reason. "For the Law, since it has only a *shadow of the good things to come* and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near....But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year" (Hebrews 10:1-3 nas). So the sacrificing of animals was a *finger* pointing to the real cause for the need for the sacrifice of a perfect human life. That cause was *sin*.

"Therefore the Law has become our tutor [literally: *a child-conductor*] to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith." These sacrifices—even before the Law Covenant at Mt. Sinai—had a message, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:21). But once Jesus shed his own blood—all the animal sacrifices pointing to his sacrifice of life were made obsolete.

Jesus Needed to Die as a Sacrifice

The Jews stumbled over the fact that their Messiah first had to die. They missed the point of all those sacrifices! They had no idea that Messiah would be a *priestly* king. They overlooked the point spoken by "the mouth of all his prophets, that Christ should suffer" (Acts 3:18; Luke 24:26) and die, seeing only *the promised blessing* work of the royal priesthood. Today many "modern Christians" (who appreciate Jesus to some extent) also do not understand that Jesus had to *die* for sin atonement. They see him as leading a wonderful, exemplary life—but they fail to see the need for blood atonement. However, it is a simple matter of justice: "The wages of sin is death." Since Adam, our first parent, sinned and was condemned to death with all his posterity—in order for him and us to be freed, someone had to die in his place. Jesus satisfied those claims of justice. "My flesh, which I give for the life of the world" (John 6:51).

These questions yet remain, Why then would the Apostle Paul be asking *Christians* to "present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice"? What would be the point of sacrificing *after* Jesus already sacrificed his life? Would not any additional sacrifice be just as useless as continuing to make animal sacrifices after Jesus already died for sins?

A Royal Priesthood

The Apostle Paul was not the only one who talked about giving oneself for a "sacrifice." The Apostle Peter talks about our being a "holy" and a "royal priesthood" which offers up "sacrifices" (1 Peter 2:5,8). What could Christians possibly offer God as an "acceptable" sacrifice?

It is easy to understand how Jesus is our high priest offering himself as a sacrifice on our behalf for sin atonement: "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession" (Hebrews 4:14). However, Paul is calling Christians to sacrifice and Peter is saying Christians are part of a priesthood—"royal" no less! John the Revelator also calls followers of Christ, "priests to our God" (Revelation 5:10).

Paul himself gives us the key to unlocking just how Christians are part of a sacrificing priesthood. Unmistakably, he refers to the Day of Atonement when he says, "For the bodies of those animals whose *blood is brought into the holy place* by the high priest as an offering for sin, are *burned outside the camp*. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. Hence, *let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach*" (Hebrews 13:11-13).

The Day of Atonement

A closer look at what happened on that important Atonement Day (Leviticus 16) presents the answer to our question.... The two animals offered for sin on that day were first a bullock and then a goat. Moses was instructed at Sinai that the bullock was for Aaron himself and "for his house." The goat was specified "for the people."

What happened to the bullock also later happened to the goat. The high priest himself donated the bullock then laid his hands on it. By this action he was saying: "This is me!" Then the sacrifice was killed in the Court of the Tabernacle and burned on the Altar—a pleasing fragrance. But the hide, flesh and waste were burned outside the camp of Israel. What an awful smell! By contrast, the high priest also burned incense on the incense altar as he went into the innermost room of the Tabernacle (the Most Holy) with the blood of the bullock.

Then the Priest laid hands upon the Lord's goat—taken from congregation of Israel. It was killed and burned as was the bullock—its blood, too, was sprinkled in the Most Holy.

The Real Sacrifice

When Jesus offered himself in sacrifice at the River Jordan and said, "I come to do thy will," he was offering his humanity. His human will was killed, so to speak. For three and one half years it was as if his flesh burned on the altar. When the world outside observed what he was doing with his life, it was a stench to them. But to God it was a sweet-smelling sacrifice. Finally, he died on the cross. When resurrected, appearing "in the presence of God for us" (Hebrews 9:24), the merit of his blood was presented to justice in the presence of God. What more could be done?

Nothing more *needed* to be done. But God has been selecting a church to follow in Jesus' footsteps. To make our sacrifice acceptable, our high priest laid hands on us because we have no value apart from Jesus. Jesus makes our sacrifice "acceptable" and "holy." As the bullock was sacrificed, so the goat likewise—including the burning "outside the camp." And that is precisely why the Apostle Paul says, "Let us go to him without the camp bearing his reproach." He is calling on Christians to be faithful to their commitment of sacrifice—no matter what the world thinks! "For we are a fragrance of Christ to God to the one [the world] an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life" (2 Corinthians 2:15,16).

In numerous places we are invited to suffer and die *with* Christ. If indeed "we *suffer with Him* in order that we may also be glorified with Him." (Romans 8:17). "It is a trustworthy statement: For if we *died with Him*, we shall also live with Him" (2 Timothy 2:11,12).

So God is pleased to accept our sacrifices—"present your bodies"—to become part of one sin-offering "sacrifice." Though our wills are dead to self—still it is a *living* sacrifice because in reality we have to consciously keep it dead on the altar till totally consumed. God is not asking us to sacrifice a sinful life—we do not have the right to that anyway! Our acceptable sacrifice is putting aside or surrendering our legitimate human hopes, plans and ambitions to the will and service of God.

However, since we are part of the priesthood too, we can look forward to the privilege of blessing the people of the world after all the Atonement Day sacrificing is done. Being part of a "*royal* priesthood," this will mean the church with her Head Jesus will have the authority and power to effectively bless the whole groaning creation (Romans 8:22).