

Followers of the Way

Living Sacrifices

Steve Campbell 26-06-22

Romans 12:1-8

Sacrifice is not a word or a concept widely used today. In biblical times, however, it was an everyday experience.

When was the first sacrifice?

The Passover Lamb?

Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac?

Abel's sacrifice which was favoured by God?

No, the first sacrifice was long before this. When Adam and Eve sinned, disobeying God and eating the forbidden fruit, they realised for the first time they were naked and tried, inadequately, to cover up their shame with fig leaves. The LORD made garments of skin for them meaning an animal had to be sacrificed to do so.

[Hebrews 9:22](#) tells us, 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.'

Thus a blood sacrifice is necessary to cover over guilt and shame and that a sinful people may approach the Holy God. So God instructed Moses to inaugurate the sacrificial system for this purpose, with its elaborate mix of Levites and priests, offerings and feasts.

A sacrifice was an offering totally and utterly dedicated to God.

Despite the detailed laws about animal sacrifices the system was often abused, by both priests and people.

In 2 Samuel 2:12-17 we read of Eli's sons whose sin 'was very great in the LORD's sight, for they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt.'

And later the LORD complains through the prophet Malachi about those who bring unacceptable sacrifices to him: 'Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord.' (Mal 1:14)

Although there are similarities with pagan sacrifices, their intentions are totally different. Pagans made offerings to their gods, including child sacrifice, seeking to appease them and win their favour, and somehow thinking they were providing food for their deity.

This bore no resemblance to the sacrifices made to the LORD, as He made clear in Psalm 50:12-15:

‘If I were hungry I would not tell you,
for the world is mine, and all that is in it.
Do I eat the flesh of bulls
or drink the blood of goats?

Sacrifice thank-offerings to God,
fulfil your vows to the Most High,
and call on me in the day of trouble;
I will deliver you, and you will honour me.’

The attitude of the heart was more important than what was sacrificed. King David realised this when he said:

‘You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart O God,
you will not despise. (Ps 51:16-17)

This is something his predecessor, Saul, hadn’t learned. He was commanded by the LORD to destroy the Amalekites and all that belonged to them; that is he was to totally and utterly dedicate them to God. However he spared the king and the best of the animals. When he claimed he carried out the LORD’s instructions, Samuel asked, ‘What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?’ (1 Sam 15:14) When Saul tried to make some lame excuse about keeping the best of the sheep and cattle to offer to the LORD Samuel silenced him with these words:

‘To obey is better than sacrifice,
and to heed is better than the fat of rams.’
(1 Sam 15:22)

The sacrificial system was only ever meant as a temporary solution, as it could never deal permanently with the problem of sin. It pointed towards the one, complete and all-sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, made by Jesus, God’s Son, on the cross.

His once-for-all, never to be repeated sacrifice, covers all sins of all people for all time. We receive the benefits of this through faith in him.

This gospel of Christ’s death and resurrection was proclaimed by the apostles, and it’s this gospel that Paul outlines in the first 11 chapters of Romans. Then in Ch.12 the apostle shows what the correct response should be:

‘Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.’
(v.1)

The only sacrifice required now is of ourselves. Paul addresses the brothers collectively, that is the body of believers, both in Rome and everywhere. The word is ‘adelphoi’ and can mean both brothers *and* sisters. Some people are uncomfortable with inclusive language Bibles, but in many cases they are in fact more accurate. Paul is not like the old traditional preacher, trying to be more inclusive, who addressed his congregation as, ‘My dearly beloved brethren and cistern!’

He urges us all, as we contemplate God’s mercies revealed in Jesus’ sacrificial death for us, to offer our bodies as living sacrifices. Note that it is our bodies we are to offer.

Christianity is often accused of only being interested in saving the soul. But we are both body *and* soul and the Bible clearly shows that we are to be concerned with people’s physical as well as spiritual wellbeing.

You know what the problem with a living sacrifice is? It keeps crawling off the altar! So how can we be a living sacrifice? We must be prepared to be totally and utterly dedicated to God.

This was not a fresh revelation given to Paul, as Jesus said something similar during his ministry:

‘Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.’ (Luke 9:23)

The Christian life involves self-denial because, at its heart, sin is selfishness – it’s all about me, me, me. I know this only works in English, but if you take the word SIN, the central letter is I. *I* am my problem, so in order to eradicate my sin problem I must stroke out I, which then becomes a cross †. So becoming a living sacrifice means denying self, but it also means dying to self. When someone took up their cross, it was not for the good of their health, it meant they were walking towards their death.

When we trust in Christ as Saviour and follow in his way, we are to crucify our sinful nature with its passions and desires. That all sounds very grand, but just as we living sacrifices often crawl off the altar, so our sinful natures do not always stay on the cross! Therefore Jesus made it clear that we are to do this daily – ‘take up your cross daily’, deny yourself *every* day, crucify your sinful nature *each* new morning. This is the only way most of us can make it through.

And Paul assures us that this is holy and pleasing to God, and is our spiritual act of worship. Some translations render this ‘reasonable service.’ The terms are interchangeable – worship is service, service is worship.

Church notice board – Service is ended, worship begins!

Paul continues with a warning and instruction in v.2:

‘Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.’

Or as JB Phillips memorably put it:

‘Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within.’

A living sacrifice does not follow the world, but Jesus Christ; we are not to fill our minds with worldly things but with God’s word; and we are to think biblically about what we see, hear and experience around us, even things in the Church. Perhaps *especially* things in the Church!?!

We are all urged to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, totally and utterly dedicated to God, as we follow Jesus, the way, the truth and the life. For some that has meant a martyr’s death, for others a life-time of devoted service.

Timothy and Rhoda Sloan are missionaries from Northern Ireland and have served in Ukraine for 18 years; they’ve planted a Church, shared the gospel through word and literature, have a children’s ministry and are setting up an orphanage. When war broke out they had a chance to return home and escape the danger. They believed God called them there for a purpose and decided to stay, and now alongside their regular ministry they feed and provide clothes for over 100 people each day.

This is an ordinary couple from a wee place in the back of beyond in Northern Ireland, but who are totally and utterly dedicated to God. An example of living sacrifices.

I leave you with Eugene Peterson’s translation of this text from Romans 12:1-2 in the Message:

So here’s what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.