

The importance of sacrifice

'AT-ONEMENT'

Sacrifice is a way of approaching God, to mark an occasion, thank him for a blessing or ask his protection or forgiveness. Because God is holy, anyone approaching him must first be cleansed from their sin. Sacrifice is the way God provides for a person or group to receive forgiveness. This process is called 'atonement' or covering, from the idea that the blood hides sin by covering it and so enables God and sinners to be 'at one' again.

IS SACRIFICE PAGAN?

The sacrificing of animals is common to many religions. It is only when we look at the reasons for Israel's sacrifices that we see a clear difference from pagan practices.

In Israel, the sacrifice is for the benefit of the ordinary person who brings it. It is he who places his hand on the sacrifice, kills it and receives the words of forgiveness. There are no sex acts or fertility rites, and no attempts to contact the dead or pray to ancestors. There is no casting of spells, studying of entrails or fortune-telling. There are no self-inflicted wounds to prove sorrow to God, and there is no sacrificing of children.

In Jewish sacrifice there is no attempt to bribe God or manipulate his favours. People can't impress God with a large sacrifice, because they aren't graded according to wealth and power. There is no special offering required of a king, for example. Every person or family is expected simply to bring the best sacrifice they can manage, without reducing themselves to poverty. If a family is poor, then a pigeon or a cup of flour is enough.

Where there *is* a larger sacrifice, it is to indicate a greater responsibility for sin. The high priest offers the largest, because of everyone he has sinned most knowingly! In all this, the only purpose is to be made right with God and receive his forgiveness.

HOW DOES THE THEME OF SACRIFICE DEVELOP?

In Isaiah 53, the prophet describes the innocent suffering and death of the 'servant of the Lord'. This servant dies, not for his own sin, but for the sin of others. In other words, he is a sacrifice—'led like a lamb to the slaughter'. His death is a 'guilt offering' to cover the wrongs of others, so that they may become right with God.

When Jesus comes, he is this 'suffering servant'. Matthew's Gospel says that Jesus fulfils Isaiah's words: 'He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows' (Isaiah 53:4). Peter writes in his first letter: 'He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed' (1 Peter 2:24). This understanding comes from Jesus himself.

In Luke's account of the Last Supper, Jesus warns his friends that he will be 'numbered with the transgressors'. After his resurrection, he explains everything to the two people he meets on the road to Emmaus:

Beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Luke 24:25–27).

The death of Jesus includes every aspect of sacrifice. He is a ransom for our guilt. He cleanses our dirty lives. He pays the debt we owe for our wrongdoing. In Mark's Gospel Jesus says he must give his life 'as a ransom for many'. This is the function of the burnt offering in Leviticus—to provide atonement for sin and deal with guilt.

The fullest explanation of the death of Jesus is found in the letter to the Hebrews. The writer tells us that Jesus' death on the cross is the supreme sacrifice of all time—a sacrifice to end all sacrifices.

The sacrifices described in Leviticus are solemn, costly and moving. But they are never enough. They are for ever being repeated, because sin is never fully dealt with. The letter to the Hebrews describes this weary and repetitive process:

Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins (Hebrews 10:11).

The writer expresses the painful knowledge that all the sacrificing of animals has never really dealt with sin. Jesus, on the cross, at last makes a sacrifice which works for everyone for all time. He dies shouting triumphantly, 'It is finished!' As the letter to the Hebrews explains:

When this priest [Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God (Hebrews 10:12).

Like the 'sin offering', the blood of Christ has power to cleanse. It not only removes the guilt of sin, but also purges away its pollution. When we accept the death of Jesus for us, we can approach God with confidence. Our sins are forgiven. Our consciences are clear:

Therefore ... since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body ... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water (Hebrews 10:19–22).

The 'fellowship offering' of Leviticus is a sacrifice which becomes a shared meal. It expresses a joyful unity of life, between God and people and between the worshippers themselves. In the New Testament this becomes the agape, Eucharist or Lord's Supper. By breaking bread and sharing it, believers give thanks for the sacrifice of Jesus, broken for them. By pouring wine and drinking it, they remember his blood shed for the sins of the world.

The New Testament writers encourage believers to care for one another because of their fellowship with Christ. Paul warns the Christians at Corinth that if they don't share their meal (if the wealthy eat while the poor go hungry), then it isn't the Lord's Supper.

When you come together, it is not the Lord's Supper you eat, for as you eat, each of you goes ahead without waiting for anybody else. One remains hungry, another gets drunk (1 Corinthians 11:20–21).

'LIVING' SACRIFICES

The most exciting development in the New Testament is that we ourselves are now temples, priests and offerings. Peter writes, 'You ... like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 Peter 2:5). Paul encourages Christians at Rome to offer themselves 'as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God' (Romans 12:1).

Our offering of ourselves is not to pay for our sin. Only the death of Jesus can do that. But we can become 'living sacrifices'—offering our bodies and minds, time, gifts and daily life to God. What a glorious development, from the dead animals in Leviticus to our own total commitment today! Jesus looked forward to the time when 'true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth' (John 4:23).

A FAIR SHARE

The New Testament writers don't forget that the old system of sacrifice supported God's priests. Grain, meat and bread from offerings went to feed the priestly tribe of Levi, which had no land or income.

In the New Testament, the ministers of Christ are to be provided for in a comparable way. Paul was prepared to support himself by his tentmaking, but he still insisted that 'those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel' (1 Corinthians 9:13–14).¹

¹ Knowles, A. (2001). [*The Bible guide*](#) (1st Augsburg books ed., pp. 65–66). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.