



Gospel / Life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 10: Living Life As Living Sacrifices

Meditation on Psalm 107

Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures for ever.

Let the redeemed of the LORD say this—those he redeemed from the hand of the foe, those he gathered from the lands, from east and west, from north and south.

Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away.

Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle.

Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.

Some sat in darkness and the deepest gloom, prisoners suffering in iron chains, for they had rebelled against the words of God and despised the counsel of the Most High. So he subjected them to bitter labour; they stumbled, and there was no-one to help.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He brought them out of darkness and the deepest gloom and broke away their chains.

Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men, for he breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron.

Some became fools through their rebellious ways and suffered affliction because of their iniquities. They loathed all food and drew near the gates of death.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble, and he saved them from their distress. He sent forth his word and healed them; he rescued them from the grave.

Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men. Let them sacrifice thank-offerings and tell of his works with songs of joy.

Others went out on the sea in ships; they were merchants on the mighty waters. They saw the works of the LORD, his wonderful deeds in the deep. For he spoke and stirred up a tempest that lifted high the waves. They mounted up to the heavens and went down to the depths; in their peril their courage melted away. They reeled and staggered like drunken men; they were at their wits' end.

Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and he brought them out of their distress. He stilled the storm to a whisper; the waves of the sea were hushed. They were glad when it grew calm, and he guided them to their desired haven.

Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for men. Let them exalt him in the assembly of the people and praise him in the council of the elders.

He turned rivers into a desert, flowing springs into thirsty ground, and fruitful land into a salt waste, because of the wickedness of those who lived there.

He turned the desert into pools of water and the parched ground into flowing springs; there he brought the hungry to live, and they founded a city where they could settle. They sowed fields and planted vineyards that yielded a fruitful harvest; he blessed them, and their numbers greatly increased, and he did not let their herds diminish.

Then their numbers decreased, and they were humbled by oppression, calamity and sorrow; he who pours contempt on nobles made them wander in a trackless waste.

But he lifted the needy out of their affliction and increased their families like flocks. The upright see and rejoice, but all the wicked shut their mouths.

Whoever is wise, let him heed these things and consider the great love of the LORD.

When Paul described the Christian life that flows from the experience of God's mercy in Jesus Christ, he used the Old Testament language of sacrificial worship:

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. (Rom. 12:1)

Over the past term, we looked at various facets of the merciful acts of God to us in Jesus Christ. We were looking at the freedom to which we have been brought as children of God. What we will do now for the rest of the year is give thought to how that gospel freedom that is ours in Jesus Christ intersects with our whole lives. In particular we are going to use Paul's categories of "spiritual worship" and "offering your bodies as living sacrifices" to describe that life. In particular, we will explore the Old Testament sacrificial system and think through how the principles of the sacrifices offered in that system work out in the spiritual worship of Christian people like you and me.

In View Of God's Mercy...

P T Forsyth made a very helpful comment when he said that the Old Testament sacrifices were the fruit, not the root, of grace. The Lord gave to Israel their whole sacrificial system so that they could live their lives with His holy presence among them. This provision was the provision of grace; when Israel made their sacrifices, they did not *earn* grace but rather took hold of the grace given.

When Christians live lives of spiritual worship, offering our bodies as living sacrifices, we are not trying to ensure or receive grace; rather we are letting grace given in Jesus Christ reach its full goal in us. The life of spiritual worship, of being a living sacrifice to the Lord is the life of grace's freedom.

If we in any way start to think that our sacrifices make God our Father indebted to us, rather than being the expression of thankfulness and joy that our Father has freely cleared our debt in His Son, we are miles from the kind of life that Paul is envisaging here. Living our lives as living sacrifices is not "paying back" a debt we owe; it is giving expression to the freedom the Lord has brought to us.

In Genesis 4, the account of Cain and Abel offer us insight into sacrifice rightly and wrongly offered. Both offered sacrifices from their arena of life, Cain from the fruit of his crops and Abel from the fruit of his flocks. In Gen. 4:4 we read that the Lord looked with favour on Abel and his offering but he did not do so with Cain and his offering. (Note how the person and the offering stand together. To accept the offering is to accept the offerer. Rightly offered, a sacrifice was the presentation of the whole person before the Lord.) Cain was angry at the rejection of his sacrifice, and this led him into terrible envy of his brother, ending in the murder of one for who he should in fact have cared as a protector. In Hebrews 11:4 we are told what the element was in Abel's offering that was pleasing to the Lord: "By *faith* Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain..." Abel's faith was in God, rather than in himself. Cain believe himself to deserve favour, and was angry when he didn't get it. Abel knew he had no claim and that God favoured the undeserving. He understood that sacrifice flowed from grace, rather than earning grace.

In Psalm 51:16 David sings that the Lord does not take pleasure in burnt offerings, that He does not delight in sacrifice. Rather what the Lord is pleased with is a broken and contrite heart, a broken spirit (51:17). But from that position of humility and glad reception of grace, then true and proper sacrifices can and will be made (51:18).

The Levitical Sacrifices

Leviticus 1:1-6:7 spells out what the worshipper needed to do in bring the various sacrifices to the Tabernacle. Leviticus 6:8-7:38 spells out the particular duties of the priests in assisting the worshipper in bringing the sacrificial offering. Through both sections, we find that there are various kinds of offerings: the burnt offering (ch. 1; 6:8-13), the grain offering (ch. 2; 6:14-23), the fellowship or peace offering (ch. 3; 7:11-21), the sin offering (4:1-5:13; 6:24-30), and the guilt offering (5:14-6:7; 7:1-10).

The different sacrifices had many similarities, as we will see in the coming weeks as we come to consider them more fully, but also they each had particular features that belonged to them alone and these help us understand something of their particular function in Israel's worship.

Some of the sacrifices are said "to make atonement". Others, as they burn on the altar, are said to be "an aroma pleasing to the Lord". These two categories are basically mutually exclusive—the atoning sacrifices are never those that burn to make an aroma pleasing to the Lord. It seems from this that there were sacrifices that made a person acceptable by dealing with his sins, *atoning* for him, and then there were sacrifices which that accepted person offered to express his (renewed) worship and love to God.

As we consider our lives before the Lord, we know ourselves to be *simul iustus et peccatur*—at the same time saints in Christ, and sinners in and of ourselves. For this reason, the sacrificial system of the Old Testament provides us with good patterns and principles for our worship of God. We know that once and for all Jesus Christ has offered the sacrifice for our sins of His own holy self, and that nothing more need be done to atone. But, having said that, the principles of the sacrifices of Leviticus give us a way of expressing our faith that God our Father has fully dealt with all our sins, even as we are those who sin even as His children. Further, as reconciled children, the principles of the Levitical sacrifices will give us instruction and help as to how we can give full expression to the love and joy that is in us due to the grace that the Father has shown us, how we can be in ourselves an aroma pleasing to the Lord.

The sacrifices in the Tabernacle and the ministry of the priests in the Tabernacle fills the first 16 chapters of Leviticus. After that, from chapter 17, the book focuses on the life of Israel as the Lord's holy people in the world. Right through this second half of the book, the recurring refrain is "I am the Lord your God." Israel belongs to the Lord, through His redeeming and sanctifying work, and now they are to live holy lives before Him. That holiness finds expression in their sexual and marriage relationships, their diet, their lives with each other and with foreigners who live among them, how they deal in their business lives, their interaction with the other religions that surround them, how they structure their time over the year and more! Every part of their lives is now to be thought of in terms of holiness consonant with the holiness of the Lord who dwells among them.

The sacrifices were the means by which Israel was kept in holiness. So there was a deep connection between the sacrifices and life. More than simply being the starting

point and source of holiness, the tabernacle worship provided a kind of pattern or instruction for holiness in daily life.

Later, the Pharisees with their rules and regulations began with the good intention of saying that the whole of life is to be sanctified to the Lord. Their rules were designed to enable the principles of worship learned in the Temple to affect every part of life. Of course as we know, over time their rules became a way not of giving thanks for grace but of expressing self-reliance. And in fact their rules became more important than the law of God itself, and a way of evading that law. They became a way of pretending holiness, rather than living it! As we consider the sacrifices and their principles for our lives, we will need to be very free in the grace of God. The applications and implications we draw may be true for our time and place, but they are not exactly the same as the principles. Nor are they the same as the command of God!!