



Gospel / Life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

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

Study 22: The Burnt Offering and Laying Aside Our Desires

“Love the LORD your God, with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength (Deut. 6:5).”

When we love God this way, whatever may have a claim on our love does not count in comparison to the claim of the love of God on us.

The burnt offering (as with all the other offerings) involved the sacrifice of a perfect animal, and as expensive an animal as the offerer could afford. The perfection of the animal was a very significant matter. That it did not have any flaw or deformity meant that it was among the best animals from which the wise farmer would choose his breeding stock. Clearly it was an animal with good genes, and would make a good contribution to the future healthiness and strength of the flock. To take such an animal and to offer it in sacrifice to the LORD was agriculturally suicidal! The burnt offering required a male animal to be offered, and such a beast could produce a large number of offspring. The farmer who brought such an animal for the sacrifice was putting his desires and ambitions for the future of the flock on the altar as much as he was putting the animal there. There was no guarantee that what he hoped for would come to pass. Symbolically then, because the animal stood for him, he was also in effect saying that *all* his ambitions, hopes and plans were surrendered to the LORD and that he was placing the LORD above all other things that he could desire. There was no guarantee that what he hoped for in life would come to pass. Such sacrifice is an expression of deep love to the LORD.

The nature of sacrifice as a gift of love to the LORD only makes sense if the thing sacrificed meant something important to the offerer. That importance would be experienced as wanting, desire, or ambition. Letting that all fall to one side is an action of love only if those things were important in the first place. If they were never really desired, then giving them up is no actual sacrifice.

“Follow me!”

In Matthew’s Gospel, the call of Jesus to disciples was that they follow him. The first so called (**Matt. 4:18-22**) were Simon and Andrew, fishermen, in the midst of their tasks when Jesus met them. Immediately after there were two other brothers, James and John, also fishermen who were called as they worked with their father in their boat. Both sets of brothers had to leave both their family and their income behind in following Jesus. Later in **Matthew 8:18-22** there are some who come to him, offering their discipleship. Jesus is very clear: belonging to him will mean giving up both the security of a home and the fulfilling of normal familial duties and loyalties. In

Matthew 19:16-21 Jesus called the rich young ruler to follow him after giving away all his wealth in service of the poor.

In **Matthew 10** Jesus sent out the Twelve to proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom of God. The second half of the commission focuses on the reality that this action will involved them in the same difficulty through opposition that Jesus himself faced. “A student is not above his master (v. 24).” He counsels them against fearfulness and intimidation (vv. 26-30), for the Father knows and loves them. The opposition would even come from family members (vv. 32-37). But, Jesus says, even given that:

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matt. 10:37-39)

(Jesus repeated this saying in **Matthew 16:24ff**. Here he says, “Whoever wants to save his life will lose it...”)

These sayings, all together, make clear that the following of Jesus requires the setting aside of all other loyalties, hopes and ambitions. It may mean the forfeiting of whatever future we had envisaged for ourselves. The dynamic for such “sacrifice” is of course seen in those who followed Jesus’ call. Not only the disciples, but also Matthew (**Matt. 9:9ff**) met in Jesus the fullness of grace and forgiveness. They met the one who did not primarily come demanding sacrifice, but as the one who would offer sacrifice to the Father on their behalf. And in this Jesus who is full of grace and truth from the Father, they were introduced to the fact that the Father would not save even the most precious thing to Himself, His beloved Son but rather have His heart torn apart in the giving of His Son

Genesis 22

The lead-up to the call of God to Abram, to take “your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love” to offer him as a burnt offering on a mountain in Moriah, is very significant in understanding the event.

Firstly, the LORD had appeared to Abraham in free grace (**Gen. 12:1-3**), calling him to leave all —his homeland, family and inheritance—and to be led by Him to a new inheritance. As Abraham did this, God promised that He would bless him and make him into a great nation, on whom the destiny of the nations hung. Then, in **Genesis 15:1-5** this promise was reiterated in the face of the seeming impossibility of it, due to Abraham’s childlessness. But the LORD’s promise was that the nation would come through a descendant from Abraham himself (not an adopted descendant.) In fact, a whole galaxy of children would then be born through this one. To seal this promise, a covenant ceremony was enacted. Abraham had to prepare animals (heifer, goat, ram, dove and young pigeon—it is as though the whole sacrificial system is prefigured here). The animals were slaughtered, cut in two and then arranged in lines, forming a kind of path. In a covenant ceremony, both parties to the covenant would walk through the path, indicating that should either party break the agreement, what was deserved was that they be treated like these animals. In *this* ceremony, Abraham remained asleep, and a strange sight of a smoking firepot and a blazing torch passed through the pieces. This was a sign that God was making the agreement “within Himself”, and taking on Himself any fault of transgression of the covenant agreement. All that was required of Abraham in this covenant was faith—trust that the Lord was as good as His word.

Genesis 17 shows this promise being refined even further. The child to be born will be born through Sarah. This is almost a joke to Abraham and Sarah, but in a wonderful way the joke is on them, and it comes to be that Sarah has a child, Isaac at a great age.

When we come to the call of God to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac then as a burnt offering, we need to see that Isaac is the focus not just of all Abraham's ambitions, hopes and plans, but also of the promises, the repeated and ever-more closely focussed promises of God Himself. In laying Isaac on the wood, killing him and burning him, Abraham is being called to lay aside all his hopes for the future. He is called to a trust in God, walking blamelessly and obediently before Him (Gen. 17:1), that seems to deny all that God had promised up to that point. Abraham goes with no knowledge of what God will do, but the lead-up to this event, in which God Himself has taken every initiative and made every provision, has convinced Abraham of the grace of God. So when Isaac questions him about what is happening, Abraham can say with faith, "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Isaac accepts this with faith himself, "... and the two of them went on together (Gen. 22:8)." The provision of God comes only as Abraham has shown his faith up to the very point of plunging the knife into his son to slay him. It is then that the LORD stays his hand: "Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son (Gen. 22:12)"

The events leading up to this have pointed Abraham to the truth that is deep in God, that all of our offering comes from a mysterious offering within Himself. Abraham knew God to be the God who provides. Jehovah Jireh is the God who provides the substitute because He is God who provides the true sacrifice. For us, the sacrifices we are called to in life, even to the laying down of things that we believe God has promised us, flow out of this, that God did not withhold from us His Son, His own Son, whom He loved, Jesus.

2Samuel 23:13-17

This brief narrative recounts an occasion in the exploits of David. Bethlehem, David's home town, had been overrun by Philistines. David was very thirsty in the middle of a protracted battle, and in his longing he remembered the water from the well in Bethlehem. He said, "Oh, that someone would get me a drink of water from the well near the gate of Bethlehem." His three mighty men heard this wistful longing as a command; they would lay down their lives for their king. So, they battled through to the well, drew some water and returned with it to David. He was overwhelmed by the gift. It had been procured at such cost, at such risk. It was as precious as the blood, the life, the love of the men who had gone to procure it. It was so precious that it could not be drunk! So David took this hard-won gift and "he poured it out before the LORD." His drink offering was the outflow of the offering of these three mighty men.

The Mighty Three, Father, Son and Spirit have brought to us the water of life at the most immense cost. The Father gave His Son, the Son poured out his soul to death, by the Spirit the Son offered himself to the Father. Mighty love, deathly love. The gift of blessing that this brought to us is not just for us to enjoy and revel in indulgently. We best receive this sacrificial love of the Triune God for us as we return it to Them in sacrificial love.