

The Cost of Sacrifice

Dear Friend,

The Bible is a huge collection of 66 books that range from poetry to apocalyptic literature. It is arguably the most influential collection of books in the history of humanity. Over the course of around 1,700 years, the Bible has influenced culture, politics, economies, and empires. When modern readers engage with the Bible, they read about ancient cultures that no longer exist. The Bible is the most important source of knowledge for the life of a Christian. As Paul says in 2 Timothy 3:16-17 **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”** Without reading the Bible, a Christian is incapable of understanding what God desires them to do. There is a lot in the Bible to learn from. Today we are going to talk about the role sacrifice plays in the Bible. We will learn from the practices of the Jews and what Jesus says about himself and the sacrifice he made on the cross.

So what is sacrifice? We get the word from two Latin words formed together. *Sacer* means holy and *Facio* is to do or make something. Sacrifice is the act of making something holy. Sacrifice was not only done by the Jews, in fact, you would be hard pressed to find an ancient culture that did not practice some form of sacrifice. Some of the ancient cultures even sacrificed other human beings to their gods. Now, to our modern minds, this horrible picture of blood and death seems like it should have no place in our Bible. Yet, sacrifice plays an essential role in the Bible and it is important that we understand why.

Other ancient cultures had an understanding of sacrifice that went something like this:

“The gods are angry and distant beings. To make them give us rain and food, and to protect us from famine and in war, we must make them happy by burning animals. If we want or need something from them, they require something from us.” This idea is wrapped up nicely in the Latin phrase *“Do ut des”* “I give so that you give.” This phrase framed how the Romans thought about sacrificing to their many gods. In the Bible, sacrifice is described very differently from the practices of other ancient cultures. Sacrifice actually takes place very early on in Scripture.

The very first mention of sacrifice is in Genesis 4, when Cain and Abel brought an offering to the Lord. Cain offered fruit and grain from the earth and Abel offered the firstborn lamb with its fat. The Bible mentions that the Lord regarded Abel's offering with favor, but not Cain's offering. What is clear is that both men offered what they had to the Lord freely without fear of punishment. The next instance of sacrifice is Noah offering clean animals after the flood waters had receded enough for him to get off the boat. The Bible says the Lord smelled the pleasing aroma from the offering and made a covenant with humanity to never cause a flood like that again. Noah offered the animals out of thanks to God for bringing his family safely through the flood. The first time God commands someone to sacrifice something to Him is when He orders Abraham to offer up his only son Isaac on an altar. Abraham almost goes through with the gruesome task of killing his son, before God stops Abraham and praises him for his faith. God promises to use Abraham's descendants as a light to the rest of the world. Remember that all of these instances of sacrifice happen BEFORE the law of God was even given to His people. Sacrifice was meant to separate the Israelites from the other wicked nations around them.

There are actually 613 commandments in the Old Testament. Over 25 of those laws specifically detail how sacrifice is to take place within the community. In the book of Leviticus, you can read at great length about how and when these sacrifices are supposed to take place. Moses details why the Jews were required to sacrifice animals to the Lord in his address to the people in the book of Deuteronomy. He says, **“And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?” Deut. 10:12-13** The sacrifices were visceral reminders of how the Israelites had broken a law of God. The blood of the animal reminded them that they had made a mistake. A physical price had to be paid, so that God could continue to live in their presence. This is a much different approach to sacrifice than the ancient cultures around them. The Israelites had a track record for not obeying the Lord. Moses continues his speech by saying, **“Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff necked any longer. For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing. And you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt. Fear the Lord your God and serve him. Hold fast to him and take your oaths in his name. He is the one you praise; he is your God, who performed for you those great and awesome wonders you saw with your own eyes.” Deut. 10:16-21**

For the Israelites, sacrifice was an extensive system of reminders about God's holiness and their sin and brokenness. It was not meant to procure some response of love and provision from God. The physical price paid on the altar was meant to redirect their hearts to obeying and loving God. I know that when I start straying from God, replacing Him with something else in my heart, I need a reminder of the sacrifice Jesus paid for me.

The Old Testament is full of events that foreshadow the sacrifice that Jesus Christ will make on the cross. One of the clearest examples of this foreshadowing takes place in Exodus when the Israelites were still in Egypt. The final plague God caused in Egypt was the death of the first-born child or animal throughout all the land. God commands the Israelites to kill a year-old lamb, perfect in every way. They were to smear the blood of the lamb on the threshold of their homes. When the angel of the Lord saw the blood, he passed over that home. This significant event was celebrated every year by Jews during a festival called the Passover. The perfect, innocent lamb is like Jesus. His blood had to be shed on the cross so that we can have a relationship with God. The blood of Jesus covers us, and now God sees us as He sees His son, Jesus. There are many other examples in the Old Testament of sacrifices that point to Christ. Remember, the whole point of the sacrificial system was to remind the Israelites of their sin and substitute their lives with the life of an animal. This system wasn't sufficient and a final sacrifice had to be made.

In the gospel narratives, a couple things about the life of Jesus are made clear. He has supernatural powers to fix brokenness in the world. Jesus goes around all of Judea preaching his message of the coming kingdom of God. He miraculously heals thousands of people, even raising a couple of people from the dead. Many of the religious sects of Judaism directly opposed him and the message he preached. Why were they so against him? Why didn't they accept him as their Messiah? In Mark 2:16-17 the Bible says, **“When the teachers of the law who were Pharisees saw him eating with the sinners and tax collectors, they asked his disciples: ‘Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?’ On hearing this, Jesus said to them, ‘It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.’”** Jesus is directly challenging who they thought the Messiah was supposed to serve. The Pharisees felt as though they were too good to eat with sinners. Even associating with tax collectors would cause them social disaster among their peers. Jesus declares boldly that his message is not for the self-righteous, but for the sinners. The tax collectors and sinners recognized the message of grace they received from Jesus, and they invited him to their homes.

I help serve the homeless and the helpless every day. One conversation I have with other Christians feels like the one Jesus had with the Pharisees. Someone will come up to me and say something along the lines of “Why are you helping THESE people?” Their immediate implications are that I shouldn’t waste my time helping the homeless by giving them food or clothing. My response is, “These are the very people I was called to serve.” God knows that I myself am a sinner. The moment that I stick my nose up at someone else, believing that I am somehow better than they are, is the moment I truly lose touch with reality. The Pharisees missed the point of the Messiah, and unfortunately many Christians make the same fatal mistake today. Jesus came to pay the ultimate price for the sins of all mankind. The best way to totally miss the grace you deserve is to believe you don’t need it.

Jesus did not come to change the Law or prove the prophecies found in the Old Testament false. He came to fulfill all of the Old Testament by his blood. Jesus said, **“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Therefore, anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”** Matthew 5:17-20 How could anyone surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees? Remember, they were the ones who had long lists of do’s and don’ts you had to follow to be righteous. They were the ones who ultimately had Jesus killed for blaspheming against God. The Pharisees were externally the most righteous people in Jesus’ time. So, how could anyone surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees? The answer is YOU can’t, but God can.

An ultimate sacrifice had to be made so mankind could be in relationship with God again. Jesus is the only one who could have paid that price. He was the very Son of God, perfect in every way. He willingly submitted himself to the will of the Father, and lost his sonship for our sake. When he was resurrected from the dead, God honored him by placing him at His right hand. This is the gospel. It is summed up best in the most famous Bible verses of all, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world THROUGH him.”** John 3:16-17

If you don't understand the significance of sacrifice as described in the Bible, you can't fully grasp the price Jesus paid on the cross. Yes, we no longer sacrifice goats to God in an elaborate temple. The reason you and I no longer have to do that is because Jesus paid the ultimate price with his blood. He fulfilled the Law, because you and I could not. Our lives are supposed to reflect the sacrifice of Christ over our hearts and minds.

God is Holy. You and I are not holy. We are sinful and broken. When we are honest with ourselves, we recognize that we sin every single day. When we watch the news, we see intense signs of the brokenness of others around us. Christians believe that Jesus paid the price for all past, present and future sins of mankind. We still must accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. If we accept him, we must read the word of God and do our best to follow what Jesus commanded us. The two greatest commandments are: love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbor as yourself. (Matt. 22:37-40) If I am really going to love God with my heart, soul and mind, I am going to have to sacrifice a lot of what I would rather do or have. If I am really loving my neighbor as myself, I have to sacrifice my own will for my neighbor. When we claim Christ Jesus as our Lord and Savior, our lives must reflect the sacrifice he made on the cross. Now what Jesus said to his disciples is more understandable and meaningful. He said, **“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Matthew 16:24** Have you denied yourself today? Have you taken up your cross which is the burden of every Christian? Are you following Christ? Remember to always place him first.

Yours in Christ,



Chris Aaron Rice