

6. Understanding Sacrifice (2Q 2025 Allusions, Images, Symbols)

Biblical material: Isa. 1:2–15, Heb. 10:3–10, Exod. 12:1–11, 1 Cor. 5:7, Hag. 2:7–9, Isa. 6:1–5, Rev. 4:7–11, Revelation 5:9.

Quotes

- When I consider the cross of Christ, how can anything that I do be called sacrifice? *Amy Carmichael*
- When God becomes a Man and lives as a creature among His own creatures in Palestine, then indeed His life is one of supreme self-sacrifice and leads to Calvary. *C.S. Lewis*
- As to our not sacrificing, the Framer and Father of this universe does not need blood, nor the odor of burnt-offerings, nor the fragrance of flowers and incense. He is perfect fragrance, needing nothing either within or without. The noblest sacrifice to him is for us to know who stretched out and vaulted the heavens, fixed the earth in its place like a center, gathered the water into seas, and divided the light from the darkness. He adorned the sky with stars and made the earth to bring forth seed of every kind. He made animals and fashioned man. When we hold God to be this Framer of all things ... and we lift up holy hands to him, what need has he further of a hecatomb [*sacrifice of 100 cattle*]? *Athenagoras*, AD 177.
- Under [Moses] your nation [*i.e., the Jews*] appeared unrighteous and ungrateful to God, making a calf in the wilderness. Therefore, God accomodated himself to that nation and commanded them to offer sacrifices, as if to his name, so that you would not serve idols. (*Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew* 19) *Justin Martyr*, c.AD 150.

Questions

Why doesn't the Bible spell out in detail what sacrifice was for and what you were meant to learn from it? The heathen nations also practiced sacrifice—in what way is the Biblical model different? The Israelites saw sacrifice as something done for God—what does that mean for our understanding of Jesus' sacrifice? How can we avoid making theological mistakes here?

Bible summary

Isaiah 1:2–15 described God's frustration with the Israelites and their "meaningless sacrifices. Hebrews 10:3–10 points out the inability of sacrifices to take away sin, and that God takes no pleasure in them. Exodus 12:1–11 are the instructions for keeping Passover. In 1 Corinthians 5:7 Christ is identified as the Passover lamb. Haggai 2:7–9 refers to the coming of the desire of nations. Isaiah 6:1–5 speaks of his visions of God. Revelation 4:7–11 refers to the four living creatures. Revelation 5:9 is the opening of the fifth seal.

Comment

It's interesting that this study begins by describing what sacrifice is not! As to what it was meant to mean, Scripture doesn't say a lot. That meant that you were meant to think about it for yourself, and come to some conclusions.

The Isaiah material reveals how Israel had come to see the sacrificial system—just a way to satisfy God's requirements. In this they were little different to the pagan nations around who practiced sacrifice to persuade their gods to be "on their side." They had not learned the lessons the sacrificial system were meant to convey, so God tells them he's not interested in their sacrifices. The Israelites probably responded, "But that's what you asked for!" Indeed God did spell out in considerable detail what and how to sacrifice. But as he says, he's not interested in the blood of bulls and goats, and as Hebrews points out, this does not achieve salvation (see Hebrews 10:4).

The sacrificial ceremonies became just ceremonial—nobody bothered to think about what it meant any more. God's people thought that by going through the rituals they would be OK. But

God wants thought and understanding—the ceremonial system was only an aid to comprehending God and his salvation.

God wants a reasoned, thoughtful relationship, not a meaningless round of rites and practices:

“I hate, I despise your festivals and take no delight in your religious assemblies. Even though you present me with burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. As for your peace offerings of fattened cattle—I will not even look at them. Stop your noisy worship songs. I will not listen to the melody of your harps. Rather let justice flow like a river, and doing right like an ever-flowing stream. Amos 5:21-24. “I want your true love, not your sacrifices; I want you to know me, not your burnt offerings. Hosea 6:6. ““What use are all your many sacrifices to me?... Don’t bring me any more meaningless offerings;” Isaiah 1:11-13.

Some of God’s followers have seen this clearly, and come to understand what God really wants is not meaningless service and thoughtless ceremonies, but an appreciation of God and an agreement with his nature and actions. Take Micah, for instance:

“What should I take with me when I approach the Lord, when I bow down before the God of heaven? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I sacrifice my firstborn child for my rebellion, my own flesh and blood for the sins I have committed?

“The Lord has told you what is good, and what the Lord asks from you: to do what is right, to love kindness, and to walk in humility with your God.” Micah 6:6-8.

David saw it the same way—that the ceremonial concept of salvation was not what God wanted. “Sacrifices don’t make you happy, or I would bring one; burnt offerings aren’t what pleases you. The “sacrifices” that God wants are on the inside—the brokenness of repentance. God won’t reject a broken and sorrowful heart.” Psalm 51:16, 17.

What sacrifice does God really want? A true, heartfelt need that comes to God for all the answers; a deep personal relationship based on respect and admiration for the kind of person God is; a loving response to him who first loved us and gave himself for us.

In Romans 25, Paul uses the Greek word *hilasterion*, often translated as “propitiation,” “appeasement,” or atoning sacrifice.” But an analysis of Greek writings of the time give a different understanding: “the gift that brings peace.” Consequently in the FBV I translated this verse as: “God openly presented Jesus as the gift that brings peace to those trusting in him.” Contrast this with the NIV: “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement.”

Note that the sacrifice is from God, not to God. The sacrifice is always for us, not for God. If sacrifice is Godward, it suggests that God needs to be changed. But that’s the wrong direction.

God was in Christ reconciling world to himself 2 Corinthians 5:19), not the other way around. Nowhere in Scripture does it say that God needed to be reconciled.

Otherwise we have the bizarre concept of God “paying” God with God’s blood. Yes, Jesus did say that he came to give his life a ransom for many. Immediately we start asking questions such as who did he pay the ransom to? What was the currency? Unhelpful questions—Jesus was simply saying it cost him immensely to come here to save us.

Jesus came to save the people from their sins. Salvation is healing, not paying a price or changing God. Because of our rebellion we have chosen to treat God as our enemy. But he calls us his friends (John 15:15). We are called to extend this ministry: “God was in Christ, bringing the world back from hostility to friendship with him, not counting anyone’s sins against them, and giving us this message to change his enemies into his friends.” 2 Corinthians 5:19.

Ellen White Comment

Jesus looked upon the innocent victims of sacrifice, and saw how the Jews had made these great convocations scenes of bloodshed and cruelty. In place of humble repentance of sin, they had multiplied the sacrifice of beasts, as if God could be honored by a heartless service....Thus in the eyes of the people the sacredness of the sacrificial service had been in a great measure destroyed.