

SACRIFICED FOR US

Hebrews 9

Sacrificing of animals—that can sound so crude to us. How can anyone believe that by killing an animal and offering it to a god anything will happen? Sacrifices are not part of our world. Yes, 10 billion animals are slaughtered each year in this country for food and other things, but who of us sees that? It wasn't too long ago that people were used to slaughtering their own animals and butchering and smoking them for meat. In 1950 this church celebrated its 10th anniversary with women in the congregation going to a member's farm and having the farmer catch and chop the heads off chickens so the women could put them in boiling water to take off the feathers. Those chickens provided the meat for the congregational dinner. But today we tend to keep “messy” things away from us like washing clothes in a tub with our arms, cleaning our chamber pots, and scooping manure by hand. Butchering is done at packing plants. Other than having to wash off our hands after opening the package containing the meat, we don't have to mess with anything. And who does the work of butchering at those packing plants? It used to be skilled workers who got decent wages. Now workers are needed, but for unskilled work that pays low wages. Over 40% of the workers are immigrants. Messy things like butchering are not often a part of our lives.

But the sacrificing of animals was a very important part of the life of God's people in the Old Testament. Even before the specific laws given to the people of Israel by God through Moses we already see Cain and Abel making sacrifices to God. Abraham was to sacrifice his own son, Isaac. The law given to Moses described four types of sacrifices-- burnt-offerings, sin-offerings, the guilt-offerings, and the peace-offerings. Animals were also slaughtered when an agreement, a “covenant,” was made. In the Hebrew of the Old Testament you literally “cut” a covenant as animals are cut in two and the two parties make the covenant walk through that blood to show that if you don't keep your side, it is your blood the next time. Sacrifice was so important that it is estimated that 18,000 animals during the time of Jesus were sacrificed each day at the temple in Jerusalem. (Compare that with the 7,200 that could be processed in a big plant today going 24 hours.) But why do something so gruesome?

Can you imagine what Jerusalem and the temple was like with that many animals slaughtered each day? We build packing plants in more rural areas, where they used to be in cities like Chicago and Kansas City. People from there can remember the days when Sioux City was filled with slaughterhouses. You could tell from the smell. Along with the smell is the gore, the bloodiness of all that sacrifice. The valley outside Jerusalem where they threw away the remains was called “Gehenna,” which Jesus used to describe hell. It was known for its stench and spontaneous combustion.

All of that shows the filth and gruesomeness of our sins, the reason why there was sacrifice. Though it would seem that in our sanitized world that the last thing we would want to do is wallow in filth. But that is what we do with our sins. We become like the dogs that not only search out the filthy smells; they want to roll in it. Why do dogs do that? So their prey won't notice their smell. In that sense they want to fit in. In the same way we want to "fit in" with everyone else.

And the filthiness of sin involves blood. Blood is one of the most difficult stains to remove. In the famous scene in Shakespeare's *MacBeth* we hear Lady Macbeth's curse at not being able to remove a blood spot. In Leviticus 17 we are told about importance of blood. Blood is life. To this day Jewish butchers follow the commands of the Old Testament and bleed out the animals to be killed. The blood was to be offered to God. In other words, life was offered to Him. Our debt to God for our sin is our very lives. The animals were to be sacrificed, their blood, their life force, given to God in our place. In Leviticus 16 this is described in the Day of Atonement, that day once a year when the high priest entered the Holy of Holies in the temple and poured the blood of the sacrificial animal over the Ark of the Covenant. The idea was that the blood "covered" our sins.

But all of that was just a shadow. The real thing is described in Hebrews 9:

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, He went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

The writer of Hebrews is not giving us an object lesson on how Jesus took away our sins. No, this is really what happened. Jesus sacrificed Himself in our place, not as an animal that can only figuratively save us, but as the Son of God far more worthy and valuable than all of us put together. It is like we owed God \$1 million and He paid \$1 trillion in our place. And as we often confess, "The blood of Jesus Christ covers us from all sins."

Not only that, the sacrifice of Jesus confirms God's covenant with us. By sacrificing His own son, God had paid the price we should have paid for not keeping the covenant. It is not a partial covenant, one that might run out, but a full, permanent covenant sealed by the blood of Christ Jesus.

It is that very blood that Jesus offers to us in Holy Communion. The words he used that night before He died were, “This is the new testament in My blood.” A testament is given as a last will. It is what is bequeathed. None of that comes true until the person who gives the will dies. Jesus died on the cross for us. His blood is bequeathed to us. We receive it. So what? He says, “Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.” We receive the full forgiveness of sins through the blood of Jesus sacrificed for us.

Why is this so important to us? Couldn't God have just waved a magic wand and taken away our sins. He could have, but this is the way God chose to do it. And this way makes it certain that this is the only way. We can look for answers in ways that may seem more attractive, sensible, or “nicer” to us, ways not so harsh as bloody sacrifice. But they are false hopes. No picture of God is more open and clear than Him naked on the cross, shedding His blood for you and me.