

A Sacrifice

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[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 8th of April 2001. The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled A Sacrifice and is from Exodus chapter 24 verses 1 to 8.

And if you turn in your Bibles to page 61 to Exodus chapter 24. Aren't you glad you don't live in Old Testament times?

Pretty awful, isn't it? Imagine being spattered with blood and that's in the days before Omo existed. By contrast, Christian worship is so sanitised and respectable these days. We can wear our Sunday vest without fear of getting into mess and smell while we're in church.

Well, this ceremony in Exodus chapter 24 is a very important occasion in the life of ancient Israel. It's not just one sacrifice of many but a fairly particular one on a very particular occasion.

Israel has just left Egypt in the six weeks leading up to this event. They have left through the plagues that God had brought against Pharaoh of Egypt and then through the parting, miraculous parting, of the Red Sea to cross out of Egypt into what is the Sinai Peninsula.

[1 : 29] And then after a few weeks of travelling they come to the south of the Sinai Peninsula to Mount Sinai, a mountain that's about 2200 metres tall, fairly desert-like conditions, fairly arid and dry place.

And there atop Mount Sinai, God has come down and settled on the top of the mountain with fire and cloud and trumpets, lightning and so on, a sort of cosmic display to show that God is there. And in the chapters leading up to this, from chapter 19 onwards, God has spoken to the people of Israel, firstly that the whole nation could hear when he gave them the Ten Commandments and then when they were a bit afraid of hearing God's voice, God continued with other laws to Moses, which Moses then relayed to the rest of the people of Israel who were on the foot of the mountain. Moses himself had gone up atop the mountain to speak with God and be given the laws and the commandments. Now the issue is, will they accept?

Will they accept the obligation of the commandments and laws of God and continue in a relationship with God as God's people? So this ceremony in Exodus 24 is a solemn ceremony to confirm or ratify the covenant relationship between God and God's people Israel.

[3 : 00] It's just like the vows of a marriage service, in effect. God, in effect, has asked the people, will you obey me? Will you not murder and not commit adultery and not steal?

Will you put me first? Will you not make graven images? Etc. And now comes the time when the people say, like in a marriage service, we will. Now this is a solemn ceremony.

Approaching God is not a light matter. The instructions at the beginning of the chapter show us who can go where by way of approaching God. Moses is told by God, come up to the Lord, you, and also Aaron, who's his brother, who is a priest, and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, who also will inherit the priesthood from Aaron, along with 70 of the elders of Israel.

In effect, they're functioning as the priesthood for the nation because the actual priestly tribe, the Levites, is not yet designated as such. That comes in the next book of the Old Testament. And they are to worship at a distance.

Moses alone shall come near the Lord, but the others shall not come near, and the people, they shall not come up with him. Now what's being instructed here are three groups of people.

[4 : 23] Moses only is allowed up near the top of the mountain, close to God's presence, but still at a distance. The priests are allowed to come up towards the mountain a bit, but they're at a further distance from the top, where God is, and the people generally are not allowed onto the mountain at all.

They're down at the bottom of the mountain. There's a sort of graded priority or privilege extended. The people had to keep a distance, their priests could come a bit closer, and Moses alone, as the

leader of the nation, he could come quite close, but still at a bit of a distance, from God on the top of the mountain.

Now before they actually go up the mountain, Moses does a number of things. The first thing is that he repeats to the people the words of the Lord. So in verse 3, he came and told the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances.

Now the Ten Commandments are often called the Ten Words of God. They're introduced like that in chapter 20. In chapter 21 come the rest of the laws and they're introduced as the ordinances of God.

So here in verse 3, where Moses is to repeat all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances, he is in effect repeating to the people all of what we have as chapter 20, the words, and chapters 21, 22 and 23, which are the ordinances.

[5 : 49] So that's what Moses does for the people. He repeats to them all those laws. And without hesitation and with great enthusiasm, the people reply at the end of verse 3 with one voice, all the words that the Lord has spoken, we will do.

So they very quickly accept the obligations of being obedient to the laws and commands of God. Sadly, it won't be long before they break all that.

Just in a matter of a few days, they will break the first two of the great commandments. But here, they're full of enthusiasm to keep all the laws of God. The second thing that Moses does is write it all down.

So in verse 4, we read that Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. Now what I think that is referring to is all of chapters 20 to 23.

And in effect here, perhaps, we get the beginnings of the Bible being written. Maybe bits that have already been written by this stage. Certainly some of it have been said and done, of course. But now we get told that Moses writes down chapters, what we have is chapters 20 to 23, to be kept.

[7 : 00] Because these are not just commands for the people who are alive here at Mount Sinai. These are commands for the next generation and the next generation and the next and the next and the next.

So from the beginning, Moses writes down those words so they're preserved and they can be repeated and read and recited later. The third thing that Moses does is build an altar.

Not out of a cardboard TV box like we've got here, but out of stones, probably uncut stones because that's the instruction back in chapter 20. And then he, because there aren't any priests at this stage, he sends away the young men to go and get the animals.

So we read that at the end of verse 4. He rose early in the morning, built an altar at the foot of the mountain, set up 12 pillars corresponding to the 12 tribes of Israel. He sent young men of the people of Israel who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the Lord.

Two types of sacrifice are mentioned there, the burnt offerings and the sacrifices of well-being. The burnt offerings are the ones that usually deal with sin. The whole animal was burnt up.

[8 : 10] We actually thought of setting fire to this here, but thought that it might have toxic fumes so we decided we'd better not. But the whole animal would be burnt up and destroyed because it's sins being destroyed and the other connotation of a burnt offering is a sense of total consecration of your life to God.

So the whole animal being offered and burnt up is in a sense a reflection of your life being offered in service to God. The sacrifices of well-being would have been ones where some of the animal would have been burnt up but other parts would have been eaten afterwards as a meal with the people, the priests and the people who made offering and their families and friends as well.

And that's probably what happened with these sacrifices of well-being here, sometimes translated as fellowship offerings as well. That is, after the sins are dealt with with the burnt offerings then the sacrifice of fellowship or well-being is offered whereby you could actually sit and have a meal and in a sense enjoy the fellowship you have with each other and with God knowing that sins have been atoned for by the first sacrifice, the sacrifice of burnt offering.

Now comes the ugly part of this ceremony. Verse 6. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins and half of the blood he dashed against the altar.

And as I said before in the children's talk the dashing of the blood against the altar is in part an acknowledgement of sin being atoned for, the altar being perhaps in one sense the most holy place of all the ceremony and ritual of sacrifice that is conducted.

[9 : 53] It's also, I think, acknowledging that God will keep his side of the bargain, his promises and the promises he makes to the people of Israel. So the altar sort of symbolises God and the blood coming on that altar is symbolising God's firm commitment to keep his promises about being in a relationship with the people of Israel.

Meanwhile, half the blood is kept aside in basins. But before Moses deals with the remainder of the blood the next thing he does is again to read the law and commandments that have been given by God.

The day before he'd done that then he'd written them down now this day after he got up early in the morning he now reads out again all those laws and commandments probably Exodus chapters 20 to 23 again shows, I think, how important it is in a relationship with God to know what God says and be prepared to obey it.

That is, it's not just blind obedience, yes, God will do whatever you say but it's firmly understanding the obligations of God and then being prepared to commit yourself to heed and obey those.

These people are now being asked to keep their side of the bargain their side of the relationship or the covenant relationship between them and God. Let me say it's no easy thing.

[11 : 24] God's commands are strenuous. The Ten Commandments involve placing God first no other gods no other idols never using the Lord's name in vain keeping a Sabbath day and honouring your parents not committing murder or adultery or theft not bearing false witness telling lies giving false witness in a court case and not coveting what someone else has.

Now sometimes we could read through those Ten Commandments to start with and think well I think I've kept all of those but when we realise the depth to which those commandments alone go as Jesus taught for example in the Sermon on the Mount so that when you hate your brother or sister then you've committed murder in your heart when you lust after somebody you've committed adultery with them then we realise how rigorous those Ten Commandments are.

But then if we read on to the rest of the laws that are given we realise again that God's commandments involve every aspect of our life our economic priorities our use of money our attitude and practices at work our family life our sexual life our leisure life how we look after neighbours as well as enemies and those who live around us and not to say how we actually worship God when we gather together you see obedience to God is not a Sunday practice only as those six days belong to us and one to God but every aspect of our life wherever we go whatever we do whatever we think comes under obedience to God these are comprehensive laws and to commit yourself to obedience to them is no easy matter for the people to take but again having heard these laws read out by Moses the end of verse 7 the people repeat what they'd said the day before all that the Lord has spoken we will do and we will be obedient and then Moses sprinkles blood all over them in verse 8 he took the blood from the basins dashed it on the people and said see the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words yuck tomato sauce is bad enough but blood it's enough to make you say no God I don't want to obey because I just don't want to be covered in blood why is there such a grotesque ceremony here why splash the people with blood well firstly it shows that a relationship with God is a life and death matter it is serious it's not a light matter at all and the people are in effect saying we commit ourselves to obedience to these laws but if we fail then death is what we deserve symbolised by the blood if we fail the blood is on us we deserve to die that's how serious it is that's what this splashing with blood is symbolising on the people it was a relatively standard procedure in the ancient world it's not quite as uncommon as it would be today they understood what it was about this is a relationship a covenant relationship between God and his people sealed with blood and in effect if the people break it they deserve to die but there's a bit more than that as well because blood in sacrifice symbolises purification and this blood in part comes from the first sacrifice the burnt offering sacrifice which is for atonement for sin so what this ceremony is also doing is not only saying if you fail you deserve to die but because the blood actually comes from the sacrifice of a burnt offering it is saying in effect that your sins are forgiven and you are purified by the blood of the atoning sacrifice it is God's way of having a relationship with people who fail people who are not perfect people who the bible calls sinners and this sacrifice is

God's way of enabling sinful people to be in a relationship with him they are the ones that provide the lamb cost them to offer the lamb as a ram or whatever it is as a sacrifice but it is God's way of having a relationship with people of Israel now the writer of the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament makes some comment about this actual ceremony in Exodus 24 so I read from Hebrews

chapter 9 verse 19 when every commandment had been told to all the people by Moses in accordance with the law he took the blood of calves and goats with water and scarlet wool and hyssop and sprinkled both the scroll itself and all the people saying this is the blood of the covenant that God has ordained for you and in the same way he sprinkled with the blood both the tent and all the vessels used in worship indeed under the law almost everything is purified with blood and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins so the writer to the Hebrews is commenting on exactly the ceremony in Exodus 24 and saying that the blood is for purification and forgiveness of sin but the trouble is that in the end this is just an earthly ritual with the blood of a sheep or a ram or a goat or a bull or whatever a dumb animal in effect and it is unable to because of the distribution of the law of something that is healing so the

[17 : 28] His thing that is healing that the zm