

Sacrificial Living

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- [0 : 0 0] If you would take your Bibles out and open to Philippians chapter 2 on page 186. Today is Palm Sunday and as Neil reminded the children, as Jesus entered Jerusalem to great shouts of joy and praise and delight, what was foremost in his mind was not the popularity or adulation of the crowd, but this one thing that he had come to give his life as a sacrifice.
- And on that Passover week, Jesus enters Jerusalem as the true Passover lamb, the one who had come from God to give his life as a sacrifice for sin.
- And as we move through this week toward Easter and we celebrate the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our joy and our faith are focused on this, that Jesus Christ is our sacrifice.
- And yet there is another sacrifice spoken of in the New Testament, one which reflects the love of Jesus Christ and that is our sacrifice.
- The sacrifice that all those who follow Jesus Christ are called to make. And you are aware and I am aware that the word sacrifice is not one of the top ten most popular words in our culture, isn't it?
- [1 : 3 6] Is it? I mean, if we'd called the sun run or the fun run the sacrifice run today, I'm not sure it would be quite as popular. And I think we use the word sacrifice in one of two ways, in either of two ways in our culture today.
- The first is it's a kind of strategy which we employ so that we might get something better for ourselves later on. So I sacrifice my holiday in Cancun to max out my RRSPs.
- Or I sacrifice my career ambitions for the sake of a relationship or my children. I sacrifice the carrot cake now so that I might gorge on the chocolate cake later.
- So it's a kind of a mechanism where I choose to sacrifice something for my own self-interest. That's not what the New Testament means when it speaks about sacrifice for us.
- The second way that we use the word today is we speak about this with great solemnity and we mention people dying and we talk about them paying the ultimate sacrifice.
- [2 : 4 1] So Dr Carlo Urbani, who was the World Health Organization doctor, who was working on SARS and contracted the disease and died, at his memorial service a letter was read from Kofi Annan, the General Secretary of the United Nations.
- And in that letter, Annan praised Urbani for his ultimate sacrifice. Or when President Bush visited the Bethesda Naval Hospital on Friday, he said, I came today to thank the troops and their loved ones for their sacrifice.
- So it's an act of great selflessness that's going to bring benefit to other people. And this is how I grew up, understanding the word. You know, my parents were missionaries in Africa and my grandparents were missionaries in Africa.
- And somehow I always thought that I'd end up in Africa. But don't worry, this is just as bad. So... It doesn't say much for my sense of direction, I know.

After moving back to Australia, one of the great privileges of growing up in my home was we had regular guests from around the world who came and stayed and lived in our house who told stories of heroic sacrifice as men and women gave their lives for Christ.

[4 : 13] One of the strongest memories I have is of Bishop Fester Kavengere who was an Anglican bishop in Uganda who escaped Idi Amin's death squads and he stayed in our house many times.

And he told the story of how in 1973 Christians were being rounded up and executed. So he took it upon himself to go to Idi Amin's palace and demand an explanation.

And Amin took him in his own car to a stadium where there were thousands of people gathered where three Christians were going to be executed. And Amin allowed Bishop Kavengere to preach to the crowd.

And he said, he said, I preached for a very long time on forgiveness and on eternal life. And he said, I was amazed at the calm and the quietness and the kindness of the three men who were about to be executed who spoke forgiving words to the firing squad and prayed for them.

And then they were shot. And Festo says that in the weeks following that every single person in the firing squad with their families came to him to find out how to become Christian and they came to know Christ.

[5 : 32] He came back a few years later and he said that politically things became much more difficult. And four years after that, in 1977, the Anglican Archbishop of Uganda, Archbishop Lwum, was arrested.

And Festo went down to Amin's palace where they were holding Archbishop Lwum. And tried to be with him, but they were forcibly separated and the Archbishop was beaten to death.

Now, these stories amazed me and stirred me as a teenager. And I imagined that one day I might be called on to sacrifice my life for Christ.

And so a number of scenarios would go through my adolescent brain, most of them ending with me dying heroically to bring about some great good. I died with great calm and equanimity and some tremendous result came about.

And while it is true that God does call some of his followers to die for him, this is not the primary sense of what the word means in the New Testament when it speaks about our sacrifice of faith.

[6 : 45] Have a look, please, at Philippians chapter 2. I want to pick up halfway through verse 16. The Apostle Paul says, So that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labour in vain, even if I am to be poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all.

We are very close to the heart of the Apostle Paul's view of ministry here. He says, The reason I run and labour beyond the point of weariness, the reason for all Christian ministry, is the great joy that comes to us on the day of Christ when we see the fruit of our labours in one another.

And then he speaks this language of sacrifice, of offering, of liturgy, not just about himself, but about all Christians, including the Philippians. And we are going to see in just a moment, he does this a number of times in this book and it is not an empty rhetorical device.

He is not just trying to be theatrical or colourful, but the language of sacrifice leads us to two of the most profound realities of the Christian faith.

And the first one is this, that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross has brought a radical change in this world. See, just listen to that language.

[8 : 18] Even if I am to be poured as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith. A libation is not a cool drink in the bar after a hot game of golf.

A libation was the last thing that might be done after the sacrifice was burnt. The priest would take a little bit of wine and he would pour it on the burnt offering and the aroma would rise as a pleasing thing to God.

It's the thing that completed the sacrifice. The apostle is saying, my ministry and my death is just a small part of the main sacrifice. It's going to bring some sort of completion to it and it's going to somehow help and strengthen and progress your faith.

But the big issue, he says, the main sacrifice is the sacrificial offering of your faith. Literally, the sacrificial liturgy of your faith.

Both sacrifice and liturgy are Old Testament terms. They speak about priestly functions. In Old Testament worship, there was nothing arbitrary or variable.

[9 : 35] Old Testament worship was not something a priest or a king could regulate and change at will. It was not something that changed with the seasons and with the ancient Near Eastern tastes and music.

Specific and detailed instructions for worship had been given by God himself, carefully recorded in scripture. Old Testament worship was not market driven, wasn't seeker sensitive, it wasn't changeable.

It took place in one place, through one institution, and that was the temple at Jerusalem. And the reason why was because the temple was the place that God had chosen for his dwelling.

The word in Hebrew for temple is palace. And in the days of the kings of Israel, if you went into Jerusalem, there were two palaces, one for the human king and one for the God of all the earth.

And it was very important that God gave strict regulations for worship because he wanted to teach his people that when you come into his presence, you are approaching the king and creator of all the world.

[10 : 46] That's why sacrifice is so important in the Old Testament. It was also vital to teach his people that he was a holy God and he took sin with deadly seriousness and that without the shedding of blood, we could not approach God.

Sometime you should read Leviticus, the numbers in Deuteronomy, and see that worship took place in a highly regulated way, in a particular place, with the priestly liturgy of the Levites offering sacrifices for the people of God.

Now why am I telling you all this? It's because all the apparatus of Old Testament worship, all the sacrifices in the priesthoods and the liturgy, all that apparatus point forward to a great sacrifice which would one day come when God would come and be with his people.

When one would step forward, who would be bruised for our iniquities, who would be wounded for our transgressions, who would take our chastisements upon himself so that we may be healed, one who would stand and take everything that stood between us and God to himself so that our sins may be permanently and eternally dealt with, so that we might be inwardly washed and cleansed, so that we might be made anew in the image of God by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It's exactly why Jesus approached Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday. It is why he spoke about his death and his resurrection as being the replacement for the temple.

[12 : 25] It's why in the passage that we read a few moments ago in Mark 11 of him approaching Jerusalem, the very passage before he says, I have come to give my life as a ransom for many.

Because in his death, Jesus fulfills all the old covenant and he installs and begins the new covenant. Sacrifice of his death does away with all the old sacrifices.

It's made once for all, never to be repeated. Nothing more can be added to it. The sinless Son of God has died for us. And I think if you've been a Christian for more than a couple of years, it's very difficult to grasp the massive and radical change that this is.

Because in his death and resurrection, Jesus takes all the elements of Old Testament worship and turns them inside out. Now worship is not something we just do once a week.

Worship is now everything we do throughout the week. Now the temple of God is not confined to a particular place and building, but you are the temple of God. Wherever Christians gather, because the Holy Spirit has taken possession of us, we are living stones being built into a holy temple to offer spiritual sacrifices to God because we are the dwelling place of God.

[13 : 53] There's not one select group who are called priests. The Christian church isn't a community with priests, it's a community of priests. And liturgy is not just the performance of a public rite.

Liturgy is everything we do offered in service to God. And sacrifice is no longer something just done for us. Sacrifice is the giving of our lives to God.

The death of Jesus, it changes everything. And that is why in 2.17 the apostle calls the faith of the Philippians the sacrificial offering, the sacrificial liturgy of your faith.

Why is that? Because the service that God requires is that we turn to Christ and place our faith in him. And that faith cannot be a part-time hobby, but the whole offering of the whole of ourselves to God.

Our faith is our sacrifice, as it were, our priestly offering, our liturgy. And it demonstrates itself in a number of practical ways. Let me show you how it works here.

[14 : 59] Look down to verse 25, please. The apostle says, I have thought it necessary to send you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier and your messenger and liturgist.

That's what that word is, minister to my need. In other words, Epaphroditus, you remember, who was sent from the Philippians with a money gift. He sought the apostle Paul at great risk to his life and finding someone in a prison in Rome was often a very difficult thing.

He nearly died. He stays with Paul. He encourages him and he serves him and the apostle says that is his liturgy. Or look down at verse 30.

Epaphroditus nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete your liturgy to me. The risk he took to encourage and to love is his liturgy.

Again, liturgy is not just we do in church. It's the whole of life of service. Look down to chapter 4, verse 18. Speaking of the money gift, the apostle says, I have received full payment and more.

[16 : 10] I am filled, having received from Epaphroditus the gift you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. Here is the money itself described as a sacrifice.

Philippians gave it to the gospel and to Paul. Paul says, no, no, it's been lifted up to the throne of God, pleasing aroma before him. And just in case you think this is confined to Philippians and just in case you may be going to sleep, let's have a look at some other passages.

Let's turn right to the book of Hebrews for a moment. Hebrews chapter 13. On page 212.

Hebrews chapter 13, verse 15. Through him, that is through Jesus Christ, verse 15. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God.

That is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name, do not neglect to do good and to share what you have for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Everything good that we do, the financial gifts, the singing of praise, the testimony to Christ, this also is a sacrifice to God.

[17 : 32] Turn back with me for a moment to Romans chapter 15. left to page 154. And in verse 16, Romans 15, 16.

By the way, I didn't tell you, keep your finger in Philippians because we're going back there. grace was given to me by God, he says, to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

Wonderful, isn't it? Everything about gospel work is created in these terms. And the reason is this, that the death of Jesus has radically transformed you and I and all who follow Christ.

Because it takes men and women who are curved in on themselves, who think of other people as though they are there to serve us, and it turns us and transforms us and gives us new hearts and different goals and different attitudes.

And it brings us to the place of seeing ourselves as people whose lives are at the disposal of God. That is what God is doing in your life now.

[19 : 02] So that is the first direction this language takes us, to the radical change in Jesus' death. And now, secondly and briefly, it also speaks about the goodness of God.

If you go back to Philippians, it's fascinating to me that wherever you find the language of sacrifice applied to us in the New Testament is always in the context of joy and delight and gladness.

Look at 2.17. It finishes with glad and rejoicing. And verse 18, you should be glad and rejoice with me. The same in verse 29. The joy and liturgy in verse 30.

The same in chapter 4, verses 18, 19 and 20. The reason is because in the death of Jesus, God covers our lives and he covers our death in goodness.

Because in his death, Jesus has done something to death, which changes death for all of us. He has demoted death from being a terror and a ruler and a slave master and a jail warden.

[20 : 21] In his death, Jesus has died my death and your death. So that when death comes to us, it does not come bringing the horror of the unknown.

It comes to us and translates us into the presence of the one who died for us, who loves us beyond imagining, who rose to new life as Lord and Saviour. And that is why the sacrificial offering of our faith is not about a kind of a teeth-grinding, fist-clenching labour of performance.

It's a realisation of the totality of God's love and how he owns us in every part. And it's very difficult for us to grasp a hold of this because it's the opposite of the way we naturally think.

We naturally think that it is we who are good but it is God who ought to be treated with suspicion. We think that somehow we have to do some of the work of grace because we can't really trust him.

We can't really be sure that he wants to love us and accept us. It's easy for us to believe the lie that God doesn't really want our best so we have to keep doing things so that he might accept us.

[21 : 40] Life becomes a bit of a deal, a bargain that we make with God where we can't really trust him with our whole selves and so what we do instead is we take little corners of our lives, little bits of our lives and we give those to God so that we might keep him coming back to the table.

It's a monstrous view of God. I want to take you to one other passage just to show you how. Let's turn back to Romans chapter 12 and we'll finish here on page 152.

Apostle Paul again, Romans 12 verse 1, familiar words, I appeal to you therefore brothers and sisters by the mercies of God present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God which is your spiritual worship.

Then how does that work? Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

You see where he starts? It's all based on the mercies of God. For 11 chapters the apostle has been reveling in the stunning grace and mercy of God towards us in the person of Jesus Christ.

[23 : 14] And if you study those first 11 chapters I don't think you can come to any other conclusion except the fact that God loves to serve us and desires to pour out his grace upon us. That confessing Jesus Christ as Lord means merely taking him as our satisfaction and our joy.

and now it means not allowing our culture to define us or conform us to its way of thinking but coming back again and again to the word of God to have our minds profoundly and ongoingly renewed so that we will look at the will of God and we will see the will of God all things beautiful and all things lovely and the will of God is something desirable to us.

And I think this has particular application when we find something in the word of God that we disagree with. See what do we do when we come to the word of God and something just doesn't fit with the way that we see things?

It's not as it ought to be or the way we wouldn't like things to be. It disagrees with our sense of things. What do you do when you're offended by God's word or his word is calling on you to do something or to think something that you don't want to?

The answer is we present our bodies to God as a living sacrifice. We have our minds renewed by the word of God so that we come to see the will of God for what it is.

[24 : 43] Faultless, lovely, life-giving, necessary. That's what it means to be a living sacrifice. It's not doing deals with God.

It's not pretending to put God in our debt as though he owed us anything by giving him little things in our life. Being a living sacrifice is not giving up things to God.

It's giving ourselves up to God. It's knowing that in his death Christ has set my life on the rock of God's goodness.

forgiveness. In his death he's demonstrated the love and the grace and the mercy of God and he's opened the door for life and death and created in me desires to cherish and treasure his will for me.

So as we move out of this service together and we face our week and we face the circumstances and all the things that call upon us, that tear us in different directions and make us feel that we are fragmented.

[25 : 47] Here is the thing which is unifying and integrating. Being a living sacrifice for God. It's not that I have work over here, my hobbies over here, my family over here, my life with God over here and they're all bouncing towards and away from one another.

They're separate and disconnected. Because of the death of Jesus Christ, because of the goodness of God, I offer my life in every part to him. My work and my hobbies and my family, how I face joy and pain, how I think and speak and relate, they're all a sacrifice of praise.

We come to each day and we say, Oh God, there is nothing I want more than to approve what is most worthy and value what is most valuable and treasure what is most precious and admire what is most beautiful and hate what is most evil and abhor what is most ugly.

I reckon myself dead to everything that is unspiritual and worldly and deadening to my soul and others. Please renew me, God, awaken my capacity so that I might think right and take me body and soul and make me an instrument of your glory in the world and let the renewal that has begun inside show itself on the outside.

This is my spiritual worship to show the world that you are my all-satisfying treasure. And I think that's what was in the mind of Sir Isaac Watts when he wrote our next hymn.

[27 : 27] I wonder if you would take your hymn sheet. We're going to sing number four and in the last verse he asks this question and states this where the whole realm of nature did I own everything in the universe.

That is an offering to God that is far too small. His love is so amazing and so divine it demands everything. So let's sing this as a sacrifice of praise to God.