

Wangaratta Wesleyan Methodist Church Sunday 22nd March 2015

Easter Messages Preparing for the Cross: A Sacrifice for Others

Bible Passages: Leviticus 16:20-22; Isaiah 53:4-6, 10; John 10:14-18; Hebrews 9:26

Intro: Why a sacrifice?

A sacrifice is where we give up something of value to gain something of greater value. We say no to tickets for the cricket world cup because a best friend is getting married. I give up the opportunity to play golf to take my wife out for lunch.

A sacrifice is a way of indicating that something is valuable or worthy. We say someone has made the supreme sacrifice when they give up their life for the sake of someone else. We often hear this in relation to war and dying in the line of duty for country or people. A sacrifice is often identified with the sacrifice of a live animal to honour or appease a deity. The bible is full of sacrifices and offerings to God either to show honour and allegiance, to demonstrate obedience and thankfulness or to pay for sin and seek purification.

Let's check out what we can learn about...

1) Sacrifice in the Old Testament (and)

a. In ancient times

The first record of an offering or sacrifice in the bible is in Gen 4 where we see Cain and his brother Abel bringing an offering to the Lord, it seems out of thankfulness to the Lord for what they had. And here we see the first teaching on what our attitude should be when we make an offering before the Lord.

- Cain brought produce from his crops. Not sincere, not the best, not as thankful.
- Abel brought the best fat portions of his stock. He gave the best, showed a greater level of thankfulness.
- God looked with favour on Abel and his offering but not on Cain.
- Motivation and heart attitude was all important.

From what we can understand the use of sacrifices and offerings was not only found among the biblical peoples but other ancient civilisations also used sacrifices and offerings as a way of seeking atonement for sin or appeasing their gods.

In Judges we read that after the Philistines had captured Samson they offered a great sacrifice to their god Dagon. And again when the Philistines had captured the Ark and decided it was too powerful for them to keep they sent it back with a guilt offering.

Most of the time you can see the meaning behind a sacrifice although it is often hard to place ourselves in the shoes of the person making it. I think one of the silliest sacrifices made in the bible is recorded in Judges Chapter 11. Jephthah was a mighty warrior who was

born after his father had a relationship with a prostitute. Because of this he wasn't recognised by his family and people until they were desperate for a leader to fight of their enemies, so they called upon Jephthah to help them.

On the eve of fighting the Ammonites Jephthah made a vow before the Lord. 'If we win this Lord I will sacrifice to you whatever is first to come out of my house when I return home.' Now what did he expect to come out of his home when he arrived victoriously from battle? His pet dog? The family donkey or maybe the cook or slave? No, his only child a daughter came out dancing with a tambourine! Obviously he was devastated but he couldn't back out of a vow he had made. What a wacko! Why make such a crazy vow?

This reminds me of Abraham and Isaac

b. Abraham

This story has always sent a shiver up my spine. How could a father ever be put in a situation where he had to offer up his child, and an only one at that, for a sacrifice? This of course is not as a result of a foolish vow like Jephthah rather it was a request from God himself.

- Can you imagine the tension that must have been in Abraham's heart as he ascended the mountain with his only son? Explain.

What was the significance of this sacrifice?

- It became the perfect opportunity for God to test Abraham to see if he was prepared to trust God no matter what was asked of him. How could there be anything greater asked of a dad than to sacrifice his own son?
- This set the bench mark for the motivation behind sacrifice for future generations: Faith, obedience and heart motivation. Abraham was familiar with offering sacrifices but this day God was testing his faith and obedience. You see Abraham discovered that offering a sacrifice without the right heart attitude made the sacrifice next to useless.
- Lastly this sacrifice was a forerunner to what God did on Calvary. He offered his only son and it was as shocking to us as the thought of Abraham killing his own son.
- Fortunately God never intended Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, he only wanted to check his faith and trust. At the last moment God provided a beast so Abraham could continue with his offering to God.

Finally in the OT let's check out...

c. Moses

Moses formalised the sacrificial process for the Israelites. They were to offer two lambs daily and in addition two more on the Sabbath. There was a monthly commitment and then the annual feasts: Unleavened bread, Feast of Weeks, Day of Atonement, and Feast of Tabernacles.

This was a heavy load for the priests not to mention the huge amount of animals needed for these sacrifices. In fact this level of animal sacrifice was unsustainable and it seems that throughout the Old Testament we see an ebb and flow of commitment towards sacrifice.

The main purpose of these sacrifices was to make atonement for the people so that they, as sinful people, could still have a relationship with God. God's method of dealing with sin was to have the blood of a perfect lamb, goat or bull shed for them. You see without the shedding of blood there could be no forgiveness of sin. This is an eternal law that God holds to.

One of the avenues for forgiveness that Moses gave the people from God was that of a 'scapegoat'. Here two goats without blemish were brought before the people and the priest was to place the sins of the people upon one goat and they were to release that goat into the wilderness thus carrying the sin away. The other goat was sacrificed.

Like all sacrifices and offerings they had to be repeated again and again to be effective and often it became simply a ritual with no heart change or genuine repentance. What then was the point of offering a sacrifice to God if there was no repentance? There needed to be something different and...

2) A shift in focus

Was coming...

In the other religions of the ancient world a sacrifice was used to appease the gods or to control the will of the gods. Today this still happens among some religions and tribal groups.

God's purpose of a sacrifice was entirely different. God approaches his people graciously and provides the means for overcoming guilt so they can live in his presence.

Now we know what it means to receive God's grace and live in his presence and we know it was instituted through the death and resurrection of Christ. However God began to teach his people as early as 1,000 years before Christ that God was far more interested in our heart response to God than our sacrifice. There was a shift in focus.

a. King David understood this.

David understood that God was a very gracious God. He experienced God amazing grace upon his own unworthy state. He knew full well the process of sacrifice to atone for sin yet he reasoned that this alone was not good enough.

David said, 'You desire truth in the inner parts.' 'Create in me a pure heart'

You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.

¹⁷ My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart

you, God, will not despise. (Psalm 51:6, 10, 16-17)

David was beginning to understand God's heart towards people and what his response back should be. Expand?

Fast forward a few hundred years to the writing of the second part of...

b. Isaiah

Here we see a further transition in the understanding of sacrifice. The 'suffering servant' is introduced as one who is led to the slaughter on our behalf. He willingly took our punishment and in return we receive peace, He was wounded and we were healed. In fact it was God who placed on the suffering servant all of our sin.

This is recorded in Isaiah 53 and it is interesting that the phrases are used: 'he was led like a lamb to the slaughter' and 'his life was a guilt offering'. This suffering servant who we know represents Jesus was spoken about 700 years before Christ and God was paving the way for a re-understanding of sacrifice.

Despite all this affliction, suffering and death he will live on and the 'will of the Lord will prosper in his hand', and because of his suffering he will justify many.

Now here is the point:

- This sacrifice that Isaiah is talking about has got far greater power than any animal sacrifice.
- It is a willing self-sacrifice made for others.
- There is healing, peace and justification on offer here.
- It is God graciously approaching his people with permanent healing power.

But there is an acknowledgement from the people needed:

- They need to acknowledge they have gone astray like sheep and therefore need the suffering servant to bring them back.

This Servant is not just a scapegoat where the sins can be lightly dismissed but he is the very agent whom God is using to bring about reconciliation.

I hope you can see how God's amazing plan of salvation has been in progress right throughout time and those close to God even in the Old Testament times recognised this mighty and gracious plan. So when the time was right for this much prophesied Saviour to come God revealed...

3) The final sacrifice

When we celebrate Easter we celebrate the one lasting sacrifice that ended all sacrifices.

a. Jesus our Great High Priest

The old covenant where the priest offered sacrifice on behalf of the people so they could be forgiven was at best temporary. It was like putting a band aid on the knee to fix a broken heart: it would never heal by simply treating the outside. The healing is needed much deeper. And the priest would need to keep offering sacrifice year after year.

Hundreds of years before Jesus came Jeremiah prophesied that the time was coming for God to make a new covenant with his people. This covenant would be different to the old one. It would have a permanent high priest that would cause this new relationship with God and his people to be a deeply personal, everlasting relationship. Instead of the laws being written on stone they will be written on their hearts and they were to know the Lord God intimately.

Hebrews tells us that the old covenant was not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper rather it was only an external ointment when what was needed was internal transformation. Here we see the ministry of the Holy Spirit as the agent of transformation through the new covenant.

A quick comparison between the OT priest and Jesus:

- The OT priest first needed to offer a sacrifice for himself to be clean and holy enough to offer a sacrifice for others
- Only once a year was he allowed to enter the very presence of God. Holy of Holies.
- The sacrifice was only temporary and could never completely atone for sin.
- So you have an imperfect priest with an inadequate sacrifice.

Jesus on the other hand as the Great High Priest came to perform both the role of:

- An everlasting priest who is able to continually intercede for us before the Father
- And also to be the perfect once for all sacrifice.

This act led to...

b. Eternal redemption

Never before has there been and never will there be someone like Jesus who is the exact fit to redeem the world. No other religion past, present or future has someone to rival Jesus. No other deity could offer themselves unblemished to God like Jesus did. No one else could:

- claim perfection as the Son of God,
- be the perfect mediator between us and God,
- perform a self-sacrifice that secured our eternal redemption,
- rise from death through the eternal Spirit
- and finally to have the right to enter the perfect tabernacle, heaven itself, to prepare a place for us.

Hebrews 9:12 says: 'He (Jesus) did not enter (the tabernacle) by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.'

This is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and by His Spirit he lives within you and me.

We have looked at sacrifice in the OT and traced how God was slowly changing the focus of sacrifice from an external requirement to an internal response to a loving God. We then discovered that Jesus completely fulfilled and superseded the old covenant making way for a new everlasting covenant that you and I can partake in. What a promise of blessing we have before us? How do we daily live in this promise?

Conclusion: Living in the promise

In a strange and unique way we the redeemed now have the opportunity to again make an offering to God. Peter says we are to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus.

I reckon we who have been set free by the blood of Jesus need to see all of life as an opportunity to offer back to God a sacrifice of love, worship, obedience, Christian character, service, compassion towards others, physical and financial generosity and so on. Like the temple of old God dwells in us and we reflect his glory.

Romans 12:1 sums up how we should live: 'Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God- this is your spiritual act of worship.'

Message by Pastor David Lloyd