

## A LIVING SACRIFICE

It sounds like excruciating, long-lasting agony, this business of being a living sacrifice. Even on a short-term and very limited level, the idea of making sacrifices is no longer popular. Sacrifice is not the “in” thing in our culture. We are into self-fulfillment, self-actualization, living each day to the fullest, getting all the gusto. Sacrifice sounds too much like giving things up, and we all know that acquiring things is the real purpose of life. Ask any normal person, “How are you getting along? What are you doing these days?” Almost none of them will reply, “Hey, I’m into sacrifice. It’s a terrific thing – really wonderful. You should try it sometime!” Is that what you hear Paul saying?

Ask most anybody or even consult a dictionary about “sacrifice” and you get back things like: pain, suffering, loss, diminishment, sorrow. The word most often found preceding sacrifice is “terrible.” Rarely do we hear people talk about the common, ordinary, garden-variety kind of sacrifice. Mostly it is a “terrible sacrifice.”

Any thoughtful person knows that life is not a smooth, even, predictable affair. There will come times when sacrifice is unavoidable. There will come other times when sacrifice is advisable. Even people who hate the thought of sacrifice can often see the wisdom of sacrificing a little in the present moment, if that seems likely to bring a large benefit in the foreseeable future. But Paul, as we just heard, is not talking the same language at all. He seems to be talking about running toward sacrifice with your whole being, embracing it as a way of life from now on – and with enthusiasm and joy!

Such confusion and aberration are bound to happen when we get cut off from the source of our concepts, or when we get focused on the details of the process and forget the purpose. What is the *purpose* of a sacrifice? Well, the most immediate purpose is sanctification. The real purpose of sacrifice is sanctification – not suffering. Don’t start out looking at it from the lamb’s point of view. We see Jesus as the “Lamb of God” and cannot help but think about what it cost Him to be consecrated. But if we are not careful, we will end up missing His purpose in contemplating His cost. Our biblical forebears had no qualms about eating lamb; it is appropriate food. The focus is on sanctifying the people. Since it is to be a meal shared with God, it should be a really good meal. Hence the emphasis on a lamb without blemish. If you have important guests,

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don't you try to find some fresh vegetables and good cuts of meat to start out with? Same thing with God, only more so. God deserves the best we can come up with. Then you prepare it as carefully as you know how – prepare it, dedicate it, place it on the altar.

Then God takes over. The fire belongs to God. The fire is God's agent. The fire purifies and transforms. But most of all, the fire sanctifies. The offering is now infused, from God's fire, with the very essence of God himself. The meal is consecrated and sanctified. The people eat the sanctified offering – take it into themselves – and by taking such food into themselves, they are themselves sanctified. What goes up in the heat and the flame is God's portion, just to show that God is participating in the meal. If it is a sin offering, God gets it all; it is left in the fire until it is entirely gone. But most of the time the sacrifice is for the people, in the sense that it is the means for sanctifying the people before God. Everything will be wonderful then, of course. The people and God will be united again – the bond reestablished, the rebellion and errors eradicated, the wrongness and illness healed – and the will and the energy to keep the Covenant and live faithfully will be restored. Life will flow as it is supposed to flow under God's rule and wisdom. That is the purpose of sacrifice.

That is the function and purpose and goal of the altar. The people bring the best they have to God and they consecrate it, dedicate it, place it on the altar. God purifies it, sanctifies it, shares the meal by giving it back to the people to take into themselves. Thus the people are sanctified, and all is right and well again – until it wears off or the people forget. Then it must be done again. But that's okay. We get hungry again – just like we get hungry for the presence of God. The humble and the wise do it often enough so that the effect never wears off entirely. Sacrifice is not about pain and suffering; that is a Christian invention. Sacrifice is about a wonderful meal, a party with God, getting back in harmony and tune with God. And Paul, of course, was Jewish. He didn't know he was a Christian as any of us think of it. Christianity did not exist as something separate from Judaism during Paul's lifetime. Paul thought Jesus was the long-expected Jewish Messiah, and that he was living in the exciting end-times just prior to Jesus ushering in an entirely new age of justice, peace, and love. He thought Jesus was the fulfillment of everything Judaism had proclaimed and was trying to accomplish. Being a living sacrifice was about consecration and sanctification. Of course, Paul knew that in this kind of world, consecration and sanctification could get you into a lot of trouble. He knew what had

happened to Jesus. He himself had experienced it first-hand, over and over. But that was a side effect. My point is, we cannot understand Paul if we think sacrifice is about pain and suffering. That confuses the purpose with the side effects. Sacrifice is about consecration and sanctification. In other words, it is about joy and purpose: finally getting our lives aligned with what we love most, care about most, and really want to live for.

Do you think I'm trying to pull some sleight-of-hand – or sleight-of-mind – trick? That it takes some of the nobility away if we do not suffer and deprive ourselves for our Lord? How Jesus must hate it when His people can no longer tell the difference between deprivation and devotion. *“I came that you might have life – and have it more abundantly.”* (John 10:10) “Okay Lord, we hear you. From now on we will be dejected, feel sorry for ourselves, and give up everything we care about (or at least feel really guilty about not giving up everything we care about). And from now on, though life is hard for everybody who comes here, we will assume that when it is hard for us, it is because you love to see us suffer.”

How enormously frustrating. What a great wonder that Jesus doesn't just say “Go to Hell!” and walk away. When I was in high school, a friend of mine got a new dog from what we called the “dog pound.” It was a really beautiful dog, but it quickly became obvious that the dog had been terrified of some former master. Whenever my friend would try to teach it anything – call it to come, anything – the dog would put its tail between its legs, hunker down, and cower there looking miserable and frightened. No amount of petting and encouragement made any difference. The dog would stay in this ever-so-humble attitude of total obeisance until my friend would stop trying to say or suggest anything and simply walk away. Then slowly the dog would come out of the penitential stance and start to walk around again. Of course, my friend wanted to romp and play and do all kinds of exciting things with his dog. But all he ever got was cringing, total, abject obeisance. Often I have thought to myself: Now, there's a picture of far too much of the Christian church. Jesus wants to romp, play, go on adventures, and bring more and more people into the love circles and the life circles where all of us devote more and more of our time and life to the things we really love and care about. Yet mostly it is not that way. Mostly we either ignore Him or tuck our tails between our legs and hunker down and cower there in total obeisance. No amount of petting, encouragement, or reassurance can convince us that we are really loved and do not have to be afraid anymore. And some picture of suffering and loss is what most people conjure up in their

minds when we talk about things like “living sacrifice.” By the way, my friend finally took the dog back to the pound. Life is short; why feed something whose only ability is to cower?

We are unlikely to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem, never mind here where we live. Our sacrifices and our altars have become more and more symbolic, internalized, a matter of the inner spirit. As Paul says, “*the worship of mind and heart.*” Nevertheless, some things clear up if we remember the source. For instance, THERE IS NO SACRIFICE WITHOUT AN ALTAR. Suffering, deprivation, loss, and sorrow do not qualify as sacrifice. A thing must be consecrated on God’s altar before it qualifies as sacrifice. Accidents are never a sacrifice. Things we give up in order to gain greater glory or more riches for ourselves are never a true sacrifice, though of course that is what I will try to call it. If I deprive myself of certain things in order to send my kids to college because I want them to be successful, because I want to look like a good father, or because that is what parents in our socio-economic level of American culture have learned to do, then that is no sacrifice. If I do exactly the same thing because I believe the children belong to God and this is part of their preparation for serving God, then that *is* a sacrifice. Even if I have plenty of money and what I spend for college has no significant effect on my spending habits or on my well-being – if that is the motive, it is still a sacrifice. Sacrifice has nothing to do with suffering or deprivation *per se*. Sacrifice is always to consecrate or sanctify something.

Did that drop into place? THERE IS NO SACRIFICE WITHOUT AN ALTAR – but *anything* consecrated to God *is* a sacrifice, even if (God forbid!) we enjoy it, like it, and want nothing else more. Anything placed upon God’s altar is a sacrifice. The real point is this: Suffering, pain, loss, etc. are all side effects of the altar business. They happen frequently enough that we have associated them with sacrifice, and indeed, we would be foolish to believe that consecrating ourselves to God in this world will leave us unscathed. But the purpose of sacrifice is sanctification – not suffering. Theoretically, if we are truly purified and consecrated, then we can go onto the altar and never feel any pain – only the increase of power and heightened joy. (“Reunited, and it feels so good!”) By the way, you probably already know it but “sanctification” simply means to be made sacred – to be at one with God; to be aligned, at peace, united with God – until you both want the same things and work toward the same purposes, and the communication flows easy and clear between you.

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It is easy to see what happened, isn't it? Fire purifies. Fire is always the symbol of God's transformation – symbol of the Holy Spirit. And since we are not purified and something is always incomplete in our consecration, well, we have come to expect a certain amount of heat and pain and loss from the fire. If we get close to God, something is going to change: something is going to be required that we do not think we want to give; something is going to be taken away that we think we want to hold on to. It doesn't seem to matter how often we remind ourselves that God is wise and good and loving – and that if a thing is taken away, it was not truly right for us; and that if a thing is required, we will be blessed by the challenge to come up with it, at least in the long run. Sacrifice is not truly a diminishment or a loss. In true sacrifice, we always become more, not less. Things placed on God's altar – including us – are always used for their highest purpose, and they come more and more into their true form, identity, and destiny. Nevertheless, much of the time all we think of is the heat and the flame and the pain. So sacrifice is seldom thought of in terms of consecration and sanctification, even though those are the only important things about sacrifice. Instead, sacrifice is now invariably associated with loss, pain, and the pits. When Paul talks about our presenting ourselves to God as a living sacrifice (placing ourselves on God's altar, is the image), we do not hear the bands playing or the angels singing – like Paul meant it and lots of early Christians heard it. To our ears, it sounds more like Hell – misery and burning. Naturally that makes sense, since so many Christians, for so many years, have told us that Jesus' true aim is to throw us all into Hell.

The upshot is: Quite a few of us do not feel really dedicated or sincere or committed or faithful unless we are in a lot of pain. If we have really turned life over to God, then we ought to be doing a lot of suffering. Our lives should be full of sacrifice. Only, by "sacrifice" we do not mean experiencing sanctification – feeling really close to God, and feeling free and alive and finally able to serve like we have always wanted to. We just mean pain and giving up wonderful things – like greed, cheap sex, depression, envy ... you know the list. How sad to give up our delightful and wonderful ways.

I am reminded of the thrifty farmer who moved from California into tornado country. Properly impressed by the stories he had heard, he took some of his hard-earned money and built a super-strong storm cellar. From then on, whenever the sky would turn dark, he would head for the storm cellar. Time after time he came out of the cellar to find no damage done and no evidence of any unusually severe storm. He was beginning

to wonder if all the stories had been exaggerated and if his investment in the storm cellar had been an overreaction – the foolish fear of a newcomer. Then one day he came out of the cellar to find that a tornado had indeed leveled everything. His house was gone. The barn was a shambles. Half the livestock were dead or crippled. Debris and chaos were everywhere. The farmer took a look around, glanced skyward and shouted, “Now that’s more like it!” (Audie Ramsey)

I should not keep repeating, but I am trying to record over some terribly flawed old tapes. Sacrifice does not mean suffering, pain, or loss. Sacrifice means placing something on God’s altar – to consecrate and sanctify it. Paul urges us to stop fooling around with all the little stuff and to offer our very selves on the altar. He is not focusing on what the purification and transformation might be like for any of us at the moment. He seems to assume that it’s what we all truly want in the long run anyway, so we might as well go for it big time. “Come on in, the fire’s fine.”

And how shall we approach communion today, which is always an altar-and-sacrifice affair?

Sometimes we focus on the sacrifice of Jesus: the body and blood – the crucified One. Jesus is truly the Consecrated One, the obedient Son – the One who truly lives from the altar. And the life and actions of Jesus reveal that God so loved us. God is the ONE Jesus is obeying, so there is no other satisfactory explanation for what Jesus does except that “*God so loved the world ...*”

Sometimes we go on from that to our own total amazement, and to our own response. The Sanctified One invites us to take unto ourselves the same Life and strength that moved and purified and sanctified Him. Sometimes in communion we focus on our own participation in the meal: What the body and the blood will do in us – what they *need* to do in us. Partaking of the meal is to offer ourselves – to go on the altar ourselves. That is why this is the central sacrament: the summation, reenactment, renewal, and power of all that the Christian Faith means and stands for and does for us – and does within us. Transformation is the meaning of this meal. The altar, the fire, the Holy Spirit, the eating – taking into ourselves – it all points to the same conclusion. Yes we are loved, but we are going to be changed, transformed, sanctified. And that is not a process that ends. Paul gives us the perfect picture: a living sacrifice.

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What happens to a sacrifice after it has been on God's altar? Half of it goes to God, and the other half is used to sustain the community. Those are the two commandments: You shall love the Lord your God, and your neighbor as yourself. "Love me, love my kids." No surprise here. So we are reminded: *"He who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself."* The transformation is not just for our spiritual amazement. It is also to make us more useful to God and to the faith community. It seldom sounds very good when we try to put it into words. Despite the fact that it is one of the world's most closely guarded secrets, it is nonetheless true that beyond all our other needs and hopes and desires, we do hunger and avidly long to be useful, to be important, to be of service to God and to the community of people on earth who live to love and serve God. For some of us, that may be only a few people that we know about. For some of us, that may be the whole world. Either way, we come to the sacrifice of this communion meal and, from that, we offer ourselves as living sacrifices. And then the joy begins. If there is also pain and loss, as usually there is, that is truly the least important part of communion. It is only a side effect of the glory of transformation – and of communion, which means being united or reunited with both God and each other.

Yes, yes, and more yes. Only, do not forget the real truth of Jesus' sacrifice – the power that really drove it and the truth that makes it real: *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."* (Hebrews 12:1-2)

Oh my friends, does that sound to you like something with its tail tucked between its legs, cowering down, and cringing?