

The Life of Sacrifice

"We must go a three days' journey into the wilderness and **sacrifice** to the LORD our God as He commands us." (NAS, Exodus 8:27)

ὁδὸν τριῶν ἡμερῶν πορευσόμεθα εἰς τὴν ἔρημον καὶ θύσομεν
κυρίῳ τῷ θεῷ ἡμῶν καθάπερ εἶπεν ἡμῖν

הַדֶּרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים גֵּלָד בַּמִּדְבָּר וְזָבַחְנוּ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ
בְּאֲשֶׁר יֹאמַר אֱלֹהֵינוּ:

via trium dierum pergemus in solitudine et **sacrificabimus**
Domino Deo nostro sicut praeceperit nobis

I. Introduction.

Sacrifice is an ancient practice of human civilization. In different civilizations different beliefs are associated with its practices. Nevertheless, it is important to observe that the most ancient practices of sacrifice were intended either as a payment of tribute to appease a supernatural being for favor or as an act of social fellowship between the deity and the worshipper. According to Robertson Smith, in his lectures on *The Religion of the Semites*, “The leading idea in the animal sacrifices of the Semites ... was not that of a gift made over to the gods, but of an act of communion, in which the god and his worshippers unite by partaking together of the flesh and blood of a sacred victim.”ⁱ

The Old Testament uses different words for sacrifice. The first, עֹלָה (*‘ōlāh*) means *whole burnt offering* (Leviticus 1:3). Its homonym עֹלָה (*‘ōleh*) is translated as *leaf, leafage* (Genesis 3:7), and עָלָה (*‘ōlāh*) is translated meaning *to go up, ascend, climb* (Genesis 19:15). The second word, קֹרְבָן (*korbān*), means *offering, oblation* (Leviticus 27:11). The third word מִנְחָה (*minhāh*) means *gift, tribute, offering, present, oblation, sacrifice, meat offering, and grain offering* (Leviticus 6:15). But the fourth word, זָבַח (*jābah*), means *sacrifice, sacrifices of righteousness, sacrifices of strife, the covenant sacrifice, the Passover, annual sacrifice, and thank offering*.

W. A. Van Gemeren in his essay on “Offerings and Sacrifices in Bible Times” makes a very helpful distinction between offerings and sacrifice. According to him the word “sacrifice” denotes the particular way of presenting a certain offering, whereas the word “offering” represents several categories of gifts to the Lord. He writes, “Only three categories of offerings are to be considered as sacrifices: the sin offering, the guilt offering, and the burnt offering, but not all offerings are sacrifices. The tithe was particularly one of the tributary offerings. Thus, it can be said that all sacrifices are offerings, but not all offerings are sacrifice.”ⁱⁱ Using offerings as a generic term for both offerings and sacrifices, Van Gemeren categorizes them as (1) Propitiatory: sin offering, guilt offering; (2) Dedicatory: burnt offering, cereal offering; (3) Communal (Fellowship)

offering: peace offering, wave offering, thanksgiving offering, vow, free will offering. The purposes of these offerings and sacrifices were: first, that the nation of Israel might know that God had ordained a way as to how he was to be approached; second, that it is because of sin and guilt, one could not freely approach Yahweh; third, that all that the people of God possess is given by God and therefore they owed continual recognition to the Lord for his mercies by bringing offerings and sacrifices to him.

But how does this apply to us today as New Testament believers? Since we know that the institution of offerings and sacrifices before the coming of Christ was typological and temporal in its purpose, and the offering and sacrifice (προσφοράν καὶ θυσίαν, *prosphoran kai thusian* meaning *offering* and *sacrifice* in Ephesians 5:2) which is perfect (τετελείωκεν, *teteleiōken* meaning *complete* or *perfect* in Hebrews 10:14) has been offered in the person of Jesus Christ, should we say that offerings and sacrifices are abolished and are no longer mandatory? Are we released from these as requirements?

The answer in the Bible is both yes and no. The Bible explicitly proves the sufficiency of the personal offerings and sacrifices of Christ for the atonement of humankind. Therefore offerings or sacrifices brought to the house of the Lord for the purchase of forgiveness or favor from God is unbiblical. Nevertheless, New Testament teachings explicitly re-enforce offerings and sacrifices for Christians today.

II. Sacrifice for Christians Today.

A. Sacrifice because of Absolute Trust.

In our first seminar on *the Calling of God*, we saw that God calls a person at four levels: first, the call to a saving relationship; second, the call to a sanctifying life of discipleship; third, the call to be on mission with God; and fourth, the call to a specific task. In the second seminar on *the Life of Obedience*, we saw that obedience is absolute compliance. In the third seminar on *the Life of Faith*, we saw that faith is believing the unseen. Now, absolute trust in God is the common virtue that influences all these areas of Christian living. Absolute trust in God is an indispensable trait of genuine Christianity. But how do we know that a person has absolute trust in God?

When Abraham gave the first choice of land to his nephew Lot, he sacrificed his right. He had an absolute trust in God (Genesis 13:9). When he took his only son Isaac to Moriah in absolute compliance to God's command to sacrifice him, he did so because of his absolute trust in God (Genesis 22:8). Consider the words of Abraham, "God himself will provide the lamb..." When Jesus saw the multitudes following him with ulterior motives he demanded from them sacrifice as a sign of absolute trust in him. Jesus told the rich ruler who wanted to inherit eternal life to sell everything and give to the poor (Luke 18:19). Could anyone obtain eternal life by donating all his possessions? Certainly not. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and in order to receive eternal life one must put his absolute trust in Him. The answer lies in the last clause of the sentence in Luke 18:19—"then come, follow me." The rich ruler lacked absolute trust in Jesus.

Jesus was explicit in his teachings about the requirement of absolute trust in His lordship. Talking to his disciples, He demanded from them self-denial and acceptance of the similar kind of suffering and death on the cross as he himself was anticipating (Luke 9:23). For Jesus submission to such a sacrificial life was a basic qualification of discipleship. In the times of Jesus one would not meet His requirements unless he/she proves his/her absolute trust in Him by sacrificing everything and following him. Peter had to leave his fishing net and the boat and Mathew had to leave his tax collections. Many similar examples both from antiquity and modernity can be sited here. This is true and valid even today.

In Luke 9:57-62, Jesus forewarned the three men who were fascinated by his teachings and miracles and wanted to follow Him. The first he asked to reconsider the kind of sacrifice required in terms of the lifestyle that might be demanded. He told him, “*Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head.*” In other words he was asking if he was willing to sacrifice and detach himself from the basic comforts of life in order to follow him and trust his leadership. The second person he asked to reconsider his dependence on himself to meet the social obligation of burying his father. He needed to have absolute trust in Jesus to meet such obligation and to obey in absolute compliance. Jesus told him, “*Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God.*” From the third person Jesus demanded the sacrifice of his emotional attachment to his family. He needed to have absolute trust in Jesus for his family.

Whenever the calling of God puts us at the crossroads to make choices, we are expected to make a choice that involves sacrifice in order that we may show our absolute dependence and loyalty to God. The times of Jesus as well as through out the two thousand years of the history of the church are filled with a great cloud of witnesses, who through their sacrifice, testify to their absolute trust in God.

B. Sacrifice because of the Mercies of God.

Sacrifice is a logical response of human beings to the mercies of God. Just as every action has a reaction and every stimulus a response, human beings are intellectually capable of adequately responding with action to their experience of the mercies of God. In Romans 12: 1, Paul writes, “*I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.*” The King James Version rightly translates the Greek word λογικὴν (*logikēn*) as *reasonable* whereas NIV and NAS versions fail to communicate Paul’s rhetoric. In Romans chapters nine through eleven, Paul elaborates in detail on God’s mercies both to Jews and gentiles and then makes a logical demand from them to sacrifice.

Luke 7:41-47 highlights the sacrifice of the expensive perfume on the feet of Jesus:

Two men owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he canceled the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?" Simon replied, "I suppose the one who had the bigger debt canceled." "You have judged correctly," Jesus said. Then he turned toward the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I came into your house. You did not give me any water for my feet, but she wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You did not give me a kiss, but this woman, from the time I entered, has not stopped kissing my feet. You did not put oil on my head, but she has poured perfume on my feet. Therefore, I tell you, her many sins have been forgiven-- for she loved much. But he who has been forgiven little loves little."(NIV)

C. T. Studd, an English Test cricketer who sacrificed the comfort of aristocracy and went as a missionary to China in the Victorian era, rightly describes the reason for his sacrifice. He said, "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for him."

Martin J. Selman in his article "Sacrifice for Christians Today" appropriately describes sacrifice as the response of human gratitude toward God. He writes:

For the biblical writers, however, sacrifice could never be reduced to a human centered enterprise nor was it possible to entertain the idea of a purchasing credit with God. They saw sacrifice as a debt to be gladly repaid, not because anyone could begin to pay back what was owed to God, but as a way of making public the depth of one's gratitude. This is not in any sense to criticize the heroism of those who freely give off themselves for others, since self-giving is an essential element of Christian sacrifice.ⁱⁱⁱ

C. Sacrifice because of Passion for His Kingdom.

The Kingdom perspective is a perspective of visualizing an individual, society, a nation and the world through God's eyes seeing what they are, what God wants them to become, and what is the Christian's role in that process. Every child of God should be taught and trained to have the Kingdom perspective. For in the Kingdom of God a Christian is either a missionary or he is a mission mobiliser. And for both causes an equal amount of passion is required. Every Christian should be encouraged to pray and develop passion for God's Kingdom.

It was passion for God's Kingdom that motivated Paul to make sacrifices. Let us read 2 Corinthians 11:24-28:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. (NIV)

Passion for His Kingdom is a sign of a higher level of spiritual maturity in which worship of God transforms the values of life, impacting beyond the walls of our denominations, race, language and nation. It is a passion for His Kingdom to come on earth soon. This is what happened to the believers at Moravia in 1732. From a community of 600 believers 70 went out as missionaries. Millions of Christians have suffered, perished and died in the last 2000 years, but passion for God's Kingdom continues to result in sacrifice.

Consider the life of Lottie Moon, who after spending several years in China, fell sick and could not return home to America alive. Her belongings were handed over to her brothers. When her brothers opened her box they began crying because her belongings were nothing compared to her basic needs. She had everything back home, and yet she did not have much. What motivated her to live such a sacrificial life? She had passion for the Kingdom of God. We need that passion in our generation. The Church often becomes parochial and introverted in its perspective and unwilling to sacrifice because its members and leaders lack passion for the Kingdom of God. Most churches today exhibit tremendous amount of optimism and shrewdness in planning and raising millions of dollars in order to erect beautiful facilities for their own use but when it comes to planting churches or training leaders in the unreached part of the world there is no similar optimism and faith. They have a hard time in raising even a few thousand dollars for missions and their budget reflects proportionately high allocation for internal investment.

It is time for most churches to begin praying sincerely - "Lord, give us passion for your kingdom," so that our passion may result in sacrifice."

III. How do we Sacrifice today?

The practical aspect of how we sacrifice today can be extrapolated from the causes that we discussed earlier. If these causes are not reflected in our giving, our giving is not a true sacrifice. Our giving must reflect our absolute trust in God, our conscious awareness of the mercies of God, and our invincible passion for the Kingdom of God.

Nevertheless the practice of sacrifice must begin with a correct understanding of

selfishness and **stewardship**. Inadequate knowledge of selfishness and stewardship is a giant obstacle in the practice of biblical sacrifice.

A. Practice the Pre-requisites of Sacrifice.

1. Be Conscious of Selfishness:

Let us consider first of all what selfishness is. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “selfish” as *devoted to or concerned with one's own advantage or welfare to the exclusion of regard for others*. Selfishness is a state of mind where the interest of self takes precedence over the interests of God and others. Selfishness is the corrupt form of self-love. After sin entered the world the gift of self-love to human beings became perverted. Therefore no human being is perfectly selfless. An unregenerate person is capable of exhibiting selfishness in various forms and degrees. We need to examine our hearts, asking:

How much am I preoccupied with myself?
Do I care for other's needs as I care for mine?
Have I been self-assertive?
Have I spoken more than I have listened?
Am I gathering more than I can use?

These questions are good even for a corporate group to prevent a selfish spirit in our financial budget.

When we walk with the Holy Spirit and yield to Him in absolute obedience, we receive wisdom, power, and guidance from above to restrain our potential capabilities to sin by becoming selfish. The more we sacrifice, the more we grow and learn better about selflessness and sacrifice.

2. Practice Stewardship.

The second important prerequisite to the practice of sacrifice is the precise understanding of stewardship. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “stewardship” as *the responsible use of resources, especially money, time, and talents, in the service of God*. In Genesis 1:26, God appointed Adam and Eve to be stewards and to subdue the creation but not be subdued by it. A good steward is committed to the Kingdom values and the Kingdom's purposes. He uses God's resources for himself wisely according to his needs and not for luxury.

In the parable of the rich fool in Luke 12:16-21 Jesus warned the listeners not to be lovers of wealth who store material things for their selfish use; instead in Luke 16:9, he encouraged them to use worldly wealth in order to gain friends.

If one is addicted to a luxurious lifestyle, unnecessary shopping, fascinations for expensive beauty and glamorous lifestyles, and has great difficulty in stepping down to a

conveniently simple lifestyle, sacrifice for such an individual must begin with Christian stewardship.

Stewardship is essentially the good management of resources in a manner that is most honoring and glorifying to God. A good steward never spends beyond his income but lives well below it so that small amounts of savings are kept for the dry season and for charitable works. Bad stewardship can lead a person into debt, preventing him from bearing fruits.

Stewardship involves discernment between wants and needs. For example, if one is supplied with plenty of food, one should eat only so much that one's physical need is met and good health is maintained. He should eat food in order to live and serve. He should not live in order to eat and become overweight. The same principle applies in all other areas of our life. A good steward has a biblical and eternal perspective on life. He looks beyond and he looks at his resources as God would look at them. He earns all that he can but invests wisely towards generating things that are of eternal value. The following questions can help us to analyze our stewardship:

- Is this a want or a need?
- Do I really need this?
- Can I manage without this?
- How much of this will I use?
- Will the use be worth the investment?

Stewardship is not only a stewardship of money but also of time. Christianity in the postmodern world is endangered by the bankruptcy of time. How will a person sacrifice time when he does not have time? A person's worth is seen in his possessions and his achievements, so he must work most of the time to prove his worth. Being busy is a sign of aristocracy. Christian parents do not have time for their children so their children grow up in "Childcare." Christian spouses are working longer hours affecting the marital relationship and home life adversely. Lives in the cities have become complex and difficult. More activities are added in order to acquire greater comfort and security. Work in the office, work at home and then work in the church have undermined the importance of time for relationship with other human beings. We have twenty-four hours in a day and they are filled with work that satisfies our needs and wants alone. How do we tithe our time?

Perhaps an honest examination and evaluation of our lifestyles with some of the following questions will be of some help. One may ask the following questions and seek help from God to answer them:

- Do all my involvements have Christian values?
- Can I withdraw myself from some of the involvements?
- Am I spending more time in unproductive entertainments?
- Can I make my lifestyle a bit simpler than it is?
- Can I spend more time in communion with God than with His works?
- Can I set aside specific time every week to value a person more than my work?

Can I be intentional and determined in setting apart a specific time for the task that is of eternal significance?

Paul while talking about the evil of the love of money, exhorted the believers to be content. He writes, “*But godliness with contentment is great gain.*” (Timothy 6:6) Can I be content with all that I have?

B. Personal Touch to Impact Human Lives.

Sacrifice in the Bible is explicitly personal in nature. Jesus touched the blind, the lame, the lepers and the dead. He spent time with the children and He fed the multitude personally. Paul spent his time with Timothy and Titus and built them as leaders to continue God’s work after his departure. Unfortunately nowadays the big Christian organizations emphasize financial giving at the expense of personal involvement. Often personal involvement of the giver is reduced to just signing a check. The philanthropic activity of donating money for the maintenance of a monument, or preserving wildlife, or erecting a huge statue in memory of somebody happens even in the non-Christian world. How then, is the biblical sacrifice unique and distinct?

Biblical sacrifice is personal. It is touching human lives personally in order to meet both spiritual and social needs. The giver is more intentional and determined to claim the holistic result that God promises in the Bible. He not only sacrifices his money, but also he gives time in prayer, in follow-up (if possible, personal follow-up), and uses his talents, by all means, to win one more for Christ.

Biblical sacrifice is motivated by divine love, love that sustains and is more focused on the objective rather than the act of giving. Sacrificial giving adopts an individual, people or language and prayerfully anticipates an impact of the investment to the ultimate glory of God. The investment is accompanied by a commitment for a defined period of time (say 5 –10 years). It demands patience, a stubborn determination amidst many religious commitments, and faith in the Lord of the harvest. It is not merely giving, but adopting and nurturing human lives in line with the Great commission.

The life of sacrifice is unique in its essence and value. It is biblical and Christlike.

C. Examine Yourself before Giving.

Much can be said about how to sacrifice and yet we will differ in our definition of sacrifice, because the definition of NEED is subjective. The way we have been brought up and the kind of lifestyle, which we are habituated, will influence our perception of what constitutes a sacrifice.

Nevertheless, our conscience in the Lord is able to help us discern between sacrifices and offerings. Any giving from the portion that is legally not available for our use is not a sacrifice. Any giving from an unwanted and unused surplus is also not a sacrifice.

The following questions for self-examination might be helpful. As I give to the Lord, I need to ask myself:

- Does my giving reflect that I love the Lord above all?
- Does my giving reflect that I am totally dependent on the Lord?
- Does my giving deprive me of my rights and privileges?
- Does my giving trim down my lifestyle?

IV. Conclusion.

Though all sacrifices are offerings, not all offerings are sacrifice. Sacrifice in the New Testament is not abolished but rather re-enforced with renewed essence.

Christians sacrifice because through sacrifice they publicly declare their absolute trust in God.

Christians sacrifice because it is a reasonable response to their experience of the mercies of God.

Christians sacrifice because they are passionate for the Kingdom of God.

Sacrifice begins with a Christian understanding of selfishness and stewardship.

Although the perception of sacrifice varies because of differences in the perception of need, one can examine oneself and know if he/she is living a life of sacrifice.

Let us pray:

Dear Lord, I did not bring a penny into this world nor I shall be able take one with me. All I am is just because of your grace. Had it not been for your grace, I would have vanished a long time ago into nothingness like the seas of humankind have come and gone in the past. I know that my life is just a bubble of water on this earth, only for a moment and I have a very brief opportunity to love you and obey you in building your Kingdom before time lapses into eternity. Therefore, please fill me with passion for your Kingdom while I am here on this earth. Make me the man after your own heart for this generation. Please help me to live a life of sacrifice. Amen.

ⁱ George Buchanan Gray, *Sacrifice in the Old Testament: Its Theory and Practice* (New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc, 1971), 1.

ⁱⁱ *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (1984), s.v. "Offerings and Sacrifice in Bible Times," by W. A. Van Gemeren.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin J. Selman, *Sacrifice in the Bible* ed. by Roger T. Beckwith and Martin J. Selman (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1995), 159.