

A Living Sacrifice

“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” (Rom. 12:1)

The Psalmist defines those who will be united with Messiah at his coming, as those who have entered into a sacrificial covenant with him: “Gather my saints together unto me; those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice” (Psa. 50:5). The offering of sacrifice then, marks out those who will be gathered to Christ in the day of coming glory. But what sacrifice can the saints offer, in an age when animal offerings are not accepted? Romans chapter 12, cited above, contains the answer: “present **your bodies** a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God”, which is our “reasonable service”. We lay down our lives in a life of sacrificial service before our Master. This citation from the Apostle’s inspired letter to the Romans is derived from a number of Old Testament sources, and for our exhortation today, we will look at the background passages to this verse.

OFFERING UP THE LEVITES

Numbers chapter 8 describes how that the Levites were separated from the rest of Israel in order to minister before the priests in their service. Interestingly, this process is described as the offering up of a sacrifice:

“thou shalt bring the Levites before Yahweh: and the children of Israel shall put their hands upon the Levites: and Aaron shall offer the Levites before Yahweh **for an offering of the children of Israel**, that they may execute the service of Yahweh” (Num. 8:10-11).

Notice the description here: whereas sacrifices were usually dead, being killed, the Levites were to be a collective offering whilst alive – a living sacrifice. And just as Romans 12 speaks of our offering as a “reasonable service”, even so the Levites were to “execute the service of Yahweh”. Moreover, Romans chapter 15 describes the position of ourselves (as Gentiles) in similar terms, when Paul prayed that: “**the offering up** of the Gentiles might be acceptable ...” (Rom. 15:16). In these things, we see our own situation: separated to the service of Christ, by devoting our lives to serving the Great High Pries, living out the spirit of sacrifice in our day to day affairs.

Numbers chapter 8 speaks of the Levites as being a “gift” to Aaron: “I have given the Levites as a gift to Aaron and to his sons from among the children of Israel to do the service ...” (Num. 8:19). And Messiah speaks of his disciples likewise:

“I have manifested thy name unto the men **which thou gavest me out of the world**: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word” (Jno. 17:6).

Again, verses 12 and 15 of Numbers 8 describe how that in order to be an acceptable offering, the Levites had to associate with a sacrifice “to make an atonement”, and a cleansing at the hand of Moses. Even so, Romans chapter 6 describes how the

believers are cleansed through the waters of Baptism, something which associates them with the sacrifice of Christ, and a sharing of the likeness of his resurrection. Putting to death the “Old Man” of the flesh, we walk “in newness of life”. Having died to sin, we now live unto God, and are therefore part of a sacrifice that died in order to live.

SHADRACH, MESHACH AND ABED-NEGO

Romans 12 continues to describe the condition of our separateness: “be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind ...” (Rom. 12:2). These words bring to mind the circumstances of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, the three friends of the prophet Daniel, living in the kingdom of Babylon. Daniel chapter 3 describes how a decree was made which was designed to bring about the destruction of those who worshipped any other God than a gigantic Idol that Nebuchadnezzar had made: “whoso falleth not down and worshippeth shall the same hour be cast into the midst of a burning fiery furnace” (Dan. 3:6). Here was the challenge to the Jews in Babylon: would they fall down in obeisance to the false deity of Babylon’s king, or would they stand tall and refuse to honour the idol? These three men of faith proved to be the latter: they refused to bow the knee before the idol, even when threatened with being cast into the burning fiery furnace:

“O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us out of thy hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up” (Dan. 3:17-18).

With regard to the “burning fiery furnace”, the question suggests itself, What was it constructed for? The image that the faithful trio refused to bow before was made of molten gold, and to construct such a large image would require the construction of large furnaces to prepare all the gold. Interestingly the Babylonians also worshipped a god of fire. This means that when Nebuchadnezzar threatened to cast any non-worshippers into the fire, he was effectively threatening that if any refused to bow before his Image, they would be made a burnt offering themselves, in being offered to the god of fire, from whence the Image came. But when cast into the fire, we find that the Angel of Yahweh protected them, preventing even the smell of fire to pass upon them.

The Apostle Peter described the trial of our faith in terms that allude back to this event:

“...now for a season, if need by, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:7).

Just as Daniel’s three friends walked through the fire, and were not burned (Isa. 43:2), even so the trial of our faith is likened to a trial with fire. But the faith of these men was so much more precious than the golden idol of Babylon, and although their refusal to submit brought upon them the condemnation of the world, their faith was rewarded by being “promoted ... in the province of Babylon”, as we hope to be

elevated in the reign of Jesus, the great king. Just like this event which took place so long ago, the angel of Yahweh will stand with us in our trials, ensuring that if we hold fast, we might be elevated to be given praise, honour, and glory in the presence of our King whom we serve.

Returning to Romans 12, we see the allusions to Daniel chapter 3. The exhortation is to “be not conformed to this world,” which matches the spirit of Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-nego, in refusing to conform. Rather than to die as a sacrifice to the idol, they remained alive, as a “living sacrifice”. Just as Romans 12 instructs the believers to “present your bodies,” as a sacrifice, even so these three “yielded their bodies” (Dan. 3:28) in their confident trust in Yahweh’s ability to save. Their example in standing up for the Truth whilst all around them were bowing before the god of Babylon is a powerful example to us. Even though we are few in number, we, like they, refuse to bow before the altar of mammon, and we refuse to conform to the image of this world. Even so, we look to the praise of the Great King who has secured our salvation.

ONE SACRIFICE

An interesting feature of the Living Sacrifice is that it is one offering, yet made up of many parts. Notice the terminology: “present your bodies” (plural) “A (singular) living sacrifice”. In other words, the ecclesia as a whole represents a single sacrifice – like the Levites that we considered above. The language is reminiscent of the law concerning the burnt offering, and the Psalmist’s exposition of it’s principles. Leviticus chapter 1 states:

“if his offering be a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish: he shall offer it of his own voluntary will at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before Yahweh ...” (Lev. 1:3).

Notice here, the burnt offering was not a compulsory sacrifice; it had to be offered “of his own voluntary will”. Even so, our “living sacrifice” is something we present out of our own free-will, with no compulsion. Verse 9 records how the animal was to be washed:

“his inwards and his legs shall he [i.e. the priest] wash in water: and the priest shall burn all upon the altar, to be a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto Yahweh” (Lev. 1:9).

The entire body was consumed upon the Altar, teaching that we must give our all in the service of Yahweh. But it’s inward parts were to be given special attention, and be washed thoroughly. Psalm 51 captures the spirit of this, being a Psalm of David in the context of his sin with Bath-sheba:

“wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin”

And again:

“behold, thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom” (Psa. 51:2, 6).

The Psalm continues to describe how that there was no sacrifice under the Law that would atone for his sin:

“thou desirest not sacrifice; else would I give it; thou desirest not in burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Psa. 51:17).

Here is the point: Yahweh did not delight in the offering up of animals, so much as the repentance of a sinner. There were no animal offerings that could cover David’s sin, and there were not burnt offerings that could make up for what he had done. Instead, he was to be the sacrifice himself, offering up a broken spirit, and a contrite heart. He was the offering, to be cleansed inwardly, just like the burnt offering, but in the form of a living sacrifice, cleansed by the power of the Word of God.

THE SLAIN LAMB

Ordinarily, for the most part, a sacrifice was dead. But when we come to consider our Lord Jesus Christ, though he died, yet he lives. Being raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, he is a living sacrifice who bears the marks of his crucifixion, as he showed to his disciples, and particularly Thomas. So John saw in his apocalyptic vision:

“I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood ***a Lamb as it had been slain...***” (Rev. 5:6)

Again, the voice of the redeemed:

“worthy is ***the Lamb that was slain*** to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing ...” (Rev. 5:12).

We saw earlier the principles of our baptism: a death and resurrection to a newness of life – which can only be brought about by our association with the sacrifice of Christ. His offering is the ultimate example; it is his disposition of mind to do his Father’s Will that provides an example to us. The Lamb was slain to receive this sevenfold blessing, a theme that permeates the apostle’s Epistle to the Philippians:

“let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. ***Wherefore*** God hath also highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name ...” (Phil. 2:5-9).

We come together to memorialize the offering up of Messiah as a sacrifice for our sins. But we need to let His mind be in us: crucifying the flesh daily, and willingly offering up ourselves as living sacrifices, looking towards that day of coming glory, when it will be given to us, to live and reign with the Slain Lamb throughout the ages to come

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