

## **The Sacrifices**

### **Leviticus 1-7**

Think for the moment of the idea of *sacrifice*. What are the sacrifices that you admire?

- The story of the man who dives into the surf to save the young boy being carried away by the rip and who sacrifices his own life in the process.
- The story of the single mother who sacrifices her own happiness and even her own physical well-being so her child can have the opportunities in life that she missed out on?
- The story of the young, rising professional who has a rich career ahead but gives up those prospects to devote his professional skills to some aid organisation working to relieve poverty in Africa.

They're the big ones, aren't they? They're the people we admire because they've made great personal sacrifices for the sake of others.

But that's not the only sort of context in which we refer to sacrifice. We'll often speak of sacrifices that are part of our own lives.

- The young person who sacrifices joining the work-force straight out of school and thus earning money in order to get a further education so that hopefully they can earn more money later on.
- The rising sports star who sacrifices junk food and late night parties and maybe even some significant friendships so they can put the effort into training and reaching their sporting goals.
- The person who sacrifices that extra donut or CD or session at the movies so they can send the money to support a disadvantaged child in India.

- The woman who speaks of sacrificing her desire for ice-cream or chocolate so she can still look good in that close-fitting dress.
- Or recently on *The Biggest Loser*, where it was claimed that Cameron made the "ultimate sacrifice" of not losing too much weight to make sure his daughter got through to the final.

Now, I've this suspicion that in some circles the word *sacrifice* is devalued. People recognise the word has a certain amount of positive value attached to it. We admire people who make sacrifices. We tend to put them on pedestals in our minds. We wish we could be like them. And so we look for ways to speak of our own behaviour in terms of sacrifice. It makes us look good. So we include all sorts of trivial things as being the various sacrifices we make. We even find ways to talk about bad things in terms of making sacrifices.

- I really enjoy flirting with the ladies, but for the sake of my marriage I'll sacrifice that pleasure.
- I really enjoy the excitement of driving fast, but for the sake of others on the road I'll sacrifice that thrill.

I think there are two important aspects to the idea of sacrifice.

- First, there's the aspect of giving up something – the idea there's some cost involved. I think every-one realises that's part of the meaning of the word.
- Secondly, there's the aspect of giving up something for a purpose – the idea that there's some gain from the sacrifice.
  - If I'm swimming in the surf and drown, that may be a great tragedy (although some may disagree

with that) – but it's not a sacrifice. It only becomes a sacrifice if some deliberate purpose is achieved or attempted by my drowning.

- If I forego having a coffee and donut and throw the money in the bin, that may be rather stupid – but it's not a sacrifice. It only becomes a sacrifice if I use the money for some other purpose.

### **Sacrifice in Leviticus**

The first seven chapters of Leviticus refer to the various sacrifices God required from Israel. As you read through these chapters, you find a lot of detail. What's more, it's a lot of detail that seems quite irrelevant to us today. It's not about coffee and donuts. It's not about chocolate and ice-cream. Maybe if it was, it'd hold more interest for us. Rather, it's about cattle and sheep and goats and a bit of grain. More than that, it's about bringing a goat to the tabernacle, putting your hand on its head, slitting its throat and having a priest do various things with the blood and the meat.

- You and I don't have goats wandering around in our backyards.
- You and I don't have a tabernacle to which we could take a goat even if we had one.
- Most of us would have trouble slitting the throat of a goat.
- And we don't have any priests or altars so we can do the appropriate things with the blood.

These chapters seem so distant from our everyday lives. What could we possibly learn from these chapters to help us today?

I think there are a few things we can learn – and I think the easiest way to approach them is to focus on those two

elements of sacrifice. I won't be dealing with all the bits and pieces in these chapters; rather, I want us to focus on the bigger picture – to step back from the trees and have a look at the forest.

### What they Gave up

The first element of sacrifice is the aspect of giving up something. What is it that God asks these people to give up? That varies depending on the nature of the sacrifice and the circumstances of the one making the sacrifice. There are five different types of sacrifice outlined in these chapters – the NIV calls them:

- the burnt offering;
- the grain offering;
- the fellowship offering;
- the sin offering; and
- the guilt offering.

If you have a different translation, it may use slightly different terms that mean much the same thing.

Four of those five types of sacrifice normally involve giving up an animal. There are three exceptions:

- the first one being the grain offering – the very name of that offering implies it doesn't involve an animal;
- the second exception is the sin offering of someone who's very poor – they could bring an offering of fine flour; and
- the third exception is the fellowship offering – in this case, it does involve an animal but it's not the whole animal that's given up. A significant portion of the animal is eaten by the one making the sacrifice and his family.

Now, I suspect it's not easy for us to put ourselves in the shoes of these people in terms of understanding what it meant to give up an animal. I don't think I understand it fully at the emotional level. I'm a city person – not someone who's had to live off the land. Even those who've lived off the land in modern times in Australia may not fully understand what it was like for these people in ancient times. Animals were valuable. They were the basis of the livelihood for many of these people. Eating meat wasn't a common occurrence. The family felt the cost of sacrificing an animal on the altar – they felt it in very practical ways. We may think it's no big deal to go out and buy a goat to give to God – but I don't think these people thought like that. Giving up an animal was a big deal to them – perhaps in ways that we can't begin to understand.

Further, the animal had to be without defect. That is, you couldn't bring a second-rate animal to offer as a sacrifice. You may be tempted to think:

This animal's only going up in smoke on the altar. It's not really going to be used for anything useful – like filling my stomach. It doesn't really matter if it's only a scrawny little goat with a broken leg that's not much good for anything.

God demanded animals presented for sacrifice be without defect. The altar wasn't the place to palm off second-rate animals and thus kill two birds with one stone.

Now, the law did make different provisions for differing circumstances in which people found themselves. It was recognised that not everyone had equal wealth. For some people, the sacrifice of a goat didn't cause them a great deal of hardship. They had plenty of goats from which to

choose. For others, they had as much chance of saving up to buy a goat as you and I have to buy a house – it's not beyond the realms of possibility, but it would take a fair effort. And so, with many of the offerings, provision was made for the poorer members of the community – they could sacrifice something less expensive in absolute terms. Yet, for all, there was some cost involved. It's not something totally insignificant going up in smoke on the altar or given over to the priests.

### What was the Purpose of it

So, that's what they had to give up. What about the other element of sacrifice? What's the purpose? What did they hope to gain from the sacrifice? Again, that depended on the particular sacrifice involved. It had something to do with their relationship with God, but the different sacrifices dealt with different aspects of that relationship.

- The sin offering and the guilt offering are provided to deal with problems in the relationship. Sin's an offence to God. It makes Him angry – it rightfully makes Him angry. Thus, after sin, the relationship needs restoring. The sin offering and guilt offering are provided for that purpose. They remind people their sin causes offence.
- The burnt offering also has an element of that in it – yet, it goes further. It expresses recognition of God's sovereign lordship. The person making the sacrifice expresses their submission to God – their commitment to God; their desire to wholeheartedly serve God.
- The fellowship offering conveys the idea of communion with God. With this sacrifice, some of the animal goes up on the altar, some goes to the priests and some comes back to the family for them to eat

and enjoy in the presence of the Lord.

Thus, the sacrificial system provides a range of ways for the people to express their relationship with God.

It isn't intended as a mechanical system such that the act itself guarantees a restored or OK relationship. There's more to it than that – especially with the sin offering and the guilt offering.

- The person making the sacrifice acknowledges that they've sinned. They lay their hand on the head of the animal. It's an act of identification. They acknowledge their own guilt.
- The person asks for God's gracious forgiveness. Such forgiveness isn't deserved. It's not earned. It's not even earned by bringing the sacrifice. Yet, it's given – because God's gracious. God removes the guilt from the sin. The sin itself isn't removed – God doesn't undo the past – but the guilt and ultimate punishment the sin deserves is removed.

The whole system's in the context of relationship with a holy God who demanded His people be holy. The whole system's in the context of a gracious God who knew His people sinned and would continue to sin and provided a way for the damaged relationship to be restored.

That's not to say the system wasn't open to abuse. It was. That's part of our sinful minds – we're quite capable of taking anything God gives us and trying to twist it to our own advantage and use it for our own purposes. As you read through the Old Testament, you find the Israelites did this to the sacrificial system. There were times they tried to use it in a mechanical way – even a legalistic way.

- There were times when they thought that, if they

kept up all the sacrifices as required by the law, then God would have to bless them – if they put enough sheep on the altar then God would put enough grain in the fields.

- There were times when they thought that the sacrifice in itself is what God's interested in – that God's not concerned about their lack of godly behaviour or their lack of repentance for sin; He's only concerned that the right number of animals be put on the altar each week.

That's not how the system's intended – that's human abuse of God's system.

### The Point of the Sacrificial System

At this point, I'd like to remind you that it's God who introduces this sacrificial system. This isn't something dreamed up by the ancient Israelites and invented as their system for the way they hope they can relate to God. That's not how it works. This is the system God reveals to them about how they relate to Him. That, I think, leads to two significant questions.

- First, what does God intend the people to learn from this system?
- Secondly, since God doesn't change, why don't we have to follow this system today? Why is it that we're bored by all these details instead of going out to buy a few goats so we can relate to God?

What's God intend the people to learn? No doubt there are several things – but I want to focus on one. Sin's a serious business. We humans have a tendency to forget this – mainly, I think, because we're used to it and used to living in a world infected by sin. Yet, that wasn't God's original creation. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve

lived in perfect harmony – with each other, with their environment and with God. It's their sin that destroyed that harmony.

- It destroyed their harmony with God because they'd rebelled against God's wishes. God acted in judgment against them.
- It destroyed their harmony with each other and that becomes increasingly evident in Genesis 4 where Cain kills Abel.
- It destroyed their harmony with their environment as a result of the judgment God pronounced.
- What's more, it introduced death.

We've got used to those things – and we tend to take them for granted as simply being part of our everyday existence. We've adjusted. We've learned to cope.

- We're used to living without being conscious of God's attitude to our sin.
- We're used to living in disharmony with other people – with disagreements and nasty rumours and envy and gossip and the like.
- We're used to pulling weeds out of our gardens.
- We're used to dying after our threescore years and ten.

We think this is just normal human existence. We don't know any different. But it's not normal. Sin's a real problem. It's especially a problem in terms of the possibility of relating with the holy God. The sacrificial system reminded the Israelites of that.

Imagine a young Israelite family. They've worked hard on their small plot of ground. The field's produced well this year and they've enjoyed the way their mother's been very innovative with all their grain recipes. It's amazing

what she can do with a bit of grain when she puts her imagination to work. Yet, they do like the odd bit of meat every now and then. They have a small flock of sheep which they tend very lovingly. One of them's just about ready to be butchered for the dining-room table, when dad realises he sinned a couple of months back and better use that sheep as a sin offering. Sin hits home to the whole family in a very practical way.

But it's even more than that. When dad gets the precious sheep down to the tabernacle, he has to lay his hand on its head and kill it. The blood's drained out of the animal – some of it's put on the horns of the altar, the rest is poured out around the base of the altar. The fat of the animal's burnt on the altar. The meat's cooked and eaten by the priest. The whole process shows him God takes sin seriously – so seriously that the life of an animal has to be sacrificed. There's a very real difficulty in a sinful human wanting to relate to a holy God. And, on the national level, there's a very real difficulty in a sinful nation wanting to have the holy God dwell in their midst.

### **Is this Relevant for Modern Christians?**

So then, if sin was so serious back then, why don't we keep up this sacrificial system today? Why don't we have an altar at the front of the church and the smell of blood and burning animals in the air? Has sin lost its bad press? Have we come of age and realised sin isn't the big bad monster it was made out to be? Have we grown up in our relationship with God and matured beyond those frightening stories told to us in our childhood to scare us into doing the right thing?

No. God's attitude to sin hasn't changed. It still offends

Him greatly. He's still angry about sin. Listen to what the New Testament says. Romans 1:18

*The wrath of God [that is, the anger of God] is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness ...*

Ephesians 5:5-7

*For of this you can be sure: No immoral, impure or greedy person – such a man is an idolater – has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God's wrath comes on those who are disobedient. Therefore do not be partners with them.*

God's attitude towards sin hasn't changed. God still hates it as much as ever – and He expects His people to hate it.

What's changed is the status of the sacrificial system. It was never intended as a permanent system. It was always intended to point forward to something better that God would do. It was a picture of what was to come – and what now, from our current perspective, is in the past. The sacrificial system pointed to Jesus.

This is one of the main themes of the book of Hebrews in the New Testament. Have a look at Hebrews 10:1-4

*The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood*

*of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

What's it say?

- First, the sacrifice of animals could not make up for human sin. If the penalty for sin is death, it's a human death that's required, not an animal death.
- Thus, secondly, the sacrificial system was just a shadow – it wasn't the reality itself; it pointed forward to the reality that would come in the future.
- And so, thirdly, that's why that system couldn't deal with sin with any finality – it was an ongoing and endless system. It couldn't say you wouldn't have to come back in the future. It couldn't guarantee your ongoing cleanness.

What was the solution? What was the reality to which this shadow – this sacrificial system – pointed? Verse 10

*And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest [that is, Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God.*

What's Jesus do? He offers Himself as the perfect sacrifice for human sin.

- Jesus is God become man. He identified with us. Thus, He could offer a human sacrifice for human sin.
- Jesus lived a perfect human life. He always did the Father's will. Not once did He sin. Thus, He had no sin of His own that needed to be judged by

death. He was unblemished – the sacrifice of a pure life.

- Jesus died on the cross. He died on our behalf. He died for our sins – to pay the penalty for us – the penalty that we ourselves deserved to pay.
- Jesus did that once for all time. Because it was the perfect sacrifice and remains the perfect sacrifice, it doesn't have to be repeated. His sacrifice was sufficient to cover all human sin.

And so today, in our church services, we don't have an altar and we don't kill any sheep. It's no longer necessary – we don't live in the time of shadow; we live in the time of the reality. Indeed, for us to bring a sheep as a sin offering today would be wrong.

- It'd be saying Jesus' sacrifice wasn't good enough.
- It'd be saying there's something I have to add to Jesus' sacrifice if I want to deal with my sins.

That would be to trample Jesus' sacrifice underfoot.

It also means that we don't bring anything else as a sin offering today. Why does God forgive your sins?

- Some people think they get forgiveness by being good – that if they can offer God enough goodness, then God'll forgive their bits of badness.
- Some people think they get forgiveness by doing religious things – that if they pray enough or go to church enough or read the Bible often enough, then God'll forgive their wrongdoing.
- Some people think they get forgiveness by doing penance – that if they inflict enough suffering on themselves, then God'll overlook the wrong things they've done.

It's an insult to Jesus. He's already done everything for

you. You get right with God on one basis, and one basis only – because Jesus died for you and paid the penalty for your sin.

So what should be your reaction to this stuff on sacrifices in Leviticus? Let me suggest three things – there are other possibilities as well, but these three are fairly basic:

- First, to remember that sin – your sin – is a serious business. God's offended by it – greatly. He's always offended by it. It deserves a serious penalty.
- Secondly, in order for you to have a relationship with God, something has to be done about your sin. God can't simply ignore it – neither should you.
- Thirdly, recognise and accept that Jesus made the proper sacrifice for you – namely, His own life. He made the sacrifice on your behalf. He sacrificed Himself so you could be in right relationship with God. Be thankful for what He's done for you.