

The Principles of Sacrifice

The principle of sacrifice is one of the fundamental truths of the Christian gospel, and unless Christians understand the principle they will not discover a real knowledge of God or how to live a life pleasing to Him. We read in the book of the Revelation, *"The Lamb slain from the foundation of the earth"*, showing that eternally Jesus Christ had already laid down His life for us. We also read, *"A Lamb as it had been slain"* who is seated on the throne of heaven, having prevailed to open the seals of the book. So the Lamb who was slain continues to live and reign for ever. *"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and for ever."* God therefore opens our understanding, if we have ears to hear, to this wonderful aspect of His nature, which is to make sacrifice, for 'God is love' and true love will always make sacrifices.

We also read of Our Lord Jesus, when the Bible speaks of the sacrifice of Himself, (Hebrews 9.26), willingly laying down His life for us. He demonstrates in His own life this eternal aspect of the nature of God: He is the Son Of God. If we look closely too we will read of the Holy Ghost, Who was sent to glorify Jesus and will not speak of His own, or Himself. This shows the denying of self in the Holy Ghost thus making sacrifice for the glory of the Son of God. So we have in all the three persons of the Godhead the principle of sacrifice being outworked.

The principle of sacrifice seems to have been, in a limited way, understood by human beings since almost the beginning of human life on the earth. We read of both Cain and Abel bringing offerings to God. They brought different things; one offering was accepted and the other not, so we learn that some sacrifices are acceptable to God and others are not. The two men brought of their own substance, possessions may be a better word for us to understand, so it did 'cost them' to make such an offering and therefore a sacrifice was involved. God was very real to those early dwellers on the earth, and even Cain, after he had murdered his brother, has a conversation with God before he departs from His presence. The awareness of who 'God is' required these two men, in their thinking, to bring some 'gift offering' to Him, and in many cultures, even those serving strange gods, the people bring offerings and make sacrifices to their gods. This may be less than helpful when such sacrifices are offered to 'devils', but it does show that deep within the psychology of human beings there is the principle of bringing gifts to the gods they serve.

Sin abounded among human beings, and by the time of Noah it had got so bad that God determines to judge the earth and remove 'all flesh', sinful flesh, from the earth. That is, apart from Noah and his family of 8 souls, and of course the animals which God had created. After the flood we read again of offerings and sacrifice. Once the eight souls are on dry land Noah very quickly makes an altar (Genesis 8. 20 & 21) and sacrifices each of all the clean beasts to God. There were of course 7 of the clean beasts taken into the ark, so removing one still leaves 6 to form 3 pairs to 'replenish the earth'. There were 2 each of the 'unclean beasts'. Perhaps Noah understood that clean beasts were required for an offering to God.

It is clear that Noah realised that an offering to God was necessary to give thanks for the deliverance which God had secured for them in the ark, through the flood. What God had said to Noah had been totally fulfilled; the building of the ark in such a dry place, taking 100 years to build, had proved to be their salvation. 'Praise the Lord' is the response 'and let us make an offering to God'. It is such a pity that the same attitude does not apply in the world today, as many never give God any thanks for the blessings He gives them in this life. We could also consider that the use of clean beasts may well show us that Noah understood that God was a holy God, and His judgement against unrighteousness, in the flood, indicated that God will not accept that which is unclean.

As we move through time we come to Abram, 'exalted father', whom God called out of Ur of the Chaldees into the land of Canaan. This was the land of promise for him and still, of course, for his descendants. We watch current history with great interest. Abram enters the land of Canaan with all his family and his goods, and sees again the word spoken by God proved to be totally true. God appears to Abram and says, *"I will give this land to your seed (offspring)"*. Abram responds and builds an altar to God, as a means of giving thanks. We are not told of any 'animal' or other sacrifice Abram placed on the altar, it was just empty. The thought is that in truth Abram was placing himself on the altar to serve God. He could not of course physically offer himself as that

would mean his death, but in a way, “Lord here am I; I acknowledge you as Lord and I am here and here is my life to do your will”. In one sense Abram was a ‘living sacrifice’, a life given willingly to the will of God, to the one Abram recognised as Lord, the one who had brought him thus far. We read that Abram moved further into the land of Canaan and there built another altar, and here Abram ‘calls on the Name of the Lord’. His faith has moved on, and still on the basis of Abram offering himself to God he expresses his trust in God. *“I will call on the Lord who is worthy to be praised; so shall I be saved from my enemies”*. Here is Abram’s faith expressed to God; ‘I call on the Lord’. God is the God of Abram.

It was vital that Abram had done this at that moment of time, as when there is famine in the land Abram travels down into Egypt; out of fear of Pharaoh killing him so Pharaoh can take his very beautiful wife, Abram tells lies. He gets himself into huge difficulties, telling lies always does, then the God on whom Abram had called saves him by plaguing Pharaoh. Abram is sent away and returns, so we read, to exactly the same place where he had called on the Lord, and there again Abram calls on the Lord. One could say Abram renews his faith and his willingness to obey God. There was even more reason to show thanks, and such willingness now because of this further deliverance. Abram can declare again his trust in the Lord, who has become His salvation.

At times, most Christians get things wrong; we all do so in various measures. It is not that we are not holy but sometimes we make wrong judgements. Sometimes we adopt the ways of the world; we ‘go down into Egypt’. When we do so, God will bring us back to the place where we expressed our trust in Him.

Sometimes He takes us back to the beginning to start us off all over again. In the book of the Revelation, Jesus says to two of the churches to remember ‘where they were’ and repent and go back there, to do ‘the first works’, put things right and then move forward. It is wonderful that God does such a thing for us all. He did it for Abram and He will do it for you and for me. We read, *“If we believe not, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself”*. God’s eternal love for us is secure and He will ensure that He brings us through to glory. The secret, as with Abram, is to have presented our lives to serve God, recognising that He is Lord and the great work He has done for us in Our Lord Jesus Christ.

Abram moves on and separates from his nephew Lot, and God appears to Abram again. *“Look at the land; wherever you can walk I will give it to you”*. Again, Abram builds an altar, this time in the plain of Mamre. Mamre means ‘vision’, or ‘coming from the vision’; here Abram builds an altar on the basis of what God has shown him, again, “Lord I believe, here am I”. His faith moves on. We are told in the New Testament ‘the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith’, and so here with Abram, as he discovers the righteousness of God unfolding in his life, he again builds an altar and makes a sacrifice. Again no animal, it is just Abram to be the ‘living sacrifice’.

We need now to introduce Melchizedek into our study. He is the ‘King of Righteousness’, that is what Melchizedek means, and King of Salem, ‘King of Peace’. He meets Abram after the victory God gave him at the battle of the kings. Here is the ‘king of kings’ appearing to Abram, and most consider the appearance of Melchizedek a pre-incarnate appearance of our Lord Jesus. Abram gives tithes of all to Melchizedek, acknowledging Melchizedek as God and Lord. Abram is blessed as a result of this encounter, and receives the wonderful revelation of ‘the most High God, possessor of heaven and earth’. Abraham, as Abram later became when God changed his name, regularly calls God the ‘God of heaven’ in his dealings with him as his life progresses. This was a life changing experience for Abram, who declares this truth later when offered the ‘spoils of war’ by the other kings. Abram would not take anything from them in case they could say that they had made Abram rich. It is not surprising then at the next meeting between Abram and God, God says, *“I am your shield and your exceeding great reward”*. We see how Abram’s faith progresses.

When Melchizedek met with Abram he gave him ‘bread and wine’. This of course must correspond with the bread and wine which Our Lord Jesus gave as tokens of His body and blood at the ‘Last Supper’. So, somewhere in the eternal purpose and sacrifice of God, which we have looked at a little already, Abram feeds on the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus. God is pointing Abram towards the sacrifice of Our Lord Jesus. God is pointing Abram to another altar, the cross of our Lord Jesus. As a result, and based on this wonderful encounter, Abram believes God. He takes God’s word as to his seed being ‘as many as the stars in the heaven’,

and God reckons this for righteousness to Abram; so righteousness by faith becomes established. Abram believing that one 'out of his own loins' would become the child who would inherit the promise made unto Abram.

We now move ahead some years in the life of Abram. We move past the time when Hagar gave birth to Ishmael, and then the time of Isaac's birth. On the basis of faith, Sarah had conceived a son in her old age; that which is only possible with God had taken place. Abraham had the joy of his son and saw again the fulfilment of God's word to him. Then, of course, the challenge, the testing, comes and we find the last altar mentioned in the life of Abraham. This altar is on Mount Moriah, considered to be the later site for the city of Jerusalem. God required Abraham to offer up his son Isaac as a sacrifice. Isaac was the child of promise and yet was to be offered up. It is easy, of course with hindsight, to see how Isaac is a type of Jesus Christ, the sacrifice, and Abraham a type of God, the Father willingly offering up His son. Of course this is true, and we rejoice in such truth; but for Abraham the challenge was very real to his faith and his love for his God, the one on whom he had called and to whom he had already built 3 altars as a recognition of his life being a 'living sacrifice'. Truly God was the 'God of Abraham'.

We know the account well and how at the last moment, when Abraham is about to slay his son, God stops Him and provides an alternative. This of course speaks of the sacrifice Jesus made for us all; God Himself provided the sacrifice. God tells Abraham, "Now I know you fear", love, or have in total awe, might be a more modern expression, "God, as you have not withheld your son, your only son from me". Wonderful faith; Hebrews tells us that Abraham had reckoned, - calculated in a spiritually logical way of faith, - that God was even able to raise Isaac from the dead to fulfil His promise. Of course God raised Jesus from the dead to fulfil His promise of eternal life for us. The parallels are very clear for us to see, and yet again we see the principle of sacrifice. This time there is a person on the altar, ready to be a burned offering to God: Abraham's life was already offered to God, now it was to be his son. God requires all and yet gives all in our Lord Jesus, as even here on Mount Moriah God Himself provides the sacrifice. God provided the offering in order that Isaac could live, and so it is with us that God has offered His Son that we may have eternal life.

Romans 4 tells us that *"Abraham staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief but was strong in faith giving glory to God, being fully persuaded that what God had promised, He was able also to perform"*. When our lives are offered up to God, as was Abraham's, faith is the only way forward and God honours that faith in all things.

We leave behind Abraham, our father of faith, but what an example he is to us, as we move on to Isaac and the one altar in his life. We find the account in Genesis 26, verses 23-25. God appears to Isaac, - there is always a personal contact between God and His servant in such circumstances. Each Christian is to know God for himself and there is to be no 'second-hand' Christianity. 'Isaac, although I am the God of your father Abraham I want to be your God too and for you to know me. So I have come to you to make myself known'. *"I am the God of your father Abraham and will bless you"*.

Isaac builds an altar and calls on the Name of the Lord. It is a similar response to that of Abraham, expressing his trust in God and, on that basis, the offering up of his life in service to God. From that moment onwards God is the God of Isaac as well as the God of Abraham; Isaac has moved into His own place of faith and is no longer dependent on the faith of his father. It is all very uncomplicated and that is the testimony of Isaac's own life. We are reaching the end of our altars in the book of Genesis but finally come to the one of two built by Jacob. We read in the last verse of chapter 33, *"And he erected there an altar, and called it El-elohe-Israel"*. El-elohe-Israel means 'God, the God of Israel'. This moment comes quite late in the life of Jacob, and to understand the place of faith Jacob was in at the time he built his altar, we need to track back through his life.

Jacob was the younger of two twins, Esau was his elder brother. Rebekah, their mother, was told that 'the older shall serve the younger' and so it proved to be. Jacob means 'supplanter', rogue, cheat. Jacob had already taken Esau's birth right for a bowl of vegetables, and when Isaac was to bless the two sons, Jacob stole in and took away Esau's blessing, so fulfilling his name. Jacob flees from the presence of Esau and has a vision while asleep. The vision is often called 'Jacob's ladder', and there God appears to Jacob.

"And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.

¹³ *And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said, I am the Lord God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou lie, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed;*

¹⁴ *And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed.*

¹⁵ *And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou go, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of.*

¹⁶ *And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, surely the Lord is in this place; and I knew it not.*

¹⁷ *And he was afraid, and said, how dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.*

¹⁸ *And Jacob rose up early in the morning, and took the stone that he had put for his pillows, and set it up for a pillar, and poured oil upon the top of it.*

¹⁹ *And he called the name of that place Bethel: but the name of that city was called Luz at the first.*

²⁰ *And Jacob vowed a vow, saying, If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on,*

²¹ *So that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God:*

²² *And this stone, which I have set for a pillar, shall be God's house: and of all that thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto thee".*

It is very similar in many ways to the appearance of God to Abraham and to Isaac. *"I am the Lord God of your father Abraham and Isaac and I will bless you"*. No altar is built by Jacob but he raises up a pillar and makes a vow that 'if you will bring me back to this place alive and well, then you will be my God just as you have been the God of Abraham and Isaac'. No faith from Jacob, but a deal; he was into deals and that is how he saw all this; it was in his psychology. Jacob was a man of cunning and guile and not very trusting except of his own wits and deviousness.

The story follows on and Jacob prospers with his uncle Laban and eventually returns to Canaan after about 20 years. On the way Jacob wrestles with God at the brook of Jabbok and God deals with him in a way that leaves him weak in his body, but changes Jacob's name to Israel. Israel means 'Prince of God'; 'you have power with God because you have prevailed'. Here is a different Jacob, no longer needing to be a 'wheeler-dealer' but a person who has access to Almighty God and has the blessing of God upon him. In chapter 33 Jacob, now Israel, returns to his home land and realises that God has been totally faithful to him. He builds an altar to 'God, the God of Israel'. 'You are my God now and I submit all to you and trust you that you will provide for all my needs'. Again there is no animal on the altar but the life of the 'new Jacob', the 'Prince of God', offered up in total faith to God. Here is the act of faith from a man who had lived by his own cunning, finally surrendering unto God.

After his return, God tells Jacob to build an altar. It is the first time God tells any of these men to do just that. All the other altars have been 'of their own heart'. We read in Genesis 35 that Jacob was to go to Bethel and build an altar. There was still no animal on the altar, so Jacob's life was to be offered up. They put away all their strange gods; - always everything else we serve has to be laid aside, everything has to be on the altar for God: no divided loyalties are allowed. Jacob came to the place where he made his initial promise to God, back to Bethel, back to the house of God, back home with God. God appears and says *"I am Almighty God. I will bless you just like I promised Abraham and Isaac. You are no longer Jacob but Israel, you are now a prince of God, and have a place before me and I will bless you"*. What a wonderful place for Jacob; but God tells him to make the altar and 'to lay down his life', and so God says that to us also. The 'place with God' only comes when our lives are all offered up, but that is the place God wants us all to be, so He can hear our prayers and be our God.

Now we have the 'God of Jacob', the 'God of Israel'. We have the testimony of these 3 so different men; the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. All three men have the blessing of God upon their lives and are trusting for

the land to be given to their offspring. When God appears to Moses He says, *"I have remembered the covenant I made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob"*.

So we see how these three men, in their encounters with God, came to a place where they offered themselves to God, yielding their lives to Him to be His servant; the principle of sacrifice being outworked. We saw at the beginning of our thoughts the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus; in one way, eternally being the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world a Lamb having been slain reigning on the throne of heaven. This sacrifice of course was worked out in time on the earth. A Roman cross became the altar on which our Lord Jesus offered Himself to His Father. God provided His own Lamb, His only Son and, unlike with Abraham and Isaac, the sacrifice, the death of Jesus, actually took place. Jesus Christ died; 'The spotless Lamb of God was slain'. Jesus drank the cup which the Father gave Him to drink, and yet in doing so became the Saviour of the world. God the Father raised Jesus from the dead so that we could, by the mercy of God, be justified from all our sins; total forgiveness; total reconciliation: *"God was in Christ Jesus reconciling the world unto Himself"*. This is our wonderful salvation, and by it those who will receive Jesus Christ can be filled with the Holy Spirit, being born of God, and as with Jacob be changed from a place of sin into a place where, as sons of God, we have power with God and are heirs and joint heirs with Jesus Christ. Even our mortal bodies can be made 'alive' by His Spirit which dwells in us. So we have life, eternal life. The life of God in us, the life which was laid down for us by our Lord Jesus; *"He that has the Son has life"*. So we are alive in Christ, spiritually alive, no longer dead in trespasses and sins but made alive in Him.

All this because Jesus offered Himself to God; He was the most excellent sacrifice, following and understanding the eternal principles of God.

So what of us? Paul writes, *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service, and be not conformed to this world: but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God"*

The same principle applies to all the sons of God as it did to the Son of God; to be a sacrifice. Paul says 'present', or 'make a gift of', your body as a 'living sacrifice'. You/me placed on the altar, offered up to God; a total act of faith, calling on the Lord. As with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob we are to be surrendered to God, realising His total faithfulness to us. He has not brought us into Canaan but into the eternal life of His Son, the land of promise. We are brought into the kingdom of God, into the life and power of the Holy Spirit, to live as sons of God upon the earth, looking for the coming again of our Lord Jesus. We are to follow in Jesus' footsteps and deny ourselves and take up our cross daily. We are not to be conformed or shaped by this world and its sin and unbelief, but to allow the Holy Spirit to teach us the principles of sacrifice in all that we do, so that we may 'prove the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.' Amen!