

## Sacrificial Stewardship (April 2020)

In this month of April, Lent comes to an end with the drama of Holy Week, and we celebrate Easter, the joyous holiday of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

In the Bible, you never hear about Jesus' resurrection without his death on the cross, and you never hear about his death on the cross without his resurrection. From the very beginning of the church, these two facts have always gone together. Jesus is the one who was killed; Jesus is the one who rose from the dead. Without the resurrection, there is no hope; but without the cross, there is no sacrifice.

Sacrifice is a central theme of the Bible. Already in the first book of the Bible, Genesis, Abraham offers sacrifices to God. Once God calls the people of Israel to obey the law, offering sacrifices is part of what they are commanded to do. The sacrifices continued all the way until the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed (in AD 70, about forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection).

The images and practice of sacrifice helped the earliest disciples of Jesus make sense of his death. At first, they thought he was going to be a king like David, sit on a throne, and rule everybody on earth. Even though Jesus told them again and again that he would die in Jerusalem, they didn't believe him. It was only after Jesus rose from the dead and showed himself to them that the disciples began to wrestle with the tough question: why did Jesus have to die?

As they looked back at the people of Israel's whole history with God, they saw a pattern emerge. Sacrifice was always the way God and people related to each other. The first sacrifice was God's: He created a world that was not Himself, even though the world sinned and turned away from Him. God sacrificed His honor to forgive sinners. God sacrificed His glory by making the insignificant people of Israel to be His chosen people.

In turn, God taught His people to make sacrifices to Him. They were asked to sacrifice to God the firstfruits of their harvest. They were asked to sacrifice to God ten percent of everything they earned or grew or harvested over the year. They were asked to sacrifice their pride, their sins, and their unbelief. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). And of course, they made sacrifices of animals in the Jerusalem temple. (Back in those days, the only way to eat meat was to have it slaughtered at a religious temple. People then understood that they were taking the life of an animal and could only do so rightly under God's supervision.)

One of the animals that the Israelites offered for sacrifice was the lamb. At the first Passover, when the Israelites were still slaves in Egypt, the blood of the lamb protected them from the

angel of death. Jesus was crucified at the same time as the sacrifice of lambs at the temple on the Israelite holiday of Passover. Afterwards, the apostles realized that Jesus was a sacrifice in the same manner as a Passover lamb: his blood protects us from the angel of death. His sacrifice brings us safely to the promised land of everlasting life.

But it's clear from this how costly our salvation is: it cost Jesus his life. He sacrificed his life for ours. The heavenly Father blessed Jesus' sacrifice by giving him new life.

Most of the time, our stewardship should be a proper fit for our income and time. God does not expect us to give *everything*, so that we are left homeless and starving. God blesses us with food, clothing, shelter, and pleasures like music and books and movies and travel, because He desires all His creatures to have joyful lives. By asking us to give back to Him, God is actually just setting us free from overdependence on these things. By giving a portion of our goods to God, we are able to enjoy the things we keep even more!

But this is not quite the complete picture. It's a good for giving generously to become an ordinary part of life. But it can become *so* ordinary that we no longer notice it or feel it. In fact, it can start to feel like a payment. "I gave God X percent of my income; I enjoy what I have left; now God will bless me." This is not really a gift in faith. It has become another habit, something we can do without thinking or believing at all.

So sometimes we need to consider sacrificial giving. This is risky giving, more than ordinary giving. It's giving more than is comfortable. It's giving to something so important that our ordinary needs fall to a lower level of value. It's realizing that we are too comfortable with God, that we take God for granted, and that we need to do something big—make a sacrifice—to remind ourselves that everything we have comes from God. He doesn't demand this of us. We give this freely, cheerfully, because we feel the need to respond to God's sacrificial generosity with sacrificial generosity of our own.

We never give sacrificially *in order to* win God's love for us. God already loves us! God has already given us everything we need, and more besides. "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32).

Sacrificial giving is always a *response* to God's love. It's a way to share God's love with more people. Sacrificial giving is the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.