

The Ultimate Gift

From China and India to Mexico and South America, from the Assyrians in the Middle East to the Druids in England, to the Etruscans by the Mediterranean – all over the world, there is evidence that human sacrifice was practiced to assuage the anger of the gods.

Many people have seen a similarity between those gods who needed to be placated with sacrifices and the God of the Bible, whose very plan to save us included the sacrifice of his beloved son.

But the similarity is a superficial one. The God of the Bible abhors human sacrifice. In Jeremiah 32:35, God remarks on those “who cause their sons and their daughters to pass through the fire”. This is not God’s way. It is an activity “which I commanded them not, neither came it into my mind, that they should do this abomination to cause Judah to sin.”

Nor did it please God that Jesus was put to death.

The parable of the Lord of the Vineyard illustrates God’s displeasure with those who murdered Jesus. After the workers had beaten and killed some of his servants, the Lord “having yet therefore one son, his wellbeloved...sent him also last to them saying, ‘they will reverence my son’”. But the workers conspired against him instead, saying “This is the heir; come, let’s kill him and the inheritance will be ours!” (Mark 12: 6-7, 9).

Yet from the earliest times, God gave his people a code of law that included sacrifices. The book of Leviticus details the rules for burnt offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, offerings for holy days, and offerings for every day. Sacrifices were part of every Israelite’s life.

These sacrifices are alluded to when we read that Jesus “needed not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people’s: for this he did once, when he offered up himself” (Hebrews 7:27).

We are called to follow his example, “and walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God” ((Ephesians 5:2).

Sacrifice is clearly part of both the old and the new testament message. Yet God condemns both those who put Jesus to death, and also some who offered sacrifices under his own Old Testament Law.

Isaiah recounts the words of God: “To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to me?...I am full of burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me...bring no more vain oblations...they are a trouble to me; I am weary to bear them” (Isaiah 1:10-14).

The Psalmist too recognizes that shedding blood is not itself God’s goal: “Sacrifices and offerings you did not desire...burnt offering and sin offering you have not required” (Psalm

40:6). “For you do not desire sacrifice, otherwise I would give it: you do not delight in burnt offering” (Psalm 51:16).

Is God contradicting himself? Why make sacrifice a central feature of worship and then say it is not required? But God does not leave us to be confused:

“The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit,” says the Psalmist ((51:17). “A broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise”.

So, he does want sacrifice after all!

What else might that involve? Isaiah tells us: “wash you, make yourself clean...cease doing evil; Learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow” (Isaiah 1:16-17).

And from the prophet Samuel we learn that “to obey is better than sacrifice” (I Samuel 15:22).

Nor do the New Testament writers leave us without explanation. “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service” (Romans 12:1). A living sacrifice? Isn’t this a contradiction in terms?

But there is part of us that we should put to death. The apostle Paul calls it the “old man”: “knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him... that henceforth we should not serve sin. Likewise, count yourselves also to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:6,11).

Sacrifice, we find, is at the heart of acceptable worship. But it must be self-sacrifice. No other kind will do. All of the animals sacrificed in keeping the Law were worthless if they did not teach this lesson. The Law was, in fact, our “schoolmaster to bring us to Christ” (Galatians 3:27).

Jesus is the perfect example of sacrifice. God did not require Jesus’ death in order to be appeased. Jesus did not die to placate God, but to persuade us. Jesus died so that we could see what he was willing to do for us. He died to show us what love is; to show us what obedience is; he died to change us, not to appease God.

God neither put Jesus to death, nor required that we do so.

So how is it then that Jesus’ sacrifice can save us? By giving himself for us, he reaches out in grace, and by seeking that grace we reach back to him in love. And in that connection, “we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace (Ephesians 1:7).