

September 1, 2019 – Hebrews 13:1-17

I think we all know what it means to make a sacrifice. Some of us do it every day. We sacrifice our own needs for the sake of our spouse. We sacrifice our own desires for the sake of our children.

Some of us make even bigger sacrifices. Our military men and women, our police officers, our firefighters, our EMT's and paramedics. These are men and women who do more than sacrifice luxury. Sometimes, they sacrifice their very lives.

We're familiar with the worldly concept of sacrifice. But I'm not sure we're always familiar with the Biblical concept of sacrifice. Because the Bible is full of sacrifices. But they're not sacrifices for food and clothes. Or peace and safety.

The Bible is full of sacrifices for sin. And in the Old Testament, we read about lots of different kinds of sacrifices for lots of different kinds of sins. They would sacrifice bulls, sheep, goats, lambs, doves, pigeons. They would have sacrifices of thanksgiving. Of peace. Of prayer. Of guilt.

But the most important sacrifice of the entire Jewish calendar was the festival known as the Day of Atonement. The was the sacrifice that covered all other sacrifices. You see, God tells us in His Word that every sin must be atoned for with a sacrifice. Every single commandment you break must be paid for in blood.

And while it's all well and good, if you're an Israelite in the Old Testament, to say that you've made a sacrifice for every sin you can possibly think of, what about all the sins you can't think of? What about the sins you've forgotten? What about the sins you didn't realize were sins? What about the mountain of day-to-day guilt and uncleanness that builds up from our sinful thoughts and our careless actions? What about them?

Well, for those sins, you have the Day of Atonement. Where a goat – one goat – would be sacrificed for ALL the sins of ALL the people. And the goat's blood would be brought into the Most Holy Place. To the Ark of the Covenant itself.

And there the blood would be sprinkled on the mercy seat of God. And by the end, the priest would be covered in blood. And the room would be covered in blood. And this box of pure gold that was the embodiment of God's holy presence on earth would be covered in blood.

And then the dead goat, bearing all the sins of the people, would be dragged out of the camp. Treated as the most unclean thing on the planet. Too unclean to even keep within the camp's perimeter.

And there it would be placed on an altar of wood and would be burned until it was nothing more than a pile of ashes. And all of the sins of the people would literally go up in smoke. And when the people saw that smoke, they knew that a sacrifice had been made once for all.

Well... not quite once for all. Because that sacrifice would have to be made again. And again. And again. The Day of Atonement took place every single year. And every single year there would have to be another sacrifice.

That is, until God sent His own sacrifice down. But it wasn't goat. It was His Son. And though they didn't realize it, the Jewish leaders who crucified Jesus repeated the ritual sacrifice of the Day of Atonement almost perfectly. They took Jesus and they beat Him. Until they were covered in blood. Until the embodiment of God's holy presence on earth was covered in blood.

And then they dragged Him out of the city. Treated Him as the most unclean thing on the planet. Too unclean to even keep within the city walls. And they placed Him on an altar of wood. Nailed Him to it, in fact. And lifted Him up, so that everyone who saw him would know that a sacrifice had truly been made once for all. And no sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins would ever need to be made again. It was finished. The Day of Atonement was finished. Because all had been atoned for.

As Christians, we never forget this reality. It is the core of everything we believe. And yet, just because sacrifices of blood and guilt and atonement no longer need to be made, that doesn't mean there are no sacrifices anymore. Sacrifices still exist. And I'm not just talking about worldly sacrifices here, like those we make as spouses and parents and citizens.

There are Biblical sacrifices too. And that's what we find out about in our Epistle lesson today. Because after describing this Day of Atonement sacrifice and after showing the parallels it had to Christ, the writer here tells us that we still have a sacrifice to make. But it's not a sacrifice of atonement. That's already been made, truly once for all. Until the end of days. No, it's a different kind of sacrifice.

We read, *"Therefore, let us go to him [that is, to Christ] outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured."* In other words, let's follow in His footsteps. He suffered for us. We should do a little suffering for Him. But why? Christ sacrificed for us to give us the forgiveness of sins. What do we have to offer Him through our suffering?

Well... nothing. We have nothing to give Him. He has no need of us. He has no need of our sacrifice or suffering. But we do it anyway, for our own good. The writer continues, *"For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come."*

What he's saying here is that when Christ was dragged out of the city, bloody and beaten, and nailed to that cross, it was a symbol. A symbol of the world's rejection of Him. But also a symbol of His new kingdom. His new covenant. His new city of God that is to come.

A city not built by human hands. A city not centered around a physical temple. A city not forgiven by animal sacrifices. But instead, a city built by God. With Christ as it's center. And forgiven by His blood. Christ left the old city of Jerusalem behind and on that cross He established a new kingdom.

And whenever we make a personal sacrifice in Christ's name, it's like we're following in His footsteps. We are leaving the old kingdom behind and we are walking out into the new kingdom. Where we will find suffering and hardship and persecution. But also, where we will find Christ. Nailed to a cross. And look to Him for forgiveness, once for all. And wait with Him for the city that is to come on the last day.

Whenever we make a personal sacrifice in Christ's name, we follow in His footsteps. We learn what it means to do things differently than the world. To look at our priorities through God's eyes. To know what the coming of God's kingdom really looks like.

And there are lots of sacrifices that you can make. The writer says that there's such a thing as a sacrifice of praise to God. What is a sacrifice of praise? Well, he says it's *"the fruit of lips that acknowledge God's name."*

In other words, a sacrifice of praise is anytime you obey the 2nd commandment. *"You shall not misuse the name of the Lord, your God."* And, of course, it's inverse, *"You shall use properly the name of the Lord, your God."* A sacrifice of praise is anytime we open our lips and use God's name rightly.

Every time I stand at this altar saying the prayers of the congregation and say, "Lord, in your mercy," and you say _____, that's a sacrifice of praise. Every time I stand up here and say, "The Lord be with you," and you say _____, that's a sacrifice of praise. Every song we sing. Every prayer we make. Every word of scripture we read. It is all the fruit of lips that acknowledge God's name.

But our sacrifices go beyond that. There are sacrifices of goodness too. Sacrifices where you share what you have with those in need. *"Such sacrifices are pleasing to God,"* he says. There are sacrifices of obedience. Where you listen to your leaders in the church and you do what's best for the congregation even if it's not what's best for you.

We read earlier in this passage that there are sacrifices of brotherly love. Sacrifices of hospitality to complete strangers. Sacrifices for those who are in prison. And notice it doesn't say, sacrifices of hospitality to your friends and neighbors. Sacrifices for those in prison for their faith. No, it's sacrifices to complete strangers and convicted criminals. Period. Those are the sacrifices of true brotherly love.

There are sacrifices of marital love as well. Sacrifices we make to keep our marriages strong and sexually pure. Sacrifices we make, certainly, within marriage. But also sacrifices we make outside of marriage. Where we show honor for the marriage that God may one day give us by keeping ourselves free from sexual immorality, even when it would be easy to do otherwise.

There are sacrifices of contentment. Where we sacrifice what we can have for what we should have. Where we sacrifice the love of money for the love of our Lord. Where we sacrifice fear of the future for the promise of God, which tells us, *"I will never leave you nor forsake you."* *"The Lord is my helper; I will not fear."*

There are lots of sacrifices you can make. As many as there are commandments in the Bible. The world says these sacrifices are foolishness. They're a waste of time. A waste of money. A waste of pleasure. But the world would also look at the cross and say that it was a waste of a life.

We know better. We know that not a drop of blood shed on the cross for us was wasted. We know that not a drop of sweat shed from our brow for the kingdom of God goes wasted. If it's a sacrifice made at God's command, then it is a sacrifice He has blessed. A sacrifice that takes us out of this world and its sinful desires. A sacrifice that brings us to the foot of the cross. A sacrifice that keeps us ever seeking God's kingdom. Amen.