

Living Sacrifices

Romans 12:1-2

Through Christ we come to the heavenly Zion, the new Jerusalem where we worship the Lord with all His people on the Lord's Day. What are doing when we do this? We offer ourselves to Him as living sacrifices, and He receives and transforms us, renewing covenant with us. Understanding covenant renewal worship explains what we do and the great blessing the Lord has for us through it.

Overview of the Text

After being warned against pride that leads to being cut off from Christ, Paul tells the church in Rome, by the mercies of God, to present their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable, which is their "reasonable service" (v. 1). This word *service* can be translated "service of worship" and refers to the sacrificial worship performed by Israelite priests (cf. Heb. 9:1, 6). We don't offer animals anymore because Christ fulfilled those sacrificial types, but because believers are a holy priesthood in Christ we still present ourselves as living sacrifices. To understand fulfillment don't think in terms of being canceled, forgotten, or erased, but coming to fruition. When Jesus fulfills the law and teaches on it in the Sermon on the Mount, we learn what keeping the commandments fully looks like. When Jesus offers Himself as the true sacrifice, that doesn't mean sacrificial worship is over. Now we can worship the Father through Him and be transformed more fully by the renewing of our minds, learning and knowing God's good, acceptable, and perfect will (v. 2).

Why We Worship

We saw in Hebrews 12:18-29 how serious and wonderful worship is in the new covenant. What we believe the purpose is for the worship service will determine its design and how we approach it. When churches think Sunday worship is primarily for evangelism, this usually involves popular praise music and a program centered on people who aren't Christians yet. Since part of the church's job is to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12), this typically gets moved to mid-week programs where in-depth teaching can happen, and thus the small group becomes the main event for maturing believers. In Scripture we see evangelism can happen in a worship service, but it's not primarily a hospitality event for unbelievers (cf. 1 Cor. 15:23-25). Other Christians think worship functions mostly for theological education, making the service feel like a lecture. There might be a couple songs and prayers, but preaching is what "matters." Loving God with our minds is essential, but worship includes much more than this—present your bodies. Still others believe worship is primarily to provide an emotional experience. Emotions are a great gift from God, but should always be required to follow the truth. Presbyterians will say that we come to give glory to God in worship, which is true, but we also come as completely dependent creatures to receive from Him. The service obviously blesses us far more than God because He is the giver of every gift. This give-and-get (really get-give-get), sacrificial worship is described in terms of covenant renewal.

Being in Covenant

The word *covenant* is used over 300 times in the Bible, describing the way God meets and interacts with His people. He "cuts a covenant", gives the terms of the covenant, and then remembers, renews, fulfills, blesses and chastises within the covenant (Gen. 6:18, 15:18, 17:7; Lk. 1:72; Heb. 8:8-10). Adam broke the covenant of life when he ate from the tree (Hos. 6:7). Jesus is the fulfillment of the new covenant, the yes and Amen of all of God's covenant promises (Jer. 31:31-33; 2 Cor. 1:21). The idea of covenant might be

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unfamiliar to some of us, but we have a federal government, which means a covenant (*foedus*) government which must follow the laws. We witness covenants at weddings where the traditional vows say, “I do promise and covenant before God, and these witnesses...” This wonderful relationship is not less personal because of the vows and commitment, but more, and it’s a picture of Christ’s covenant, His marriage, to the church (Eph. 5:25-27; cf. Mal 2:14). So all Christians are in covenant with God, and He invites us come and worship Him within it: “Gather My saints together to Me, Those who have made a covenant with Me by sacrifice” (Ps. 50:5). We are called to believe and worship Him, which is how we keep covenant. Some think that it’s impossible for individuals to break the new covenant, but the New Testament warns Christians against it. When a professing Christian has walked away from Christ, they have “trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace” (Heb. 10:29). The author of Hebrews hopes for better things for his readers, but it’s a real warning (cf. John 15; Rom. 11).

Our Worship Service

We’ve seen that we are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, and Peter says, “as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 2:4). We don’t offer the blood of bulls and goats because they looked forward to Christ’s sacrifice for us. But we do learn about worship from the Old Testament and the sacrifices that God required (cf. Mic. 6:6-8). The three main offerings in the Mosaic sacrificial system are the purification or sin offering, the ascension (often translated “whole burnt”) offering, and the peace offering. All sacrifices point to substitutionary atonement, but they have different emphases. In the sin offering, the worshiper would put his hands on the animal, and confess his sins. This offering obviously has to do with the confession of sin, and the animal was symbolically dying in the place of the worshiper for his sins. In the ascension offering, the entire animal would be consumed in fire, ascending as a pleasing aroma to God. The point of this offering is transformation, changing the worshiper by the power of God’s word (Heb. 4:12). The third offering, the peace offering, returned some of the meat to the worshiper so he could feast with God. When these three offerings were offered the same time, they went in this order: sin, ascension, peace offering (Lev. 9:7). This order is followed intuitively by most Christians when they pray and by most churches when they worship. We have a call to worship where we come together; a confession of sin and assurance of pardon; we are transformed by the reading and preaching of the word; and then we come to the communion table where having been forgiven and transformed by God, we sit down and feast with Him; last, God blesses and sends us out. This is called covenant renewal worship, and it embodies the story and glory of the gospel. There are too many blessings to count here. We don’t feast in the great hall of the temple whenever we can get to Jerusalem, but every week in the body and blood of Christ, looking forward to the final wedding supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:6). In the new covenant all will know Him from the least to the greatest, and so all are included here. We hear the gospel (evangelism), are cleansed of sin, instructed (education), fed (emotionally et al), and blessed by God.