

To God Alone Be The Glory

If you were to design your own religion, how would it work? I'm especially wondering how you would deal with sin in your religion. Consider stealing. If I take your car and wreck it, you might let me replace your car and apologize, and that's all. But what if I take your name and wreck it? What if I steal your identity and wrack up a bunch of bills and try to walk away? It would take more time, but I could restore your good reputation. Ok, but what if I take two members of your family and wreck them, end their lives? I can't do anything to bring them back. And in your new religion, how do I get rid of the guilt or the shame of what I did? If you were to design your own religion, how would it work?

In this discussion so far, God has been missing. Actually, he's missing from a lot of religions. Most religions point you back to yourself. You have to make a sacrifice of some kind in order to get rid of your guilt or your shame. Even if a god in any of the religions gets rid of some of your guilt, you still have to help. So being redeemed is still on you. Of course, you could also design your religion to help people minimize their sense of how bad they are. Think about it. If you're not that bad, you don't have to do anything to get rid of your guilt. You just have to convince yourself that you have nothing to feel ashamed about. Ah, but reaching a happy place is still up to you.

Our sermon text for today has us diving into the deep end of Holy Scripture. The

one true God already designed a religion, and it actually deals with guilt and shame head on. In Old Testament times God even set aside one nation from all the others and taught them a system of animal sacrifices conducted by priests for reestablishing a relationship between very holy God and very sinful people. Through this portion of God's Word, the Holy Spirit wants to convince us that **ONLY ONE PRIEST MAKES YOU SAINTS TRIUMPHANT**, and it's **not by many sacrifices**.

Our text speaks about this. ¹¹*Day after day every [Jewish] priest stands and performs his religious duties [in the temple at Jerusalem]; again and again he offers the same [animal] sacrifices, which can never take away sins.* If we moderns are to understand this text, we need to review what God taught his people in the centuries before the Christ was born about how to reestablished a good relationship with him. Our text mentions 'sacrifices,' meaning 'animal sacrifices.' Today we might have difficulty explaining how it makes sense to destroy an animal as a way of communicating with God. But this idea has been around since nearly the beginning of time. The children of Adam and Eve were already bringing thank offerings to God. Cain thanked God with fruits and vegetables. Abel celebrated God's goodness by offering up the best animals from his flock (Genesis 4). Noah sacrificed some of the animals after the flood was over (Genesis 8). He was saying thanks to God for sparing him and his family. When God affirmed his covenant with Abram, again animals were

sacrificed (Genesis 15). God even provided a ram to sacrifice instead of Isaac after Abraham demonstrated that he loved the Lord more than he loved his son Isaac (Genesis 22).

So far the animal sacrifices have been about giving thanks to God. But during Moses' lifetime God set down five specific kinds of sacrifice (three of which were already being used by the people [burnt, gift, fellowship; sin and guilt offerings were new, as far as we know]. God incorporated existing worship customs into the worship that he prescribed.) By all these sacrifices God allowed his people to "draw near" to him. Interesting how we still use those words at the beginning of the Common Service, "Let us draw near to God with a true heart." And in this morning's liturgy [Service of the Word] we used the words, "We have come into the presence of God." In Moses' time an animal sacrifice was an important part of sinners drawing near to God. Such a meeting with God could not happen without addressing the hard truth that a sinner cannot survive in the presence of the Holy One. If the people had designed their own religion, they would have turned to themselves for the solution. They would have to do something. So in his love and mercy God provided a way for his people to be AT-ONE with him, and these animal sacrifices were the way to AT-ONE-MENT (atonement).

Now I know this material is a little heavier than usual, but if you're still with me, I hope you noticed that God's way for his people to be at-one with him required

them to do something. Based on today's text, I maintain that 'their actions' were not what caused God to forgive them. I'll explain why as the sermon unfolds.

We first need to address the question: why animal sacrifices? Why not a plant, or a poem, or some kind of money? Because sin is serious. You can't buy your way out of the consequences. Sin results in death.

Think about this from God's point of view. God gave you life so that you could do what is good and right all the time. 'Your doing good' is like shining a light on the one who created you. Doing good glorifies God. But if you take away from God the glory that belongs to him by doing what he says is wrong, such as eating more than you need for today, or showing disrespect for those in authority, or being proud about yourself instead of humble, what can you give back to God to make up for that? He already owns everything. Since you have used your God-given life to steal his glory, he demands that you give back the life he gave you. In other words, God has always maintained that the wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23).

So now, if you are an Old Testament believer and you want to stay alive and still have your sin atoned for (so you can be AT-ONE with God), you need a substitute to give up its life, a substitute similar to you. Both animals and mankind were formed from the ground. Both are said to have the same life-force or life-principle [in Hebrew a *nephesh*]. Both animals and mankind have the "breath of life" in them. What is death but the

yielding of your life-principle and your breath of life? One more similarity: both man and animals have blood in their veins to shed. If your blood is shed, you can't hold on to your life. God explained this to Moses: "*The life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life*" (Leviticus 17:11). So you see, when an Old Testament priest presented the blood of a sacrificed animal to God, the blood proved that the animal had died in place of the people. Blood was shed to atone for that sin. The animal gave up its life.

But back up a step as you put yourself into the sandals of an Old Testament believer. Before the animal was killed as your substitute, you would place your hands on the head of the animal and confess your sins. By this you were symbolically transferring your sins to the animal. And then the priest would take all the animal's blood. It died instead of you.

For those of us who have hearts of compassion for animals, we should be aware of how careful the Old Testament priests were not to make the animal suffer more than was necessary. Their knives were sharper than razors, and within a second or two the animal simply went to sleep for lack of oxygen to the brain. It was actually faster than the way veterinarians euthanize sick or unwanted animals today, and probably less painful.

The Lord himself said that these animal sacrifices restored the covenant

relationship between holy God and sinful people. Do you hear the powerful preaching of the law in those sacrifices? "If you don't deal with your sin, your relationship with the one true God cannot be repaired! You will be stuck in your guilt and shame." But listen again for the even more powerful preaching of the gospel in those sacrifices. "Holy God himself has intervened. He has permitted us to transfer our sins to another! He has freed us from our shame and from our guilt." By bringing an animal to sacrifice, the Old Testament believer was saying, "Here God, in testimony to what you have promised to do for me as my Savior-God, I give you such as I have, not because I can earn favor by doing this, or because I can in any way improve my standing as a sinner before you, but simply because I believe that you will keep your covenant, even when I can't."

Do you see how meaningful these sacrifices were for our brothers and sisters, the Old Testament believers? By visiting the temple, the one church in the whole land, they were reminded: "All people will have to stand before God to account for their sins. But through these sacrifices that God accepts from us, we can confidently stand before God without fear. We can draw near to God, come into his presence, and worship him with humble and penitent hearts."

Now let's tie in what we've reviewed about the Old Testament sacrifices with the one New Testament sacrifice, because, as our text points out, **ONLY ONE PRIEST MAKES YOU SAINTS TRIUMPHANT**. And it's not by many sacrifices, **but by the One Sacrifice** (12-18). You see, those many animal

sacrifices set aside God's wrath only for the time being. How? By pointing everyone to the future when the One Great Sacrifice for sin would be offered on the cross. Just as the Old Testament believer was expected to bring the best animal from his flock for sacrifice, so God gave his best, his own Son. And ¹²*"when this priest, Jesus, had offered for all time one sacrifice for sin, he sat down at the right hand of God."* What a contrast! The Old Testament priests had to offer sacrifice after sacrifice. And the writer of our text uses a present tense here, which probably means that [the book of Hebrews was written before the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 A.D.—] the Jewish sacrifices were still going on. But look at Jesus: he sacrificed himself for sin only once. And now where is he? Sitting down, at God's right hand, waiting for his enemies to be made his footstool (v. 13). He is purposely giving everyone plenty of time to repent of their sins, to draw near to God with a true heart, because all sins have been paid for by God! Through you and me Jesus wants to call out to everyone we know: "Come before the Lord and be pronounced not-guilty for Jesus' sake."

But if a person will not... If someone is saying to God, "I don't want your forgiveness, not for this sin. I'm not sorry for this one"—if people say this, by words or by actions, as in 'staying away from God's Word,' then God will be forced to treat them as his enemies. Why? Because sin is serious, and they are rejecting God's one plan to save them from it.

But by God's grace you and I do not reject God's saving plan: ¹⁴*"by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever, that is, he has brought to complete salvation those who are being made holy. We are being made holy. The Holy Spirit is working in us through our daily Bible reading and through our worship services, so that we will live lives that are more and more pleasing to God. See how intensely interested God is in our spiritual growth?"*

He even goes so far as to put his laws, or teachings, in our hearts and write them on our minds (v 16). In other words, he has made them clear to us. We understand them. We can think about them throughout the week. ¹⁷*"Then he adds: 'Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.'* ¹⁸*And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin."* That's why Jesus' work never needs to be repeated. By the one sacrifice of the High Priest Jesus Christ you are Saints Triumphant. The shame or guilt you feel for past sins—there's no need for it anymore. God can't remember why you feel shame or guilt. He wants you to let it go. Because of Jesus, already now you can imagine looking at Judgment Day from the other side of it and hear yourself saying, "It turned out just like God said—he didn't remember any of the things I had done wrong."

Since this is true: have a joyful week. Go and live to God's glory. Be intensely interested in your spiritual growth. Show God how much you appreciate the one sacrifice by which he made you Saints Triumphant.