



Digging Deeper Week 5

Come to the Altar

Substitutes are not usually my favorite. Substitute sugars always seem to have a weird aftertaste. Many years ago when low-fat diets were all the rage, my husband and I were so excited to find “fat free” potato chips. The chips were made with a fat substitute that made our digestive systems go a little haywire, and products with this particular additive eventually were pulled from the market. Another place we find substitutes is in the classroom. When I worked as a substitute teacher, I was needed to take the teacher’s place in supervising behavior and learning; but I didn’t have the information, education, and relationship with the students that the regular teacher had. I quickly realized an important principle that applies to all substitutes: while substitutes are not the same as the real thing or the original, sometimes they are necessary. Substitution is needed in some areas of life.

Actually, the concept of sacrifice goes all the way back to Cain and Abel, who made offerings to God (Genesis 4:3-4). Likewise, the first thing Noah did after the flood waters subsided was build an altar to present a burnt offering to God (Genesis 8:20). Throughout Scripture we find references to people sacrificing to the Lord out of gratitude and reverence to God. Job, Abraham, and many of the patriarchs of the Old Testament killed animals and offered them to God on an altar on behalf of themselves or others.

Under Moses’ leadership, the Lord instituted an official sacrificial system of offerings. (Leviticus 1–7). The key idea of sacrifice was substitution, whereby the blood of an animal was a symbol of payment for sin. Some of the blood was sprinkled on the people to signify cleansing and forgiveness. By following God’s instructions, the people displayed covenant loyalty. Under the Mosaic covenant, God made promises to His people and asked them to offer sacrifices and celebrate holy days to honor the covenant between them. The system of offerings wasn’t salvific in itself—leading to salvation. Instead, it was a way that God’s people could express outwardly their internal desire to restore the relationship between sinful people and a holy God.

Several different types of offerings were laid out in the Mosaic law including burnt, grain, peace, sin, and guilt offerings. The nuances for the various offerings had to do with things such as whether the sin was intentional and whether the offering was intended to restore peace for an individual or a relationship.

Some key markers of the offerings suggest that they were:

- Voluntary (Exodus 25:2)
- Proportionate to income or means (Leviticus 5:7)

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- Perfect and without physical defect or blemish (Leviticus 3:6)
- Presented by a priest for himself or on behalf of another person (Leviticus 4:3, 13, 22, 27)
- Killed (Leviticus 1:5; 3:2; 4:4)
- Placed on the altar (Leviticus 1:8)
- Burned (some offerings were partially burned and then the meat was eaten, whereas burnt offerings were completely consumed by fire until only ash remained—Leviticus 1:13, 17; 2:16; 3:11, 16; 4:35)

The Book of Leviticus contains additional instructions for how, when, and where each action in the sacrificial system was to be performed. No one could ever label this process as “haphazard.” It took intentionality and advance planning in order to execute God’s instructions properly. God gave His people this system as a sign and foreshadowing of substitutionary thinking. He planned even then to one day send His Son to die a sacrificial death as a substitute for you and me. His blood would cleanse us from sin and make a way for forgiveness. Christ ended the sacrificial system through His death not as a replacement but as a fulfillment. The writer of Hebrews says it well, “Christ has now become the High Priest over all the good things that have come. He has entered that greater, more perfect Tabernacle in heaven, which was not made by human hands and is not part of this created world. With his own blood—not the blood of goats and calves—he entered the Most Holy Place once for all time and secured our redemption forever” (9:11-12). Substitutes are no longer needed when you have the real thing.

With the new covenant, Christ made animal sacrifice unnecessary. Christ was the spotless, unblemished lamb who was sacrificed for our sin (John 1:29). As we understand the sacrificial system, we can better grasp Paul’s words in Romans 12:1-2. So Paul explains what sacrifice looks like for a follower of Christ:

¹Dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him. ²Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

(Romans 12:1-2)

In these verses we hear the language of sacrifice used in a way that would have been revolutionary for the times. Greco-Roman culture in Paul’s day did not think about religious activity apart from priests, temples, and sacrifices—whether in Judaism or pagan worship.¹ So Paul’s request for individuals to come to the altar in a spiritual sense would have stood in stark contrast to their culture.

As we think about the Old Testament sacrifices, we can make these applications in light of Romans 12:1-2:

We intentionally offer ourselves to God. The Greek word Paul used to call the church in Rome to the altar was *paristemi*, meaning “to present.” In the Septuagint (Greek Old Testament), this word “was often used as a technical term for a priest’s placing an offering on the altar.”² Offering ourselves to God will not happen by accident. Sacrifices were prepared, scheduled, and practiced continually. Likewise, our spiritual service of worship will require our action of responding to God’s grace in our lives.

We have to die. Coming to the altar means dying to our flesh so that we can live by the power of the Holy Spirit. We tell God that His way trumps our way. It’s so much easier to type those words than live by them. In Matthew 16:25 we find Jesus talking about altar living: “If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it.” Now, placing yourself on the altar to die to self doesn’t mean you lose yourself. God made you unique and gifted you. He has a calling and plan for you. In fact, by dying to your flesh and living for God, you will find your identity and purpose, which are anchored in love and hope.

Our focus turns outward. Sacrifices were offered on behalf of others. Coming to the altar and dying means following Jesus into a life of service. As we love and serve those around us, we will find that our own souls are nurtured.

We put first things first. Both the sacrificial system in Leviticus and the Romans 12:1-2 call to sacrificial living were about worship. Worship is assigning worth to something. We worship when we give worth to God by following His ways. He tells us not to be conformed to this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds. This means we prioritize God's words above the messages of our culture and even our own thoughts and emotions. Old Testament offerings were to be the best of what each person had to give to God. In a similar way, we offer God the best of our time, talents, and treasures. We want no leftovers in God's fridge when it comes to our offerings!

I'm grateful that the practice of offering animals on an altar is no longer necessary. We have the real thing, the ultimate sacrifice—and Jesus is His name. Instead of coming to the altar with a literal sacrifice of animals, birds, grain, or oil, we come with our lives. We offer ourselves to God in response to His love and trust that living His way is best!

Notes

1. Michael F. Bird, *The Story of God Bible Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 143.
2. John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament: Romans 9-16* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 142.