

Week Five

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SACRIFICE

Call to Worship

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him stood the seraphim. Each had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said: "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said: "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for."

[ISAIAH 6:1-7]

Confession

O God, in creation you fashion us in your image, in Christ you reveal to us your love, through the Holy Spirit you welcome us into the fellowship of believers; we bow in gratitude before you. We constantly distort your image, but still you restore it. We daily betray your love, but still you extend it. We often disrupt fellowship, but still you bless it. Come unto us at this time and in this place, O Lord, that your image in us might be revealed, your love for us returned, and our fellowship in Christ renewed. Amen.

[VOV]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

It was now two days before the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. And the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him, for they said, "Not during the feast, lest there be an uproar from the people." And while he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he was reclining at table, a woman came with an alabaster flask of ointment of pure nard, very costly, and she broke the flask and poured it over his head. There were some who said to themselves indignantly, "Why was the ointment wasted like that? For this ointment could have been sold for more than three hundred denarii and given to the poor." And they scolded her. But Jesus said, "Leave her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you want, you can do good for them. But you will not always have me. She has done what she could; she has anointed my body beforehand for burial. And truly, I say to you, wherever the gospel is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her."

[MARK 14:1-9]

DEVOTIONAL

Shortly after sin had entered the world and God had pronounced judgment on sin, we read the following in Genesis 3:21: “And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.”

God looked at their clothes and said, “*Nope. That’s not going to work.*” The clothes that Adam and Eve had made for themselves were not adequate covering to face the new fallen world in which they were now living. Remember when they first sinned? Sin opened their eyes, but not in a good way. Sin laid them bare, left them feeling exposed. For the first time, they realized they were naked. So, they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths, single-piece garments. And ever since, the human race has engaged in an enterprise of self-covering that always falls short.

God knew that Adam and Eve needed something more substantial for covering. They needed something made by his hands, not their own. When we read Genesis 3:21, it is apparent that some animals died in order that the man and woman could be sufficiently clothed. This is the first hint of substitutionary atonement that we see in the Bible. “Substitutionary atonement” is just a fancy way of saying that an innocent one died so that a guilty one could be covered. You see, covering sin is not simple, quick, and easy (like grabbing some leaves off a tree and sewing them together). Covering sin is costly, painful ... bloody. Sin produces suffering and death, so the cost of covering sin involves suffering and death. It involves sacrifice.

Did Adam and Eve think they could just sweep things under the rug, tidy up the disastrous mess they had made without any cost, without any price being paid? Do we think that? When we try to cover our own sin, we are engaging in a futile self-salvation project. We are essentially saying, “I can atone for my own sin.” But this is a gross under-estimation of both the breadth and depth of sin’s devastation.

The death of the animals in Genesis 3 is the first biblical hint that atonement requires sacrifice. It points us forward to the ultimate sacrifice. Jesus Christ suffered and bled and died so that we could be adequately clothed—clothed in his righteousness. The blood of Jesus is our atonement, our covering. Just like Adam and Eve, we can’t cover our own sin. God must do that, and he has made that possible with the costly sacrifice of his own Son. In light of this: “I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness” (Is. 61:10).

REFLECTION

1. *What are some of your fig leaves (false coverings)? These are just things you and I use to try to make ourselves look okay or feel okay about ourselves (good works, talents and abilities, religious duty and discipline, performance at work).*
2. *God calls us to put our faith in the covering that he alone provides. He calls us to faith in Christ. The bloody death of Jesus is our only hope. What would it look like for you to believe that today when you are tempted to “self-cover”?*

Closing Prayer

Everlasting Creator-Father, I bless thee for the everlasting covenant, for the appointment of a Mediator. I rejoice that he failed not, nor was discouraged, but accomplished the work thou gavest him to do; and said on the cross, 'It is finished.' I exult in the thought that thy justice is satisfied, thy truth established, thy law magnified, and a foundation is laid for my hope. I look to a present and personal interest in Christ and say, Surely he has borne my griefs, carried my sorrows, won my peace, healed my soul. Justified by his blood I am saved by his life, Glorifying in his cross I bow to his scepter, Having his Spirit I possess his mind. Lord, grant that my religion may not be occasional and partial, but universal, influential, effective, and may I always continue in thy words as well as thy works, so that I may reach my end in peace.

[VOV]

Call to Worship

The Mighty One, God the Lord, speaks and summons the earth from the rising of the sun to its setting. Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God shines forth. Our God comes; he does not keep silence; before him is a devouring fire, around him a mighty tempest. He calls to the heavens above and to the earth, that he may judge his people: "Gather to me my faithful ones, who made a covenant with me by sacrifice!" The heavens declare his righteousness, for God himself is judge!

[PSALM 50:1-6]

Confession

O God, in gracious love you promise to care for the creatures of earth; in steadfast love you keep your promise. But we, who so quickly embrace your covenant, just as quickly betray it; we, from whom you desire worship, too often offer only scorn. For making and then keeping your promise in the greatness of your mercy, we sing your praise, Lord; and for accepting and then spurning your covenant in the greatness of our sin, we ask your forgiveness. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. And when they heard it, they were glad and promised to give him money. And he sought an opportunity to betray him. And on the first day of Unleavened Bread, when they sacrificed the Passover lamb, his disciples said to him, "Where will you have us go and prepare for you to eat the Passover?" And he sent two of his disciples and said to them, "Go into the city, and a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him, and wherever he enters, say to the master of the house, 'The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished and ready; there prepare for us." And the disciples set out and went to the city and found it just as he had told them, and they prepared the Passover. And when it was evening, he came with the twelve. And as they were reclining at table and eating, Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me, one who is eating with me." They began to be sorrowful and to say to him one after another, "Is it I?" He said to them, "It is one of the twelve, one who is dipping bread into the dish with me. For the Son of Man goes as it is written of him, but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! It would have been better for that man if he had not been born."

[MARK 14:10-21]

DEVOTIONAL

Philippians 2 says this of Jesus Christ: “He made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death” (2:7-8) Not only was it a sacrifice for God the Son to take on human flesh, you might say that Jesus’ entire life was marked by sacrifice—giving up his rights and spending himself for the sake of others. From the beginning of his life, his feet were always walking toward the ultimate sacrifice of death on a brutal Roman cross. This brings a question to mind: Why is sacrifice so central to God’s plan of redemption and reconciliation? Why couldn’t God just forgive people of their sins without sacrifice?

If you think about what it means to bring about reconciliation in a human relationship, you can see how sacrifice is always part of the process. Let’s say I offend you or hurt you in some way. If we are to reconcile our relationship, you will necessarily have to sacrifice. It will cost you something to forgive me, because you will have to absorb the pain of the offense. You will have to sacrifice your right to be angry and move toward me with forgiveness. But I will have to sacrifice too. I will have to lay my pride on the sacrificial altar if I am going to move toward you with confession and repentance. The bottom line is that without sacrifice there is no reconciliation. There is only hardness of heart and death of relationship.

In a very similar way, we must sacrifice in order to move toward God with confession and repentance. We must come to the end of ourselves, killing any sense of pride and self-righteousness. But we are not the ones who move first. It is not our sacrifice that saves us. God’s plan of redemption is primarily about his sacrifice, not ours.

Redemption is a term of value, so there must be a cost involved. To redeem means to buy back, to regain possession of something in exchange for payment. Because we are created in the image of God and he loves us, he considered us worth the cost of redemption. However, the full cost of redeeming a human being is staggering. What does it cost to buy a person back from the realm of sin and death, from the reign of Satan? The cost is commensurate with the destruction that sin, death, and Satan have brought to humanity. The cost is beyond our ability to pay. No amount of sacrifice on our part would enable us to cover the cost. Thankfully, the full cost fell on Jesus. All of the curses of the Fall, most notably our sin and the resulting death, were placed on Christ. His sacrifice makes our reconciliation with God possible. Thanks be to God!

REFLECTION

1. *Is there anyone in your life with whom you need to reconcile? If they are in the wrong, what will it cost you to forgive them? If you are in the wrong, what will it cost you to ask their forgiveness? Chances are, this cost pales in comparison to what it cost Jesus to buy your forgiveness.*
2. *Spend a few moments thanking God for the sacrifice of his Son to buy your redemption. Thank him for paying for specific sins for which you could never have paid.*

Closing Prayer

Send your Spirit among us, O God, as we meditate on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Prepare our minds to hear your Word. Move our hearts to accept what we hear. Purify our will to obey in joy and faith. This we pray through Christ, our Savior. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

The Lord who calls us to worship today is the same Jesus who refused the temptation to worship the evil one. Rather than receive the glorious kingdoms of this world, he endured the shame of the cross, and today is Lord of lords and King of kings. Now are gathered in him all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, glory and power. With the saints of all ages we say, “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!”

[BASED ON COLOSSIANS 2:3; REVELATION 5:12]

Confession

God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we are your covenant people—one church, drawn from all nations. Our citizenship is in heaven. Yet we confess, O Lord, that we sometimes lose sight of your kingdom and its ways. We confess that we sometimes live more as citizens of our own land than as citizens of your kingdom. By your truth you call all peoples to account. Forgive us for losing our distinctiveness. Focus us on the cross and on the salvation you give through him who is the Lord and King and Judge of us all, Jesus, the Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And as they were eating, he took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, and they all drank of it. And he said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. Truly, I say to you, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.” And when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives. And Jesus said to them, “You will all fall away, for it is written, ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.’ But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” Peter said to him, “Even though they all fall away, I will not.” And Jesus said to him, “Truly, I tell you, this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” But he said emphatically, “If I must die with you, I will not deny you.” And they all said the same.

[MARK 14:22-31]

DEVOTIONAL

Can we know for sure that God keeps his promises? Everyone knows how easy it is to make a verbal promise, but then waffle if it becomes too difficult to keep. Could this ever happen with God?

In Genesis, God made a series of promises to Abraham: He promised to give Abraham many descendants and make him into a great nation, to bless him and make his name great, and to bless all the families of the earth through him. He also promised to give the descendants of Abraham a particular land. But Abraham was unsure. His circumstances didn't indicate that God's promises could actually come to fruition. So, in Genesis 15, Abraham asked God some questions: "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless," and, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess [the land]" (15:2)?

In answer to these questions, God did something that seems strange to us in our cultural and historical context. He had Abraham sacrifice some animals, cut them in half, and then lay the pieces of the animals across from each other. Then Abraham fell into a deep sleep, and a smoking fire pot and flaming torch passed between the pieces. This ceremony, common in the ancient Near East, was called "cutting a covenant." Two parties entering into a binding agreement or covenant with one another would cut an animal in pieces and pass between the pieces to inaugurate the covenant. The ceremony signified that the two parties were promising to fulfill the terms of the covenant. If they failed to keep the promises of the covenant, they were saying, "May we become like this animal." It's like they were saying, "I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die." The sacrificial ceremony was literally a pledge of one's life to keep the promises of the covenant.

When the smoking fire pot and flaming torch (which were symbols of God's presence) passed between the pieces of dead animals, God himself was assuming responsibility to make sure that all the promises of the covenant were kept. Abraham was asleep, completely passive, while God initiated and ratified the covenant. O. Palmer Robertson writes, "The solemn ceremony of self-malediction provides the Lord's reply [to Abraham's questions]: 'I promise. I solemnly commit myself as Almighty God. Death may be necessary. But the promises of the covenant shall be fulfilled!'"

It's a staggering thought! God was saying, "May I be torn to pieces like these animals if the covenant between me and Abraham's descendants is broken." The terms of the covenant would end up being broken—but not by God.

Abraham's descendants would be unfaithful to God and his covenant. But, God kept his promise. He had sworn on his life to bless Abraham. So, the blessing for Abraham and his descendants (which includes us as Christians) was made possible by the curse of death that fell on Jesus. In Jesus, God the Son took on flesh, and his flesh was torn apart in order to keep his covenant promises to Abraham (and us). Jesus, the covenant-keeper, sacrificially offered himself for us: "Take, eat; this is my body. Drink of this cup, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:26-28). The blood of Jesus, the sacrificial Lamb of God, is our assurance that God keeps his promises. What better assurance could we ever have?

REFLECTION

1. *What promises of God (which you have in Christ) are you struggling to believe? How can the blood of Christ give you assurance that God keeps his promises to his children?*
2. *Spend a few moments praising God that he is a covenant-keeper and that he has fulfilled all the provisions of the covenant that binds you in everlasting relationship with him.*

Closing Prayer

O Christ, by remaining faithful till death, you show us the road to greater love. O Christ, by taking the burden of sin upon yourself, you reveal to us the way of generosity. O Christ, by praying for those who crucified you, you lead us to forgive without counting the cost. O Christ, by opening paradise to the repentant thief, you awaken hope in us. O Christ, come and help our weak faith. O Christ, create a pure heart in us; renew and strengthen our spirit. O Christ, your Word is near; may it live within us and protect us always. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

Clap your hands, all peoples! Shout to God with loud songs of joy! For the Lord, the Most High, is to be feared, a great king over all the earth. He subdued peoples under us, and nations under our feet. He chose our heritage for us, the pride of Jacob whom he loves. Selah God has gone up with a shout, the Lord with the sound of a trumpet. Sing praises to God, sing praises! Sing praises to our King, sing praises! For God is the King of all the earth; sing praises with a psalm! God reigns over the nations; God sits on his holy throne. The princes of the peoples gather as the people of the God of Abraham. For the shields of the earth belong to God; he is highly exalted!

[PSALM 47]

Confession

Merciful God, we have not loved you with all our heart and mind and strength and soul. Lord, have mercy. We have not loved our neighbors as you have taught us. Christ, have mercy. We are indifferent to the saving grace of your Word and life. Lord, have mercy. Forgive and heal us by your steadfast love made known to us in the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And they went to a place called Gethsemane. And he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I pray." And he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them, "My soul is very sorrowful, even to death. Remain here and watch." And going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him. And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Remove this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will." And he came and found them sleeping, and he said to Peter, "Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour? Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak." And again he went away and prayed, saying the same words. And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy, and they did not know what to answer him. And he came the third time and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and taking your rest? It is enough; the hour has come. The Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand."

[MARK 14:32-42]

DEVOTIONAL

"[God] said [to Abraham], "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains

of which I shall tell you.” So Abraham rose early in the morning, saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and his son Isaac. And he cut the wood for the burnt offering and arose and went to the place of which God had told him” (Genesis 22:2-3).

It's hard to imagine the complexity of emotions Abraham must have had as he made his way up Mount Moriah, the place where God had commanded him to sacrifice his beloved son. Isaac was his only child, the one he had waited decades for, the one whom God had promised and then miraculously provided. Isaac was a physical sign of God's goodness and faithfulness to keep his covenant with Abraham. He represented all the dreams and aspirations of Abraham's heart—Isaac was Abraham's treasure. There was a lot at stake.

We don't know exactly what Abraham was feeling, but we do know how he responded. Instead of arguing with God, he immediately began preparing for the sacrifice. His response was obedience: he “saddled his donkey,” “cut wood for the burnt offering,” and began making his way up the mountain.

This isn't like the man in Jesus' parable who found a treasure in a field and sold everything he had to buy the field. That man knew what he stood to gain. We don't mind sacrifice if we know there is a good reason or reward. However, it seems Abraham had neither of these, just a mysterious faith that he and the boy would come back together from the altar (22:5).

When they came to the altar, Abraham carefully laid out the wood, then bound his son and placed him on the wood. And just as he was taking the knife to slaughter his son, God interceded:

“But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” And he said, “Here I am.” He said, “Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.” And Abraham lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, behind him was a ram, caught in a thicket by his horns. And Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son” (22:11-13).

To believe God means to trust beyond reason and reward that he is good, and that what he demands he also provides. It is in this sense that Abraham believed God, and so was willing to obey God, even to the point of offering up his only son.

God honors our obedience and worship by providing what we really want and desperately need: a substitutionary sacrifice. Abraham did not withhold his only son from God; “[God] did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32). Isaac was the promised seed of Abraham through whom God would bless the nations; Jesus was the promised seed of Adam through whom God would bring redemption to all peoples throughout history. Isaac carried the wood on his back up to the altar to be sacrificed; Jesus carried his own cross on the road to Calvary where he would be

crucified. Isaac was laid upon the altar in anticipation of his death through his father's own hand; Jesus was slain upon the altar and cut-off from his Father. A substitutionary lamb was provided for Isaac, but Jesus was the substitutionary lamb provided for us all.

Jesus is the greater and perfect sacrifice who empowers our obedience and worship.

REFLECTION

1. *What is your treasure, the thing you cherish and protect and want to control?*
2. *What would it look like for you to "give" that to God?*
3. *Can you trust his goodness and provision for you?*

Closing Prayer

O God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, All that were ever saved were saved by thee, and will through eternity exclaim, 'Not unto us, but unto thy name give glory for thy mercy and truth's sake.' Thou hast chosen to transact all thy concerns with us through a Mediator in whom all fullness dwells and who is exalted to be Prince and Saviour. To him we look, on him we depend, through him we are justified. May we derive relief from his sufferings without ceasing to abhor sin, or to long after holiness; feel the double efficacy of his blood, tranquillizing and cleansing our consciences; delight in his service as well as in his sacrifice.

[VOV]

Call to Worship

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling. There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High. God is in the midst of her; she shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns. The nations rage, the kingdoms totter; he utters his voice, the earth melts. The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress. Come, behold the works of the Lord, how he has brought desolations on the earth. He makes wars cease to the end of the earth; he breaks the bow and shatters the spear; he burns the chariots with fire. "Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!" The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.

[PSALM 46]

Confession

Merciful God, we meet each other today at the foot of the cross, as inhabitants of one world. We wait with each other as those who inflict wounds on one another: be merciful to us. As those who deny justice to others: be merciful to us. As those who put our trust in power: be merciful to us. As those who are greedy: be merciful to us. As those who put others on trial: be merciful to us. As those who refuse to receive: be merciful to us. As those who are afraid of the world's torment: be merciful to us. Amen.

[WSB]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And immediately, while he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man. Seize him and lead him away under guard." And when he came, he went up to him at once and said, "Rabbi!" And he kissed him. And they laid hands on him and seized him. But one of those who stood by drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. And Jesus said to them, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. But let the Scriptures be fulfilled." And they all left him and fled. And a young man followed him, with nothing but a linen cloth about his body. And they seized him, but he left the linen cloth and ran away naked.

[MARK 14:43-52]

DEVOTIONAL

It is so easy to feel righteous about sacrifice. When we “sacrifice” by tithing, or abstaining from sex or alcohol or food, or giving our time to help others, we feel pretty good about ourselves. We might not say it this way, but perhaps we even feel like we have earned some good graces with God. We present these things to God in our minds like we are making a case for why we deserve to be forgiven, or blessed, or noticed. However, this type of thinking prevents us from giving God the sacrifice he desires—after all, our money, our bodies, and our time all belong to him already; is it really so generous to give a small portion back? That is more stewardship than sacrifice.

It will not do to say to God, “Yes, I have sinned, but look what good I have done! Look what I have sacrificed!” God desires a different kind of sacrifice, one that encompasses our very being. In King David’s famous confession concerning his adultery and murder and cover up, he comes clean with God. No excuses, just full disclosure and ownership. No ritual ceremony, just impassioned prayer. This is what people do when they have come to the end of themselves. They bring absolutely nothing to the table, and count on God to be everything to them.

But why didn’t David bring this to the altar of ritual worship? He needed forgiveness, and the means of atonement in his day was the blood of an animal. He explains: “For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:16-17).

Just as “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4), nothing we sacrifice for God will “tip the scales in our favor” or satisfy his holiness. God alone blots out all our iniquities and restores to us the joy of our salvation (51:9,12). David’s point was not that sacrifices would no longer be made (they would), but simply that a sacrifice in and of itself counts for nothing apart from the heart of the one who offers it.

God desires our whole heart, and the only way to give yourself completely is to let go of the notion that any part of your heart or your spirit or your life is good apart from him. When we stop trying to justify ourselves before God, when we allow ourselves to see the scope of our sin, when we understand our total depravity, our hearts will break as David’s did. We will cease striving for a righteousness of our own, stop covering up our unrighteousness, and look only to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died “once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

REFLECTION

1. *What makes you feel like you are doing okay with God?*
2. *How have you judged those around you that do not make the same kind of sacrifices you make for God?*

3. *What would it take for you to bring nothing to the table (a broken and contrite heart)?*

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, giver of every good and perfect gift, teach us to render to you all that we have and all that we are, that we may praise you, not with our lips only, but with our whole lives, turning the duties, the sorrows, and the joys of all our days into a living sacrifice to you, through our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

[WSB]

Call to Worship

The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for he has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers. Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully. He will receive blessing from the Lord and righteousness from the God of his salvation. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. Selah Lift up your heads, O gates! And be lifted up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle! Lift up your heads, O gates! And lift them up, O ancient doors, that the King of glory may come in. Who is this King of glory? The Lord of hosts, he is the King of glory!

[PSALM 24]

Confession

Almighty and merciful God, we confess to You that too often we approach You out of duty and obligation rather than genuine love and affection for Your presence. Forgive us for uttering songs of praise to You without being transformed by the truths that we are singing. Forgive us for muttering prayers of adoration to You without depending upon Your love and grace. And forgive us for acting as though You are pleased with our show, pretense, and religious activities, when we do not love our neighbor. You take no pleasure in these worthless offerings, they are an abomination to You. You will hide Your eyes from us, and You will not listen. We confess that we seek comfort and isolation rather than moving toward people, like You have moved toward us. We humbly ask that You would teach us to do what is truly good; that we would seek justice and correct oppression. We pray that we would love seeing things made right in this world because You have first made us right through the cross of Christ. Amen.

[BASED ON ISAIAH 1:10-17]

Contemplation

GOSPEL READING

And they led Jesus to the high priest. And all the chief priests and the elders and the scribes came together. And Peter had followed him at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. And he was sitting with the guards and warming himself at the fire. Now the chief priests and the whole council were seeking testimony against Jesus to put him to death, but they found none. For many bore false witness against him, but their testimony did not agree. And some stood up and bore false witness against him, saying, "We heard him say, 'I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.'" Yet even about this their testimony did not agree. And the high priest stood up in the midst and asked Jesus, "Have you no answer to make?"

What is it that these men testify against you?” But he remained silent and made no answer. Again the high priest asked him, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” And Jesus said, “I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven.” And the high priest tore his garments and said, “What further witnesses do we need? You have heard his blasphemy. What is your decision?” And they all condemned him as deserving death. And some began to spit on him and to cover his face and to strike him, saying to him, “Prophesy!” And the guards received him with blows.

[MARK 14:53-65]

DEVOTIONAL

We live in a culture obsessed with self-improvement. We want to change our job, our body, our house, our habits, and hobbies. We even want to “improve” the people around us. When it comes to opportunity and options for change, our day is unparalleled in history. The problem is that we also live in an age of unparalleled convenience. I can shoot a video on my phone and send it to someone a thousand miles away, all within minutes. I can take a pill and lose weight while I sleep, allegedly. Without any work of preparation, I can eat nearly whenever and whatever I want. Privileges like these have cultivated unrealistic expectations and unwarranted impatience. We cannot escape the effects of our technological age.

The Bible offers an entirely different norm for change, which is more profound and deliberate. It promises holistic change, but not all at once, and not without sacrifice. In Romans 12, after Paul has laid out the theology of the gospel, he exhorts his readers to take action, to let the gospel change them, if you will: “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1).

The way we take action is to present the entirety of who we are to God “as a living sacrifice” to him. This is a peculiar phrase. The allusion to Old Testament sacrifice is clear, but what is being sacrificed on *that* altar dies. So what are we to make of this “living sacrifice?”

On one hand, personal growth is sacrificial. We do not need to atone for our sins (Jesus is the final sacrifice for sin), but we do have to put to death our selfish ambition and our desire to be in control. So much of our motive for change is to secure ourselves by our own means. We want to change our bodies to secure a good image, acquire wealth to secure comfort, and gain power to secure our happiness. All of that must be put to death.

But that is only part of what Paul is saying here. Our worship is sacrificial, but it is also living: “If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13). In other words, our sacrifice of worship is to live for God, to present the members of our body to God as “instruments of righteousness” (Romans 6:13). This is possible because “he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also [give life to our] mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in [us]” (Romans 8:11). Because Jesus offered up his body on the cross to secure our salvation forever, we can offer up our entire life to God

as a continual act of worship.

The norm in our culture is to sacrifice whatever we have to get what we want. The way of true sanctification is to sacrifice everything we want because of what we already have in Christ. This is the heart of Lent. We are decluttering our lives, inside and out, testing the values and habits and desires that have become our acceptable norm. We are making room in our heart and mind to consider what Jesus gave up for us, and it is changing us. It's not all at once, because that would rob us of the joy we experience in knowing the one who changes us.

REFLECTION

1. *What kinds of things do you want to change about yourself and your life?*
2. *What would it look like to offer these things to God in worship?*
3. *How will pursuing change help you seek God above all else?*

Closing Prayer

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we, your unworthy servants, give you humble thanks for all your goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all whom you have made. We bless you for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life, but above all for your immeasurable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And, we pray, give us such an awareness of your mercies that with truly thankful hearts we may show forth your praise, not only with our lips, but in our lives, by giving up ourselves to your service, and by walking before you in holiness and righteousness all our days, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory throughout all ages. Amen.

[WSB]

SIXTH SUNDAY OF LENT: PALM SUNDAY

By his resurrection Christ broke apart the gates of death and opened to us the way of life, announced victory to the women and apostles and brought salvation to the whole world, annihilated the power of death and renewed the entire creation, gave us the promise of resurrection so that we might rise with him in new life. We proclaim and affirm that, through the death and resurrection of Jesus, “Death is swallowed up in victory.” And so we cry out: “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

[FROM THE WCF 20.1; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:55-57]



In Christ alone my hope is found
He is my light, my strength, my song
This Cornerstone, this solid Ground
Firm through the fiercest drought and storm
What heights of love, what depths of peace
When fears are stilled, when strivings cease!
My Comforter, my All in All—
Here in the love of Christ I stand

In Christ alone, who took on flesh
Fullness of God in helpless babe!
This gift of love and righteousness
Scorned by the ones He came to save
Till on that cross as Jesus died
The wrath of God was satisfied
For ev'ry sin on Him was laid—
Here in the death of Christ I live

There in the ground His body lay
Light of the world by darkness slain
Then bursting forth in glorious Day
Up from the grave He rose again
And as He stands in victory
Sin's curse has lost its grip on me
For I am His and He is mine—
Bought with the precious blood of Christ

No guilt in life, no fear in death—
This is the pow'r of Christ in me;
From life's first cry to final breath,
Jesus commands my destiny.
No pow'r of hell, no scheme of man,
Can ever pluck me from His hand;
Till He returns or calls me home—
Here in the pow'r of Christ I'll stand.

[KEITH GETTY AND STUART TOWNEND]