

“Sacrifices Must Still Be Made”

Hebrews 9:11-14  
Psalm 146

A reminder as we engage God’s teachings today, that in this season we are currently in, we are looking back to a series of texts and messages from three years ago that STILL hold true for us today. If you recall, two weeks ago we began with the time is STILL now and the place is STILL here. To do what, you might ask? To celebrate God’s grace and inspire the next generation for Christ by worshipping joyfully, growing spiritually, loving boldly, and serving faithfully. And last week we revisited the buoyant utterance of hope displayed through the faith of blind Bartimaeus. His story and many others remind us that hope in God, which is a virtue needing to be cultivated and not just “sunny optimism”, STILL floats.

Staying in step then, today we build off a text and message that demanded our sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise. Anyone remember that message from three years ago? If it makes you feel any better, I remember the concept but not the whole message verbatim.

As the saying goes, it is easier to preach ten sermons than it is to live one. This is meant, not to deter us, only to prepare us to face the reality of the challenge of God’s truths against the everyday rhythms of humanity. Here is the thing though. Even though we might not remember that very message, it likely served a purpose at that time in our lives. If I were a betting man, I would say we have all lived some portion of that message out. If we have given a gift to someone out of gratitude or made a tithe to the church out of thanksgiving for God’s work through the church and what the church means to us, we have embodied that message. If we have taken time out from our everyday rhythms and worshipped God in praise, we have embodied that message.

This brings us to our challenge for today. Sacrifices must STILL be made. Sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise! Sacrifices of giving! Sacrifices of living for Christ who alone deserves our all! Sacrifices to God must STILL be made.

Sacrifice is often about prioritization and discipline, since we don’t always have the space or time in our lives to accommodate all the things we would like. It seems to ring true that at times, you’ve got to lose some to gain some.

At the close of verse 14, the writer of Hebrews gives us insight as to why God would have sent Jesus and why his sacrifice was necessary; “to allow believers to worship the living God.” You see, even though those during the age of the first covenant believed they were worshipping God by their ritual sacrifices (see Leviticus and Numbers), complete worship was not being fulfilled. It was as though their practice of sacrificing animals and harvest crops had come to overshadow the very reason they were making the sacrifices to begin with: God. Just because they made these sacrifices, did not give reason for them to go off and do whatever else they

desired. God, who is a passionate God, desired more focus, more attention, more glory, and more thanksgiving and praise. So, what did God do? God gave the best of the best, the ultimate sacrifice, to build a bridge and provide every person the only viable reason they need to worship God fully. God sacrificed God's only son, so that you and I could have life and have it abundantly. A life not defined by sin and darkness, but a life of light and truth and hope and joy. As recipients of true life, made possible through Christ's suffering and sacrifice, we are called to make sacrifices in giving our lives back to God.

Max Lucado, in his book *Unshakable Hope*, he shares a powerful story. As I share this story, I invite us to listen for ways in which sacrifice, defined by acts of prioritization and discipline, are revealed.

*For eight decades of the twentieth century, Christians in Russia experienced systemic persecution from the communist government. Schoolteachers would hold us a Bible and ask kindergarten students if they had seen such a book in their homes. If a student said yes, a government official would visit the family. Pastors and lay people were imprisoned, never to be heard from again. The government required pastors to visit their offices once a week to report on any new visitors. Pastors were required to present sermon topics for approval.*

*This was the world in which a man named Dmitri practiced his faith. He and his family lived in a small village four hours from Moscow. The nearest church was a three-day walk, making it impossible for them to attend church more than twice a year.*

*Dmitri began to teach his family Bible stories and verses. Neighbors got wind of the lessons and wanted to participate. When the group grew to twenty-five people, the officials took notice and demanded he stop. He refused. When the group reached fifty people, Dmitri was dismissed from his factory job, his wife was fired from her teaching position, and his sons were expelled from school.*

*STILL, he continued. When the gathering increased to seventy-five people, there wasn't enough room in his house. Villagers squeezed into every available corner and closed in around the windows so they might listen to this man of God teach. One night a group of soldiers burst into the gathering. A soldier grabbed Dmitri and slapped him back and forth across the face. He then warned Dmitri to stop or something worse would happen to him.*

*As the officer turned to leave, a small grandmother stepped in his path and waved a finger in his face. "You have laid hands on a man of God, and you will not survive." Within two days it was reported the officer was dead from a heart attack.*

*The fear of God spread, and one hundred fifty people showed up for the next house meeting. Dmitri was arrested and sentenced to seventeen years in prison. His jail cell was so small that he needed only one step to reach each wall. He was the only believer among fifteen hundred prisoners. The officials tortured him, and the prisoners mocked him. He never broke.*

*Each morning at daybreak Dmitri stood by his bed, faced eastward, raised his arms to God, and sang a song of praise. Other prisoners would jeer. STILL, he sang.*

*Whenever he found a scrap piece of paper, he scribbled down a verse or story from memory. When the paper was completely filled, he took it to the corner of his cell and affixed it to a damp pillar as a sacrifice to Jesus. Officials routinely spotted papers, removed them, and beat Dmitri. STILL, he worshipped.*

*This went on for seventeen years. On only one occasion did he nearly recant his faith. Guards convinced him that his wife had been murdered and his children were wards of the state. The thought was more than Dmitri could bear. He agreed to renounce his faith in Christ. The guards told him they would return the next day with a document. All he had to do was sign it, and he would be released.*

*The officials were sure of their victory. What they did not know was this: when believing people pray, great things happen. Believing people were praying for Dmitri. A thousand kilometers away, that night his family sensed a special burden to pray for him. They knelt in a circle and interceded passionately for his protection. Miraculously, the Lord allowed Dmitri to hear the voices of his loved ones as they prayed. He knew they were safe.*

*The next morning when the guards came for his signature, they saw a renewed man. His face was calm, and his eyes were resolute. "I am not signing anything!" he told them. "In the night, God let me hear the voices of my wife and my children and my brother praying for me. You lied to me! I now know that my wife is alive and physically well. I know that my sons are with her. I also know that they are all STILL in Christ. So, I am not signing anything!"*

*The officials beat him and threatened to execute him, but Dmitri's resolve only increased. He STILL worshipped in the mornings and posted verses on the pillar. Finally, the authorities had all they could take. They dragged Dmitri from his cell through the corridor in the center of the prison toward the place of execution. As they did, fifteen hundred criminals raised their hands and began to sing the song of praise they had heard Dmitri sing each morning.*

*The jailers released their hold on him and stepped back. "Who are you?"*

*“I am the son of the Living God, and Jesus is His name!” Dmitri was taken back to his cell. Sometime later he was released and returned to his family.”*

We will likely never find ourselves in a Russian prison, but we may find ourselves in impossible situations. We may feel outnumbered and outmaneuvered. We may want to quit. Remember this: Christ is STILL more! Christ, who sacrificed his all through prioritization and discipline to God, is STILL worth our sacrifices.

One author summarized our practice of sacrifice with four “L” words. Sacrifice of our lips, life, loot, and love.

“Lips”- The writer of Hebrews says, ‘Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that confess his name... for with such sacrifices God is pleased’ (Hebrews 13:15–16).

“Life”- Eugene Peterson translates Romans 12:1 in *The Message*, ‘Take your every day, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering’ (v.1, MSG). Paul’s description of a living sacrifice also reminds us that you have to go on offering your life as a sacrifice to God, offering the whole of your life for the whole of your life.

Jago Wynne writes, ‘Our act of worship is no longer to bring a sacrifice, but to be one ourselves. We remain living. It is all of us that is being offered. Worship is about what I say with my tongue. It’s about what I watch... what I think... where I go with my feet.’

“Loot”- Generous giving is another New Testament sacrifice. Paul encourages the sacrifice of generosity in contributing to the needs of others (Rom 12:8). ‘Share with God’s people who are in need’ (Rom 12:13).

“Love”- The writer of Hebrews says, ‘do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased’ (Hebrews 13:16). *‘Doing good’ means giving up things that are not good. ‘Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould’* (Romans 12:2, J.B. Phillips).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, sacrifices must STILL be made, for God, for Christ, for us!