

God and Meaning in the Sacrificial System

Bring no more futile... offerings. Isaiah 1:13 NJB.

What's the point?

What's the point of the sacrificial system? God himself raises the question:

“To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me?” Isaiah 1:11 KJV.
Especially in the context—of those who believe all that is required is to go through the ceremony. Why sacrifice? To repeat the old bumper sticker: “God has said it. I believe it. That's all there is to it.”

God certainly did initiate the sacrificial system. He told the Israelites what to do—in great detail. Trouble was they got caught up in the system, the mechanics of salvation, and failed to see the point of it all. So eventually God himself has to intervene, and explain that what they are doing is not what he wanted.

What are you doing? He asks. What are you thinking? What is the point of all this ceremonial stuff? Most of all: what kind of God do you think I am that you should act this way?

God puts it bluntly:

“I have no desire for the blood of bulls, of sheep and he-goats. Whenever you come to enter my presence—who asked you for this?” Isaiah 1:11-12 NEB.

The ritualistic worshiper may be forgiven for being surprised. After all, isn't he doing exactly what God told him to do? “Who asked for this—well you did, God!” The one doing the sacrificing can point to chapter and verse, declaring “See, it says so right here!”

But now God is saying that's *not* what he wants: “Do you think I want all these sacrifices you keep offering to me? I have had more than enough...” Isaiah 1:11 TEV.

More than enough. Because the religious systematizers of Isaiah's day had reduced the sacrificial system to just a mechanical process. Sinned? No problem—just sacrifice, and it's all taken care of! So easy... Sinned again? Same answer—another sacrifice. More sins, more sacrifices. It's an easy payback system—you get into debit, and so you gain credit through sacrifice. Simple!

Of course, the worshiper might wonder about the God who set up the system—what kind of person was this blood-and-fat demanding deity? But hey—he was the one who asked, so you did what you were told, right?

So God has to fix the misconception: “I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.” Isaiah 1:11 NIV. *What were you thinking? That I was some kind of bloodthirsty ogre who could only be satisfied with blood and the violent death of animals?*

In fact God has to put the whole system on the line, rejecting the gross perversion of what he had intended: “Who asked you to do all this tramping about in my Temple? It’s useless to bring your offerings. I am disgusted...” Isaiah 1:12 TEV.

God is disgusted

God is disgusted. As we look at the sacrificial system, we’re likewise disgusted. This system seems to have more to do with some perverse market-place than the plan of salvation. Which is why Jesus came in and cleansed the Temple—throwing out the God-abusers, the religionists who were so perversely misrepresenting God and his relationship to us.

So what *does* God want, speaking through Isaiah to his people? “Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” Isaiah 1:16, 17 NIV. Instead of relying on some ritualistic system, *do right!* Instead of “taking care of sin” in some legal way, God tells his people to learn and accept the ways of *right doing* and *right being*.

Instead of a preoccupation with legal status, what is far more important in God’s eyes is a life that is lived right. He would far rather you spend time in doing right for others than in fulfilling what you believe are significant religious niceties. For you can be wholly wrong even as you try to observe the religious laws. How? Because of the way you are thinking.

What God is looking for is a meaningful relationship. He identifies what he really wants: “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” Isaiah 66:2 NIV. Respect, honor, acceptance—a serious attitude that is thinking Godwards; not a blind following of the rules that will “fix” any problems with this demanding deity.

Pig’s blood

To those who preferred form and ceremony over the meaning, the actual symbols over what they pointed to, God in the very next verse has strong words:

“But whoever sacrifices a bull is like one who kills a man, and whoever offers a lamb, like one who breaks a dog’s neck; whoever makes a grain offering is like one who presents pig’s blood, and whoever burns memorial incense, like one who worships an idol. They have chosen their own ways, and their souls delight in their abominations.” Isaiah 66:3 NIV.

With the wrong perspective, says God, sacrifice is like murder; offerings are just killing animals—even a pet dog. Horrifyingly, God says that your gifts to him are like a present of pig’s blood—a particularly dreadful thought to the Israelites to whom he was speaking. Even burning incense is likened to idolatry. In other words, *the whole system has been so corrupted and perverted that it teaches the opposite of what God intended—because of the attitude of the worshipers*. They have “chosen their own ways”—doing their own thing—and are evil self-centered religionists who use the sacrificial system to take care of the “God problem.”

Worthless worship

This is absolutely worthless worship, says God. As if he really *needed* such sacrifices: “I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens... Do I eat the flesh of bulls or drink the blood of goats?” Psalm 50:9, 13 NIV.

No—such ideas come from paganism: the perverted ideas that claim god needs to be appeased and propitiated and satisfied with violent death, with plenty of blood. Does the true God need blood? Is he some vampire that drinks blood? What kind of God do such ideas portray?

The truth is, says David at the end of the same Psalm, the kind of sacrifices are those that describe our relationship to our loving Lord, representing the right image of who God truly is, “that I may show him the salvation of God.” Psalm 50:23 NIV.

It was not just Isaiah among the prophets that condemned such futile attempts to manipulate and control God, to try to gain salvation through killing livestock:

“I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies. Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them,” says God through Amos (5:21, 22 NIV).

Why? Again God is tired of lip service, and the failure of his people to recognize meaning and significance. They seem quite content to use the “required payment system” of animal sacrifice to balance their sin deficit. As the system became such a routine part of life, the people came to see this sacrificial duty as just another part of life, another habit to go through to placate and satisfy this demanding God.

Instead of meaningless and futile offerings, God wants his followers to realize the situation and look to the deeper meaning and significance of relating to him. It’s not the sacrificial process, but what it signifies:

“But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!” Amos 5:24 NIV.

Business transactions

Similarly God through Jeremiah inveighed against the failure of the people to even listen as they made their ritualistic sacrifices:

“Hear, O earth: I am bringing disaster on this people, the fruit of their schemes, because they have not listened to my words and have rejected my law. What do I care about incense from Sheba or sweet calamus from a distant land? Your burnt offerings are not acceptable; your sacrifices do not please me.” Jeremiah 6:19, 20 NIV.

“We’re giving God so much,” the people would tell themselves. “Even the costliest incense from Arabia—the land of Sheba—nothing is too good for our God. We pay the highest of prices, so God should fix everything for us!”

Such an attitude reflects a total failure to listen to God, to understand the meaning of his laws. Most of all, it represents a complete rejection of a personal relationship, and turns the whole process into just a business transaction.

And while today we do not physically sacrifice, many still are most comfortable operating the system, transacting business with the One who would rather have our love, not our check books.

Playing the game

A compelling example is that of King Saul as he lost his way. Saul knew that religious observance was a powerful tool, and tried to use the power of religion to bolster his fading fortunes. In his arrogance, Saul usurped the right to offer sacrifices—seeking to play the system to his political advantage. But the result was disaster, as Samuel realized, pointing out that it was not the actual sacrifices God desired, but the right attitude of mind:

“But Samuel replied: ‘Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has rejected you as king.’” 1 Samuel 15:22, 23 NIV.

Saul lost out precisely *because* he thought he could utilize the sacrificial system. He was not looking for an appropriate relationship with God, rather he simply wanted to manipulate the process to his own advantage.

Despite God’s provision of the sacrificial system for the Israelites (and notice that for a significant part of the Old Testament period the system was not in place), many Biblical passages relate to the inability of the system to actually “work” and achieve what God most wanted. As just one example, take this recognition from David:

“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have opened; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.” Psalm 40:6 NIV (alternative reading).

What God really wants

What does God want then? David answers in the same psalm, pointing to the relational aspect, the love of salvation:

“But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you; may those who love your salvation always say, ‘The LORD be exalted!’” Psalm 40:16 NIV.

Even the very last Old Testament book once again concludes with the vanity of meaningless offerings, the futility of sacrificing without thoughtful recognition, and the desire for a true relationship with God. In fact, God is so moved that he wishes the temple to be closed to such pointless actions that achieved nothing:

“Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you,’ says the LORD Almighty, ‘and I will accept no offering from your hands.’” Malachi 1:10 NIV.

Divine displeasure—not because of the wrong rituals, or inappropriate sacrifices, or even the defective system, but because the worshiper is just going through the motions, acting a part, fulfilling obligations. There is no attempt at understanding, no desire for a close connection with this God—their chief concern is “just make the payment!”

What God truly seeks is made clear earlier in the book:

“‘I have loved you,’ says the LORD. But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’” Malachi 1:2 NIV.

God wants true love and agreement, true obedience that is based on recognizing right rather than blind, uncaring ritual.

For as Hebrews makes clear, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” Hebrews 10:4 NIV.

Only God can heal the damage of sin—and systems are no substitute for a deeply personal relationship with our loving Lord, which is what God has wanted all along.

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