

St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups Oct. 21st 2007

Deeper into Worship: The Altar of Sacrifice

Leviticus 1:1-9; Ps 51:1-5 & 10-12

Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

This is the 2nd in our new series, Deeper in Worship, where we are looking at the model of the Temple in Jerusalem. When we come into God's presence to worship Him, we ask for the Holy Spirit's presence to help us, we offer our praise and thanksgiving, and after that we need to say sorry and ask for God's forgiveness. We enter the Court of Praise and see the Altar of Sacrifice. This is where devout Jews would say sorry to God and priests would offer a sacrifice to provide atonement for sin. The Israelites knew this was very important. Note that the animal had to be without defect, something that resonates for us as we consider the sacrifice on the cross of the perfect Lamb of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. The major annual Jewish festival to do with sin was the Day of Atonement, where blood from a sacrificed animal was sprinkled over the altar. In addition, a scapegoat onto which the nation's sin had been symbolically placed was sent out into the desert.

Sin is perhaps an old-fashioned, non pc concept, but the clue to the meaning is in the spelling: the word SIN has I in the middle. Sin is doing what *I* want instead of living God's way; often we hurt others as well as ourselves in the process. We may know full well what we *should* be doing but end up doing the opposite anyway. St Paul knew all about this; look at Romans 8:19 & 22. Atonement is forgiveness and restoration. Again the clue is in the spelling and in the syllables: atonement = at-one-ment. Atonement means we are made *at one* with God.

We no longer have an altar of sacrifice and it's possible that the psalmist who wrote Ps 51 did not have access to one either, as the psalm may have been written after the destruction of Solomon's temple, when the Israelites were exiled to Babylon in 587 BC. But the psalmist knew about the altar and how the sacrifice system worked, and yet he doesn't rely on it. As a devout Jew, he knew that any animal sacrifice was only a symbol of an attitude of heart.

Ps 51 describes the fact that the psalmist knows he has sinned and he feels unclean, asking for cleansing, v.2. He realises that sin may sometimes be against others but crucially it is against what *God* wants from him, v.3. God desires truth and wisdom, and God Himself is the source of cleansing, v.7. We need to do more than just perform the sacrifices in Leviticus, but there does still have to be a sacrifice on our part, v.17. We have to commit ourselves and live differently. Someone has written, "*Confession without change is just a game*". We choose to become more holy: we do that through God's Holy Spirit but we need to use our own wills. That's what repentance is.

We no longer need animal sacrifices because Jesus sacrificed Himself willingly for us on the cross; His sacrifice was once and for all. Jesus is often called the Lamb of God, i.e. the lamb who was sacrificed on the temple altar, or the scape-goat. We no longer need to fulfil the sacrifice requirements in the Jewish Law. St Paul talks about this in Romans 3: 21-25a.

The good news is that we are justified freely by God's grace. Justified is another word you can split into syllables: It's "just-as-if-I'd" never sinned. Jesus took on our sin when He gave Himself up as an innocent sacrifice. So if we turn away from our sins, and believe in Jesus, we can say it's "just-as-if-I'd" never sinned, we are completely forgiven. When God looks at us, He does not see our sin any more, because Jesus has taken it away. Once and for all.

So the crucial difference with Jesus is that we can *know* we are forgiven; it's not just a hope and pleading. Eph 2:8-9 summarises this good news: *It is by grace you have been saved, through faith- and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God*". Alleluia!



Witness: Questions to discuss

1. Begin your session by asking the Holy Spirit to be present and having a time of praise and thanksgiving: perhaps use Ps 111.
2. How might you explain the concept of sin to someone without coming over as judgemental?
3. Look at Romans 3:21-25 and summarise it in your own words in a way that you could use to explain the Good News of Christ to a non-Christian friend.
4. "*Confession without change is just a game*". Consider the difference in your own life between saying sorry and repentance. Discuss whether it might help if, as a group, you became more accountable to each other.
5. Re-read Ps 51 and allow God's Holy Spirit to move you into a time of corporate repentance, either silently or aloud.

Resource : Read "A Kingdom of Priests - Deeper into God in Prayer" by Mark Stibbe. isbn: 0-232-52064-x This is an excellent book and highly recommended.