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To Offer an Acceptable Sacrifice to the Lord


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Abstract: This article discusses the nature of "acceptable sacrifice" to God and how it has progressed over time. It concludes that we are to give "a broken heart and a contrite spirit." (3 Ne. 9:20.)



To Offer an Acceptable Sacrifice to the Lord

By Owen Cannon Bennion

Illustrated by Bill Whitaker

• The other day I heard a young speaker talking about sacrificing for the Lord. She discussed the meaning of sacrifice and seemed to dwell entirely on the aspect of sacrifice that calls for depriving ourselves of something of a material nature. This, of course, is an important part of the gospel; but as I listened I wondered if church members often think of, or are aware of, the spiritual sacrifice Jesus commanded us to offer him. To understand what this was, we need to go back to the beginning.

Following the expulsion of Adam from the Garden of Eden, God commanded him to offer the firstlings of his flocks for an offering

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unto the Lord. "And after many days an angel of the Lord appeared unto Adam, saying: Why dost thou offer sacrifices unto the Lord? And

Adam said unto him: I know not, save the Lord commanded me.

"And then the angel spake, saying: This thing is a similitude of the sacrifice of the Only Begotten of the Father, which is full of grace and truth." (Moses 5:6-7.)

Thus began the ancient practice of offering the shedding of blood and burnt sacrifices. It persisted from Adam through the history of the Israelites to the coming of the Messiah. It was meant to portray the great sacrifice that God would make of his Son because of his love for mankind.

The story of Cain and Abel shows the importance of making an acceptable offering. "And in the process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord.

"And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offerings:

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"But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth and his countenance fell.

"And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen?"

"If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin liest at the door. . . ." (Gen. 4:3-7.)

Because Cain was a tiller of the ground, he found it convenient to offer what he had rather than what the Lord had commanded. This account reveals the importance God places on the offering of an acceptable sacrifice. Cain failed to see that God wanted a special type of sacrifice. He rationalized that what he had should be good enough.

The story of the trial of Abraham gives to all Israel an example of unfaltering willingness to offer an acceptable sacrifice. A person has to have a small son to fully appreciate the anguish of the moment for Abraham when young Isaac asked, "My Father, . . . Behold the fire and the wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?" (Gen. 22:7.) He needs to remember the abhorrence that Abraham had for human sacrifice, which was practiced in his day by idolatrous priests. And yet Abraham had the calm faith and obedience to say to his small son, "God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering." (Gen. 22:8.) How God must yearn for others to show this willingness; as King Benjamin said, ". . . as a child . . . willing to submit to all things which the Lord seeth fit to inflict upon [us], even as a child doth submit to his father." (Mosiah 3:19.)

Turning now to the story of Elijah, we see the power of God manifesting the validity of the sacrifice of blood as Elijah called fire from heaven to consume an offering

to the only true God. (See 1 Kings 18:21-39.) This account has a hidden meaning that is, in a sense, a similitude of something yet to come to Israel that will be alluded to later.

Down through the history of ancient Israel we see the servants of God showing their devotion to the Lord by offering burnt sacrifices. With the crucifixion of the Firstborn and Only Begotten of the Father, the shedding of blood and burnt offerings was fulfilled. As the Nephites huddled in darkness on the American continent following the death of Christ, they heard the voice of Alpha and Omega declaring the fulfillment of the law. They were instructed to cease their ancient practice of sacrificing the firstlings of the flocks. The Son of God had been offered as a sacrifice for all mankind. They were commanded instead to "offer for a sacrifice unto [him] a broken heart and a contrite spirit." (3 Ne. 9:20.) In the latter days the Lord has reiterated this commandment, saying: "Thou shalt offer a sacrifice unto the Lord thy God in righteousness, even that of a broken heart and a contrite spirit. . . . on this, the Lord's day, thou shalt offer thine oblations and thy sacraments unto the Most High. . . ." (D&C 59:8, 12.)

If we place the same importance on this commandment given to the Nephites, and to us, as the ancients did to their burnt sacrifices, many of us need to give thought to whether we offer an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord. Perhaps we, like Cain, are offering a convenient offering or one contrary to what God has commanded instead of studying to know how we can fulfill God's requirements. What does it mean to go to the house of prayer on the Lord's day and offer oblations and sacraments to the Most High?

According to Elder Bruce R. McConkie: "A *sacrament* is a spiritual covenant between God and man." He says, "In the highest spiritual sense, the offering of an oblation consists in giving full devotion to the Lord, of offering him a broken heart and a contrite spirit." (*Mormon Doctrine* [Bookcraft, 1966], pp. 662, 541-42.) In the fifty-ninth section of the Doctrine and Covenants, then, the Lord is giving us instructions as to when and where we are to offer this special sacrifice. Although our offerings are acceptable on all days, on the Lord's day we are especially commanded to go to sacrament meeting and offer our sacrifice. We come to renew our covenants (offer our sacraments) and to offer a sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit (an oblation). If we listen to the sacramental prayers and add our amen, we renew our covenants with God. If we do this with reverence and real intent, we prepare ourselves to offer a sacrifice. Then during the latter part of the sacrament meeting, if the speaker and listener are endowed with the Holy Spirit, we are edified concerning the greatness and mercy of God, of the hope we have in Christ, and of the need we all have to repent of our transgressions. This blessed awareness can bring a godly sorrow, a broken heartedness, a feeling of contrition,

. . . we graduate to the level of offering the greater spiritual sacrifice of a broken heart . . .

a meekness and lowliness of heart.

If this feeling is truly godly sorrow, our offering is surely acceptable before the Lord. It is

different from anything of worldly value, such as money or the firstlings of our flocks.

It would seem that the Lord has brought his children a long way, gradually leading them from offering a tangible thing, such as a lamb or a bullock, to offering a thing as intangible as an attitude or a state

of mind. This is a different concept of sacrifice. It reaches into the inner man. There can be no deceptive giving for others to see, because no one can perceive this gift or sacrifice except God or those blessed with his gift of discernment.

When one contemplates the difficulty of making such an offering,

he may wonder how he can ever offer the acceptable sacrifice. It takes a certain degree of courage and restraint to give tithes, fast offerings, and other material offerings to the Lord or to go without desired luxuries, but this can be done more easily than giving one's heart in a condition that is sorrow-

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ing unto repentance and a spirit that is contrite unto true devotion. How can we keep this commandment?

The answer, typical of the Lord's way, is a simple one. First, it is necessary to read the scriptures to gain a background of knowledge about God. Such study draws us to God and gives us the motivation and desire to keep his commandments.

To illustrate, let me refer to my own childhood experience. I recall that as I began to read the stories of the prophets of God, I was impressed by the great personal strength of such men as Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Nephi. Reading how they were able to talk with God and find favor with him seemed to open a window in my soul that had been closed by the veil of forgetfulness. My spirit yearned to return to the association it had once known with God. In my early teens, as doubts began to come to my mind about the gospel, I turned to the Book of Mormon with a prayer to know if it was a true book of scripture. As I read of the account of Nephi and his brothers, I was deeply impressed. The Holy Spirit bore witness in a marvelous way that the book I read was divinely revealed. From that day my desire to serve God was strengthened.

Second, we must prepare ourselves before offering a sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit. Ancient Israel selected the fat of their flocks, the lambs without blemish. It was unthinkable to sacrifice things unclean or improper. Likewise, we need to present an offering without blemish. Although we cannot hope to be perfect, we can become truly penitent. This must be real, not a sham or pretense. By faith, repentance, and baptism, we may receive the remission of our sins

through the grace of Christ. The need for this process is a continuing thing in our lives. As we continue to repent of our sins and gain a remission of them, there comes a condition of meekness and lowliness of heart. (See Moro. 8:24-26.) In this condition we are ready to offer our sacrifice to the Lord. We perceive the mercy and love of God. Our hearts are broken simultaneously with sorrow and joy—sorrow for our unworthy sins and joy for our salvation bought by the pain and suffering of our Lord. In this condition our spirit is contrite, penitent without blemish.

With some, this experience may be secret, a very personal communion with God. Others may give expression to their experience as it happens to them in fast and testimony meeting, with those listening sharing in their experience. But in either case there is an analogy with the story of Elijah. Fire came down from heaven to acknowledge a valid offering. Jesus promised the Nephites, "And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost." (3 Ne. 9:20.)

What strength we would have if we were to offer this sacrifice frequently on the Lord's day and in his house of prayer as he has commanded!

Is it not reasonable to say that in the history of Israel we have a prototype of what needs to happen in the lives of all of us? Israel had the law to bring her to Christ. Israel began with a material sacrifice and will ultimately be brought to offer a spiritual sacrifice. There is surely a need for material sacrifice in our lives, but unless we graduate to the level of offering the greater spiritual sacrifice of a broken heart and a contrite spirit, we fail to achieve one of the real purposes of this life. ○

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