

Sacrifices in the Bible and today

In the Bible we read about sacrifices from the first to the last pages. Sacrifices are animals and other food items that people give to honour God or to get something from God.

It is not only the Israelites, the people of God in the Bible, who made sacrifices. Other nations that served other gods also sacrificed. Even until today people make sacrifices. It is the culture of some people to slaughter animals for the gods or for the persons they seek help from, and this can also be called sacrifices.

How should we as Christians think about sacrifices? Do we still have to make these sacrifices that we read of in the Old Testament? May we or should we as Christians continue to follow the custom of our traditions and slaughter animals?

In order to understand sacrifices and to know what we should do, we need to have a good understanding of the different sacrifices in the Bible and today.

1. Sacrifices in the Bible

In the early times of the Bible, sacrifices were made in different places wherever someone wanted to honour or thank God (Genesis 4:3-4). At that time, anyone was free to make a sacrifice, but it was mostly the head of the family who made it (1 Samuel 1:3). Sacrifices were usually made on an altar, which is a heap of stones where a fire was made to burn the sacrifice.

When Israel became a nation and God gave them his laws, God said that they must make their sacrifices in the place of worship (like the church is to us today). At first it was in the tent of worship (the tabernacle) and later, when they lived in Canaan, in the temple. The altar was also used in the temple.

From this time on God appointed special people, like the priests, to bring sacrifices. They had to make sacrifices on behalf of the people. The father of John the Baptist was such a priest (Luke 1:8-10). In Leviticus 8 – 10 we read of the special tasks of the priests. They had to be holy and perform the sacrifices exactly as God told them. Leviticus 16 tells of a very special sacrifice that was made once every year on the Great Day of Atonement. On this day the Chief Priest had to take the blood of the sacrifice into the most holy place in the temple to ask forgiveness from God for all the sins of the people. This blood represented all the sacrifices that were made during the whole year.

In the New Testament a big change came. The death of Jesus on the cross is often called a sacrifice (Ephesians 5:2; Hebrews 7:27; 9:26; 10:5-10). The Bible calls the sacrifices of the Old Testament “shadows” of the true sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Colossians 2:16-17;

Hebrews 9:23; 10:1-4). These sacrifices were only pointing to the real thing that was coming.

In the explanation of the Old Testament, we will see how the sacrifices below pointed towards the true sacrifice of Jesus. But these Old Testament sacrifices also help us to get a deeper understanding of what Jesus really did for us when he died on the cross.

2. Different types of sacrifices

Read Leviticus 7:37-38. We read a lot about sacrifices in the book of Leviticus. In Leviticus 1 – 7 we read how these different sacrifices that are mentioned in these verses were made. There were basically two types of sacrifices:

Sacrifices to thank God and to bring honour to him: Leviticus 1 describes the sacrifice of animals and Leviticus 2 the sacrifice of food, like wheat. These sacrifices were usually burnt totally. This was a sign that the people and everything that they had belong wholly to God. These were the type of sacrifices that Cain and Able (Genesis 4) and Noah and Abraham and many others also made. These sacrifices were made daily, and especially on the Sabbath and on the great festivals (Numbers 28 – 29).

Sacrifices to ask forgiveness of sin from God: Leviticus 3 – 5 describes different sin offerings that were made in different situations and for different sins. There were, for example, different sacrifices for priests, for leaders, for the people as a whole and for individual believers. The special sacrifices that were made every year on the Great Day of Atonement were all sin offerings (Leviticus 16). A special aspect of the ceremonies of this day was that one goat was killed and another was chased into the desert to die there (Leviticus 16:20-22). “Atonement” means to pay for guilt in order to restore the relationship between God and us that was damaged by sin.

2.1 Proper sacrifices for sins

Read Leviticus 3:1-5. Religious ceremonies and sacrifices had to be carried out in the right way (Numbers 16).

Each of the things that had to be done when sacrifices in the Old Testament were made helps us to understand the death of Jesus better. Hebrews 8:5 says: “*The work they do as priests is really only a copy and a shadow of what is in heaven*”, of what Jesus did.

- Sacrifices for sin had to be made at the tabernacle and later **in the temple** (Leviticus 17:1-4). This means that Jerusalem was the only proper place for Jesus to die for our sins. There is no other way or place that we can get forgiveness except through Jesus (John 14:6).
- All these sacrifices had to be **made by priests**. But the High Priest had to make the special sacrifice every year on the Great Day of Atonement. The book of Hebrews calls Jesus a High Priest like Melchizedek, who was even bigger than the other high priests. What Jesus did when he sacrificed himself he did as our special High Priest (Hebrews 7:26 – 8:4). Unlike the High Priests Jesus did not bring a sacrifice on his own behalf, for he was without sin. He sacrificed himself for us.
- All animals that were sacrificed had to be **perfect** (Leviticus 3:1). To be able to pay for our sin, Jesus had to be both a human being and God at the same time. As the sinless Son of God, Jesus was the perfect sacrifice (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrew 9:14).
- The person who brought the animal had to **put his hand on the head** of the animal. This was a symbol that he puts his sin and guilt on the animal (Leviticus 16:21). Our sins are put on Jesus and he died for our sins (Isaiah 53:5-6; Romans 4:23-25).
- A **bull** or a **sheep** or a **goat had to be killed** as sacrifice. Sin had to be paid for by death (Romans 6:23). But we cannot pay by death for our own sins. God planned that an animal had to die in the place of the sinner. These

animals point to Jesus, who died in our place (Galatians 3:13).

- On the Great Day of Atonement one goat was killed and the other one chased **to die outside** in the desert. This reminds us of Jesus who also died outside the city on a lonely hill of death (Matthew 27:32-33; Hebrews 13:10-12).
- **The blood** of the sacrifice had to be put on the altar. On the Great Day of Atonement blood was sprinkled on the cover of the Covenant Box (Leviticus 16:14). The blood represents the life of the animal that was killed: blood carries life (Genesis 9:4). When we say that *“the blood of Jesus purifies us from every sin”* it means that Jesus paid for our sins with his life (1 John 1:1-2:2; Ephesians 1:7; Hebrews 9:12-15, 22).
- The nicest soft parts of the animal were burnt **to please God**. Jesus’ sacrifice is the only one that really pleases God (Hebrews 10:5-10).
- Sacrifices for sin had to be **done over and over** whenever a person sinned and also once a year on the Great Day of Atonement. Jesus died for our sins once and for all; Jesus’ sacrifice need not be done again and again (Hebrews 10:11-18). All that we have to do when we realise that we have sinned is to confess and ask forgiveness (Matthew 6:12; 1 John 1:8 – 2:1).

This means that we need not keep the Old Testament sacrifices. These are only shadows that passed away when Jesus came (Hebrews 9:13-14). No sacrifice is any longer needed (Hebrews 9:25-26).

“Christ offered one sacrifice for sins, an offering that is effective for ever... With one sacrifice, then, He has made perfect for ever those who are purified from sin. So when these sins have been forgiven, no sacrifice is needed any longer” (Hebrews 10:12, 14, 18).

2.2 Thanksgiving Sacrifices

Read Jeremiah 33:11. The sacrifices to thank God and praise him for his care and blessings were done by free will when somebody was grateful for the blessings of God (Genesis 8:20). Also when the whole congregation met at the feasts every year they brought these sacrifices. In this way people showed their love and commitment to God (Psalm 116:17). These sacrifices were offered with songs and prayers of praise (Psalm 141:2).

We often read that these sacrifices were not accepted by God (Amos 4:4; 5:22). When one thanks and praises God while you do not really mean it or do wrong things, like Abel, your sacrifice is meaningless; God says he hates it. Therefore God says that a pure heart and faithful spirit is better than any sacrifice that one can bring (Psalm 40:6-8; 51:16-17; Proverbs 21:3; Hosea 6:6).

Paul says that true worship is to *“offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him”* (Romans 12:1). Hebrews 13:15-16 says: *“Let us, then, always offer praises to God as our sacrifice through Jesus Christ, which is the offering presented by lips that confess him as Lord. Do not forget to do good and help one another, because these are the sacrifices that please God”* (also Micah 6:6-8; James 1:27).

Also the money that we give towards the work of God and to help people in need is called a sacrifice (Philippians 4:18). Paul explains the way in which we must give in 2 Corinthians 8:1-15.

2.3 Animal Sacrifices today

Read 1 Kings 18:20-39. Many of the nations in the time of the Old and New Testaments made sacrifices. They sacrificed to false gods to try to move them to do wonderful things for them. When Israel moved into Canaan to live among all those nations, God told them to break down the altars where these false sacrifices were made (Deuteronomy 7:1-6). The first and second commandments of the Ten Commandments say there is only one true God and He cannot be served like false gods. Also, we cannot serve and sacrifice to anything alongside Him.

One of the things that people from other nations who became Christians after Pentecost were told is that they should *“not eat meat that was sacrificed to false gods”* (Acts 15:20). In Corinth, like in the nearby Rome, sacrifices were made to many gods (Acts 17:16, 23). Paul warned the young Christians against taking part in these sacrifices. When one makes these sacrifices, you commit yourself to these false gods, which is just like serving devils (1 Corinthians 10:14-22).

But there were some believers in Corinth who said that they totally broke with their belief in these gods. So they argued that they were free to eat the meat that was sacrificed to these gods. Paul agreed to this, but he warned that in doing this one may make weak Christians who still believe in these gods to lose their faith and return to serving these gods (1 Corinthians 10:23-33). In chapter 8 he deals with the same problem and goes on to say: *“Be careful not to let your freedom of action make those who are weak in faith to fall in sin. So then, if food makes my brother or sister to sin, I will never eat meat again”* (1 Corinthians 8:9, 13).

In many of our African cultures animals are also killed in different customs and ceremonies. The difference between this and slaughtering for meat is that the family’s ancestors’ names are called when the cow or goat is killed. The animal is killed to tell the ancestors something or to ask something from them. Some Christians who grew up with these customs believe that it is right to do so when they are Christians: it is part of their culture. Others feel that this is against the Christian faith.

People say that their ancestors are no idols and surely no devils (1 Corinthians 10: 21). It is true. The Bible does not speak directly of ancestors and about our customs. But why do people slaughter because of their culture? They expect something from the ancestors. They fear that if they do not keep these sacrifices, bad things may happen to them. This means that they have faith in their ancestors, they trust in them.

The first commandment says that we shall have no god alongside God; we shall not put our trust in something else besides God. The second commandment says that we shall not do anything to express our faith in other things. Ancestors are definitely not gods or false gods. But we make false gods of them when we do things that show we trust in them.

Some people say that they serve God because the sacrifices they make are to God. They say the ancestors are closer to God than us and can speak to God for us. This is not true. Jesus is the only one who can speak for us, Jesus is our only Mediator (1 Timothy 2:5).

There are some churches that slaughter goats or chickens as part of their services (in Xhosa they call it *isihlabelelo*). It is very difficult to say whether this is right or wrong. It all depends on the teaching of the church and on the faith of each

believer. For one person it may only be a symbol with no power. For another one it may be a so-called Christian way of serving ancestors. Slaughtering in the church is a dangerous thing. It may make people think that they serve the living God. It may let people fall back in their old beliefs. The Bible is very clear that no animal sacrifices and no spilling of blood are needed. Jesus is the one and only and final sacrifice (Hebrews 10:14, 18).

- Dr Danie van Zyl

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