

FRAGRANT SACRIFICE

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, December 23, 2012

The story of the expedition of wise men from the East to find and worship the “newborn king of the Jews” is more than an historical interlude; it is an historical precedent. Their journey of adoration is a lesson for us all, revealing significant acts of worship.

Can we also be wise in our approach to Jesus? Should we worship Him as they did? Can we?

Here’s what we have learned from them so far: The first act of worship is pursuit (their intensive journey). The second act of worship is giving (their gift of gold). The third act of worship is devotion (their gift of frankincense). And now, the final lesson: the fourth act of worship is sacrifice (their gift of myrrh).

Biblical Myrrh

Myrrh is referred to almost 400 times in the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

It was a major ingredient in the holy anointing oil which God prescribed for the Israelite priesthood that served under Moses.

“Oil of myrrh” was the beauty treatment prescribed for the first six months of Esther’s preparation to meet the king of Persia.

Psalms 45 calls it the king’s perfume. However, Proverbs 7 called it the perfume of the prostitute’s bed. It was also the fragrance of Solomon’s love song.

At times, it was used as a mild painkiller (Matthew 27).

It was also an element of ancient funeral wraps (John 19), and thus, has been associated with death.

It was one of the favorite commodities of that great and sinful city, Babylon (Rev 18), which God will destroy in a day.

Commercial Myrrh

Myrrh is the oily resin derived from the sap of a species of particularly thorny trees, known as *Commiphora* (a Greek word meaning “gum carrier”). These trees have an exceptional ability to retain their water content and withstand drought for long periods. Their sap is an unusually “aromatic resin” and, therefore, has been used in perfumes, incense, and medicines (with recognized antiseptic, anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties). The myrrh trees are related to the Balm of Gilead, sought by the weeping prophet, Jeremiah.

Myrrh appears with more frequency than any other plant substance in the writings of the Greek physician Hippocrates, who revolutionized the field of medicine in the fourth and third centuries B.C. Many popular natural tooth pastes and powders contain myrrh, which has proven beneficial to dental and gum health since ancient times.

WebMD notes that “myrrh is used for indigestion, ulcers, colds, cough, asthma, lung congestion, arthritis pain, cancer, leprosy, spasms, and syphilis. It is also used as a stimulant and to increase menstrual flow.

“Myrrh is applied directly to the mouth for soreness and swelling, inflamed gums (gingivitis), loose teeth, canker sores, bad breath, and chapped lips. It is also used topically for hemorrhoids, bedsores, wounds, abrasions, and boils.

“In foods and beverages, myrrh is used as a flavoring component.

“In manufacturing, myrrh is used as a fragrance, in incense, and as a fixative in cosmetics. It is also used in embalming.”

Myrrh has been traded in the Middle East and North Africa for upwards of 5,000 years. It is believed that the Babylonians and Assyrians burned it during religious ceremonies. The ancient Egyptians bought entire boatloads of the resin from the Phoenicians, using it in incense, insect repellent, perfume and salves for wounds and sores; it was also a key ingredient in their embalming process. At one time, the pricey dried sap was said to have made the southern Arabians the richest people on earth.

Death Perfume

“Myrrh” is derived from a Hebrew word meaning bitter, which is also the name for the serving of bitter herbs (*maror*) that are eaten as part of the Passover meal.

Because of the way it is harvested—by repeatedly wounding the trees so they will bleed the gum—and its uses in the history of Jesus—as a painkiller and a burial ointment—myrrh may be known as the “fragrance of death” or the “death perfume.”

Myrrh has become a symbol of the death of Jesus Christ and the sacrifice that He made for humanity. It is said that the wise men offered it to Him, though just a child, in respect for the sacrificial nature of the death He would die.

Worshipful Sacrifice

From time immemorial sacrifice has been linked with worship. The first demonstration of this is found in Genesis 4:4, when Abel offered “the best of the firstborn lambs of his flock” to God.

The first confirmation of this is in Genesis 7:2, when God told Noah to take with him into the ark “seven pairs—male and female—of each animal I have approved for eating and for sacrifice, and take one pair of each of the others.”

This practice was firmly established at the Israelites’ departure from Egypt when God instructed each household to kill and cook and eat a lamb, which the Lord named “the Passover sacrifice to the Lord” (Exodus 12:27).

Thus began an elaborate ritual of animal sacrifices, conducted repeatedly by the appointed priesthood, which provided temporary atonement for the sins of the people. These ceremonies continued for centuries, as long as the Temple of Jehovah stood in Jerusalem.

All of this was a prophetic picture, designed to acquaint the people with the dreadful cost of personal and corporate ignorance of or resistance to God (which the Bible calls “sin”) and the corresponding mercies of His grace for those who humbly turn back to Him.

The final chapter of the sacrifice for sin was written by Jesus Christ, who laid down His life for the sins of the whole world on another “bleeding tree,” as God’s Chosen and Spotless Lamb.

In this way, He removed the barrier that stood between humans and their Creator (Hebrews 2:17) once and for all (Hebrews 7:27) to free us forever (Hebrews 9:12). His sacrifice was “perfect, complete, sufficient” (Hebrews 9:14) and will never need to be repeated (Hebrews 9:26). It is finished.

Here is the difference Jesus has made by His sacrifice:

Ephesians 2

¹¹ Don't forget that you Gentiles used to be outsiders... ¹² In those days you were living apart from Christ. You were excluded from citizenship among the people of Israel, and you did not know the covenant promises God had made to them. You lived in this world without God and without hope.

¹³ But now you have been united with Christ Jesus. Once you were far away from God, but now you have been brought near to Him through the blood of Christ.

Sacrificial Worship

Yet, just there, the saga of sacrificial worship does not end, but takes a significant turn, turning to us—to those who choose to follow the Lord Jesus Christ. The meaning and the act of worshipful sacrifice are redefined for the new era, for the generations of Christ-followers who look earnestly for His returning. Paul captures this new definition in Romans 12:1.

Romans 12

¹ And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all He has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind He will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship Him.

Jesus fulfilled and completed the era of blood sacrifice for sin. It is over. Your blood (or mine) cannot now atone for a single sin. God is not looking any longer for spilled blood; it does not please, nor satisfy Him anymore. He looks now for a different kind of sacrifice—the sacrifice of faith, the sacrifice of worship.

Perhaps the primary aspect of worship is sacrifice—the giving up of my own energy, time, desires, preferences, to offer something to God that costs me something because He is worth something.

Perhaps my main act of worship is precisely NOT to insist on my own comfort or convenience or preference and instead be intent on offering what seems most meaningful to the Lord.

Think about it. If there is no level of difficulty, no measure of hardship, then it really isn't a sacrifice, is it?

Unfortunately, in our contemporary setting, we have separated worship from daily life.

If worship is supposed to be unceasing—a way of life—then the Sunday morning service is only one of many occasions to worship. The Sunday service is special and significant, not because it's our opportunity to worship, but because it is a joint celebration of the worship that has been going on all week long.

The Old Testament was about dead animal sacrifices; the New Testament is about living human sacrifices. David foresaw this shift.

In Psalm 51 he wrote, *“You (God) do not delight in (animal) sacrifice, or I would bring it; You do not take pleasure in (such) burnt offerings. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, You will not reject.”*

God is now looking for the same heart and motive as under the First Covenant, but with a new and different expression.

Hebrews 13

¹⁵ Therefore, let us offer through Jesus a continual sacrifice of praise to God, proclaiming our allegiance to His name. ¹⁶ And don't forget to do good and to share with those in need. These are the sacrifices that please God.

What is this sacrifice of praise? We can see here that it includes proclaiming allegiance to Jesus' name and doing good to those who are in need. Why do those qualify as “sacrifices”?

How do you imagine that declaring allegiance to Jesus Christ might be a sacrifice? And how might doing good to others be a sacrifice?

These are ways of saying that true worship is putting the cross on display in our lives.

There is always the temptation that we will be more interested in pleasing people instead of God.

We need to practice biblical thinking, rather than merely traditional thinking (even if they are *church* traditions). A worshipper must be a humble person who is willing to:

- Subordinate his or her goals to God's goals by prioritizing service toward the Kingdom of God;
- Express gratitude and praise toward God, and
- Tell others about God, His truths, and the love He has shown us.

In fact, after Paul urges us to worship God sacrificially—“because of all He has done for you”—he spends the next three chapters outlining what that looks like, what he meant by “sacrifice.”

Your New Identity

Romans 12

² Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God's will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.

Allow me to summarize:

That means sacrificing things that are familiar and, perhaps, comfortable and desirable, in order to demonstrate a new identity, a “new you.”

Drop Your Ego

Romans 12

³ Because of the privilege and authority God has given me, I give each of you this warning: Don't think

you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves, measuring yourselves by the faith God has given us. ⁴ Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, ⁵ so it is with Christ's body. We are many parts of one body, and we all belong to each other.

Here, he says we need to sacrifice our selfish pride and start showing respect to those who are not just like us.

Serve Generously

Romans 12

⁶ In His grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. ⁷ If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. ⁸ If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.

Now, Paul says we need to regard one another's unique gift and actively do our part to build up the Body of Christ (the church). Self-sacrifice is normal Christian living.

Love Fervently

Romans 12

⁹ Don't just pretend to love others. Really love them. Hate what is wrong. Hold tightly to what is good. ¹⁰ Love each other with genuine affection, and take delight in honoring each other. ¹¹ Never be lazy, but work hard and serve the Lord enthusiastically. ¹² Rejoice in our confident hope. Be patient in trouble, and keep on praying. ¹³ When God's people are in need, be ready to help them. Always be eager to practice hospitality.

Plenty of sacrifice there! Over time, love is work.

Humbly Bless

¹⁴ Bless those who persecute you. Don't curse them; pray that God will bless them. ¹⁵ Be happy with those who are happy, and weep with those who weep. ¹⁶ Live in harmony with each other. Don't be too proud to enjoy the company of ordinary people. And don't think you know it all!

No pain, no gain! Find the value in every relationship.

Take No Revenge

¹⁷ Never pay back evil with more evil. Do things in such a way that everyone can see you are honorable. ¹⁸ Do all that you can to live in peace with everyone.

¹⁹ Dear friends, never take revenge. Leave that to the righteous anger of God. For the Scriptures say, "I will take revenge; I will pay them back," says the Lord.

²⁰ Instead, "If your enemies are hungry, feed them. If they are thirsty, give them something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals of shame on their heads."

Sacrificing revenge and hatred is spiritual worship! This honors God. Gracious kindness demonstrates God's love to others. Paul pauses to summarize with these words: "Don't let evil conquer you, but conquer evil by doing good" (Romans 12:21).

But Paul is far from done! Chapters 13 and 14 continue his references to the very practical kinds of spiritual sacrifices that he expects Christ-followers to make. Time permits me only to highlight the list.

Respect Authority

Romans 13:1-7 addresses submission to governing authorities and paying your taxes as expressions of sacrificial worship to God, who is the Authority over us all.

Live From Love

“Owe nothing to anyone—except for your obligation to love one another” (Romans 13:8) expresses the essence of the Ten Commandments and reminds us of their applicability today.

Avoid Excess

The imminent return of Christ is reason enough to “wake up” from our spiritual stupor and live holy lives, sacrificing (by walking away from) the common deeds of excess and immorality that fill the world around us (Romans 13:11-14).

Accept the Weak

Romans 14:1-9 continues Paul’s fervent appeal. He urges us to accept other believers, even if their faith seems weak and their scruples excessive, because they are not *your* servants, but God’s—that’s the very necessary sacrifice of self-righteousness.

Stop Condemning

Finally, he charges us to stop condemning other believers and start considering them. Overall, we are no better than they, for we all have required God’s grace in order to be saved and we shall all be judged, not from our own viewpoint but from God’s. Paul’s conclusion?

*“So let’s stop condemning each other. Decide instead to **live in such a way** that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall”* (Romans 14:13).

Here are several things I hope you will take away from this message:

- The worship God asks for may not be just what you thought it was.
- True worship always involves a sacrifice (it’s the lesson of the myrrh).
- Worship is really practical behavior.
- Most of your worship cannot be offered inside a church building.
- Your worship of God is not always heard, but it is always seen—in the ways you relate to those God brings into your life.
- The ways you regard and treat others always expresses how you regard God, for you cannot despise others and love Him at the same time.

If wise men thought Jesus was worthy of such worship at His birth, how much more readily should we offer Him our best, when we can see what He has done for us?

Take a lesson from wise men: *Worship is the gift that wisdom gives.* Make your life about that. Choose, each day, to give Jesus Christ your very best.