

**“Sharers in the Altar”
(1 Cor. 10:18)**

Intro: I think every time I read the OT, especially Leviticus I repeatedly thank God that I don’t live under the old covenant. Maybe you too wonder how you would be able to get through the maze of instructions about what sacrifices should be offered, when, and how. Of course, God’s people had the help of His priests to teach them these things.

But even though we no longer offer them, it is good to know about them; because our knowledge of them can give us insight into what we do as well. Consider for example the words of Paul to the Corinthians:

Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar? (1 Corinthians 10:18)

Paul refers to the Israelite’s practice as a basis for instruction to Christians. But what is Paul speaking of and what is the message for us today?

The Sacrifices of the “Nation of Israel”

This week in our Bible reading we’ve read a lot about sacrifices. We learned that there were many kinds and that there were very detailed instructions given about what kind of animal to offer, how it was to be prepared, and for what purpose it was to be sacrificed.

Paul in our text refers to one particular class of offerings. These were sacrifices eaten by the Israelites.

Most of us when we think of sacrifices in the OT would probably picture something like this: An Israelite person brings an animal to the tabernacle, he hands it over to the priest, the priest cuts its throat shedding its blood until it dies. Then it is hoisted onto the altar and consumed in the fire while the worshipper goes on his way.

However from our reading this week we were able to see that some of the offerings were not completely burnt on the altar, but instead a portion was reserved from them for the priests and for the worshippers and they were “eaten” there before the Lord.

In other words, connected with the altar was a “table”.

These offerings were called “peace offerings”.

The Hebrew words for them is “shelem” and appears to be related the Hebrew greeting “shalom” which means peace.

Thus one might see these offerings as indications of a peaceful relationship with God and were offered out of gratitude for God’s blessings or to fulfill a vow made to Him in connection with a blessing.

These offerings were to be eaten “in the presence of the Lord with joy”.

“But you shall eat them before the Lord your God in the place which the Lord your God will choose, you and your son and daughter, and

your male and female servants, and the Levite who is within your gates; and you shall rejoice before the Lord your God in all your undertakings. (Deuteronomy 12:18)

And as this text also indicates along with the instructions they must be entirely consumed in either a single day or in a couple of days. This supplied motivation for the worshipper to share the offerings with others and together rejoice.

Consequently all those who ate of the sacrifice together were said to be “sharers in the altar”. That expression suggested

Sharing in the altar highlighted the importance of serving God alone and no other god.

Sharing in the altar highlighted the unity of God’s people as a spiritual family.

Sharing in the altar highlight the blessing of being in covenant with God.

The Sacrifice of the New Israel, the church

Just as the Israelites had an “altar” and a “table”, so we too have an altar and a table.

Our “altar” is the Lord’s sacrifice.

Our “table” is the Lord’s Supper.

Paul in 1 Cor. 10 uses the peace offerings of the ancient Israelites to teach the Corinthians about the Lord’s Supper and its implications for the believer’s life.

Just as the Israelites were sharers in the altar when they ate of the sacrifice, so we too are “sharers in the altar” when we partake of the Lord’s Table.

Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? (1 Cor. 10:16)

Of course, the sacrifice that Jesus made for us was his life. Thus, we can no longer eat the sacrifice itself. Instead Jesus, in keeping with the OT imagery, took bread and fruit of the vine and made them representatives of His sacrifice.

This is my body

This is my blood

Thus when we eat of the Lord’s Supper we are “sharing in the body and blood of the Lord”, not in the Roman Catholic sense of “transubstantiation”, but the spiritual sense that the bread and fruit of the vine are memorials of Jesus.

Our common share in the sacrifice of Christ calls attention to our “oneness” in Christ!

Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Corinthians 10:17)

The Corinthians were missing the unity implied by the table of the Lord.

They were divided around men.

For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ." (1 Cor. 1:11-12)

They were divided sociologically.

Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. (1 Corinthians 11:20-21)

Every time we break bread we should remember that every person partaking is a "sharer in the sacrifice". This is reason enough to put away all social distinctions and love each other and work together!

The reason we are one is because Christ died for each of us!

Our common share in the sacrifice of Christ calls attention to our exclusive devotion to Jesus and no other!

Paul's primary concern at Corinth was that the Corinthians had managed to convince themselves that they could partake of the Lord's Table and then visit the idolatrous temples and partake of the meals that were served there in honor of the gods. No rationalization like, "but those gods are not real" would do! There was a reality behind those sacrifices:

What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. (1 Corinthians 10:19-20)

The bottom line for the Corinthians was:

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we? (1 Corinthians 10:21-22)

Thus, our participation in the Lord's Supper is a pledge that we will keep our covenant promises to serve the Lord alone and put Him first in our lives.

And one final point that is not formally made in this text:

Our common share in the sacrifice of Christ should cause us to live with joy and thanksgiving.

It is interesting to note the way the early church referred to the Lord's Supper. They called it "the Eucharist". Eucharist is just a form of the Greek word, eucharisteo, used to describe what Jesus did after breaking the bread. He gave thanks!

Everett Ferguson makes this interesting observation:

"The Lord's Supper was the church's great moment of thanksgiving.

The church's basic act of prayer and worship was to give thanks. That says something significant about the church life of the early Christians

and the quality of their life in Christ. Hence, in the prayers at the Lord's table there was a remembrance of all of God's gifts. But preeminently the Eucharist was centered on the spiritual blessings which came through Jesus Christ". (Early Christians Speak, p. 96). Is this aspect of our observance missing?

Sure, there may be reason for soberness when we realize the awesome consequences of not "judging the body rightly".

There may be sadness in the realization that our sins sent Jesus to the cross.

It is not a happy experience to remember all that Jesus suffered. But should we stop there? Should we not also remember that all of it occurred because of God's great love for us?

And should we not also remember that because of that sacrifice we are being accepted by God? And that we are at peace with Him?

Our table also, like the peace offerings of the OT, is a reminder of the covenant blessings we have in God! It is reason to rejoice and give thanks!

Conclusion: So I'm glad that Christ has come and given Himself as the sufficient and final sacrifice for our sins. I am glad that I don't have to keep up with all those offerings and offer them. But it is good to remember that there is a sacrifice that we too offer:

*I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.
(Romans 12:1)*

Every day our lives should indicate through this living and holy sacrifice, the joy and the gratitude we feel for what Jesus did for us!