

One Sacrifice is Sufficient  
Hebrews 9:24-28  
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During commemorations of Veterans' Day and Remembrance Day around the world, preachers, poets, and politicians of all kinds will not doubt refer to "the ultimate sacrifice" made by their nations' soldiers, the lives given in battle for the values their countries hold dear. With slogans like, "A soldier is not dead until he is forgotten," we remember that military men and women have given their best efforts, even until their last breath, in service to their fellow citizens. It is true that in dying on the battlefield, many soldiers did sacrifice their lives, but it is also true that it is not only those who died, but also those who survived, who sacrificed something too -- their bodies, their psyches, years of their lives, time with their families. We remember these sacrifices too on Veterans Day, as well as the sacrifices made by those who stayed behind and watched, waited, and prayed, those who riveted, welded, and rationed. In war, everyone sacrifices something.

The language of sacrifice, in this sense of giving up something for a greater good, maybe even giving it all, pervades the rhetoric of war and soldiering, and gives war and its combatants the noble character they enjoy in our nations' imaginations, and that means a lot. It means that war remains a romantic force to be reckoned with. It means that valor and heroism and duty will continue to be rightly held in high esteem. And it means that to fight for high ideals requires us to

have high ideals. But it also means that for all the brutal images of war that confront our eyes and ears, for all the stories of suffering we have heard or read, for all the statistics of the numbers of both military and civilian dead, wounded, and displaced, through all of that, the nobility of war, crafted on the sacrifices we celebrate tonight, returns us generation after generation to the battlefield, and no matter how noble the cause may be, that cannot be held up as a good thing.

Perhaps we have been celebrating the wrong sacrifice.

The letter to the Hebrews also uses the language of sacrifice. The sacrifice of which it speaks is not of personal sacrifice for the good of one's country or one's countrymen, but of sacrificing animals to mediate one's relationship with God. You may remember that in ancient times, our ancestors in the faith would take animals they had either raised or purchased, bring them to the tabernacle or the temple, and hand them over to the priests to have their throats slit, their blood collected, and their remains burned on the altar. All of this was part of the way they understood how God had made it possible to have their sin removed from them, that they might be holy and acceptable in God's sight. Through much of that period of history, sin was understood in terms of bodily defilement, like a medical kind of contagion, and that unless you were cleansed of your infection, you weren't fully fit to receive God's blessing. Not to be disrespectful at all, but it was something like an ancient near-eastern version of having the cooties, that game of tag children play where you run from one another to avoid getting the invisible and

imaginary bug that gets transferred by the touch. I believe in the UK, there is something similar called the “lurgy.” Interestingly, in English, the term cooties actually makes its first appearance in the trenches of World War I, when the Allied soldiers used it to describe the lice, rats, and other pests they battled even as they dug in against the enemy. They were also known as “arithmetic bugs” because “they added to our troubles, subtracted from our pleasures, divided our attention, and multiplied like hell.” Even today, when word of a case of lice comes down in a school, parental panic sets in, and if you’ve seen that, you have something of the sense of how a ritually impure person was treated back in the Biblical day.

And so, among other means, the sacrifice of animals was one way in which the contamination of sin was removed, and the person was made acceptable to God, and fit to participate in the community. And every year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would make sacrifices on behalf of all the people, and for the people as a whole, and they could put their sins behind them and know that they had once again been blessed with God’s favor. This is the background to the language of sacrifice of our passage from Hebrews, in which something more than cooties was at stake. For the author of Hebrews, in the light of the experience of Christ on the cross, nothing less than the truth about ourselves was up for grabs, a divine revelation about our human futility, but also the knowledge of God’s divine will for our futile humanity. This type of language about sacrifice, of bulls and

blood, and priests and atonement, is foreign in our ears, but it is worth letting it burrow in there as we remember the one who truly made the ultimate sacrifice.

The case being made here in Hebrews is the final sufficiency of Christ's sacrifice, his death, to do what the daily and annual sacrifices, however noble they may have been, could not finally achieve. The word "futile" does not appear in these chapters in Hebrews in which this case is being made, but it probably should to make this perspective as clear as can be. What the five brief verses we have read tonight make clear is that the priests of old labored in places, tabernacles and temples, that are but inadequate copies of the real thing, earthen vessels imperfectly mimicking heavenly perfection. The blood they sprinkled in those places was adequate for their imperfection, but it was precisely their imperfection which prevented them from doing what Christ, by his blood has ultimately done. For Christ shed his blood in the true sanctuary, the one in heaven, and by doing so, truly and finally took away the sins of the world the animal sacrifices were supposed to have been taking care of.

My purpose tonight is not to review the details of how Jesus' sacrifice does what Hebrews claims it does, for that would take hours. Rather, what I'd like to do is to see how an understanding of Jesus' ultimate sacrifice might speak to the ultimate sacrifice we ascribe to our veterans, and to see if there isn't a word God might be trying to speak to our perpetual human futility, perhaps displayed nowhere more fully and fatally than in war. I described earlier the rhetoric of

sacrifice as imparting a certain nobility to war and its soldiers. Equally powerful in the maintaining to acceptability of war is the rhetoric of salvation. Whether we are making the world safe from Communism, Terrorism, or any other –ism, our militaries are saving our nations, our ways of life, our cherished values from the enemy who would subject us to endless suffering if we are not victorious.

Sometimes the language of salvation is even more explicit, as when we put our soldiers in harm's way to avoid ethnic cleansing, to save innocent people from an imminent slaughter. And so, in a certain sense, we end up believing that we can save ourselves or others through war, defending and justifying our view of ourselves, putting us on the right side of God for standing up for all the right things. The only problem is that every side of every war believes the same thing, that their way is the right way, their values are worth fighting and dying for, that they are saving themselves and the world. At the very least, one side of every war is fighting in futility, for their side is simply wrong and represents something worth destroying. But we know, more accurately, that truly both sides fight in futility, for war never saves anyone from anything, except perhaps from the hard work of learning how to live together in grace, humility, and peace.

From the perspective of the author of Hebrews, until the arrival of Jesus Christ, there was a certain futility in the sacrificial system. Day after day, the priests made sacrifices that did not have the intended results. The same futility can be said for war. Year after year, the argument is made that war is required for

peace and yet, that elusive peace never comes, the intended results never really materialize, at least not with any constancy. Historian Will Durant has calculated that in the entirety of recorded human history, there has been a grand total of 29 years in which a war was not being fought somewhere. Only 29 years out of thousands in which some nation, some people, some rebel group, some counterinsurgency hasn't exercised the futility of war. I'm not sure if there is a record for human futility to match this one. Our efforts to simply be human toward one another have altogether fallen short of our success. We have been as successful in eliminating war as we have in eliminating cooties.

Hebrews seems to suggest that our failure is due to the fact that we are living in the wrong frame of reference, a reality, an existence that is an inferior copy of the perfect one in heaven. It seems to reference Jesus' words in the Lord's Prayer, "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." The kingdom of God we experience here on earth is provisional, no matter our best efforts to make it perfect. And in our mistaken frame of reference, in our provisional kingdom we have believed that it is our own power which brings our perfection, and so we have tried to exercise it with the tragic results Will Durant has documented. We have offered ourselves and our children again and again, like the priests sacrificing in the temple day after day and year after year, when Christ has already offered himself once and for all, in a way which truly makes our repeated attempts even more futile than the first time around.

The progression in Hebrews is one that moves from nobility to futility to humility. The Israelites believed their system of approaching God was a noble one, superior to their neighbors in that it did not require the child sacrifice practiced by others. But however noble it was, it was found to be futile and wanting until Christ came. And in our recognition of our inability to save ourselves is found a certain humility, which must be practiced if we are to avoid falling again into the trap of the illusion of our nobility, and the practice of yet more futility.

It is not my intention to cast what the military men and women gathered here tonight have done as futile. I have no doubt they served honorably, bravely, and courageously, and for that they are to be commended and honored. For precisely that reason, it is my intention to make sure what they have sacrificed was not in vain. The only greater tragedy than war would be the belief that their sacrifices in the midst of war did not have some merit. Recognizing fully that it may appear as a hollow victory for the humility commended to us by the letter to the Hebrews, let me suggest that it is in this very act of remembering that their service has merit, for as we remember them and their sacrifices, we also remember just how awful and futile are the wars to which they are called, but how wonderful and effective was the sacrifice of Christ. And if we gain even this one battlefield for humility, we will have turned the tide on the war. You see, it was Christ's humility in descending from his perfect heaven to this imperfect copy that inaugurated the

perfect peace for which we always seem to be fighting, and ought to put an end to any other kind of human sacrifice, “ultimate” or otherwise.

Let me conclude by offering this final thought, that our passage tonight concludes with these words of hope: “so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.” Christ’s death means that the deaths of those who served in war are not the last word on either human life or the kingdom of God. There is more, and God wants more for us. Perhaps those who have already died have an even greater eagerness for his return, and they will not be disappointed. May the rest of us also eagerly await him in humility, that our futility may not be the last word in our own lives. Amen.