

## Sermon Transcript from May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2016 Is God a Blood Thirsty Carnivore? Pastor Josh Butler, Bridgetown Church

Tonight we want to look, dive in and take a closer look at sacrifice. What is going on with sacrifice in the Bible? If you are like me kind of my first impression at first glance is like, "This is weird." Right? It's just a little strange and crazy. Animal sacrifice. I had a guy once who was like, "Josh, I've started reading through the Old Testament and I'm kind of interested in exploring Christianity, but why is there so much dead meat everywhere?"

Or the question like, "Is God a bloodthirsty carnivore that just needs His pound of flesh in order to be satisfied?"

So, as we jump in tonight, probably all of the hunters in the room are going, "Yes!" You know? And all the vegetarians are going, "Oh no! What is that?"

But, I want to show us I think, actually, a different picture of what I think is going on. And not only to ask, "Hey, is sacrifice something that we can kind of put up with being in the Biblical story there?" But, I want to go with it's more than something we can put up with. I think it actually points us constructively to some really good things. I think it points us constructively to the beauty of who Jesus is. So, tonight, I want to try and offer three things that I think sacrifice and the sacrificial system in the Old Testament can teach us about God and about the salvation that we've found in Christ.

Okay. The first thing, number one, jumping right in is that life is gift. Life is gift. We are not kind of independent, autonomous creatures who can exist on our own. We require, in order to sustain and flourish and live, receiving life from outside of ourselves. So, let me explain what I mean by this that life is gift. First would be to recognize that sacrifice was universal throughout the ancient world. Right? So, if you were to go to ancient Greece and Rome, it would be in both places there. If you were to go all the way over to China or all the way in the other direction to the Americas and Incan and Aztecs, everybody sacrificed. If you were to go to the mighty, powerful empires in the ancient world or the small, more nomadic, indigenous, tribal civilizations, everyone sacrificed.

So, on the historical landscape of the world, it's more us today who are the anomaly. So, it's interesting to ask, I think, what was going on? Why was this universal phenomenon? Why did everyone sacrifice? We'll go closer into the Old Testament with Israel in a minute, but first I think we need to kind of clear some tumbleweed from the trail of history and just kind of get a glimpse of going, "What was the idea behind sacrifice in the ancient world?"

Well, a significant piece in most cultures, sacrifice occurred usually at the center of a community celebration where the community would come and would gather around and there was some kind of ceremony that was often followed by the feast, right? And everyone is kind of partying it up. So, I feel like I got a sense of this once when I had the opportunity to live on the Navajo reservation for about six months. It was a traditional, indigenous community. They're about 20 miles off the main road, and they were shepherds. So, the family [garbled] had 120 sheep, right? There were these times, regularly, where relatives, family, neighbors and people would come from around and would come to their place, and they would want to honor their guest by throwing a feast. So, the grandma would usually go out and kind of point out, "Hey, Josh. I want you to go get the sheep," and she would kind of select the one that she wanted. I did not realize until then that sheep are actually quite fast, especially when they know what you're coming for. Right?

So, it would usually turn into this run, this race, and it would usually wind up with me kind of making a diving leap and sort of grabbing the heel and wrestling the sheep to the ground. I would bring it before grandma and she would lay her hand on the sheep before it was slaughtered, and she would offer a prayer of thanksgiving to the Creator. She would say, "We thank You, Creator, for the life of this sheep and that this sheep is about to give its life in order that we might live."

And there was a recognition of the sacredness of life and the value of this animal that was giving its life and the fact the the community itself required receiving life from outside of itself in order to live. There was a sense that life is gift and the proper response to this

reality is gratitude; to recognize that we need life from outside of ourselves. This reality, I would say, is as true today as it was back then. Even if we don't practice the ceremonies of sacrifice or whatever, it's as true for us as it was for the ancient world. It kind of confronts American individualism, right? Like, we do not exist as kind of isolated, independent, autonomous beings that can just kind of survive on our own. But no, we are interwoven within the fabric of God's good creation. And, in order to exist, to survive, to thrive, to flourish requires receiving life from outside of ourselves.

Even if one is a vegetarian, still, the grain of wheat needs to be beheaded from the stock, right? The fruit needs to be plucked from its life-giving branch. There's a sense that all of us require receiving life from outside of ourselves as gift in order to thrive and flourish in God's good creation. So, life is gift. And I think this confronts, too, one of the caricatures of ancient sacrifice. There was often a picture, I think, for folks today, of going, "Man, that just looks brutal. Like, that looks cruel to animals. Why would I be cruel to animals?"

But, I think if you were to take someone from an ancient culture and you were to build a time machine and transport them forward into our world today and they were to look around at our culture, I think they would go, "Actually, you guys are the cruel ones." Right? A few observations I think they might make.

A) "Hey, your lives today, in our culture, we're still dependent on life from outside of ourselves, but we're rather disconnected from the process."

Right? So, if you're like me, I tend to go to Costco or whatever. Yeah, I get my meat there. Yes. Here we go. It's shrink-wrapped, it's in Styrofoam, you know? And there's kind of this sense that it can be easy. It's cut in perfect proportions and clean and sanitary and all. It can be easy to just kind of go, "Hey, I'm a consumer. I'm going to purchase my thing," and to be disconnected from the reality that I'm receiving life from life that was given. Right? Or I go to McDonald's and drive-thru – I don't actually, sorry. But, some people do. You're in the drive-thru and you give your 99 cents and you get the Big Mac, you know? And the sense or the feeling is, "I got my 99 cents and I'm purchasing, I'm acquiring a product or a commodity. I earned it. I don't need anyone. I earned this. This is mine."

It's just sort of this commodity or product, and we can become disconnected from the reality that, even in that moment, we're receiving life from outside of ourselves; life that was given. We are interconnected with God's good creation. And I think this ancient visitor to our culture might also say, in become disconnected from the process, the reality of creation, life-given, could it be that you, as a culture, have become ungrateful? Like, a lack of gratitude for your place in the cosmos?

So, it's interesting, though. The World Research Institute notes how about 1/3rd of all food produced worldwide, worth around 1 trillion dollars, gets lost or wasted. And, I have to wonder whether part of that comes from a lack of gratitude or recognition that, man, we are receiving from the generosity of earth's abundance, of God's world, and there can be kind of a cavalier attitude, perhaps, towards it. So, we're disconnected, it could maybe lead to a lack of gratitude, and I think our ancient visitor might ask, too, "Do you treat life as sacred or more sacred in your culture?"

And I would say, you know, as we look at things like factory farming where we crowd thousands of animals into these jam-packed things where they don't have room to move and they're standing in excrement up to the legs and the only way to actually keep them alive in this unlivable conditions is to pump them full of antibiotics, you know? I think our ancient visitor would go, "Dude, you guys are the culture that's lost respect for the life of God's good creation."

There's actually a greater sense of the sacredness of God's good world in much of the ancient world. So, as we look at Israel more specifically, there was a strong awareness that life is gift and the proper response is gratitude. So, as we see in Leviticus 1-7, it outlines it. Leviticus is all about the sacrificial system and the first seven chapters outline these offerings and they're essentially offerings for saying "thank you" to God and "I'm sorry." "Thank you" and "I'm sorry."

The grain and fellowship offerings are ways of thanksgiving; giving gratefulness to God for the abundance that He's brought, and the sin, guilt and burnt offerings were ways of saying "I'm sorry. These are ways we have not lived gratefully; the ways that we have not lived generously, as if we're receiving life from You."

And Israel, like other cultures, they would take the first and the best and there's a sense we've received life as gift and so we take the first and the best and we bring it to God and it sustained the priestly tribe. It's not like we just killed the animals and threw them away. It sustained the priestly tribe, one of the twelve tribes, and they would use it to throw these big, massive feasts and parties for everyone to feast together on the generosity of God's abundance; to celebrate the fact that life is a gift.

Some buddies of mine made a video for our Good Friday this year, and I want to share it. It kind of hits on these themes of sacrifice. So, let's take a moment and look at life as gift.

[Video]

[End Video]

Cool. Yeah. So, life is gift. And this first theme, this is one that Israel had in common with much of the ancient world. This is kind of a common ground. But, there are a lot of ways that now the second theme and third are ways that Israel was actually very unique, however, and had a different approach to sacrifice in the ancient world. And one of those themes is – what I would say is a second theme here – that sacrifice was invitation to enter God's favor. Through sacrifice, Israel was invited to enter God's favor. Not to earn God's favor, but to enter the favor that God already had there for them. And this was different from much of the ancient world. Sacrifice could reveal around, "Yes, we receive physical life, but spiritually we've got to appease the gods."

Appease God or the gods. So, there was kind of this sense, that maybe we often have, that – well, in the ancient world, a lot of the gods could be very fickle and violent and capricious, and there was the sense that if they were on your bad side, things were not going to go good. So, you wanted your crops to grow well and you wanted fertility. So, for many nations and cultures, sacrifice could be this means of trying to appease the gods to get them on your side so that they would turn and bless you and give you good things. So, sacrifice could be a way of trying to earn the gods' favor.

But, for Israel, it was the opposite. It was not a means of trying to earn God's favor, it was a way of entering the favor that God already had for you. Let me explain what I mean. If we go to Genesis 15 – and this is a significant, kind of foundational story in Scripture – in this story, God is making His covenant with Abraham, and this is where God has told him, "Hey, Abraham. I am going to bless you, I am going to make a nation from you and, through that nation, I'm going to bless the world and I'm going to give you the promised land and, through that land, I'm going to restore and heal creation and make things whole again."

And Abraham, rightly so, is going, "Alright, God. That's great. But, how can I be sure? How can I know?"

And God says, "I'm going to make a covenant with you."

So, in Genesis 15, God is making this covenant and there's a sacrifice at the center of it.

So, Genesis 15:9: **"So the Lord said to him, 'Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.'**

**"Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.**

**"As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him."**

Then God goes on to tell Abraham about, "Hey, your people are going to go into these dark times but, even when things get tough, I'm going to be with them. I'm going to be with your people. And, ultimately, there's going to be hope that I'm going to bring them back and restore them."

After this, in Genesis 15:17, it says, **"When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram..."**

So, stop there. So, in context, God is making a covenant with Abram. And, to us today,

this can seem like kind of a weird scene, right? So, God's like, "Hey, Abraham. Bring me some animals and cut them in half and sort of line the halves down and make this pathway between them."

And that looks strange to us, but it was actually a very common practice in the ancient Near East. So, this common practice was kind of like making a treaty, right? It was a covenant; it was a treaty between two kings. So, let's say for example you have great King Joe, and Joe is really mighty and powerful and you've got little King Ben with him. He's a ruler, but maybe not quite as powerful.

Great King Joe goes, "Hey, Ben. I am going to commit my army to protect your people and your land and help your crops to flourish and all these kinds of things."

And little King Ben is like, "Hey. That's great, Joe. Thank you. Hey, I'll pay you some taxes to help recoup the cost."

And they go, "Alright, let's make a deal."

So, they shake hands and kind of seal the deal. And the way they would shake hands and seal the deal was by making this covenant ceremony. So, they would slice the animals that they were going to prepare for the feast and they put the halves on each side to make a pathway, and they would grab hands and they would walk the pathway together. There's kind of this sense of going, "Hey, if I don't hold up my end of the deal, may I become like these animals. Split."

Right? So, there's this commitment and they're entering into this covenant, this commitment, together. Now, there's something similar happening here where God is sort of the great King God, right? And he's telling little King Abraham, "Hey, I'm going to do all these things and I'm going to restore the world through you."

So, He has Abraham come and prepare the animals and make the pathway. But, something interesting and unique happens next. Abraham does not walk the pathway with God. Abraham actually goes into this deep sleep, this "vision," it says, and then God walks the path alone. God walks the path alone. The significance here is that this covenant, this treaty that they're entering into, this deal that they're sealing is not dependent on Abraham's faithfulness to God, this covenant is a sign of God's faithfulness to Abraham. Whatever happens; whatever comes. And that would be crazy, right?

Like, the idea here, if you can imagine, say you were going to buy a Ferrari, right? And you're like, "Oh, I really love this Ferrari. I'm going to commit to making the payments and doing the whole deal." So, you go in the back room and you're about to sign on the dotted line and you get down to the dotted line and you find that, "Oh, I can't. It's already been signed by the president of Ferrari."

And the president comes out of the back room and he's like, "Hey, yeah. I'm inviting you. You can make the monthly payments and contribute towards it but, even if you don't, the car's still yours. It's because of my faithfulness to you, regardless of your faithfulness to me."

There's kind of that sense here with Abraham. This sacrifice, this covenant, it's not about Abraham's faithfulness to God, it's about God's faithfulness to Abraham. This is significant because this story becomes what we could call a "foundation story" for Israel's sacrificial system. So, it's occurring early on back here in Genesis 15, and the language and the imagery and stuff starts to get picked up and threaded in the Old Testament and the language it uses to talk about the temple and the priests and the sacrificial system.

So, the significance here is that when Israel is performing these sacrifices, they're commemorating this covenant that God has made with them. And as we look back at this, in Genesis 15, the sacrifice does not signify Abraham's faithfulness to God, it signifies God's faithfulness to Abraham. Abraham's not showing God how serious he is about the relationship; God is showing Abraham how serious He is about the relationship.

Abraham is not pursuing God in this scene, God is pursuing Abraham and, through him, the world. So, for Israel, this sacrificial system, it was not about appeasing God, it was about entering the favor that God already had for them as a people. There's something similar for us today. I'm not going to lead us in an animal sacrifice later or anything like that, right? But, we do come, as the body of Christ, to the bread and the wine of Christ's sacrifice for us; His body broken and His blood shed.

As we do that, yes, we prepare the table, kind of like Abraham preparing the animals. Right? We go and we buy the bread and we bring it and we break it and we prepare it, and we go and we pour the wine and we get it ready. But, when we do that, it's not a sign of our faithfulness to God, it's a sign of God's faithfulness to us in Christ. It's not a way that we appease God to earn His favor, it's a way that we enter the favor that God already has for us in Christ. We come to Christ and we feast on Him, on His life given, so that we might live.

Okay. Well, we've seen these two things. This reality that life is gift and this invitation to enter God's favor; the favor that He already has for us. Now, the third thing that I think we see in Scripture is that sacrifice is a way that God cleanses us. God cleanses us. This is sort of the opposite from the way I think many of us think about it. We tend to think of sacrifice as this thing that we use to clean ourselves up so that God can stand to be around us in our presence. Right? So, I think for many of us there's kind of this sense that, "Man, I messed up and God got really upset and He ran off in the universe somewhere," and He's kind of got His arms folded and He's looking back and we're kind of coming to God like, "I'm so sorry, God. I'm so sorry."

And God's like, "I don't know if I believe you."

You know? So, we're like, "I'll show You how serious I am."

So, we kill the animal and God's like, "Well, okay. I guess Josh really means it. I'll come."

We tend to think of sacrifice as this way that we clean ourselves up, we show God how serious we are about Him so He'll come back to be with us. But, in Scripture, it actually works in the opposite direction. It's not something that we use to clean ourselves up so God can stand to be with us, it's something God uses to cleanse us so that we can stand to be with God.

Let's look at Isaiah 6. This is a place that I think we see this really clearly. I understand you guys are jumping into Isaiah this next week. And Isaiah 6, this is a central, significant passage near the opening of Isaiah, and if we start in verse 1, it says:

**"In the year that King Uzziah died, I [Isaiah] saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying."**

So, these seraphim are kind of like these mighty, massive angels. Right?

**"And they were calling out to one another:**

**"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;  
the whole earth is full of his glory."**

**"At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.**

**"Woe to me! I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.'"**

**"Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the alter. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.'"**

**"Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?'"**

**"And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'"**

Okay. Well, a few observations from this passage. First off, Isaiah is in the most holy place; the holy of holies. And this is like the hotspot of God's presence in the temple. This was the place where God's presence most intimately dwelled on earth as in heaven. And yes, there's this reality that God is everywhere, His presence sustains all of creation, but this is like where God's intimate, powerful, indwelling presence on earth as in heaven was it. And it was this place that only the priests could go in once a year. So, Isaiah's there and, in this

vision, there's a sense that he is standing in the immediate presence of God Almighty, and I think the picture we should have in our head is something like an astronaut standing in the presence of the sun. Right?

Like, when we think about the sun, you could say that the sun is holy. It's unique in our solar system. It's set apart. It doesn't need us to exist, but we need the sun to exist. The sun gives light and it causes an abundance for things to be able to flourish. And it's good for us that the sun is there but, if you get too close to that power and glory, you could be blown away, right?

So, there's this sense that the sun – you could say – is holy in our solar system. Similarly, God is unique and distinct. As creator, He's unique and distinct from creation. He's set apart. We need Him to exist, He doesn't necessarily need us to exist. Right? And so, God is life, light and love. Like, in His eternal essence, in His being, there's nothing we can do to stop God from being an overflow of life, light and love. And He gives life to our world and our world flourishes in His presence. Now, there's a big distinction, though.

I suggest a way that the astronaut and the sun picture falls short is that, unlike the astronaut with the sun, we were made to dwell in the immediate presence of God. We were designed and created to be in the presence of glory, to actually bask in the beauty and the magnificence and the life, light and love that God is. We were made for that. We were made to dwell in the garden with Him in Genesis and to be with Him in His intimacy and His power.

But, the problem is that sin, it's like it's torn our spacesuit. Like, we were made with these bodies that were made to dwell in God's glory like the astronaut and the sun, but sin has torn our spacesuit; it's corrupted our bodies. And now, there's a sense that we can't stand to be in the presence of God. So, the picture here is not one where we mess up and God back away going, "Oh, no. I'm afraid. I can't get tainted by your sin."

Right? God's not afraid that He'll get affected, He's concerned that we will. God's not backing away. God is there and there's nothing that we can do to stop Him from being the life, light and love that He eternally is. But, now there's this sense that, in our corrupted condition, if you get too close, you might get blown away or you can't stand the glorious goodness that is God's presence. So, God will say things like, "Don't come any closer until we can deal with your corrupted condition so that you can stand to be in the presence of glory."

So, here we see with Isaiah, he's sees this and his response as he encounters God is he says, "Woe to me, I am a man of unclean lips, and a people of unclean lips."

This language of uncleanness, it's sacrifice language; sacrificial language. So, if we go to Leviticus where the sacrificial system is being outlined and the language of uncleanness or impurity is central to what the sacrificial system is dealing with. There were to kinds of impurity or uncleanness. The first kind is what we might call "ritual impurity." This didn't mean you had necessarily done anything wrong. Often it wasn't like you necessarily did something morally or ethically bad, but it was things like you had touched a dead body or been around mold or decay or had some bodily conditions where, basically, it was like you had touched or been in contact with things associated with death.

So, my friend Gary likes to say it's kind of like when I come home from playing basketball, right? And I come home and I'm all covered in sweat and everything and I'm like, "Hey," to my wife. "I'm going to give you a big hug."

She's like, "Get away from me! You stinketh."

Right? It's not like I've done anything wrong or morally wrong, per se, but there's a sense that I'm not in a good condition to hug my wife. Right? So, similarly in the Old Testament, if you had been associated or touching or contaminated by these things associated with death, you needed to get cleaned up first. So, you often would take a day and then take a bath or a shower and then you'd make a sacrifice. And the sense of this sacrifice is almost like this wool sponge, right? It was like it was soaking up the death state on you. The association with death that you had, it would soak it and cleanse it. It was absorbing it like a sponge so that you could be clean and be able to stand in God's presence again.

The other kind – you've got ritual impurity, and then you have moral impurity. Right? These were things that, later in Leviticus, it talks about things like ways that we've



contributed to social injustice or sexual debauchery or immorality or ways that we have basically unleashed the destruction of sin into God's good world. These were things that we would do associated – again, this is the way that death has come into the world. Our rebellion against God has unleashed distraction and death into God's good world.

So, what both ritual impurity and moral impurity had in common was this association with death. Here, it could almost be kind of like things that had been done to you, ways you had taken on yourself the weight of this destruction in God's world. And here, it was things that you had done, ways that you had unleashed destruction in God's good world. There was kind of this sense that, man, we live in this corrupted, broken, fallen world and we need to be cleansed. So, God would take the sacrificial system, and it was a sense that they absorbed the destruction, kind of like these wool sponges, so that we could be cleansed and stand before God.

And so, I've heard people in the past say things like, "Man, God is kind of like radioactivity. Dude, He is really powerful and can be dangerous. So, don't get too close to His presence where He can kill you."

But, I think this gets it backwards. I think, actually, God's not like radioactivity, sin is. Right? Sin is like this radioactive presence that's unleashed destruction into God's good world, and because God is so good, we, if we're going to stand in His presence, need to be cleansed of this radioactive stuff, because it can't stand to be in the presence of this life, light and goodness that God is. So, in the sacrificial system, there's this picture where God cleanses His people. God takes up their destruction. Picture of almost like soaking up the death in the land in order that they could be healed and restored in whole.

So, we see this in the final scene from Isaiah here where the angel, the seraphim, it goes to the altar and it takes these tongs and this live coal, this burning coal, from the altar and it goes and it touches Isaiah's lips and, when it does, there's a sense that, like a fresh burst of water rushing through his soul, he's cleansed. He's clean. So, what's going on here? Well, this altar, – again, right outside the most holy place was this altar – once a year the sacrifice was made on the day of atonement. And we know that the sacrifice has just been made, because he's taking this burning coal from the altar. Right? So, the sacrifice has just been made. And the day of atonement, this was like the climax of the sacrificial system. This was the once a year, center of what's going on with the temple and sacrifice.

So, this sacrifice has just been made, the angel takes this coal that's burning still and he goes and he touches Isaiah's lips and cleanses him of his uncleanness; of his impurity; of his corrupted condition and his association with death. He makes him fit for life. The point I want to draw attention to here is that Isaiah is not using sacrifice – he's not cleaning himself up so that God can stand to be around him. It's the opposite. God is cleansing Isaiah so that Isaiah can stand to be around God.

This is similar to the way the New Testament talks about Christ and His sacrifice. That we don't use Jesus or His sacrifice to clean ourselves up so that God can stand to be around us. The opposite, right? God uses the sacrifice of Christ, His blood shed for us, to cleanse us; to atone for our sin; to cleanse us and make us whole and restore us so that we can stand to be in His presence.

But, the cross is the place where the Father, through the Son and in the Spirit, takes all of our sin and our suffering and our shame, takes our tragedy and our trauma, takes our injustice, our destruction and our death, and He takes it upon Himself in the vicarious humanity of Christ in order to absorb its destructive power, to conquer it and, in Him, to wash us clean and restore us and make us whole so that we can stand fresh, clean, made whole in the presence of God.

I like to think of sacrifice in this way as something like a baby bath, right? Where God is like this mother who takes Isaiah and uses the sacrifice, like the sponge, to wash and clean and absorb all the stuff. And God, in Christ, takes Christ's atonement and He uses it to wash us clean. It's not something we use to clean ourselves up before God but, like that baby, it's something that we surrender ourselves to God's mercy and He uses it to soak up our destruction and to cleanse us and make us fit for life; to make us whole.

Sacrifice is a way that God cleanses us from our destruction. Alright, well, in closing, I want to kind of summarize here by look at how Jesus, I believe, is the fulfillment of sacrifice and all these things that we've looked at. So, it's interesting. If you were to ask, kind of open, going, "Sacrifice was universal in the ancient world. Everyone did it." Why don't

we do it today? The reason that we don't do it today – it might surprise you to know – is actually because of Jesus. The Roman empire was actually the first civilization in human history – in the fourth century – to abolish the public alters and abolish sacrifice.

Rome was the first civilization, and the reason was that in the early centuries as the church spread and went for and, eventually, had this impact in Rome, Constantine was the first emperor to end gladiatorial combat and put an end to the public sacrifices and all. And Constantine, you know, he was kind of a controversial figure. There's some good stuff associated with him and some bad stuff. But, at the end of the day, for our purposes tonight, he was the one who initiated bringing an end to sacrifice in the empire.

So, it's interesting. A scholar, Peter Leithart, puts it this way:

"Constantine's reign marked the beginning of the end of sacrifice. A de-sacrificed civilization has become so commonplace that we think it is the natural order of things. Historically speaking though, we are the aberrations."

So, you can imagine if tomorrow the president was to go out on the White House lawn and have an animal sacrifice or something, right? Twitter would be a rage. Like, "Oh my gosh. What is he doing?" Reporters and commentaries would be going crazy. But, we're the anomaly. This was kind of the norm historically. Right?

Leithart goes on to say, "For millennia, every empire, every city, every nation and tribe was organized around sacrifice. Every polity has been a sacrificial polity. We are not, and we have Constantine to thank for that."

I would want to actually take it a step further and say that we have Jesus to thank for that. Right? That Jesus has fulfilled sacrifice. Jesus is the fulfillment of sacrifice and what it represented and meant. So, next time someone asks you the early churches logic on this, their logic was not that sacrifice was bad, but that it was no longer needed. They didn't look back and go, "Oh, man. What a mistake and massive blunder all those lambs were for all those years."

They didn't say that. They said, "No. Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."

So, the next time someone asks you, "Why do we not sacrifice today," you can tell them, "Well, it's not actually that we're more aligned or more rational or think better of the world. The reason we don't sacrifice today is because of Jesus."

Jesus is the reason we don't. And Jesus fulfills all these three themes that we've seen tonight. First, Jesus fulfills this theme that life is gift. That in the most profound way, all of the meals and the things that we looked at earlier, it points to Christ, whose sacrifice is at the center of the universe. The one who has given His life that we might live. The reality that we need and require receiving life from outside of ourselves, physically, like the resurrection. We need Christ's resurrection power to raise us from death, to heal us and make us whole. So, Jesus' life is gift. He gives His life that we might live.

Jesus is the means in which we enter God's favor. Right? We don't use Jesus to try and earn God's favor. In Christ, we enter the favor that God already has for us through the life of His Son and in the power of His Spirit. So, in Jesus, we enter God's favor. And Jesus cleanses us from sin. Jesus is the one whose life was given to soak up and absorb the destruction and death in our world and to make us whole and wash us and cleanse us whole before God.

So, the two questions that want to leave you with tonight, as we come to this time we're going to come to this time where we come before the Holy Spirit and just try and respond to the Spirit by just laying our lives vulnerably before God as we come to the table of communion of the body broken and the blood shed of Christ on our behalf. As we come to this, I want us to reflect on, first off, are we living a grateful life?

Are we living a grateful life? Do we think of ourselves as this American lie of being these isolated, autonomous individuals who just kind of exist on our own or do we see ourselves as those who have received life from God outside of our self? Do we see ourselves as interconnected and dependent on our creation, on our community and, ultimately, on our Creator from who our life has come?



So, if we truly see our life as gift, we will live lives in response of gratitude. So, are we living generous lives of gratitude in worship for God? The other question is what do we need to bring Christ to be cleansed of? Right? Maybe it is things that others have done to you and the sense of the weight of the destruction. Maybe there's shame and guilt that you carry and feel. Maybe you've been abused. Maybe you have been wounded and hurt by other's sin and you feel the destruction that has come upon your life and you carry that shame or that guilt or whatever that is that is burdening and weighing you down.

I believe we're invited tonight to bring that to Christ at the table and to the power of His Spirit to experience His redemption. Or maybe you need to be cleansed of the sin and of destruction that you have done and that you have actually morally and ethically violated God's good world. There are people that you have hurt and there are others you have wounded. You have lived in ways that are destructive and given over to sin. What do we need to repent of tonight and to bring vulnerably before Christ that He can cleanse us and make us whole?

Are we living gratefully and what do we need to be cleansed of? You're invited, tonight, to come and to enter God's faithfulness to you in Christ today. Not to earn God's favor, but to rest and be refreshed in the favor that God has for us through the person of His Son and the power of His Spirit. Would you join me in prayer?