

A Living Sacrifice

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Romans 12:1

This verse is a wonderful encouragement, a great command, an amazing promise, and an incredible reminder all in one.

To fully understand this verse, we need to know the setting and the context. It is dangerous to take just a verse of scripture alone and try to understand its meaning. It is better, rather, to take the verse as it was intended, in the context of the passage and unfold not only the verses meaning, but the meaning of the entire passage.

The “therefore” in the verse means that the instructions given are to be a response to something. To fully understand Romans 12:1 we need to go back to the previous chapters and review them. Romans 12:1 comes at the end of a long discussion about the mysteries and the amazing plan God has had to save you and I from our sin. Chapter 12 discusses some of the implications of Salvation and the plan that God has to offer salvation to the Gentiles and the Jews. The thrust of the chapter is the sovereignty of God in His plan for the Salvation of the lost to show His mercy. The reader is given a rare glimpse into the plan that God has, and how each part of His plan is there to serve a purpose. Every person that receives God’s grace in Salvation becomes part of that plan, and is an instrument for His purpose to accomplish His plan. The command in Romans 12:1 is relevant to all Christians, as instruments in God’s plan for Salvation to the nations. Suddenly, our salvation has a purpose, a plan that we are to submit to. Ephesians 2:10 tells us that, “...we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” The introduction to this verse, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers,” connects this encouragement, command, promise, and reminder to the beautiful understanding that God saved you for a purpose – a plan. Let’s look at each of these parts to this verse, but for the sake of our discussion, we are going to take them out of order. First, the great command.

A Great Command – “...that you present your bodies as a living sacrifice...” In Leviticus, God went to great lengths to make sure that the Levites knew the exact procedures to sacrifice the offerings that He planned. God let nothing to uncertainty, and all of the offerings were killed. These offerings were pictures of the grossness of sin, and the coming of a savior. The blood of animals could not take away sin, but the blood of the perfect Son of God carried away the sins of the world (John 1:9). This command is after Jesus offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to forever end the Levitical system, and is different, because it commands Christians (brothers) to present themselves as living sacrifices. A living sacrifice is a life that is totally surrendered to God’s will. Just as the giver of a sacrifice in Leviticus didn’t get their offering back, a life surrendered to God’s will is one that is offered completely and without question to the will of the Father. Jesus offered Himself completely to God’s will and we too are to commit our lives to following the paths that God has laid out for us.

A wonderful Encouragement – That command seems impossible. Somebody once said that the problem with a living sacrifice is that it keeps crawling off the alter. The problem that we have as human beings is that we consistently want to serve our own desires and not Gods. This creates a conflict within us (Romans 7) between our wills and God’s will. The wonderful encouragement comes first (before the command) in this verse that we can accomplish this command by God’s mercy. God knows that we cannot do His will apart from His strength, and this verse carries an impossible command, but it tells us how we are to accomplish it too. The “mercies of God” is His patience and love for us. Exodus 34:6b - 7 defines mercy as, “...The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.” How does this help us accomplish this command? By resting in God’s forgiveness, and allowing Him to work through us to accomplish His plan we recognize that there is no good in us, but only God’s will, His plan, and His purpose. God’s mercy allows us to accomplish His command of offering our lives to Him as a living sacrifice.

An amazing Promise – in Leviticus 9 we learn of one of the first sacrifices that the Israelites made, and God’s response to it. When the children of Israel followed God’s commands, and obeyed God’s instructions, He revealed to them His glory, and He accepted their sacrifice. Verse 24 summarizes the reactions of the Israelites when the Glory of God shines on their sacrifices. “And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.” God had accepted their sacrifice and the children of Israel praised Him. One of the most significant parts of the commands regarding the sacrifices is that they are to be without spot or blemish. The animals presented to God were to be the best of the flock – without blemish. After the blood of Christ, we are commanded to present ourselves as living sacrifices to God. This would be a scary proposition without the blood of Christ to wash away the stains of our sin. The great promise is that God accepts us – washed clean of our sin through blood of Christ.

An incredible Reminder – Our worship to God is our devoting our lives to Him. When we commit our lives to Him, when we present ourselves to God as a whole sacrifice we are honoring God for who He is. Only when we see God for who He is can we completely surrender to Him and sacrifice ourselves to His will. Often we think of Worship as singing, but God sees worship as seeing God for who he really is and giving honor to Him. What better way to bring honor to God than to show that God is more important than anything that I could do, have, see, or feel on this earth. What better worship can I express than to say, Jesus Christ is my all and my all.

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