

## To obey is better than sacrifice

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1st hymn: (by Samuel Stone 1839-1900, T Aurelia by Samuel Wesley 1810-760)

1. The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;  
she is His new creation by water and the word;  
from heaven He came and bought her to be His holy bride,  
with His own blood He bought her and for her life He died.
2. Though with a scornful wonder men see her sore oppressed,  
by schisms rent asunder, by heresies distressed  
yet saints their watch are keeping, their cry goes up: "how long"  
and soon the night of weeping shall be the morn of song.
3. Through toil and tribulation and tumult of her war  
she waits the consummation of peace for evermore,  
till with the vision glorious her longing eyes are blest,  
and the great Church victorious will be the Church at rest
4. Yet she on earth hath union with God the Three in one,  
and mystic sweet communion with those whose rest is won.  
O happy ones and holy!  
Lord give us grace the we like them the meek and lowly on high may dwell with Thee.

### Readings:

- Isaiah 1:12-20
- Ephesians 2:1-10

### Intercessions:

Dear Father,

We come to pray for a world in trouble! We pray for the Middle East, with one country fighting with its neighbour who unleashed a rain of terror and murder. Israel has experienced similar wars in the past with enemies dedicated to wiping them out - in fact in history, others have attempted genocide. Through it all you, Sovereign lord, lend your help to those who follow your standard and look for your aid. So do so again we pray, and we can do little else but pray in this matter.

\*We pray for those that preach your word from the pulpits of our land. Enable hem to preach faithfully your word and your standard, without weakening that word or misrepresenting it. Strengthen them by your Spirit, and do your own powerful and mysterious work in human hearts which is beyond our full understanding.

\*We pray for Ukraine that many in that land look to you and trust you for your guidance and help. Uphold and strengthen them to stand firm as they fight for their very survival.

\* For those we know who are ill, recovering from illness, lonely, or depressed, please assist them; bring healing to those ill, and remind your people everywhere that you never leave nor forsake your own, and that the Saviour you sent for them and the world promised he would be with us always, to the very close of the age, which could be

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closer than many of us think, but remains unknown in detail to every soul including even our Lord himself.

\*Father, may your Kingdom come and your will be done in this earth, even as it is in your presence and your eternal Kingdom.

In the all-prevailing name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

### 2nd Hymn: by William Williams (*T Cum Rhondda John Hughes 1873-1932*)

1. Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land;  
I am weak, but thou art mighty; hold me with Thy powerful hand:  
Bread of heaven, bread of heaven, feed me now and evermore.
2. Open now the crystal fountain whence the living waters flow;  
Let the fiery, cloudy pillar lead me all my journey through;  
Strong Deliverer, strong Deliverer, be Thou still my strength and shield.
3. When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside;  
death of death, and hell's destruction land me safe on Canaan's side:  
Songs and praises, songs and praises, I will ever give to Thee.

### Message: "To obey is better than sacrifice"

1st Samuel 15 tells us about an event early in the history of King Saul that is an expose of the heart of the new king and of his thinking. Samuel had warned Israel of what cost they would pay for choosing to have a king like the other nations! But they were not in the mood to hear or learn. These were the days in Israel of the Prophets who had enormous power and influence. In those days there were no police, no army, no legal judges; the Prophets ruled with authority.

Read the story 1 Samuel 15:1-29. It is a sad story of the failure of a King who followed the behaviour of other nations. Look at the errors he made in justifying himself. He tried to cover up his disobedience: "The people took of the spoil - the best things .... and would not destroy them.... to sacrifice them to the Lord YOUR God". He tried to win Samuel over, but Samuel insisted the direct word of the Lord should be obeyed to the letter! He had not wiped out the Amalekites as directed. He was not apparently aware of the severity of the significance of his failure. But Samuel knew the importance of obeying God's word!

As this and other occasions Samuel knew Saul had disobeyed before he had heard the details. God often communicated directly with the prophets, who were His servants and mouthpieces! The question should have been asked "Who is in charge?" We self-indulgent and rather soft-minded Westerns have a rather casual view of God's requirement; surely God wouldn't mind as long as our intentions appear good? But God always knew the details ... and the consequences!

Samuel was told by God "I repent that I have made Saul king; for he has turned back from following me, and has not performed my commandments." Samuel was distressed and "cried to the Lord all night!" But next morning Samuel got even worse news - Saul had set

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up a monument to himself in Carmel, (a step of self-worship, even contemptible pride).

Then Samuel heard the noise of the animals, those kept instead of carrying out God's instruction, and he cried out "Why did you not obey the voice of the Lord, but rushed upon the spoil and did what was evil in the sight of the Lord"? Saul began to argue insisting that his motives were "good - that it was all for the sacrifice that would be offered to God"!

Samuel then spelled out the mistake Saul had made. "Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And the Lord sent you on a mission, saying "Go and utterly destroy the Amalekites, that sinful nation, and consume them. So why did you not then obey the voice of the Lord? (Why did you, the king, listen to the voice of those not giving the orders; are you not their authority? Should not Saul's word have been law?)

But Saul continued to argue that he had obeyed. So Samuel pronounced his judgement "Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and insubordination is as iniquity and idolatry!"

Then pronouncing God's judgment he said: "because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has rejected you from being king!"

Saul then admitted his wrong, saying that he had feared the people and listened to their voice.... "Now please pardon my sin and return with me that I may worship the Lord". Samuel refused and repeated Saul's mistake and the penalty. As Samuel turned to go Saul grasped the edge of Samuel's robe, and it tore. And in classical prophetic manner Samuel announced with great finality: "The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to your neighbour, who is better than you!"

He then called for Agag and, and somewhat shockingly to a modern audience, he said "As your sword has made women childless, so shall your mother be - "and he hewed Agag in pieces before the Lord in Gilgal".

This had not been the first time Saul disobeyed orders of God through Samuel.

Earlier in his kingship he had been instructed to wait for Samuel to perform a burnt offering before a battle. And because he deemed Samuel to have delayed coming, he had called for the burnt offering and the peace offering, which he then offered himself, against clear orders. To justify himself he claimed the people were starting to scatter and he felt he had to control things. Samuel said "you have done foolishly in not following the commandment of the Lord, for the Lord would have established your kingdom. But now it shall not continue; the Lord has sought out a man after his own heart, and the Lord has appointed him to be prince over his people because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you."

Samuel was the prophet, the mouthpiece of God in those days, and he was intent on God's will being done. He had called the disobedience of the king "rebellion and stubbornness", for which he had forfeited the right to be king.

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These sacrifices were an ancient rite, preceding Israel's time as a nation, given by God, to atone for their sins and shortcomings. This was a "propitiation", a reconciliation between an offended person and the one causing the offence. It required atonement fulfilling the ancient truth about the offence, as made clear by God in Leviticus (Lev 17:11) :

"For the life of the flesh is in the blood. and I have given it for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life".

It was a blood sacrifice for a sin or guilt offering, necessary for a sinful man to be reconciled to a holy God. It recognised the severity of the offence, and the requirement was that it be

- an unblemished animal
- it had belonged to the offender
- it cost the life of the animal in lieu the offender
- it was a substitute for the human person

It was truly a gift of God which He gave man as a temporary means of atonement (at-one-ment) to enable the reconciliation of man to his holy God. This recognises that we have been separated - estranged - from God and his holiness by our sin.

Isaiah was a good prophet, but was terrified when confronted by the holy God in his vision of God when God called him to service. He realised his unworthiness. Moses likewise had to hide himself in a cleft in the rock, provided by God, when God appeared to him in Exodus. God knew Moses could not be confronted by him - it would cost Moses his life to have looked at God. God told him on Sinai "I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by". This was, of course, all for Moses' sake. For any man to be confronted by God was to die, as sin cannot co-exist with God in his presence, and man is sinful. C. S. Lewis in "The Great Divorce" writes of a dream showing the difference between the inhabitants of heaven and the totally in-substantial visitors from "the grey town" which represents hell, or maybe only "purgatory".

Remember that the soldiers were terrified when an angel appeared to them at the tomb of the risen Jesus - they became as "dead men".

We celebrate the eucharist in all orthodox Christian Churches, which represents the last supper Jesus had with his disciples. I have done so in many settings and denominations. In our home in New Barnet in London we had the local church Youth group meet in our home, and it seemed appropriate to celebrate communion. A petite little English girl expressed her discomfort with the "blood-thirsty" nature of the communion. She said it seem so "uncivilised" to talk about eating flesh and drinking blood!" She said "Why don't we just have a slice of cake and drink a cup of tea and remember Jesus?" I answered her with something like - "To begin with, we are simply repeating a form of the last supper in memory of the first event of the institution. But also the significance of a sacrificed life speaks of the horror of sin, and the great cost of redeeming it. It costs a life! Ezekiel makes the point (Ezek 18:4) "...the soul that sins shall die!" That was how serious it was! This statement should be built into our history and our understanding of sin.

Today we do not have a system of sacrifice, or do we? The Jews have not sacrificed animals since the destruction of the temple in A.D.70. But we have our

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offerings, our self-justifications, our offerings in lieu of our obedience to God, our attempts to pay for our guilt, (such as we might think even by coming to church!) These fall far short of sacrifices!

We need to sing some of the great songs of salvation, like Toplady's words in our last hymn. The Word of God provides our most satisfactory answers.

David said in Ps 51:16-17 "For Thou hast no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burnt offering Thou wouldst not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit - a broken and contrite heart O Lord, Thou wilt not despise."

Hosea 6:6 says "For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

Isaiah 66:2 says "but this is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word."

Mark 12:29-35 (Jesus speaking with a wise scribe "The first [commandment] is 'Hear O Israel: the Lord our God is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.' And the second is 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. There is no commandment greater than these." And the scribe agreed with enthusiasm. Jesus encouraged him, saying "You are not far from the Kingdom of God."

So herein are the reasons for the radical requirements of the atonement that has been made for us, and the great cost it was to God. Therefore we should never accept it lightly - God grant that we can learn the lesson in our depths! Amen.

### 3rd hymn: Augustus Toplady (T Petra Richard Redhead 1820-1901)

1. Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee;  
let the water and the blood from Thy riven side which flowed  
be of sin the double cure, cleanse me from its guilt and power.
2. Not the labours of my hands can fulfil thy law's demands:  
could my zeal no respite know, should my tears forever flow,  
all for sin could not atone, Thou must save and Thou alone.
3. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling;  
naked, come to Thee for dress; helpless look to Thee for grace;  
foul, I to the fountain fly; wash me, Saviour, or I die.
4. While I draw this fleeting breath, when my eyelids close in death,  
when I soar to worlds unknown, see Thee on Thy judgment throne,  
Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in Thee.

### Benediction:

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

This service was prepared by Neil McIntosh (M.B.B.S. F.R.A.C.S.) for HopeNet SA