

Sermon	
Passage	Ex27,1-8
Place & date	Denver Oct 21, 2007
Series	Tabernacle #3
Point of the <i>sermon</i> (present tense, personal, contemporary)	- Sacr on the altar are there for reminding believers of sins - and to thank God for deliverance from them.
Goal	- encourage believers to believe that their sins are truly forgiven - teach them how Jesus fulfilled the sacrifices

THEME

Theme	The altar is the fountain of grace
1	a stream of blood
2	forgiven... but why?
3	confidence
4	living sacrifice

Believers, washed in the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ,

We followed Ruth and her little brother Samuel last week when they went to check out the tabernacle. All they saw was a white fence and they asked their dad about it. He explained it to them and said: "You did not find the entrance, but I will take you there next time."

Today, Ruth's dad is outside the tent, walking between his animals. He has a whole bunch of them: goats, rams, little lambs. He feels blessed.

He is looking at the rams. Sometimes he grabs one by the horns and checks its strength, looks in the ears, and feels the legs. They are strong.

Ruth is watching him. 'Dad, what are you doing? Are you looking whether they are sick?'

'Yeah, something like that. I am looking for the best one, a strong ram without any imperfections. I want to bring it to the tabernacle and sacrifice it to God.'

'But when you sacrifice it will die. Should you not find one that's sick anyway?'

'No, because for God only the best will do. God gives us everything.'

Yes, that's right, Ruth thinks. God is good for us. He has taken care of us every day, even here in the wilderness.

'Look, this one is perfect. It has a good dense and shiny fur, and its legs are straight. I'll bring that one.'

'But why are you making a sacrifice today, dad?'

I have sinned. When I found it out I have asked my neighbor for forgiveness and now I go to the tabernacle to confess my sin.'

Can I come?

Yes, sure.

Ruth knows the way. She can see the white curtain from far away.

It is so long! But she knows there is an opening, too, with beautiful bright colors.

She is glad that there is a door. God invites us inside, she has learned.

1. a stream of blood

When they get there there is a line. They join at the end. Everybody has brought an animal, holding a rope, or they are carrying it in their hands. Some have brought a little lamb or some doves.

'Has everybody sinned, that they come to sacrifice here?' Ruth asks.

'No, some just want to thank God. Others have had a baby and are here to become clean again. Look, there is someone with a bread. You can bring that, too.'

'Look, dad', Ruth says loudly – a little too loudly -, 'over there that animal has a limp. Wasn't that forbidden?'

Yes, you're right!

When the man arrives at the opening the priest has noticed it, too, and sends him home. You cannot serve God with something you would like to get rid of. It is a sacrifice and you honor him with the best you have.

The priest is even more angry with a man who has no sacrifice at all: 'How dare you come to the Lord with empty hands! What are you thanking him for? How can you express your gratitude or confess your sins without a sacrifice?!'

A priest opens the curtain for Ruth's dad. She stays outside. Her dad has sinned, it is his sacrifice. And this is no place for little girls.

The courtyard behind the curtain is a busy place. And noisy that it is! You hear animals everywhere.

There is a smell of burnt meat and fat. Not very pleasant. It comes from the altar. That is the first thing he sees. He can't miss it. It is right in front of him and all the activity happens around this altar.

It is quite big: 8'x8' wide and 5' high.

Flames shoot out of it, and lots of smoke goes up into the sky.

The smell is bad, but he knows: For God it is a pleasant smell, because he loves to receive the sacrifices of his people.

So this is the place where it all happens: the altar in the tabernacle court.

Reasons for sacrifices

Several priests are ready to take the animals and slaughter it, but first the priest asks: “Why are you here?” Ruth’s dad bows his head and admits that he has sinned:

“I have stolen from my neighbor Solomon. One of his sheep ended up in my flock and I kept it. But I have returned it to him this morning and paid him 20% of the value extra. Here is my ram. I come to ask for forgiveness. The ram is a guilt offering.”

The priest nods and takes the ram. He takes a knife and kills it. Blood starts gushing out. He sprinkles it on all four sides of the altar.

Then he removes the fat and burns it on the altar. It creates a lot of smoke. While the smoke is going up the priest says: ‘God accepts your sacrifice. Your sin is forgiven.’

Now it’s the turn of Solomon, his neighbor, with his sheep. He says: ‘I want to celebrate that the Lord is my savior. I thank him for the honesty of my neighbor. I want to give myself to the Lord. Please accept this sheep as a burnt offering.’

The priest says: “Put your hands on the sheep’s head, please” Then he slaughters it, and places it on the altar. He burns it completely.

Guilt admitted and reminded

Why did these men show up with their animals?

Could they not just come to the tabernacle, confess their sins, and receive forgiveness?

Five different sacrifices were brought on the altar. In all cases at least a part of it was burnt and went up in smoke. And the aroma was “a pleasing aroma” to the Lord.

The blood of the animal was important: it was the symbol of life.

The animal that was killed took the place of the believer. It carried a strong message: your sins carry the penalty of death. You can meet God if you bring a sacrifice and blood flows.

Every animal sacrifice was a reminder: what you have done is wrong, you broke God’s law. God does not tolerate sin. You must confess it and blood must flow, then God will forgive your sins.

Life up in smoke

What was the message?

This altar with all these sacrifices was necessary because of the sins of the people.

Some people had a hard time sacrificing their little lamb. The children loved it! ‘Is there no other way?’ they asked. Yes, said the priest, you can lie on the altar if you’d like. But then I’d have to kill you.’

The sacrifices were costly. But when the believer looked at the smoke and the flames on the altar he would not think of the property he lost but he saw himself going up in flames, as it were: ‘That’s me, right there! I deserved to be killed because of my sins!’

This was the message: ‘By my sins I have forfeited my life. I am guilty and I deserve to die. The animal dies and therefore I can live!’

That's the message.

But we must listen closely or we will misunderstand this.

We can easily get a wrong impression: that the OT believers thought they received forgiveness because they *paid* for their sins by sacrificing an animal. Then we remember the New Testament and know that's over now since Jesus paid for our sins by the sacrifice of his body.

No payment but admission

This is a wrong understanding of the sacrifices.

Indeed, people were harmed by sin and God's law was violated. But you cannot pay for that by just sacrificing an animal. Try that today in court and you won't get away with it.

No, the sacrifices did not really pay for sins but were a way to admit their sin and ask for forgiveness.

This was the way God's people could maintain and enjoy the relationship with God.

This is what we read in Hebr10,4

"The blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin."

These words were not a change of plan, as if God later decided that animal sacrifices were not sufficient after all.

He does not say 'from now on'.

This is a general statement that is always true. It did not become true in the New Testament but it was true all along.

So all those sacrifices were only a **reminder** of their sins, as Hebr 10 says:

"The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship." (Heb 10.1-2)

God was teaching his people this lesson:

you must realize your sin and guilt in your heart before you bring the sacrifice. And the burning of the sacrifice taught them that God demanded the death of the sinner.

2. forgiven... but why?

How did they receive forgiveness?

But...: did the priest not say 'your sins are forgiven' after the sacrifice had been brought? Was this real, or just a wish? Did God give forgiveness of sin or did he not?

God had already saved his people. They were not going to earn salvation by sacrifices. Bringing and parting with the animals did not earn them anything.

That's the difference with other religions that have sacrifices. They are driven by the principle: 'I do something for my god, now he must do something for me. By bringing sacrifices the worshipers could force their gods to help them.

With God it is exactly the opposite. Sacrifices are not Israel's invention and initiative. They are God's way to remind them of their sins and yet to allow them into his presence.

Here in the tabernacle it was different: the believer made a profession of faith: I am a sinner and yet I can come here.

I bring this sacrifice but it is not a payment; it is an acknowledgement of what God has done for me.

God accepts me not because of what I do or bring here but out of grace alone. It was out of spontaneous love and respect, humility and gratitude for their God that they came before him with their sacrifices.

God's grace was the basis of the entire tabernacle. At the center of the tabernacle court there was not a desk where you could settle the debt but there was an altar, where the animal that represented you went up in smoke as a symbol of your sins or as a symbol that you gave yourself and dedicated yourself to God in a fellowship offering.

Jesus is the answer

The book of Hebrews helps us understand the essence of the Old Testament religion that made fellowship with God visible through the sacrifices.

God forgave their sins and accepted sinners in his presence – but not because these animals were good enough to take their place in his judgment.

First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them" (although the law required them to be made). [9] Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second. [10] And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." (Heb 10.8-10 NIV)

Jesus sacrificed his body and blood.

This was the ultimate act of obedience to the will of God. His perfect obedience and his precious blood were the real sacrifice God wanted.

They are the basis for the forgiveness God gives to us;

and they were the basis for the forgiveness God gave to Israel.

Israel lived on borrowed capital. God forgave their sins not because of the dead animals but because of the sacrifice of Jesus that he would bring later.

So in Jesus God provides the way out for us.

3. Confidence

Now the altar is gone and we can no longer bring animals to be slaughtered. What does it tell us?

The altar was built on God's grace. God forgave in advance.

But this was not because of the blood poured out on this altar.

The altar, the tabernacle, and the entire Old Testament are calling for more. Thousands and thousands of animals had been killed on this altar through the centuries. Goats, rams, doves, and lambs – all that blood was still not enough.

When would the flow of blood stop?
When will the sins of man finally be atoned for?

Finally, God's justice was satisfied when Jesus offered himself. Jesus is the final sacrifice on the altar. Therefore our fate was sealed at Golgotha. The cross of Jesus means that God has crossed out and cancelled the accusations against us.

We don't need to come to an altar with a sacrifice in our hands. The blood of Jesus was more valuable than all the blood of the OT sacrifices.

We only to come to the cross need with empty hands and bow down in faith and humility. Confess your sins and receive grace. Believe that this grace comes from the blood of Christ alone. It is enough. It covers all your sins.

What the Old Testament believers longed for and received as a symbol is yours today, every day: the full forgiveness of all your sins. It has been accomplished and guaranteed by Jesus Christ, the lamb of God.

There is no condemnation for everyone who is in Christ Jesus. When you are united with him through faith you have been on the altar. You have been consumed by the fire. You have died because Jesus has died. This is a miraculous identification, much deeper and more satisfying than with an animal that takes your place on the altar. God's grace is here, fully.

This is the basis of your confidence when you pray, when you approach God: Jesus' blood has flowed, the price has been paid fully. Now God has accepted me and nobody can undo it.

Jesus said 'It is finished' and he sealed the fate of the Old Testament believers as well as your and my fate: we have been redeemed, set free, by his sacrifice.

How do you respond?

The men who came to the tabernacle could not come there with empty hands, only with perfect sacrifices.

What are you offering up to God? What do you mention in your prayer?

Lord, please forgive me – I didn't mean it. I didn't know. I will try better next time. I try to live a good life. I have served you faithfully.

When we hear of someone who is diagnosed with cancer, we sometimes respond like this: 'but she was always helping others', with the idea 'she doesn't deserve this. God should reward her for her good works.'

Let us remember: we do not get what we deserve, Jesus got what we deserved and we get what he deserved. We appear before God, our hands are empty, but Jesus fills them with his sacrifice, his righteousness.

This is how we should pray.

So come to the throne of grace with confidence. Jesus has paved the way and has become the pleasant aroma in our place. God accepts you because of him.

Your prayers can be different: humble and confident at the same time.

Jesus fills your empty hands.

4. Living sacrifices (a new desire)

What Jesus did changes the way you can approach God because you have confidence to approach him. He removes your guilt.

He also brings a change to your heart. Jesus creates new desires.

The book of Hebrews turns the spotlight on the effect it has on the believer, on his conscience:

Christ (...) went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. [12] He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.

[13] The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.

[14] How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" (Heb 9.11-14 NIV)

God accepted the believers at the altar through the blood of animals.

How much more will we profit from Jesus' blood? It is perfect and it is ten-thousand times more powerful than the long stream of animal blood.

His blood works on the inside: it cleanses your conscience from sins that bring death.

The effect of a clean conscience is that we serve the living God. We become **willing servants** who place his will first in our lives and obey it.

What is that, a cleansed conscience?

It means that we are truly free.

First, we heard that the guilt of our sins cannot keep us away from God.

And now, not even the memory of these sins in our conscience needs to stop us.

Have you ever noticed how your conscience can continue to accuse you and make you unfit to serve God? Your sins continue to drag you down and they have power over you.

The things you have done in the past stop you from joyfully serving the Lord.

Sometimes we know in our mind that we are forgiven but the memory of sin keeps us worried that it will happen again, that we cannot truly change, or that someone else will confront us with what we did. We continue to live in the past and are not truly living as a forgiven sinner.

You are no longer under sin. Don't be a slave to sin in your mind and heart. You are free! And you have a desire to serve Jesus. No longer dragged down by the past. No longer reminded of your sins in the past that block your progress on the path of God.

The past has been wiped out and you can start with a clean slate.

Will you believe it? And believe it again and again, even though you may still be confronted with the consequences of what you did?

Will you live in the newness of life and offer yourself with joy to the Lord, breaking with the sins of the past?

This is the new way the New Testament speaks about sacrifices. The word 'sacrifice' still determines our lives, but now in a different way: we become sacrifices, living sacrifices, by living a life devoted to Jesus. Free.

How are you devoted to Jesus?

Do you go look for his presence every day? Do you want to be at his side, learning from Him? Then listen to what he says and take the time in your day to spend time with him.

I don't know about you, but I find that difficult, too. Our lives are like an unfinished quilt: the whole thing is a patchwork. You put a little patch here and there, running from one place to the other, trying to give attention to every area. The more urgent something looks (phone calls, work) the faster you run. But you can forget all about Jesus or see him as one of the patches, the religious patch that you give some attention, too.

But I need to listen to what he says and spend time with him every day, not as a separate patch. He is my life. He is everything. I must realize that he holds the whole quilt of my life together.

That's not weird or over-spiritual. Jesus is a person. You can meet him when you listen to his word and seek him in prayer.

Do you give him your heart? Do you love him with all you have and realize that he is more than anything or anyone on earth?

Like those worshipers who brought the best animal they had, in what ways do you sacrifice yourself to him? What do you give up so that you can spend time with him? Where do you see conflicts between what you like and his will? And how do you respond: do you continue to keep him out of your decisions or do you yield to his will?

You can give yourself to him completely because you are free now. Nothing should hold you back.

Break with the sins that still hold you back so that you may share in the freedom of Jesus. His sacrifice makes it possible.

Amen