

A GOD WHO SACRIFICES FOR US

We are about to hear about the last station of the cross, which describes the sacrifice of the suffering servant of God who died to pay the price for the sins of mankind. It seems appropriate, therefore, to take just a moment to consider what exactly **is** a sacrifice? Parents make sacrifices for their children. Soldiers sacrifice their lives for their country. Making a sacrifice is giving up something we care about for the sake of achieving what we consider to be a greater good. In history of religion, sacrifices play a prominent role.

After the fall, when man had plunged himself into the darkness of sin and death by separating himself from God, he began to invent gods out of his imagination. That there had to be a god—or gods—was obvious—even to primitive man. The simple fact that they existed indicated that someone or something had created them. In this they were more enlightened than modern philosophers and scientists who deny that creation implies a creator. Even though the scientific method is based upon the principle that everything that happens has a cause, they argue that the universe itself has no cause—it just is. Like those Paul describes in the *Book of Romans*, they deny that, "...what may be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them." (*Romans 1:18-19*) In any event, it was obvious to primitive men that creation had to have a creator and that the creator had to be far more powerful than they were. They called this creator "god"—or, more often, "gods,"—and reasoned that they could please these gods by offering them sacrifices. The idea was simple and logical: if you were nice to other people by giving them things, they might be nice to you by giving you things in return. Therefore it only made sense that if you were nice to the gods, the gods would be nice to you. So they offered up things to the gods that they hoped would please them. The "things" that they offered were called "sacrifices," and they offered them up when they needed something the gods could provide—rain for their crops, success in the hunt, victory in battle, and so forth. They also reasoned that the larger the sacrifice, the more the gods would be pleased. And the largest sacrifice they could imagine would be the sacrifice of a human life.

Therefore, human sacrifice was practiced in almost all ancient religions—the religions of the Phoenicians, the Mesopotamians, the Indians and the Chinese, the religions of the Aztecs, the Mayans and the Incas, and the religion of Native American tribes like the Pawnees. Such is the product of man's imagination when he creates his own religion.

In the *Old Testament* God condemned human sacrifice. Moses said, "When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there."

Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire. Such a thing is an abomination to the Lord." (Deuteronomy 18:9-10)

But not only did God ban human sacrifice, He rejected the whole idea of soliciting his favors by offering sacrifices. The sacrificial system God gave to the children of Israel had nothing to do with procuring favors from Him. Instead, it provided a way for Him to forgive their sins. The Levitical sacrifices functioned more as sacraments than as sacrifices. God allowed the Israelites to sacrifice physical things like vegetables and grain and oil and animals to atone for their sins. But the sacrifices were also models, prototypes of the real Sacrifice—the death of a Messiah God would send—whose death would atone for all the sins of all mankind. Through the prophets God told us about this Messiah. He would be a suffering servant of God who would offer Himself up as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind. He would be our scapegoat, our substitute, who would take all of our sins upon Himself and die in our place to pay their penalty. He would be our Passover lamb who shield us from the angel of death. In the words of John the Baptist: he would be "*...the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*" (John 1:29) Our God is not a god who requires us to purchase His blessings with sacrifices; He is a God who offers Himself up as a sacrifice for us in order to bless us with the greatest gift of all: the forgiveness of our sins. And the sacrifice He offered was something He valued more than anything in the world: the life of His only Son, Jesus Christ. God, who forbade us to sacrifice our children to Him, sacrificed his child for us. Amen.

And now we hear in the words of the prophet Isaiah how this sacrifice took place—words that were written down over six hundred years before Jesus was born.