



Minutes With Messiah

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The Decease We Accomplish

There is an intriguing statement in Luke's account of the transfiguration. It puts Jesus in an unusual light, at least in usual human terms.

And it came to pass about an eight days after these sayings, he took Peter and John and James, and went up into a mountain to pray. And as he prayed, the fashion of his countenance was altered, and his raiment was white and glistening. And, behold, there talked with him two men, which were Moses and Elias: Who appeared in glory, and spake of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem. But Peter and they that were with him were heavy with sleep: and when they were awake, they saw his glory, and the two men that stood with him. (Lk 9:28-32)

It is in the verse that tells about what Moses and Elijah were talking to Jesus about. They were talking about his death which he would "accomplish" at Jerusalem. For most of us death isn't an accomplishment. Not only don't we plan on dying, usually we don't expect it to serve a purpose. Jesus, on the other hand knew from the beginning that he would die, and when, and what purpose his death would serve.

Even before Jesus became *bar mitzvah* he spent time studying Torah with the prominent rabbis of his time. When his parents questioned what he was doing he replied, "Do you not know that I must be about my Father's business?" (Lk 2:49) Even before taking on the responsibilities of a Jewish man he knew that he had a purpose—his Father's purpose.

To another group of people he revealed that his death would serve a purpose. "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me. This he said, signifying what death he should die." (Jn 12:32-33) He also spoke of being lifted up to Nicodemus. "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life." (Jn 3:14-15) Early in his ministry he knew that his death was meant to bring eternal life. It was in death that he would accomplish the meaning of his life.

Most people never know what they have accomplished. Few even among their acquaintances know what their life or their death will accomplish. Even most who attain some form of celebrity rarely can point to a major spiritual accomplishment. Occasionally there will come a shining light. I know of a young lady from Hobbs, New Mexico, who died recently. I grew up with her mother. She affected more people in her brief life and battle with disease than most of us dream of touching. I still hear occasionally about people who were made more aware of life and of God by her courage. She may not have had Moses and Elijah come to talk about her decease that she would accomplish in Hobbs, but she accomplished much.

Yet what will the rest of us accomplish? Much indeed, if we will. "Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands; that, if any obey not the word, they also may without the word be won by the conversation of the wives; While they behold your chaste conversation coupled with fear." (1 Pet 3:1-2) "Notwithstanding she shall be saved in childbearing, if they continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety." (1 Tim 2:15) Perhaps not by death but by life, Paul says women may accomplish much. The men likewise. "If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work." (1 Tim 3:1) Nor do we have to be elders. Living and dying for Christ in front of our children or acquaintances is a great accomplishment. We don't have to be known throughout the world. The only one who needs to see the life or decease we accomplish is God. Let us all strive to accomplish much for His glory.

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Such a Sacrifice

That was a real sacrifice. How I sacrifice for my kids. You have to sacrifice for your art. Think of the sacrifices he made to get to the Olympics. We hear statements like these and get the impression that a sacrifice is something harsh or difficult. Yet when we look at biblical sacrifice we may find exactly the opposite.

The English word “sacrifice” has the same root as “sacred”, and originally meant that which makes one holy. The Hebrew word, “korban”, is from a root that carries the meaning of closeness. Thus a sacrifice, rather than that implied in the quotes above, is something designed to bring us closer to God and his holiness. This is a good and pleasant thing. We are separated from God. We want to return to God; to be closer to Him. We gladly bring a sacrifice to get us into that position.

Admittedly, sometimes it is difficult to bring a sacrifice. This is not because we don't want to bring it, but sometimes because of the cost. Yet God did not want sacrifices that were so costly that they put the giver into a difficult situation. Sometimes He decreed different sacrifices based on the financial ability of the individual. Such was the case for the “trespass offering” in Leviticus 5:6-7:

And he shall bring his trespass offering unto the LORD for his sin which he hath sinned, a female from the flock, a lamb or a kid of the goats, for a sin offering; and the priest shall

The courtyard of the Temple was a busy place resembling restaurant row.

make an atonement for him concerning his sin. And if he be not able to bring a lamb, then he shall bring for his trespass, which he hath committed, two turtledoves, or two young pigeons, unto the LORD; one for a sin offering, and the other for a burnt offering.

Sometimes we think of the place of sacrifice, if we think of the Temple at all, as a solemn place, filled with the smell of blood and the sound of animals being slaughtered. The courtyard of the Temple, actually, was

a busy place resembling a small town. Rather than the smell of blood, the predominant smells were probably cooking meat and baking bread. Instead of the butcher shop it more resembled a restaurant row. While the beef and lamb cooked on the altar, and the meal offerings baked alongside it, those whose offerings had already been made sat in an area off to one side, talking and eating the tasty foods that had been offered on their behalf. In another area tables were set up for the portion that was to go to the Levites, and they could be seen coming and going with their families as their duties allowed. The noise of sheep, goats, and calves separated from their mothers was no doubt significant. But over all that came the sounds of the priestly chorus, singing the psalms, sometimes accompanied by musicians on stringed instruments or the *shofar*, the ram's horn trumpet. The laments of those bringing a sin offering met their counterpoint in others rejoicing because God was merciful and gracious. The daily clothing of the worshippers was in contrast to the fancy, almost festive, garments of the priests, and particularly the high priest. The Temple was a place full of sights, sounds, smells, and tastes to make the sacrifice as pleasant as possible. Rabbi Dovid Green points out, “On that stage, in costumes unrivaled, and with drama real as life itself the Jewish soul learned to laugh and cry to sing and sigh its way back a state of wholeness.”

That is what sacrifice is for; to bring us back to a “state of wholeness.” Without God we are incomplete. “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” (Gen 2:7) Of all the creation, only in the case of man do we find God breathing himself into the creation. Although we still breathe, we are separated from God by sin (Isa 59:2). We are no longer whole. We need something or someone to bring us back to wholeness with God.

We offer sacrifices

Although there is no longer a Temple and the sacrifices of animals and grain are no longer presented to the Levites, even we still have sacrifices to offer to God. They are not costly, or even difficult to bring. Nor do we bring the sacrifices to a priest to offer. As priests, we offer our own sacrifices for ourselves. “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ.” (1 Pet 2:5)

Among the sacrifices we can offer we find doing good for others. “But to do good and to

communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.” (Heb. 13:16) Paul spoke of God’s pleasure in what others had done for him. “But I have all, and abound: I am full, having received of Epaphroditus the things which were sent from you, an odour of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, wellpleasing to God.” (Phil. 4:18)

We daily have the opportunity to offer other sacrifices. These are of little real cost to us, but are of great value in the eyes of God. Too often, though, we forget these sacrifices: prayer, praise, and thanksgiving. “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD: but the prayer of the upright is his delight.” (Prov. 15:8) “By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.” (Heb. 13:15) “I will offer to thee the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and will call upon the name of the LORD. (Psa. 116:17) Perhaps it is because we think of sacrifice as something difficult that we forget to offer these easiest of sacrifices.

More than anything, though, God has always wanted men to bring breathing sacrifices, the offering of life. This wish has continued even to our time. David said that our heart was of supreme importance. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise. (Psa. 51:17) God wants a broken heart, but not a dead one. Instead he wants our sacrifice to be an ever-living one, not one that dies upon the altar. “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. (Rom. 12:1)

All of these are sacrifices in the sense of offerings that will bring us closer to God. None of these, in themselves, will make us holy. For that God required a sacrifice of blood. For that sacrifice God served as the High Priest to bring the blood of atonement into the Holy of Holies.

The best and last sacrifice

“And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.” (Eph 5:2) With these words Paul introduces the sacrifice that makes us holy. In this case it cost dearly. God gave of Himself, because nothing else was of sufficient value or purity, in order to show man how much He valued man and desired his purity. The sacrifices of prayer and good works bring us closer to God, but it is only through God’s grace and justice in Jesus Christ that we can be made holy.

The writer of the book of Hebrews spends a significant portion of that letter showing that Jesus is

the best and the last sacrifice for sin. Best because he was the sinless Son of God. Last because there is no longer need for another.

But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more

The sacrifices of prayer and good works bring us closer to God.

shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb 9:11-14)

Jesus is a better sacrifice for sin. The older sacrifices were good and effective, but they were of limited effect. They consisted of the blood of innocent animals; his consisted of his own blood. They purified the flesh; he purified the conscience.

Of equal importance, the former sacrifices were offered yearly; Jesus offered himself once and that was sufficient. “And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified.” (Heb 10:11-14) The previous offerings had to be repeated yearly, reminding the people yearly of sin. Jesus gave himself once, and needs not repeat that sacrifice.

Since Jesus gave himself to purge our consciences from sin, we have at least three obligations in response. One of those obligations is to offer our own sacrifices of good works and prayer. A second, and sometimes neglected response is to allow our consciences to be purged of sin—to forget those sins that have been forgiven, in ourselves and in others. A third obligation is to not add unnecessarily to the sins for which Jesus gave himself. “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” (Rom 6:1-2)

God On His Horse

The wind has been blowing over the past several weeks in Albuquerque. Although we are quite familiar with the wind that doesn't reduce our agony when it blows allergens around. People have been complaining about the wind and what it brings with it. People, that is, who are unfamiliar with the scriptures.

When we get thirty to fifty mile-per-hour winds, instead of complaining we should be looking for God. After all the wind is his steed. God "maketh the clouds his chariot: who walketh upon the wings of the wind." (Ps 104:3) "Yea, he did fly upon the wings of the wind." (Ps 18:10)

Assuredly, God uses the wind for other reasons. It was an east wind that brought the locusts upon Egypt and then it was a west wind that took them away (Ex 10:13, 19). An east wind blew all night to divide the Red Sea, allowing Israel to escape from Egypt on dry land (Ex 14:21). A wind brought quail for the Israelites to eat in the wilderness (Num 11:31). Jonah was, to his dismay, familiar with the wind. A mighty wind from God was the cause for him to be thrown overboard, subsequently to be swallowed by a great fish (Jonah 1:4). An east wind made him want to die after his shelter withered away (Jonah 4:8). The prophets spoke of God winnowing the chaff of mankind in the wind (Ps 1:4; Ps 35:5; Isa 17:13; Dan 2:35). Whatever use God makes of the winds, it is because they are his to use, even if it may be for his figurative transportation.

In two recorded incidents Jesus showed that he was the Son of God by his control over the wind. In one

instance, as recorded in Matthew 14, Mark 6, and John 6) the disciples were on the Sea of Galilee at night and fighting a contrary wind. Out of the dark Jesus came walking over the water, intending to pass them. When they saw him they called him into the boat (after, Matthew tells us, Peter walked to meet him). "And when they were come into the ship, the wind ceased. Then they that were in the ship came and worshipped him, saying, Of a truth thou art the Son of God." (Matt 14:32-33) It seems they were more amazed at the wind dying down than at Jesus' walking on water. (For another version of this story see the November 2001 issue.) The other incident is found in Mark 4 and Luke 8. Jesus fell asleep in the boat as they crossed the Sea of Galilee. When a wind came up that threatened to swamp the boat he commanded the wind to stop. "And they feared exceedingly, and said one to another, What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?" (Mk 4:41) Who indeed was this that had control over God's steed? Who but the Son of God!

Too often we go through our days experiencing the things of life, but not experiencing life. We see God's creation, but many never see "God, creator." Many ignore that God can be seen in all of His creation. Some of us drive along, never bothering to notice who is in the car passing us. We do the same, sometimes, to God. He comes riding by on the wind. Next time that happens, instead of complaining try to look up, wave, and just say, "Hi, God." He'll appreciate it, even if everybody else thinks you are crazy.

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