



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

“Would you please comment on the teaching given in Hebrews 13:9-16. I would like to understand the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice in relationship to the sacrificial system as given by God to the nation of Israel.”

The Context

I think it is important to place this teaching in the context of the rest of the Epistle to the Hebrews; failure to do this will result in an incomplete understanding.

The first point to understand is the contrast between the Levitical priesthood and the priesthood of Christ. Jesus was a priest after the order of Melchisedec, as the Writer says, “For he testifieth, Thou art a priest after the order of Melchisedec” (6:17). The Levitical priesthood could not achieve perfection; “If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law) what

further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec, and not be called after the order of Aaron" (6:11). The writer then goes on to say that if the priesthood is changed, then the law must of necessity be changed. The structure of the Levitical priesthood was rooted in the sons of Levi, but the Writer says, "It is evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning the priesthood" (6:14). The contrast is brought into sharp focus in verse 23, "And they truly were many priests because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (7:23-25). Christ was made priest. "not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life" (7:16). The Levitical priests, 'having infirmity,' offered sacrifices for themselves as well as for the people. The Son "offered up Himself." Law was sealed with the blood of animals; grace is sealed by the blood of Christ.

In view of the foregoing, I think we are now in a position to look at the teaching in chapter 13.

Wholesome 'Food'

The Writer seems concerned that his readers should be extremely careful to understand Christ aright, for he says, "Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is good that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein" (13:9). He does not say what these strange doctrines are, but it seems fairly obvious that they are concerned with the eating of meats of animals which have been used in sacrificial rites. Perhaps there is an echo of Paul's teaching here, "But meat commendeth us not to God" (1 Cor.8:8), so he may be referring to pagan sacrifices; or it could be that he was issuing a warning to Jews who were still seeking their salvation by following the sacrificial cult of their forefathers. Whoever these people may be, there is one cardinal point that he does not wish them to miss, these meats, he says, "have not profited them that have been occupied therein."

He then goes on to tell christians that they should have nothing whatever to do with sacrificial foods, "We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle" (v10). As we know from our O.T. teaching, the Levitical priests could share in practically all of the food of the sacrificial victims; (see Lev.6:26;10:14f; Numbers 18:9f); the one sacrifice which they were forbidden to eat of was the one when blood was taken into the holy place as a sin-offering for the people, as it is written, "And no sin-offering, whereof any of the blood is brought into the tabernacle of the congregation to reconcile withal in the holy place, shall be eaten; it shall be burnt in the fire" (Lev.6:30). This, of course, would include the sin-offering on the Day of Atonement. This eating of sacrificial foods Paul actually refers to as 'eating of the altar,' "And they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar" (1 Cor.9:13). If we read from Heb. 9:11-14, the Writer there is at pains to point out the excellence of the sacrifice of Christ against the sacrificial offerings of the Levitical priests, and later in the same chapter he says, "For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figure of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us: Not yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with the blood of others, etc. "We have already established that the Levitical priests had no right to eat of the food of the sin-offering, consequently he is declaring that they had no right to be partakers of the Christians' 'altar', and he is not referring to the altar itself, but to the victim on it, Christ Himself.

The Writer then goes on to refer to the ritual burning of the bodies of the sacrificial beasts which had been used as sin-offerings; this ritual was to avoid pollution of the

city. For the same reason, criminals were customarily put to death outside the city gate. In this way he sees in the sacrifice of Jesus the magnitude of His suffering for the people, "For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without (outside) the camp. Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate." In this way, the Writer correctly sees and portrays the place of Jesus' death as a fulfilment of the law concerning the sin-offering.

The Christian's Direction

"Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach." Leviticus chapter 16 teaches us about the sacrifices made on the Day of Atonement, particularly about the goat offered for the Lord, and the scapegoat. The Lord's goat was offered as a sin-offering, and all the iniquities of the children of Israel, together with their transgressions in all their sins were laid upon the scapegoat and it was sent out by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness. Lev. 16:26 goes on to say, "And he that let go the goat for the scapegoat shall wash his clothes, and bathe his flesh in water, and afterward come into the camp." So evidently, the man who let go the scapegoat, after he had been ritually cleansed, returned to the safety of the camp. In contrast to this, the Writer to the Hebrews exhorts christians to remain 'outside the camp,' with Jesus, in the unclean and unsafe world. This is a tremendous thought, indicating as it does that wherever the Lord is there should His followers be with Him, bearing His reproach, feeling the reproach of the world against themselves, perhaps suffering because of Him, but gladly joying to be with Him, because, as the Writer says, "For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come."

The Writer ends this particular section by giving christians an exhilarating exhortation as to what they should do in an alien environment, "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. But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased." The christian has to show his gratitude by sharing the benefits of Christ's sacrifice with others. His gracious name should be ever on our lips; His saving power should be told abroad 'in season, and out of season;' His healing balm for a sin-wracked world should be our constant theme. Jesus, our Christ, our Lord, our Saviour. Yes, we will come to You outside the camp.

The few verses we have considered are, to my mind, some of the most beautiful in the Bible. We feel as if we are on holy ground. May this always be our experience as we see the beauty and symmetry of the Word. and as we consider the One whom it portrays. (*All questions to Alf Marsden, 377 Billinge Road, Highfield, Wigan.*)