

## *Living Sacrificially*

Romans 12:3-8

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“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer yourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.” (Romans 12:1) With the call to offer ourselves as living sacrifices fresh in our mind, Paul continues with the admonition, “By the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment.” (Romans 12:3)

Today is Reformation Sunday. “Think for a moment what it would mean to you if you could not own a Bible or if the Bible was not even available in your language. What if you were taught that the Bible was only for church officials to study and interpret? That was the exactly the case in (John) Wycliffe's England. So, nothing was more important to Wycliffe than getting the Bible and its message into the language and hearts of the people. He knew the Scriptures would change lives. As he put it: God's words will give men new life more than the other words that are for pleasure. O marvelous power of the Divine Seed which overpowers strong men in arms, softens hard hearts, and renews and changes into divine men, those men who had been brutalized by sins, and departed infinitely far from God. Obviously such miraculous power could never be worked by the work of a priest, if the Spirit of Life and the Eternal Word did not, above all things else, work with it.<sup>1</sup> Wycliffe believed a translation without interpretation was needed so that the humblest person could learn from it.<sup>2</sup> It is from the seeds of the Reformation, the belief of a man like John Wycliffe that Wycliffe Bible Translators came into being. Through Wycliffe Bible Translators the work of Bible translation continues with more than 500 languages with complete Bibles around the world.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1201-1500/john-wycliffe-reformation-morningstar>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.history.pcusa.org/reformation-sunday>, 2007, John Wycliffe

<sup>3</sup> Wycliffe Bible Translators website

I first learned of the Wycliffe Bible Translators in December of 1981. A group of some 30 college age students flew from Sacramento, California, to the campus of the University of Illinois in Champagne, Illinois. We joined with 17,000 other college age students at the Urbana Missions Conference. That mission conference introduced me to so many new and wonderful things. First, it was December in Illinois. It was cold. Bitter cold. And it snowed. As a kid from California I had never spent a week in the cold and the snow. I asked myself, “Who could live in this type of weather?” It was also an incredible week as we had the privilege of listening to Billy Graham preach the gospel message, along with numerous other outstanding Christian witnesses. At that mission conference I had just started dating this incredibly vivacious and beautiful young woman named Julie Stone, and when we attended a workshop by one of our favorite speakers at the conference, we sat down, looked at the title of the seminary, and felt like maybe God was telling us something. The title was, “Marriage and ministry.” At that point we had been on two dates, and we were 21 and 20 years of age. Not being the type of people to rush into anything, we waited a full eight months before we got married, now both 21 years old, and beginning our senior year of college. Perhaps most importantly, because this really is the most important thing in anyone’s life, we were asking ourselves what it might look like to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. We wanted to offer ourselves in sacrifice and service to the one who had given his life for us.

One woman named Marilyn Lazslo told about working with Wycliffe Bible Translators in Papua, New Guinea. She had been assigned a village in a remote region, which she could only reach by boat. She was going to live many years in that village, learning their language, and eventually translating the Bible into their language. As she traveled by boat she passed through another village. The people were intrigued to see this strange white woman and they welcomed her. Somehow she explained that she was going further down the river to take the word of God to another village. So the people in this village asked if she could do the same for them. She apologized and said she had to go to this other village. She left, went to the village she was assigned, spent many years there, made progress, and eventually brought them the word of God.

Years later, on her return trip, she passed back through that village she had stopped in such a long time before. There in the middle of the village was a building. She asked about the building. The people of the village said it was a house for God. She asked if someone had told them about God. They said no, no one had yet come to tell them about God. But they had built a house, and now they were waiting for someone to bring them the story of God in their own language.

Marilyn Lazslo told that story to 17,000 college students who wanted nothing more than to be witnesses for Jesus Christ, who wanted nothing more than to offer themselves as living sacrifices for Jesus Christ. Later one of my friends said that if there were buses waiting we would have filled them, headed to an airport, and made a beeline to bring that village in a remote part of the world the word of God. Instead, the conference ended and we all went home. To wait. We went home to wait for God to show us where our call would be.

My friend Dave was at that conference. About four years later Dave had completed his schooling and had kept listening for God's call, had kept waiting, and Dave became a translator with Wycliffe. He went to Nepal. He lived among people in a remote area and he helped them discover the word of God. Today Dave Beine is an instructor at the Summer Institute of Linguistics with Wycliffe. He has a Ph.D. He has written numerous scholarly articles about the work he has been involved in, and as God has a way of doing, Dave's work has broadened beyond translating the Bible into preventing the spread of the HIV/AIDS virus. My friend Dave has offered himself as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

I came home from that conference and I waited. I was 21 years old and I was so ready for God to use me. About a week after we got home from that conference, our pastor pulled me aside and said an elderly woman had called the church to ask if someone could help her out. She had trouble with her mobility. She couldn't get around very well. All she had to keep her company at home were her dogs. But she couldn't get outside to clean up after her dogs, and so unless someone could help her out, she would have to get rid of her dogs.

You never saw someone drag their feet and complain and mutter under their breath like I did when I went to that elderly ladies house. I had been waiting for the Lord, waiting for the Holy Spirit to guide and direct and lead me and empower me to be his witness, and I had been guided and directed and led and empowered to go to an elderly woman's back yard and clean up after her dogs. My friend Dave got Wycliffe Bible Translators in Nepal and I got a shovel and a plastic bag in the back yard of a woman named Eunice. I remember making my way carefully through Eunice's backyard, collecting those treasures, and saying to myself, "This isn't what I signed up for." And then at some point, and I wish I could say it was sooner but knowing my attitude of pride at the time it was probably later, as I was mumbling about this isn't what I signed up for, it was as if Jesus was standing there with me and saying, "Then what did you sign up for?" There it was, a ton of bricks. What did I sign up for?

Isn't that an interesting question? More than interesting, it is a foundational question. Jesus Christ displays God's mercy in full view, a mercy evident through his suffering and death on the cross. We receive that mercy and become followers of him. But he has always been crystal clear about what it means to follow him. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." (Matthew 16:24, 25) He told his disciples that the rulers of the world revel in their power and position, but "not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:26-28)

Paul begins Romans 12 with soaring rhetoric about offering ourselves as living sacrifices to God. I envisioned it being a dramatic adventure like my friend Dave going to Nepal and many other distant and impressive places. When I found I was called for a season to work in one lonely woman's backyard helping clean up after her dogs, I complained that this isn't what I signed up for. But maybe it was. Maybe it was.

After the soaring rhetoric of offering ourselves as living sacrifices, Paul continues, “by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.” And then he places all of our giving, all of our gifts, all of our sacrifices, all of our services, missionary callings to Nepal and basic human services like a backyard clean up, he places all of the sacrifice and service we do for our Lord in the context of the Body of Christ.

In the body there are many members but they don't all have the same function. In other passages about the Body of Christ he stresses how important each member of the Body is. Oh yes, some acts are more visible and maybe receive more honor and glory, but the Body cannot exist, cannot function, without each member of the Body doing their particular task. And what a terrible mistake it is when one part of the body thinks they are more important than another. “Do not think of yourself more highly.” Maybe he should have written a line for people like me when I was cleaning up a back yard. “And do not think what you are doing is too lowly.” It all matters. And some of the things that seem so small and insignificant might well be the very things that God is using to help this world understand that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven is a servant of all. For there was Jesus one night on his knees, like a servant, washing feet. And that was exactly what he signed up for when he came to save the world.

On this stewardship Sunday, I want to tell you about a friend of mine from our church in Houston. She has been dead more than ten years, but when she lived, she lived sacrificially. Sometimes it was simple and basic sacrificial living, like the day I was out making visits. Every time I showed up at a house, the family said, “Oh, Jeanne Lyon was just here.” About the fourth house I knocked on the door and asked, “Has Jeanne Lyon been here?” When they said yes, I asked, “How far ahead of me is she?” When they said about five minutes I sped up my visits, but I was never able to catch up to her.

Jeanne also took serving and sacrifice in the church seriously. Again, her resume wasn't flashy or spectacular, but she did offer herself in so many ways. She was a member of our mission committee. She volunteered with a local organization that had a resale shop, pretty similar to Jonnycake. At one point they asked her to be the president of the board. She organized a visitation ministry at our church. She also led our church in raising money to sponsor a ministry with Untouchables in India. She regularly corresponded with a missionary doctor in the Congo. She helped our church form a partnership with the Presbyterian Church in Guatemala. She went every week to the local elementary school and mentored a student. When a medical mission called Healing Wings flew kids from less developed countries into Houston to have life-saving surgeries she met them at the airport, drove them to the hospital, and then visited them faithfully.

When Jeanne got sick with cancer and her health was failing, she called me to come visit her. She was a very direct woman, and she sat me down and said here is what I have planned for my memorial service. She told me the scriptures and the songs and she asked if I understood her wishes. Then she said, "Do you think you can follow these instructions?" I said, "Yes ma'am."

The verses she chose were such a statement of faith. I think back on John Wycliffe, that early reformer, and his belief that the common person, the humble person could read God's word and it would change their life. Jeanne Lyon trusted in the scriptures and because of that she put her faith and trust in Jesus Christ. She said read from Isaiah 43

***"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze...but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint."***

And from the Psalms . . .

***“I sought the Lord, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears...this poor woman called, and the Lord heard me; he saved me out of all my troubles...yes, the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”***

She wanted to include Romans 8:

***“I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

Because she had complete trust and confidence in the resurrection power of Jesus Christ she had the verse from II Corinthians

***“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day...so we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but what is unseen...for we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.”***

There was the passage from John 14***“In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.”***

That day, as she sat there on her deathbed, she was surrounded by anything but death. She was surrounded by life. She had offered her life as a living sacrifice and she was confident that she belonged to Jesus Christ body and soul, and that he would not let one head fall from her head without protecting and providing for her. By this point she had so little to offer. She couldn’t get out and visit or mentor or drive to the airport to pick up a sick child. Her body was spent. Her body was spent but her spirit was strong. As sick as she was, she was knitting. I asked what she was knitting. She said there were some children she heard

about on the other side of the world who needed stocking caps. And so she was knitting some caps. With the last bit of energy she had, she was knitting stocking caps for needy children. At that point she said there is one more verse she wanted to have read at her service. She had me turn to Romans 14. That is where Paul writes,

***“For none of us lives to himself alone and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.”***

If you come to the end of your life, that is a pretty good place to end up. When you come to the end of your life, that is a pretty good place to end up. How do you get to that place? In view of God’s mercy, offer yourself to God as a living sacrifice. And when you do, do not think of yourself more highly than you ought. When you offer yourself to God, you become part of the Body of Christ. In the Body of Christ, every gift matters. Every gift matters because every member matters. Dear friends, whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord. So if we live, let us live to the Lord.