

As A Living Sacrifice You Carry Your Own Execution-Stake

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus our Lord,

Attached you'll find Saga 2, ***Our Lord's Ways Are Perfect In All He Does***. In this Kingdom Living Today Addendum we offer several accounts stemming from our first two months at the retreat center. There was so much new to learn about repairing the property and properly caring for the livestock. Everything but our trust in our Lord seemed to be in a state of continuous change. A verse with which the Holy Spirit often encouraged us was, "For who has despised the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:10a). There were many days when it seemed like we were making no progress, and it seemed that the day of hosting our first retreat would never happen.

In those early months, David and Joan, who were friends of Gene, would leave their four children at home to get ready for school and would come to the lodge and pray with us. Those times of prayer near the wood stove and their willingness to put themselves out on our behalf meant a lot to us. In the years we were at the retreat center, the phrase "sacrifice of praise" came to have deep ongoing meaning for us.

"Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name. And do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Hebrews 13:15,16).

Followers of Jesus are called to sacrifice in many ways, even presenting ourselves as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (Romans 12:1). Sacrificing our own desires and goals and interests in order to follow Jesus as Lord and to do His Father's will requires taking up our own personalized "execution stake":

"If anyone wants to come after Me, let him say 'No' to himself, take up his execution-stake, and keep following Me" (Matthew 16:24 CJB)

"And anyone who does not take up his execution-stake and follow Me is not worthy of Me" (Matthew 10:38 CJB).

As you may have noticed, according to the writer of Hebrews 13:15,16, there are three particular sacrifices we are called to offer to our Father. We who love and serve Jesus as Lord of our lives and are led by His Spirit are commanded to always offer up a sacrifice of praise — and that means in good times as well as bad! It's easy to pour out praise to Father during times of worship, whether in song or in prayer. That's certainly appropriate and good — but that's not a sacrifice! Rather, eliminate how good you feel when you praise your Father with a cheerful heart, and instead draw from the depths of your heart a praise from a broken and contrite spirit. Then your praise becomes the lifeline to which your trust clings, knowing that beneath you are the unfailing arms of our Lord Jesus.

Our God is worthy of praise no matter how you feel or what's going on around you. Even King David, in one of his darkest hours after having ordered the murder of Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, pleaded with God to open his lips that he might praise Him (Psalm 51:15). And when Paul and Silas were thrown into prison after a severe flogging, how did they respond? They prayed and sang hymns to God in the hearing of the other prisoners. In other words, their trust and grateful praise weren't dictated by their painful circumstances but rather by their sure confidence that He is still on His sovereign throne and very much aware of these beloved two sons in Christ (Acts 16:23-25).

However you choose to bring your sacrifice of praise to our heavenly Father, Who sees and knows you from the inside out, be mindful that the sacrifices that matter to Him emanate from a

broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). Choosing to honor the One Whose ears are attuned to your praises even when you are suffering is the kind of "sacrifice" that glorifies Him (Isaiah 61:3).

Again, Hebrews 13:16 recounts two other forms of sacrifice "with which God is well-pleased": doing good and sharing with other people. And again, the sacrifice part comes from having a heart willingness to bring joy to our Father whether or not the "good deed" being asked of you or the "sharing what you have" is convenient or painless! In fact, we who love and serve Jesus are warned to not grow weary in well-doing (Galatians 6:9; 2Thessalonians 3:13). Rather, trust the Holy Spirit within you to keep you focused on the One Whose loving compassion girds your heart to fully give without expecting anything in return from the recipients. Your Father's pleasure and your Lord's joy in your obedient trust are truly a full reward for any sacrifice you make!

When you pick up your own execution stake, you have taken the first step to genuinely praising your heavenly Father in word and deed and revealing your resolute desire to please Him. Our Lord has always done what pleases His Father. And we who walk in His steps in obedient trust are also commanded to do what pleases Him:

- "The one Who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for *I always do what pleases Him*" (John 8:29).
- "And *find out what pleases the Lord*" (Ephesians 5:10).
- "[We] receive from Him anything we ask, because we keep His commands and *do what pleases Him*" (1John 3:22).
- "Now may the God of peace...make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you *what is well pleasing in His sight*, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen" (Hebrews 13:20,21).

Prayerfully ask the Holy Spirit for the grace to pick up your own execution-stake and purpose to have your life revolve around what pleases our Lord, no matter what sacrifice it takes.

Mike & Sue