

Lecture XI

"The Offerings of Cain and Abel, and the Origin of Animal Sacrifices Considered"

Part II

by

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(Abridged and Paraphrased)

"In process of time it came to pass that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD [Yahweh]. . . . And Abel he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof." (Genesis 4:3,4)

We must now examine the other arguments by which theologians explain the silence of Moses concerning the divine appointment of animal sacrifice. These arguments may be arranged under two distinct heads: first, those which endeavor to show that the divine institution of animal sacrifices after the fall is implied, though not expressed, in the Mosaic narrative; and second, those which are founded upon circumstances altogether independent of that narrative.

I.

[Divine Institution is Implied]

1. Now the first argument brought forward by theologians is almost too weak to require a refutation. The familiarity, they observe, with which the mention of the sacrifices of Cain and Abel is introduced shows clearly a pre-existing practice. Now familiarity of expression undoubtedly does imply a pre-existent practice, a practice admitted and consequently existing before the period at which the expression was used. Had Abel, therefore, himself been the historian of the incident, much force might have been due to this remark, and we should have been authorized in some measure to assume

that he spoke of what was neither a new nor a singular mode of worship among men.

But the whole weight of this inference is destroyed the moment we reflect that Moses, and not Abel, was the author of the book of Genesis, and that to the Israelites, and not to the ante-diluvians, was the narrative addressed. The familiarity of the manner, therefore, with which the mention of sacrifice is introduced marks merely the intimacy of Moses and the Israelites with the idea and use of that religious ordinance. This is an intimacy which it would have been strange if they had not learned it while living in Egypt, or from the establishment of the Passover and the multitude and variety of their legal offerings. But it is an intimacy which cannot be made to imply, in the smallest degree, the existence of a divine command for such offerings so soon after the fall.

2. If the preceding argument be destitute of all strength, that which we are next to consider is so full of uncertainty and doubt as to be equally useless and inapplicable. "In process of time," we read in our English Bibles, "it came to pass that Cain brought an offering unto the LORD." But this we are told is an incorrect translation of the Hebrew expression, which ought not to have been rendered "*In process of time,*" but "*At the close of the appointed season.*" Admit the truth of this remark in its fullest extent, and still it will be found incapable of establishing the point it is intended to prove. It will still be a matter of doubt for what purpose this season had been appointed. And those who assert that it was the season which had been already appointed by God himself for the celebration of sacrifices as an act of worship and propitiation for sin, assume the divine institution of that rite whose very divine institution is the subject of debate. That is circular reasoning.

The real truth, however, is that this is not the proper mode of translating the original words but only the interpretation which is put upon that translation by those who defend the divine origin of sacrifices. The true rendering is universally admitted to be that which is found in the margin of our own authorized Version--"After days, or "at the end of days, it came to pass that" Cain and Abel brought their offerings to the Lord. And so general is this phrase, so indefinite in its meaning and so capable of being molded into any form which the prejudices and preconceived opinions of the expositor may require, that both the divine and human institution of animal offerings have been alike attempted to be supported by a reference to its authority.

3. The consuming of Abel's sacrifice by fire from Heaven has been insisted upon as affording not only a strong but a decisive proof of the primitive and divine institution of animal sacrifices. But where is the proof of this fire? There is no statement of a consuming fire in the text. This dubious fact can never, therefore, be brought forward with the force of a conclusion deduced from undeniable premises. But even were the fact completely established, it must still be evident to every impartial mind that the acceptance of Abel's sacrifice by fire can prove no more than its acceptance by any other mode. And it is equally clear that the approbation of an act of piety after it has been performed has no necessary or essential connection with the previous existence of a positive command for its performance. The acceptance, therefore, of Abel's sacrifice, however displayed, marks only the fact of its having been grateful to the Being it was intended to please.

4. I turn now to an argument which, in some slight degree at least, is connected with the nature and obligation of those duties which we owe to our Creator.

Those who promote this argument cite two incidents to support it. "Nadab and Abihu," we are told, "offered strange fire before the LORD which he commanded them not. And there went out a fire from the LORD and devoured them, and they died before the LORD" (Lev. 10:1,2). The ark of God shook as it was carried by oxen from Gibeah, "and Uzzah put forth his hand to the ark of God, and took hold of it. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah; and God smote him there for his error; and there he died by the ark of God" (2 Sam. 6:6,7). Uzzah was smitten because, without authority, he presumed to stabilize the tabernacle of God's dwelling by his fleshly arm. Nadab and Abihu were devoured because they performed their services with fire which the Lord had not commanded them to use.

The argument continues, then, by pointing to God's acceptance of the offering of Abel as contrary to his reaction to Nadab and Abihu and to Uzzah. If the firstlings of Abel's flock had been slaughtered at God's altar without a direct and positive command for such a sacrifice, would not Abel's arm, like that of Uzzah, been stretched forth to slaughter them without authority? And would not Abel, like Nadab and Abihu, have offered that before the Lord which the Lord commanded him not? Would not then his act of worship, like theirs, have called down the vengeance rather than the approbation of God?

We think not. The answer to this argument is that the circumstances of the

cases are materially different. When Nadab and Abihu offered strange fire before the Lord, it was after another fire had been provided by God himself for their use, and after he had commanded that "the fire should ever be burning upon the altar and should never go out" (Lev. 6:13). When Uzzah was punished for supporting the tottering ark, it was because he and his Levite brethren ought to have carried it on their shoulders using poles rather than placing it in a cart drawn by oxen. In both these cases there was a positive irreverence in the act; and in both, the individuals who were the objects of God's wrath had the light of a previous revelation which might have taught them the impropriety of the conduct they pursued.

But Abel, so far as we can perceive, had no revelation to teach him the mode in which he should worship the Almighty. And if he reasoned that an offering of the firstlings of his flock would be the most acceptable service his piety could present, we can never consider it as an act blameworthy or irreverent, nor can we compare it with the acts of Nadab, Abihu, and Uzzah.

Such are the usual arguments by which it has been attempted to infer from the narrative of Moses that sacrifices had been instituted by God before Cain and Abel brought their respective offerings. They are arguments which are so far from being conclusive upon the point, that they do not even afford presumptive evidence of any considerable weight. Let us proceed, therefore, to examine whether a divine command for the practice of animal sacrifices immediately after the fall may not be gathered from circumstances independent of the book of Genesis.

II.

[Circumstances Independent of the Book of Genesis]

The circumstances generally referred to for this purpose are three: first, the universal prevalence of animal offerings; second, the declaration of St. Paul that Abel's offering was made acceptable by his faith; and, third, the alleged impossibility of accounting for the origin of animal and bloody sacrifices from the unassisted dictates of reason alone.

1. Now in examining the first of these circumstances, we must undoubtedly allow that the universal prevalence of animal sacrifices forms one of the most remarkable features in the religious history of man. In every age and every nation of the world--ignorant or enlightened--the same shedding of a victim's blood is found to have been adopted and relied upon as a mode of conciliating an offended deity or acknowledging the dependence of the offerer upon the power and kindness of a protecting deity. Therefore we

must look for the origin of the practice in some period which preceded the first general dispersion of the human race. If we can discover among the earlier records of the human race the history of some transaction which tradition might have handed down to every succeeding age, and in which the sanction of Heaven to the practice of sacrifices of blood was distinctly and solemnly displayed, we have at once done all that is necessary to account for the universality of that religious ordinance without resorting to any assumed command from God.

Now such a transaction may easily be found in the proceedings of Noah when he came forth from the ark. Impressed with the wonders of his salvation from the flood, and conscious of his unworthiness of the least of the mercies he had received, Noah removed the covering of the ark and went forth and "built an altar unto the LORD, and took of every clean beast and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt-offerings on the altar. And the LORD smelled a sweet savor; and the LORD said in his heart, 'I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake. While the earth remains, seed-time and harvest, and cold and heat, and summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease.' And God blessed Noah and his sons" (Gen. 8:20,21,22 and 9:1).

It was impossible for the sons of Noah to have been either ignorant or unmindful of the solemnity of this rite and the solemnity of its acceptance by Jehovah. The blessing, and the sacrifice which called down the blessing, would naturally be fixed in their own thoughts and communicated to their posterity. In every future exigence mankind would naturally recur to the same means of obtaining favor with God. In this course, therefore, we find the Patriarchs persevering; and this course was also pursued by each of the other families by whom the whole earth was divided after the flood.

Thus we find an easy and satisfactory account of the origin of a similar custom in every nation of the world. And why then, with this plain and simple explanation before us, should we unnecessarily presume that animal sacrifices were founded upon the tradition of a positive command when no such command can be found?

2. But of all the arguments independent of the book of Genesis which have been produced for the original institution of animal sacrifices by God, that which is deduced from the words of St. Paul appears to be possessed of by far the most plausibility and force. For does not that Apostle say that "by faith Abel offered a more excellent and acceptable sacrifice than Cain?"

In this argument it is assumed that every individual who is praised for his faith in the eleventh chapter of the Epistle to the Hebrews demonstrated his faith by an obedience to some positive command. But such is very far indeed from being a true representation of the case.

Noah, no doubt, "being warned of God prepared the ark" which God had commanded him to prepare. Abraham, no doubt, when called to go into a strange land, "by faith obeyed the call" and went into the land into which God had commanded him to go. But of the rest of the faithful who are praised, it is certain that many acted without any command given. Thus "by faith Moses, when he was come to years" and had time and understanding to reflect upon the duties which belonged to his station, "refused" any longer "to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter," though we know of no divine command that he should refuse to be so called. Thus "by faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not when," without any special injunction from God, "she received the spies in peace." Jephthah too is accounted among those who were distinguished by their faith, though most assuredly his rash vow was uttered without any direct or divine command. At any rate, therefore, the assertion that faith was the ground of the acceptance of Abel's offering does not necessarily imply any pre-existing divine institution of sacrifice.

But if we consider carefully the manner in which St. Paul has reasoned with regard to Enoch, we shall perceive that the faith of Abel may more naturally be inferred from the mere respect which was shown to his offering than from his obedience to a pre-existing institution. For of Enoch the Apostle observes that "by faith he was translated that he should not see death; and was not found because God had translated him. For before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please him" (Heb. 11:5,6).

In other words, since Enoch was translated because he pleased God, and since without faith it is impossible to please him, it necessarily follows that Enoch was translated because of his faith. His faith, therefore, is to be deduced from the fact of his translation. Such is the argument with regards to Enoch. And from the manner in which St. Paul has just before spoken of Abel, it does certainly seem highly probable that he intended a similar course of argument to be applied to him; for of Abel, as of Enoch, he says that he "obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts" (Gen. 4:4).

Consequently, as the faith of Enoch is to be inferred from the mere fact of

his translation, so may the faith of Abel be deduced from the mere acceptableness of his sacrifice to God. The works of Cain, then, were wicked, because they were desecrated by infidelity; and he was rejected because through unbelief he had not done well. His brother, on the other hand, through belief had done well, and his works were righteous because mixed with faith. And both this faith and this lack of it may be proved from the different manner in which the two offerings were received.

It is not explicitly stated either by Moses or St. Paul in what respect the faith of Abel was superior to that of Cain, yet it not a matter of much difficulty to determine. Besides a general belief in the proposition that "God is, and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him," we may fairly suppose that the faith of Abel comprehended also a firm reliance upon all the promises and revelations which had hitherto come from God. Consequently, we may be certain that Abel believed in that particular promise which assigned to the seed of the woman the office of crushing the serpent's head.

For while we deny that the faith of *all* the worthies enumerated by St. Paul was displayed by their obedience to some special command, we freely admit that they *all* founded their actions and belief upon some pre-existing revelation or promise. Thus "by faith Sarah received strength to conceive, because she judged him faithful who had promised" that she should be "delivered of a child when she was past age" (Heb. 11:11). And Joseph, in a steady belief that God would fulfill his promise and put the descendants of Jacob in possession of their appointed inheritance," by faith . . . made mention of the departing of the children of Israel and gave commandment concerning his bones" (Heb. 11:11). Thus also "by faith did Rahab receive the spies in peace," believing that the Israelites would obtain that victory which God had promised them over the inhabitants of Canaan. And thus shall we find in every instance of faith alluded to by St. Paul, that there was a distinct belief in some preceding promise or revelation, either of a particular kind as in the cases already detailed, or of a more general nature as in the faith of Enoch.

Since then it is certain that the promise of a redemption and a Redeemer had been already communicated to man, and that even before the sacrifice of Abel man had received a revelation of a future deliverance, we are directly and undeniably authorized to assert that it was for his faith in that peculiar and benevolent declaration of God's will that "the LORD had respect unto him and to his offering." And from the same principles we as clearly infer that "unto Cain and to his offering the LORD had not respect," because

Cain was deficient or devoid of that faith.

The respect, therefore, which was shown to the sacrifice of the faithful Abel, and the preference he obtained over the less faithful Cain, can never be condemned as inconsistent with the wisdom and holiness of God or as unworthy to be recorded in a divine revelation, until it has first been proved that the doctrine of our acceptance through faith is either irrational or unrighteous.

If, then, the belief in a previous command is still to be maintained, it must be maintained upon the ground of the impossibility of accounting for the origin of animal sacrifices by reason alone, which is the last of those arguments which have been urged in defense of a divine command for such offerings. The examination of this point will form the subject of the next Lecture, in which I shall bring this lengthened discussion to a close by establishing the two following positions: First, in considering the circumstances in which Abel stood, an offering "of the firstlings of his flock" was neither an unnatural nor an unreasonable service; and second, considering the recorded declarations of the Almighty to our first parents after their transgression, such an offering was perhaps the most proper method he could adopt of demonstrating his faith in the promise of some future deliverance from the consequences of the fall.

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