



Acts and The Early Church (Week 7/8) Worshipped without Blood or Smoke

Small Group Discussion Questions

Connect *In what area of your life do you most need to be reminded that God will finish the work he started?*

Warm-Up

1. Other than your household (or church), *what is your main frontline? Do people know you are a Christian?*
2. Has anyone ever asked you what church is like? What sort of questions do they commonly ask?
3. What would worship have *smelt* like in the ancient world? What was missing in the early church?

Read Acts 17:16-25

4. What were pagan practices of worship like? Why did they have so many idols? *What did Paul think?*
5. Why did people in the Greco-Roman world make sacrifices to idols? *What security did this give them?*
6. What were Jewish practices of worship like? How were Jewish sacrificial practices distinct? (Try to carefully work through the contrast of their origin, focus, and purpose.)
7. What was the purpose of sacrifices in the Jewish Temple? Why was this necessary?
8. What is the link between sin and death? How did the sacrifices help remind people of this?

Read Acts 17:29-31

9. What is the point of God saying that all people are God's offspring? How does this relate to idols?
10. What—according to Paul—is calling all people to do? What does repentance look like in practice?
11. Who will come to judge the world? What is the 'proof' that God has provided to trust in his Son?
12. What are some of the spiritual beliefs common in Australia? What would Paul say about these?

Read Hebrews 13:9-16

13. In what way is Jesus a sacrifice for sin? How is he the ultimate sacrifice made once-and-for-all?
14. What is the parallel between the sacrifice Jesus made and the sacrifices made in the Temple?
15. If Christians make no sacrifices (and do not need to), *why do we offer ourselves as living sacrifices?*
16. Where else in the New Testament do we hear the exhortation to offer our lives as 'living sacrifices'?
17. How is offering ourselves as 'living sacrifices' continual (i.e., it never stops!) and comprehensive (i.e., it involves every aspect of our life). Can you think of examples in your own life?
18. Are there any of your frontlines in which you struggle to see how they can be acts of worship? You might like to take time as a group to reflect on how this area can in fact be orientated to God.
19. What practical reminders/rhythms help you keep on orientation your whole life as a living sacrifice?

Apply *Is there any area of your life in which you think you need to grow as a living sacrifice?*

Pray *Gracious God, thank you for the ultimate sacrifice and provision that you have made for us through your Son. Please help us to daily offer ourselves as living sacrifices in response to your grace. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

GOING DEEPER

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Small Group Discussion Questions

On Your Frontline this Week

Who else is praying for your frontline? You might want to share some prayer points with a friend. Pray for their frontline too.



For Families

- *Download:* some of the family resources to use at home: stbartskids.org

Listen, Watch, and Read

- *Read (article):* “Does the Crucifixion make God a murderer?” by Undeceptions: <https://undeceptions.com/articles/does-the-crucifixion-make-god-a-murderer/>
- *Listen (sermon):* “From Atheism to Faith” by Vaughan Roberts: <https://stebbes.org/sermons/from-atheism-to-faith/#sermons>
- *Listen (sermon):* “With proof” by Rico Tice: https://www.allsouls.org/Media/AllMedia.aspx?show_media=50717&show_file=54375
- *Listen (podcast):* “The Crucifixion” by Undeceptions: <https://undeceptions.com/podcast/the-crucifixion/>
- *Listen (podcast):* “The Rest is History on the Crucifixion” by Tom Holland: <https://podcasts.apple.com/gb/podcast/175-crucifixion/id1537788786?i=1000557553721>
- *Listen (sermon):* “The Sacrifice” by Tim Keller: <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/the-sacrifice/>

Series Resources

- *Read (book):* “Strange Religion” by Nijay Gupta. 
- *Read (commentary):* “The Challenge of Acts” by Tom Wright. 
- *Read (book):* “Why the Gospel” by Matthew Bates.
- *Read (advanced commentary):* “Acts: Witnesses to Him” by Bruce Milne.

 [Available to borrow in the Church library](#)

ACTS: STRANGE RELIGION

*Week 7/8 “Worshipped without Blood or Smoke”
by the Rev’d Adam Lowe (07/09/2025)*

피와 연기가 없는 예배 | Duɔ̃r cin yic Riēm ku Tööl
无血无烟的崇拜 | இரத்தமோ பலியோ இல்லாத ஆராதனை

Bible Passage: Acts 17:16-34 & Hebrews 13:9-16

*Thank you Jesus that you have opened up the way to forgiveness and life.
Please help us to daily offer our lives as a living sacrifice for you. Amen.*

For a variety of reasons, people can often feel really apprehensive about telling others that they are a Christian and go to church. Maybe you’re at work on a Monday and someone comes up to you and asks you what you got up to on the weekend. You might respond by saying, oh, we did Park Run on Saturday, took the kids to sport, tried to squeeze in some life admin/shopping, and, um, *on Sunday morning I went to church.* - - That’s the moment you brace yourself for the response, perhaps grimmacing, glancing away, shielding yourself from what comes next! *You might expect the person to run off in terror or stand there stunned.*

But most of the time, you know what happens? People want to know more. They’ll ask you questions! Like, wow! What is that like? What do you do *at church*? Are there many kids? How many people go? // They’re curious. / *You might be surprised by the TYPE of questions and the QUANTITY of questions people ask.* Perhaps even if they could come along.

But one question, you might never-ever expect is: *how does it smell?* // What would you say? Maybe, Christians aren’t as stinky as you think! Or perhaps, actually it kind of smells like coffee. Or flowers.

- But in the ancient world
whether it was in the way that pagans worshipped,
or when Jews gathered at the Temple to worship,
it smelt like smoke.
- Thick pungent smoke. / It was the smell of sacrifices.
- *There were of course significant differences between how the Pagans and Jews worshipped,*
but sacrifices were at the heart of the ancient way of worship. //

But Christians were radically different.

- *No idol.*
No altar.
No smoke.
No temple.
- The absence of these things would have spoken volumes.
It would have felt completely disorientating.
Like a modern church service without a Bible reading or praise.
Like being invited to a BBQ or visiting the sausage sizzle tent at bunnings,
but the grill is cold and there's just salads on the table.
- **What was missing made it weird.**
- Yet, the lack of a sacrifice didn't dismiss the need,
but pointed to the way that it had been fulfilled.

So let's try and wrap our heads and hearts around that.

- In order to do so, we need to grapple with three things:
The Need for Sacrifice;
The Ultimate Sacrifice; and
The Living Sacrifice.

THE NEED FOR SACRIFICE | ACTS 17:22-24

제사의 필요 | Kōr dē kōc | 献祭的必要性 | பலியின் அவசியம்

First, the **need for sacrifice**. Let's take a look at Acts 17, verse 22. / *But first some backstory...*

Paul is in Athens. He has been reasoning in the Synagogue and in the marketplace, day after day, with both Jews and Greeks... And then finally, he gets up at the meeting of the Areopagus, which was a forum in which the latest teaching, philosophies, or religions could get hashed out and Paul says:

"People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship —and this is what I am going to proclaim to you."

Paul had been distressed to see just how crowded the city of Athens is with idols.

- There were idols *everywhere* for *everything*.
- Idol worship was deeply ingrained into daily life,
and inescapably woven into their festivals, architecture, and politics of the day.
- *Athens was renowned for its openness to the latest spiritual trends, so there was a range of views.*
However, it would have been typical for people to make offerings at some of these altars,
of grain, wine, meat, and the burning of incense.
- They not only believed that a particular god or spirit could inhibit that idol,

but also that if you did the right things and made the right sacrifices,
you *might be able to appease and keep the wrath of the gods at bay, as the smoke wafted upward.*

- If you were lucky, you might even *please* them insomuch to gain blessing:
be it fertility, protection, or even guidance. /
- This was the way that they thought they could kind of have access to the gods,
and be shielded from their fury. / You'd never have any security or know where you stood.
- In fact, you could never really even be sure that you had covered all your bases! //
That's what we see as Paul spots an idol to an 'unnamed god'.
On one level they were trying to show their progressiveness in being open,
but on another level they were effectively making a spiritual hedge in case they had missed one!
- / The smell of the sacrifices that filled the city, was also the smell of insecurity.
Of misplaced trust and a mistaken way to approach God — that's why Paul is distressed. /

We know that there also was a Jewish community in the city of Athens because Paul spent time in the synagogue reasoning and pointing them to Jesus.

- Idols—of course—were strictly forbidden for Jews.
There's a few times when they got that spectacularly wrong.
But offering and sacrifices at the Temple were central in Judaism as part of religious practice.
- When a sacrifice was made, almost always involving the slaughter of an animal,
the whole of it, or some portion of it, would then be burnt on the altar.

- Sacrifices were central in both the Greco-Roman and Jewish ways of worship,
but the Jewish ways were utterly distinct from the pagan practices of sacrifice. //
- The Jewish practice of sacrifice:
Originated *from God* not man.
Focused *on one God* not many.
Was relational rather than transactional.
Was based on obedient faith and not fear.
Were substitutions for sin not a purchasing of favour.
- There were all sorts of offerings and sacrifices that Jews needed to make, but one of the main reasons was to not only reminded them of the gap between them and God,
between our sin and his holiness, but also:
to grapple with the relationship between sin and death. / That's why blood needed to be spilt.
When an animal needs to be killed because of your sin, it's hard to forget that sin has a cost.

When we think about this system of sacrifice, and the need for sacrifice, *it can sound offensive.*

- In fact it should! That's kind of the point.
- *It might be a bit gruesome, but can you imagine what it was like, especially with a larger animal:*
Of the physical exertion that would have been needed. The sweat, the noise, and the blood.
- / The Temple was the place where God was especially present with his people,
but it was only possible to draw close as a priest, a mediator, offered a sacrifice on your behalf. /

- We might be quick to think, how obscene, gruesome, and primitive! Even unnecessary!
- But that's because, at least in part, that in our culture and our world, we diminish just how much of a problem is sin, guilt, and shame...
We can think, surely the gap between us and God is not that big.
Or surely my sin doesn't really compare to when I do really really bad things.
- But because God is *perfectly holy* and *perfectly just*, there's no amount of sin that will do.
And there's nothing I can do to really take that sin away.

A few weeks ago I was cooking a cheesecake for our youngest's eighth birthday. I had made the cake, cooked the cake... and then prepared the lemon curd for the top. It was getting late, I was keen to go to bed, but just before I poured the curd on the top, I tasted it. Something was seriously wrong. Instead of half a cup of sugar, I had tipped in half a cup of salt. *And there was nothing that could remove it or compensate for it. That's like sin.*

- Sin fractures our relationship with God, with one another, and with the world.
And if we long for forgiveness then God still needs to justly and completely deal with it. /
- Imagine if every time we sinned that an animal had to be killed! The author of the letter to the Hebrews sums it up saying, without the shedding of blood, *There is no forgiveness.*
- *You would not have been possibly able to dismiss the costliness of sin and the barrier it creates.*
- You're reminded over-and-over again. / *But you'd also be longing for a permanent solution. //*
- The pagan systems were a desperate attempt for humans to try and reach out to God, but the Jewish way of sacrifice was a gracious accommodation of God reaching out to us.

THE ULTIMATE SACRIFICE | ACTS 17:29-31 & HEBREWS 13

완전한 제사 | Yic theëc dë Kōc | 终极献祭 | இறுதியான பலி

*But God didn't stop there in reaching out to us,
because he came to us as the **ultimate sacrifice**. Verse 29...*

"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands **all people everywhere to repent**. For he has set a day **when he will judge the world with justice by the man** he has appointed. He has **given proof** of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

When Paul says, that we are God's offspring, he's making the point to the greeks and to all, that all of life stems from one God who is the Lord of heaven and earth.

- To the greeks, he's saying: it's nonsense to think that this God, the one and only true God, is somehow *caught up* and *contained* in the idols that you made with your own hands.
- What sort of 'god' would that be? Weak? Feeble? Actually, imaginary! They're not real. //
- The people in Athens had a reputation for getting quite excited by new spiritual fads. /
- As modern people, we can kind of think, *we'd never get caught up with such silliness!*
We're way too smart for that! We're rational. Scientific. Never superstitious.
- But of course we do. People believe all sorts of *spiritual* things.
The question is what gives you confidence, what is the basis for what you believe? /

As Paul calls the greeks—and the Jews—to repent, to turn to and back to God, he's not asking them to do so on the basis of how eloquent or convincing his argument is. /

- *Of how impressed they might be by his spiritual insights or innovation. /*
- He's saying, you need to put your trust in the one whom God has raised from the dead.
- The resurrection of Jesus is the proof. That's the basis of your belief. //
- *We can be quick to not only dismiss the problem of sin, but also the promise that God will judge the world.*
- But hear what Paul is saying: that as surely as Jesus was raised from the dead, he will return to judge the world with his perfect justice. / He has set a day. It's coming. //
- And the only basis that any of us can possibly have confidence for that day, is because Jesus has already paid the price for our sin on the cross.
- The fact that he was raised shows us, it is the proof, that he was victorious.
- The writer to the letter to the Hebrews puts it like this:

The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come. (Hebrews 13:11-14)

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews is making a parallel between:
the sacrifices that were made in the Temple and what Jesus has done on the cross.

- The point is not that they are *equivalent*, but that what Jesus has done is the *fulfilment*.
- That's a core theme in the letter to the Hebrews on repeat.

That Jesus is the great high priest who sympathises with our weakness + gives access to God (ch.4)
He has appeared once for all at the culmination of ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. (ch.9)
That we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (ch.10)
That is by his single offering he has perfected for all time those who were being sanctified (ch.10)

- Jesus did what the sacrificial system only foreshadowed.
Jesus once-and-for-all has atoned — paid the price — our sin.
He takes away our sin, our guilt, and our shame.
- There is:
Nowhere else to look.
No other spiritual hedge to be placed.
No sacrifice that needs to be made.
No more blood to be shed. / Because of WHAT Jesus has done for us. //

Richard Dawkins in his book the 'God Delusion',
says that that this idea of atonement, as absolutely central to Christianity is:

vicious, sadomasochistic and repellent... If God wanted to forgive our sins, why not just forgive them, without having himself tortured and executed in payment. . . ?”

- Dawkins hasn't only missed the connection between sin and death, but also that in order for justice to be done that someone had to pay the price.
- And so God — the entire Trinity was *lovingly* at work — stepped in and did it himself for us.
- For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son. //
- How do you respond to that?
- We're told in Athens, that in response to the call to repent: some rejected it, some wanted to know more, and some believed.
- But it seems no one was repulsed. Because they all understood the need for a sacrifice. //
- When Paul points out the unnamed idol to the Greeks, it's like he's saying, you've not only missed one, but you missed THE ONE.
- Christians can approach God with confidence. You can approach God with confidence and security, not through an idol, nor the offering of sacrifices over-and-over again, but through Jesus.

THE LIVING SACRIFICE | HEBREWS 13

살아있는 제사 | Kööc Piir | 活祭 | ജീവ பலി

The only sacrifice that Christians offer is a **living sacrifice**. Ourselves! *Back to Hebrews 13...*

[15] Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. *And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.*

It's really interesting that whenever God critiqued the way that his people worshipped in the OT, or when Jesus critiqued the worshipping practice of some of the religious folk of the day, there were almost always two concerns at the heart of the rebuke.

- That despite them going through the motions:
- Their hearts were distant; Their obedience was lacking.
- Note that the author of the letter to the Hebrews addresses both. Offer to God a sacrifice of praise — *that speaks to the singing out of hearts transformed by God.* And do not forget to do good and to share with others — *that's living obedient lives for God.*
- We don't do these things to be saved, but their evidence that we are saved!
- *It's similar in Romans 12 as Paul exhorts God's children to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, that this is true and proper worship.*
- The Christian does not need to make sacrifices in order to be saved. But because we are saved, we offer our whole lives to God. / It's all encompassing.

- **It is continual** — it is our life-long response;
It is comprehensive — it involves every aspect of our lives.
- Our work, our family lives, our giving, our rest, our all — is orientation to God in praise.
Not just when we gather on a Sunday. Our lives are to be constant worship of God. //
- The sacrifice in Christian worship — *as you look around the room — is the life of the Christian.*
- / Do we do that perfectly? Not even close. /
But in God's kindness, he is pleased even with the feeblest but sincere offering.

In C S Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia, one of the main characters — *Edmund* — goes from selfish traitor to faithful King. After being lured by the White Witch with the promises of Turkish Delight and power, his selfishness and betrayal almost destroys his siblings and puts the whole land of Narnia at risk. / And when the White Witch demands Edmund's life because he is a traitor, Aslan—the Lion—stands in his place. Aslan dies in Edmund's place. Edmund doesn't witness the death. But he knows that Aslan died *in his place*. *Edmund knows—with sorrow—that it was his treachery that put Aslan there.* //

Aslan met Edmund's greatest need for forgiveness through the very sacrifice of his own life. //

How do you respond to the one who has saved you? The only possible response that makes any sense, Is to live your whole life for them. / And that's precisely what Edmund did. Not in order to earn or pay back salvation, but in response to being saved.

After Edmund encounters the risen Aslan he's transformed. He goes on to live for the true and living King. Or as beaver says, the one who is Lord of the whole wood. To whom everything belongs.

It's not just the Lord of the wood who stepped in for us.
But the Lord of heaven and earth. The Lord of everything!

We don't have idols because our God is alive. / We can come to him anytime and anywhere.
We don't need to make sacrifices of our sin because Jesus has done that once and for all.

We turn our whole lives to him, because:

it's to him — the Lord of Heaven and Earth, that everything belongs; and
it's through him — that everything that has been redeemed.

Jesus is not only the source of our confidence.

Jesus is to be the object of our praise *forever*.