



A Better Sacrifice

Pentecost Sunday, June 8, 2025

Pastor Dave Schultz

Gospel Lesson, Mark 13:1-8, 14-16

¹ As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!”

² “Do you see all these great buildings?” replied Jesus. “Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

³ As Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴ “Tell us, when will these things happen? And what will be the sign that they are all about to be fulfilled?”

⁵ Jesus said to them: “Watch out that no one deceives you. ⁶ Many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and will deceive many. ⁷ When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. Such things must happen, but the end is still to come. ⁸ Nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places, and famines. These are the beginning of birth pains...

¹⁴ “When you see ‘the abomination that causes desolation’ standing where it does not belong—let the reader understand—then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. ¹⁵ Let no one on the housetop go down or enter the house to take anything out. ¹⁶ Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak.”

Sermon, “A Better Sacrifice”¹

In our June *Parish Visitor* I wrote that I have something in common with Pope Leo XIV. That something is that in 1982, Robert Prevost (as Pope Leo was known at the time) earned his Master of Divinity from the Catholic Theological Union in Hyde Park, Chicago. I likewise have studied there. I walked those same halls and perused those same shelves of CTU’s library. I only took one class there, but that’s enough for me to have a small educational connection with Pope Leo XIV.

I took that class in the fall of 1997, and it was entitled, “Rabbinic Judaism and Jesus’ Jewish Background.” It was taught by Hayim Perelmuter, a Jewish rabbi—not a Jewish Christian, but a Jewish Jew, and it was one of the most unique classes I’ve ever taken. He began teaching at CTU in 1969, so he may have had the future pope in one of his classes.

With most classes, I was familiar with the material on day one. Not with this class. Everything in it was brand new to me. I think that statement underscores one of the deficiencies of Christianity, and that is that we have lost our connection to our Jewish roots. We study the Bible—and rightly so—but we forget that every book in the Bible was written by a Jew.

Through the centuries, Christians have blamed the Jews for the crucifixion of Christ—not realizing that Jesus was not only crucified by Jews, but he was also crucified by Pontius Pilate and the Romans. That means that Jesus was crucified by all humanity because all humans are sinners. You cannot lay the blame for the crucifixion at the feet of the Jews only.

Rabbi Perelmuter wrote a book entitled, “Siblings,” the premise of which is that Jews and Christians are, in fact, sibling faiths. We’re closely related. We’re more alike than we are different. And that’s important for us today as we see a rise in anti-Semitism in our country in the wake of the Hamas terror attack on Israel on October 7, 2023.

Despite our similarities, there’s been a schism—a split in the family, as deep as the ancient split between Jacob and Esau. When did that split occur? When did Jew and Christian each go their own way?

The answer to that question takes us all the way back to the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Second Temple. That event was predicted by Jesus in 30 A.D. and recorded by Mark in 60 A.D. and finally fulfilled by the Roman General Titus in 70 A.D.

Because we are Christians, we generally fail to grasp the significance of this event as it would have affected First Century Jews. The destruction of the Temple was a defining moment for the Jews, a turning point with lasting consequences.

With that in mind, I would like to explore this passage in light of Jewish history concerning this landmark event. I am convinced this will enable us as 20th Century Christians to find meaning for our lives today.

¹ Sources: Emil Bernhard Cohn and Hayim Perlmutter, *This Immortal People*, Paulist Press.
Hayim Perlmutter, *Siblings*, Paulist Press.
Lawrence Schiffman, *From Text to Tradition*, KTAV.

Judaism in the First Century was not a unified religion. The gospels testify to this fact. There were many different sects vying for the heart and soul of the Jews. The Pharisees were separatists who believed in the immortality of the soul as well as angels and the resurrection. On the other hand, the Sadducees denied all of these. The Pharisees represented mostly the middle and lower classes while the Sadducees represented the ruling class.

We're familiar with those two sects because they are referred to often in the New Testament. Another group not mentioned in the New Testament were the Essenes. They were precursors to Christian monks, usually living very austere, communal lives in places such as the Qumran Desert. The Essenes are the group responsible for the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Another Jewish sect were the followers of Jesus. The first generation of Christians did not consider themselves as founders of a new religion, but rather as another sect or branch of Judaism, like the Essenes or the Pharisees.

Making up yet another branch of Judaism were the Zealots, who were fiercely nationalistic and willing to take on the whole Roman Empire in order to liberate Israel. One of Jesus' disciples, the lesser known Simon, was a Zealot.

To understand the destruction of the temple, we will want to understand the mindset of the Zealots. When God did not bring the political liberation from Rome which the Zealots had expected, they joined ranks with some of the more radical Pharisees and together they began taking matters into their own hands. They launched an uprising against the Roman government and by the year 66 A.D. had succeeded in driving all Roman soldiers from Jewish soil. They also succeeded, however, in provoking the wrath of Rome and its Caesar, Nero. Nero dispatched the Roman General Flavius Vespasian to Israel in order to quell the uprising once and for all. The Jews, led by the Zealots, prepared to defend their homeland.

Vespasian launched an inch-by-inch battle to reclaim the Promised Land for Rome. He finally laid siege on Jerusalem, which was bulging with pilgrims and refugees seeking protection within its walls. Jesus had warned the Jews to flee the city, but far too many sought refuge within its walls and were doomed.

The Zealots were determined to fight to the end, and expected the whole city to have that same determination. In fact, they burnt the stores of wheat and barley so that the Jews had no choice but to fight to the death.

Paradoxically, when Vespasian came to Jerusalem, he proclaimed to its inhabitants, "Fools, why do you seek to destroy this city and burn the temple? I only demand of you that you deliver to me one bow or one arrow, and then I will depart from you."

The Jewish Talmud may be guilty of understatement, but the point is that Rome was interested in reaching a peaceful settlement with Jerusalem. Many of the Jews, including a certain Rabbi Johanan Ben Zakkai, wanted to take advantage of the peaceful solution proposed by Vespasian. Rabbi Ben Zakkai is known as the most important rabbi you've never heard of.

Ironically, Rabbi Johanan's nephew, Ben Battiah, was the leader of the Zealots and was the man responsible for burning the stores of wheat and barley. He was determined that no one should leave Jerusalem alive.

Rabbi Johanan, wanted to make peace with Vespasian and was determined to leave Jerusalem. However, when he expressed his intent to his nephew, Ben Battiah said, "We have made an agreement among ourselves that nobody shall leave the city—except the dead."

At that, the peace-seeking Pharisee came up with a plan. He instructed his followers to "Carry me through the city in a coffin until I am able to leave."

So the rabbi was placed in a coffin—alive—and carried about Jerusalem until sunset. Finally, Rabbi Johanan's disciples went to the gate of the city where Jewish guards questioned them. "What have you got here?" they asked.

"The body of Rabbi Johanan. We must take his coffin outside, for a corpse may not be kept in Jerusalem overnight."

Just to be certain, the guards were prepared to pierce the body through, but in words echoing John's account of the crucifixion of Jesus, Rabbi Johanan's disciples said, "Shall the Romans say, 'They have pierced their master?'"

The coffin was delivered to General Vespasian, whereupon it was opened and the peace-seeking rabbi stepped out and greeted the general as if the general were a king. This put General Vespasian in a difficult position because if he accepted the complement, he would be guilty of rebelling against Nero and subject to death. Remember one of the charges against Jesus was that he claimed to be king and the crowds declared, "We have no king but Caesar! Crucify him!"

Rabbi Johanan addressed the general, saying, "You will soon be king for there is a tradition rooted in scripture that the Temple will not be delivered into the hand of a common soldier, but to a king."

Sure enough, within days Vespasian received word that Nero was dead, and he was summoned to Rome to become its Emperor.

Before Vespasian left, he did two things: First, he placed the army under the leadership of his son, Titus. Second, he asked Rabbi Johanan to ask a favor of the new emperor. The rabbi asked the general to spare Jerusalem, but that request was denied. So then the Rabbi asked for permission to establish a rabbinical school at Yavneh on the Mediterranean Coast. That favor was granted. So the peace-loving rabbi led a small band of students to Yavneh. The move was in accordance with Jesus' warning to flee Jerusalem before the end. It also fulfilled his prediction that a remnant would be spared.

There was no peace for Jerusalem. The new general, Titus, was less compassionate than Vespasian and assaulted the city with battering rams until the walls crumbled. Soldiers desecrated the Temple with the blood of pigs, raped women in the Holy of Holies, and finally demolished the Temple altogether.

Sometime after the carnage, Rabbi Johanan and his students returned to the city and beheld the Temple in ruins. The Rabbi listened to the lamentations of his students. They asked

Rabbi Johanan, "How can atonement ever be made again now that the Temple was destroyed?"

The Rabbi replied, "We have another means of atonement which is as effective, and that is the practice of lovingkindness, as it is stated, 'For I desire lovingkindness and not sacrifice' (quoting from Hosea 6:6). And so we find with Daniel, who devoted himself to acts of lovingkindness (by fulfilling the word of God), giving alms to the poor and praying three times a day."

With that statement, Rabbi Johanan began the reshaping of Judaism from a religion centered on the blood sacrifice of animals to a religion of prayer, almsgiving, and heartfelt devotion to God. In that respect, the Judaism of today is far removed from the Judaism of the Old Testament.

A recent news story reported on the Jewish desire to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Would that mean a return to animal sacrifice? Rabbi Perelmuter said that if the Temple were ever rebuilt, it is almost certain that the system of animal sacrifice would not be resumed. And that dovetails with last week's message, that God has continually led his people, both Christian and Jew, toward more humane systems of worship.

In 70 A.D., the Jewish system of animal sacrifices died. But out of the ashes, a system of new faith practices arose. An old system of atonement was carried out of the city in a coffin, and out of that coffin arose the teacher of a new system of prayer, almsgiving, and heart devotion. And those practices compare very favorably to what we in Methodism refer to as the means of grace.

The means of grace are spiritual disciplines and practices that help us grow in faith and deepen our relationship with God. They include such things as reading, meditating and studying the scriptures, prayer, attending worship, and almsgiving, to name a few.

What that means is that post 70 A.D., Jews and Christians are much closer to one another in devotion to God and in faith practices than we often realize. And Rabbi Perelmuter was right: Christians and Jews really are siblings. And as siblings, we should defend one another and love one another.