

The Relationship of Re-Symbolizing to Sacrifice

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Abstract: The passage under consideration calls upon many scriptural examples to show the relationship of living by the Spirit to the idea of sacrifice, which must be preceded by re-symbolizing the material world.

Text: Romans 8:1-17

8 Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus,² because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you^[a] free from the law of sin and death. ³For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh,^[b] God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.^[c] And so he condemned sin in the flesh,⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

⁵Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what the flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. ⁶The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. ⁸Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.

⁹You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. ¹⁰But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life^[d] because of righteousness. ¹¹And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of^{f[e]} his Spirit who lives in you.

¹²Therefore, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation—but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. ¹³For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live.

¹⁴For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. ¹⁵The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship.^[f] And by him we cry, "Abba,^[g] Father." ¹⁶The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

The root of spiritual change is not in personal experience, but in an act we could call re-symbolizing. In resymbolizing, a person makes the choice to evaluate a situation, circumstance, or even one's life in view of a revealed perspective, not with the input of the sinful nature.

In Exodus chapter 14 at the brink of the Red Sea, the people evaluated what seemed to them to be certain disaster and wanted to go back to Egypt:

¹⁰ As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. ¹¹ They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? ¹² Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!" ¹³ Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."

Moses call them not to ignore the situation—the chariots, the Red Sea, the other factors-- but to resymbolize it in terms of what the Lord would do for them, not in terms of their assessment of the danger, nor their strategies to address the danger.

Apparently they did not learn from this experience, because in Numbers chapter 14, the people again evaluated their experience from the vantage point of their own fears and their own solutions when they again wanted to return to Egypt. As we learn from the recounting of that experience in Psalm 78, it was because their hearts were not faithful.

In fact, the failure to resymbolize one's surroundings according to what God would say about it, is faithlessness.

When Abraham took his son Isaac to Mt. Moriah, he had to resymbolize all he knew about physics and physiology. The book of Romans tells us that he had to resymbolize everything about Isaac's life and the "facts" of what the end of a life meant.

The role of revelation in our lives is to close the gap between what God says and our understanding of our lives, through the development of symbols; moving from the natural understanding to the non-natural.

There is one way that a person can have proof that he or she has re-symbolized experience and assessment of one's life: sacrifice.

If Abraham hadn't been willing and hadn't actually tried to sacrifice his son, there would be no proof he had resymbolized his precious son. In the same way, we experience through sacrifice our own quickening, our own coming to life. We can look at the natural representations of things but find that revelation almost always challenges our natural understandings and calls us to resymbolize in terms that God provides. And we only demonstrate that through sacrifice.

In Exodus 14 and Numbers 14, the people refused to go forward as the armies closed in on them and refused to sacrifice themselves to go and fight in Canaan. They hadn't resymbolized anything. They insisted on operating on their own fears that were generated by their own evaluation of their situations.

The basis for sacrifice is resymbolization. It's not just a proof of something, it is itself a threshold. We go through that door and are quickened on the other side of the door. We can see this in most unusual places in the Bible. For instance, even businessmen are called to not predict outcomes based on their own assessments, but to yield—sacrifice—such to God. We read in James 4:

¹³ Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." ¹⁴ Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶ As it is, you boast in your arrogant schemes. All such boasting is evil. ¹⁷ If anyone, then, knows the good they ought to do and doesn't do it, it is sin for them.

We can see three phases in the sequence of resymbolizing:

- First, the presence of natural representations -- up until revelation begins to help with resymbolizing
- Second, generalizing that leads up to and includes the act of sacrifice
- And third, the quickened state that results

In this sense, generalizations and the act of resymbolizing are an index.

The further you move from the natural representations to the revealed ones, the more the quickening.

What Abraham did, even in a figurative sacrifice, was a proof. For instance, the proof that an animal has been resymbolized—from possession to offering—is the act of taking the animal to the temple to be sacrificed. David, when offered the threshing floor as the site of the temple, refused to just take it. He sacrificed by paying for it.

In His Temptations, Jesus had to take all the things offered to Him by Satan (physical sustenance, the treasures of the world, even the protection of God) and resymbolize them in terms of what God said about each. And in the process, He proved His resymbolizing by refusing to take them from Satan.

What prepares someone for the conflicts of life? In all pragmatic examples in Scripture, people resymbolized their circumstances in view of God's words, and this marked a strategic turn of events in their lives. Contrast this to those who died in the desert—they weren't willing to resymbolize; they weren't willing to sacrifice. The two are tied together.

Look at the examples of people who did show their resymbolism by the proof of sacrifice:

- Jehosaphat, sending his singers out before the enemy armies
- Elisha, asking God to show his servant a different view of the surrounding armies

- Both Elijah and Gideon were at first unwilling to resymbolize, but later did and proved it by their self-sacrifice
- The widow of Zarephath who resymbolized her own hunger and her meager provisions in light of what God said about them in order to feed Elijah
- The Shunammite woman who refused to “face reality” about her dead son because of his miraculous birth—sacrificing everything to singlemindedly seek someone to raise him from the dead
- The Ninevites who did not depend on their great political and economic power but resymbolized their status with the sacrifice of fasting and prayer

The question in Romans 8 is, I or the Spirit? Verses 1-11 show we are under a different regime —“the realm of the Spirit”—when we become Christians. We no longer assess things via our fears or experience. We must give up, sacrifice—but by doing we access the kind of power that raised Jesus from the dead. Our sacrifice proves we have resymbolized—a visible threshold, that we can expect will be followed by a quickening.

Paul said repeatedly that his life was a sacrifice. He would have seen himself on a continuum—moving with the Spirit toward quickening.

This is indexic power, that links the eternal to the temporal. It can link, or it can sever. It pulls you out of sinful representations into the regime of the Spirit.

We are not just suggested to live by the Spirit, we are OBLIGATED to do so. Without the shift and resymbolization, we will die, says the book of Romans. Our misdeeds are caused by “natural” representations. But for those led by the Spirit, He bears witness, testifies, authenticates. By so doing, He is demonstrating for the world the union of the human mind with the eternal. In fact, that was the purpose of all spiritual gifts—to bear witness to a union between the two worlds.

Trust is essential, clinging to the Spirit and depending on Him is essential. The Israelites refused to use the words of God to resymbolize their experiences. In each crucial decision, they almost always refused to resymbolize what they saw.

Do you need to resymbolize something in your life? You would start by seeking out the proper symbols in Scripture, and prepare to sacrifice your own assessments. That sacrifice is a threshold across which you can expect to have a quickening such that only the Spirit can provide.

You can’t just “work up” or generate your own symbols. They can’t come from within yourself. You can only sacrifice based on Biblical symbols. By so doing, you validate your resymbolization of your own world, your own experiences, your own assessment of reality. You show that you have moved away from your own sinful nature, crossing the threshold into a new regime in which the Spirit, not your own “natural” views, will rule.

