

GOD WITH US
Part 1: The Great Blessing
Genesis – Deuteronomy

Message 8 – Approaching a Holy God
through Sacrifices and Offerings
Leviticus 1-15

Introduction

The book of Exodus concluded with the presence of God gloriously filling the newly constructed Tabernacle. The book of Leviticus picks up the story by showing the people *how* they must approach their awesome and holy God who now dwells in their midst. “*Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy*” (19:2). How can unholy people approach this most holy God? Only as their sins are covered by sacrifices.

As the name implies, Leviticus focuses on the duties of the *Levites* (the priestly tribe in Israel) in leading the people in approaching Yahweh through sacrifice. In order for Abraham’s descendants to be a blessing to the entire world (Genesis 12:1-3), they must maintain fellowship with Yahweh, the true source of all blessing. Yet, in order to maintain fellowship with Yahweh, Israel must worship Him appropriately. *The strength of Israel’s ‘kingdom-of-priests’ testimony to the world (Exodus 19:5,6) will be directly tied to the strength of their worship of and connection to Yahweh.*

Kinds of Offerings: Leviticus 1:1-6:7

My former teaching colleague, Dr. Paul Tanner, gives an excellent overview of the sacrificial system as described in the opening chapters of Leviticus:

The sacrificial system of the Old Testament was very complex, and included both scheduled sacrifices and unscheduled sacrifices. Unscheduled sacrifices included the peace offering, sin offering, etc. Some sacrifices were offered in regard to sin (sin offering, and guilt offering). Others were an expression of thanksgiving, gratitude, or for one’s love for YHWH. Some sacrifices were offered to deal with ceremonial uncleanness (e.g., the sacrifices required of the woman following childbirth in Lev 12). Furthermore, the sacrifices could be on an individual basis or on a national basis (e.g., the Day of Atonement). As one can easily determine, the sacrificial system required thousands of animals and continual activity for the priests who had to perform the necessary procedures. Nevertheless, sacrifice was the essence of worship in the Old Testament, and was designed to be done in

conjunction with faith. The motives behind a sacrifice could include any of the following concepts: 1) A Gift. Sacrifice involved a surrender of what one was and what one had. As the worshipper lost something (the sacrifice had to be totally consumed either by the priest or upon the altar), something was gained (the satisfaction of worship and recognition that everything belonged to God). 2) Communion. Sacrifice could express that longing in man for union with God and fellowship. 3) Expiation (payment of guilt). Since blood was such a predominant aspect of the sacrificial system, the worshipper was constantly mindful of his sinful condition and need for expiation. His sin and guilt could only be dealt with by a blood sacrifice. This called attention to the seriousness of sin and man's need for a substitute to bear his punishment. (Paultanner.org, on Leviticus 1-10. Paul's detailed notes on the entire Bible are available at Paultanner.org. He also has many other helpful resources there.)

Following are the five basic kinds of offerings and their purposes.

**See Addendum for discussion of blood sacrifices in Scripture.

The Burnt Offering: 1:1-17

The Burnt Offering was fundamental to Israel's daily worship ritual, both individually and corporately. Whether a bull, a lamb, a goat, or a pigeon (depending on the worshippers ability), the offering was *entirely consumed by fire* on the altar. None of it was left to be consumed by the priests. After laying one's hands on the offering (signifying the transfer of sin), the sacrifice was made by the priest (signifying a death to atone for sin) and the smoke of the offering ascended heavenward (signifying God's acceptance of the offering). The worshipper would leave with a renewed commitment to live all of life as a sort of sacrifice to God.

The Grain Offering: 2:1-16

People could bring various kinds of Grain Offerings (also called Meal Offerings) to the Lord as a symbol of their gratitude for His provisions. Often, a Grain Offering would accompany other kinds of offerings. The grain could be prepared in different ways (thick loaf, thin loaf, pancake, etc.). The priest would burn a portion of the grain on the altar. The remainder would be eaten by the priest. The worshipper left with nothing, recognizing that everything was a gift from God . . . including the gift of forgiveness of sins.

Salt was a key component in all Grain Offerings. ***“Every grain offering of yours, moreover, you shall season with salt, so that the salt of the covenant of your God shall not be lacking from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt” (Lev.2:13).*** Why? Because salt was a preservative that symbolized, among other things, permanence and friendship. ***“All the offerings of the holy gifts, which the sons of Israel offer to***

the Lord, I have given to you and your sons and your daughters with you, as a perpetual allotment. It is an everlasting covenant of salt before the Lord to you and your descendants with you” (Numbers 18:19). When the Israelites added salt to their Grain Offerings they were reminded that God’s call upon them, as His special friends, was irrevocable and permanent. Speaking of Israel’s future as a nation, the apostle Paul wrote: **“For the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (Romans 11:29).** That was written after Israel’s rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, enforcing all the more the idea of permanence in God’s covenant with them.

The Peace Offering: 3:1-17

Unlike other offerings, the Peace Offering involved a meal that God, the priest, the worshipper and the worshipper’s friends could all participate in. A portion of the offering was burnt before the Lord, while the remainder became the substance for a celebratory meal for priest and worshipper(s). The worshipper would leave the tabernacle with a sense of joy that he/she had peace with God.

*The apostle Paul might have been thinking of the Peace Offering when he penned Romans 5:1,2. He had just described in detail the sacrifice that Christ made to take away our sins. Then, these joy-filled words: **“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”** As believers, we have access into God’s presence because the sacrifice of Jesus has opened the way for us. What an occasion for a Peace Offering from our lives!*

The Sin Offering: 4:1-5:13

Sin Offerings were specified for different classes of individuals: priests, leaders, common Israelites. This offering dealt with “unintentional” sins (with no premeditation or defiance against God; elsewhere called “high-handed sins”). The Sin Offering required genuine repentance on the part of the worshipper. The purpose was to re-establish fellowship with God. The worshipper would leave the sanctuary with a sense of forgiveness for his/her trespasses against God’s laws.

The Guilt Offering: 5:14-6:7

As an extension of the Sin Offering, the Guilt Offering added *restitution*, since these offenses involved loss of property. The wrong must be made right between the offender and the offended. If the person defrauded was God, then reparation was made to Him in the form of a fine.

The Priests' Portions: 6:8-7:38

This section deals with the specifics of how the priests were to handle each type of offering. It also specifies those portions of each offering that were allotted to the priests. Those who served at the Tabernacle obtained their basic sustenance from their work as God's representatives. When Israel later occupied the Promised Land, the tribe of Levi was not given a geographical allotment along with the other 11 tribes. Instead, their "inheritance" was the Lord and His work. (The Levites were given specified cities throughout Israel in which they could live.)

The LORD said to Aaron, "You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites" (Numbers 18:20).

"The Levites, however, will not receive any allotment of land. Their role as priests of the LORD is their allotment" (Josh 18:7).

The Installation of the High Priest: 8:1-9:24

The 7-day Ordination Period: 8:1-36

This chapter describes in minute detail the process by which Aaron and his sons were formally installed into ministry. Aaron was the High Priest. The office was hereditary, thus his sons would have followed in his role. Initially, they would have served as key assistants to their father in his role as Israel's primary spiritual leader. After an initial ceremony of sacrifice and purification, Aaron and his sons remained within the Tabernacle courtyard for a period of seven days and nights. This was the period of time during which God officially sealed their ordination into ministry.

During Israel's earliest history as a nation (1400-1000 BC), they had no human king. God's intended form of rule for Israel was a *theocracy* (God-rule) instead of a *monarchy* (man-rule). This made the role of the High Priest even more important, since he represented the people before the true King, Yahweh. The High Priest was responsible to go before King Yahweh to ask for His decision concerning important national issues. Portions of the Priests garment, particularly the breastplate, were used in the process of gaining answers from God. When the nation sinned against their King, it was the High Priest who alone represented them in His presence (the Most Holy Place) with a sacrifice of atonement, asking for forgiveness. There was no more important office or individual than that of High Priest during Israel's earliest period as a nation in covenant relationship with Yahweh.

The Launch of Israel's Worship Ritual: 9:1-24

On the 8th day, Aaron and his sons met the entire congregation of Israel at the front of the Tabernacle. As per Moses' instructions, Aaron made his first official high-priestly sacrifices of atonement, first for himself and his sons, and then for the entire nation.

Moses said to Aaron, "Come to the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering and make atonement for yourself and the people; sacrifice the offering that is for the people and make atonement for them, as the Lord has commanded" (9:7).

Having offered the sacrifices appropriately, Aaron blessed the people. Then, the glory of the Lord appeared in a stunning way, to fully confirm that the priesthood and sacrificial system of Israel were officially 'up and running.'

"Moses and Aaron then went into the tent of meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown" (9:23,24).

The Death of Nadab and Abihu: 10:1-20

After all that has just occurred, it is with shock that we come to Leviticus 10 and read of the actions of Aaron's two oldest sons, and the Lord's judgment against them.

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered strange fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke of when he said: "Among those who approach me I will be treated as holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored." Aaron remained silent (Leviticus 10:1-3).

Aaron and his remaining two sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, were not permitted to "uncover their heads or tear their robes" (i.e., to grieve the loss) since they were still in process of being formally installed into ministry by the Lord.

"You shall not even go out from the doorway of the tent of meeting, or you will die; for the Lord's anointing oil is upon you." So they did according to the word of Moses (10:7).

Aaron had to honor his role as High Priest (before God and the people) above his relationship with his sons, in the sight of all the people. The holiness of Yahweh had been compromised. The leader had to uphold this essential principle before an entire nation: "Among those who approach me I will be treated as holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored" (10:3).

Perhaps our greatest sin as humans is to form "gods" in our own image, and then to construct a systems of worship that reflect our own wishes. Such was the sin of Nadab and Abihu, when they took "strange fire" into their hands and boldly approached Yahweh. Although they had been exposed in great detail to Yahweh's character, glory and requirements, they cast all aside in favor of their own designs. One thing is clear: God is an objective reality, a Person. We cannot make of Him whatever we wish. Further, it is He, not us, who establishes the 'terms' by which we may approach Him and remain in fellowship with Him. True religion is designed by God and given to man, not vice versa.

Laws for maintaining purity among the people: 11:1-15:33

Leviticus chapters 11-15 may appear strange to us, as this section deals with minute details for maintaining purity ("cleanness") among the people. Whereas the previous section dealt with life *within the Tabernacle*, this section deals with purity issues in the entire context of everyday life *outside of the Tabernacle*. The people had to live in certain ways in order to even approach the Tabernacle, where God's holiness dwelt. Paul Tanner summarizes:

Chapter 11 deals with clean and unclean foods. The passage was fundamental to the concept of holiness, particularly the idea of separation. The Israelites were not permitted to eat anything and everything as were their pagan neighbors. Rather, the Israelites were to be distinct, even to the point of their diet. There are several reasons for these dietary restrictions: (1) some of the unclean foods are polemical [a direct statement against pagan worship rites and meals]; (2) others would create problems for diet in the wilderness and God was preserving them from disease; and (3) they illustrate the essence of holiness (God's people must be scrupulous in what they choose - does it please God?). Chapters 12-15 extend the same basic principle of holiness to the LORD in every aspect of physical life. Great care must be taken to point out that these principles are not suggesting sin on the part of the Israelite involved, e.g., the woman giving childbirth was not "in sin," nor is the text implicating the child. The whole issue deals with the presence of the glory of God in Israel's midst. The tabernacle was restricted in regard to all that was common, dirty, diseased, foreign or unclean, because the presence of the glory of God was there. This was especially true in regard to blood; only one kind of blood could be brought into the temple, namely, sacrificial blood. So the stress is on God's holiness and His separateness. "Unclean" Israelites could still worship, pray, praise, and study Torah.

Addendum: The role of blood in atonement for sin

When reading Leviticus, it is impossible to miss the central place of *blood* in the sacrificial system of Israel. One might naturally ask: Why all the need for blood? This is an important question, and it opens up for us important insights into the nature of God.

First, we must recognize that when we step back to consider the wider picture, there is blood sacrifice from beginning to end in Scripture. There is, literally, *blood everywhere*. In Genesis 3, God clothed Adam and Eve with animal skins before sending them out from the Garden of Eden. This would have required a blood sacrifice. In Genesis 4, God was pleased with Abel's blood sacrifice, though not with Cain's non-bloody offering. Abraham sacrificed a ram, in place of his son Isaac. Throughout the O.T. sacrifices of blood are the central piece of Israel's worship ritual.

Of course, the N.T. centers upon the blood sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God. Even part of the Lord's Supper is sharing in the cup, which represents His blood shed to initiate the New Covenant of forgiveness. When the apostle John is caught up in heaven in the Book of Revelation, he sees the Lamb, with the remaining marks of having been slain. It might well be said that *blood sacrifice is the central ritual act between God and man* in the entire Bible. The Book of Leviticus, then, is no aberration in content. It is simply making more specific and elaborate what the rest of the Bible makes general and central: Sinful man cannot be united with a holy God apart from blood sacrifice.

But a second observation takes us a bit deeper into the WHY of blood sacrifices. God told Adam and Eve that the penalty for turning away from Him was "death" (Genesis 2:17). Similarly, the apostle Paul wrote: "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). The clear principle is this: *Sin requires death in the economy of God*. We cannot presume to know *why* it is so with God. Perhaps in eternity all will become clear, when "*we will know fully, just as we also have been fully known*" (1Cor.13:12). Until then, we must take on the testimony of Scripture the fact that God requires death where there is sin. There is no way around this requirement. It issues forth from the essential nature of a holy God.

Now this brings us to the third observation, concerning the role of *blood* in the sacrificial system. Why not vegetable offerings? Why *blood* offerings? Leviticus gives us God's answer: "***For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement***" (17:11).

It is the blood that contains the life; thus, it is the blood that makes the atoning sacrifice acceptable to God. This is why the whole Bible keeps emphasizing the critical role of blood in the sacrifice that is acceptable to God.

“ . . . without shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness” (Hebrews 9:22).

As Christ-followers, we should understand and appreciate the value of the *blood of Christ*. His blood was, actually, the *only blood ever shed that could actually remove sins*. All other blood sacrifices were made in anticipation of His sacrifice.

“Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:11,12).

As one old hymn put it:

*What can wash away my sin?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.
Oh! precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow;
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

Takeaways from Leviticus 1-15

1. The holiness of God and the sinfulness of mankind.

Christians today seem to have a weak grasp on both the holiness of God and the sinfulness of mankind. The first impacts our *reverence for God*, while the second impacts our *repentance for sin*. When we begin to truly see God’s holiness, we will *stand in awe of Him* and give Him His true place of authority in our lives. When we begin to truly see our sinfulness, we will *fall broken before His throne of grace, crying: “God have mercy on me, the sinner” (Luke 18:13)*. Above all, when the *Holy Spirit* is moving and active within us, and we truly see God for Who He really is, we will abandon all forms of trivial religious activity and irreverent living. We will maintain a healthy fear of the Lord, seeking to move away from our sinfulness toward His holiness:

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.” If you address as

Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth; knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1Peter 1:14-19).

2. The compassion and desire of God to forgive sins.

Complicated though it is, Leviticus still shows us that God is making a way for guilty sinners to be forgiven and restored to fellowship with Him. The God of the Bible is *always making a way* for sinners to come clean. It seems that *compassion* is a ruling tendency with our God.

"Therefore the Lord longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; how blessed are all those who long for Him" (Isaiah 30:18).

3. Our "sacrifices" and God's pleasure.

Leviticus places much stress on sacrifices that are "pleasing" ("a soothing aroma") to God (Leviticus 1:9,13,17; 2:2,9,12; 3:16; 4:31; 6:15,21; 8:21,28; 17:6, etc.). While it is certainly true that the animal and grain offerings specified in Leviticus could become this "pleasing sacrifice" to God, the rest of Scripture makes it clear that a pleasing sacrifice to God is determined by the heart we bring to God, not the offering we bring.

In Psalm 51, after David's dual sin of adultery and murder, he realized that only one kind of sacrifice was "pleasing" to God:

"For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:16,17).

With a different twist, the apostle Paul makes the same point in Romans, when describing the kind of sacrifice that brings God pleasure today:

"Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, well-pleasing to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and well-pleasing and perfect" (Romans 12:1,2).