

Focal Text

Leviticus 1:1–3; 2:1–3;
3:1; 4:1–3, 13, 22–23,
27–28; 5:1–6

Background

Leviticus 1—7

Main Idea

Making sacrificial offerings enabled Israel to indicate their commitment to God, give thanks to God, recognize their relationship with God and their fellow Israelites, and experience atonement for sins.

Question to Explore

What principles can be found in Israel's practice of making sacrificial offerings?

Study Aim

To describe the offerings Israel made and identify principles for today from these practices

Study and Action Emphases

- Affirm the Bible as our authoritative guide for life and ministry
- Share the gospel with all people
- Develop a growing, vibrant faith

LESSON ONE

Making Offerings to God

Quick Read

God designed offerings for people to use to express their relationship with him through gratitude, confession, and repentance.



LEVITICUS: *Becoming God's Holy People*

Offerings and sacrifice conjure up memories of building campaigns and mission emphases in the mind of this Texas-born boy. However, in the Far East, offerings and sacrifices cannot be placed in a dollar bill-sized envelope or put in an offering plate.

On a Bangkok street corner during the Spring Festival, worshipers entered the area around a golden god. They washed their hands and forearms, sprinkling some water on their heads. Most lit incense sticks from the gas flame of outdoor lamps before finding a place to kneel around the little god-house. Offerings of flowers, fruit drinks, fresh fruit, and fresh meat were either laid on an altar or draped around elephant statues below the golden god. Beautifully attired young women sang and danced in one corner of the worship area, while dull-eyed men played musical instruments. At the gate of the worship area sat an old woman with a stack of birdcages. As worshipers exited, some bought birds and quickly set them free.

The writer of Leviticus lived in a religious world with many kinds of sacrifices. The ancient pagans believed their gods shared their appetites, and so the worshipers provided sacrifices to meet their gods' needs. If a worshiper could gain the god's favor, the worshiper might be able to conjure up supernatural intervention on the worshiper's behalf.

The Israelite sacrificial system stood in vivid contrast to that of her neighbors. The sacrifices in our study flow out of a covenant relationship with God. Israel's pagan neighbors presented sacrifices to meet their god's needs. The Israelites gave sacrifices arising from their own needs. No Israelite could think the God who made everything needed anything. Neither did any faithful follower of the one living God believe he or she could manipulate a desired response from God.

God clearly spoke to Moses in the "Tent of Meeting" (Leviticus 1:1), often referred to as the tabernacle. For the Hebrew people, the "Tent of Meeting" was the place where God's revelation occurred and where they presented their sacrifices to God. The Old Testament forecasts the coming of Jesus Christ as our Savior. The "Tent of Meeting" captures two of the profound truths expressed in the incarnation of Jesus. First, Jesus Christ puts a face on God, revealing God in the most understandable terms we can observe. Second, Jesus Christ became the ultimate sacrifice, the atonement, for all our sins. John 1:14 states, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us." The word translated "made his dwelling" can be translated *tabernacled*.

This Bible study allows us to consider the sacrificial system God established with Israel.

Leviticus 1:1–3

¹The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting. He said, ²“Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When any of you brings an offering to the LORD, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock.

³“If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect. He must present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting so that it will be acceptable to the LORD.”

Leviticus 2:1–3

¹“When someone brings a grain offering to the LORD, his offering is to be of fine flour. He is to pour oil on it, put incense on it ²and take it to Aaron’s sons the priests. The priest shall take a handful of the fine flour and oil, together with all the incense, and burn this as a memorial portion on the altar, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD. ³The rest of the grain offering belongs to Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the offerings made to the LORD by fire.”

Leviticus 3:1

¹“If someone’s offering is a fellowship offering, and he offers an animal from the herd, whether male or female, he is to present before the LORD an animal without defect.”

Leviticus 4:1–3, 13, 22–23, 27–28

¹The LORD said to Moses, ²“Say to the Israelites: ‘When anyone sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD’s commands—

³“If the anointed priest sins, bringing guilt on the people, he must bring to the LORD a young bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed.

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¹³“If the whole Israelite community sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD’s commands, even though the community is unaware of the matter, they are guilty.

Worship with Heart

Pastor Sam brought a lamb into the worship center. He examined the lamb and, finding no flaws, he put his hands on the lamb's head in a symbolic gesture of his desire to transfer his sins to the animal. Then he told his people about the sacrificial process. Another minister stood across the room and read the words of Amos 5:22, 25 with a loud clear voice. He paused and read a personal paraphrase of that text, giving a modern interpretation of the text. How would you have written the paraphrase?

“without defect” (1:3). Frankly, I am tempted at this point to digress into an extended discussion of all the hand-me-downs people have given to the church when they replaced them with better things in their own homes. How many broken-down pianos and worn-out couches have been given to the church when we acquired better for ourselves? The ancient Hebrews respected God too much to give defective or worn-out animals to him. In the bigger picture of the sacrificial system, these Old Testament sacrifices “without defect” pointed toward the sacrifice of a sinless Jesus Christ.

The worshiper was to place his hand on the head of the sacrifice to identify with the sacrifice (Lev. 1:4). In the worshiper's mind, when the worshiper's sins were confessed and the worshiper laid his hands on the animal's head, his sins were transferred to the animal. The Bible clearly involves the worshiper with the worshiper's offering.

Several years ago I came to a startling insight. Long ago Baptists started giving through offering envelopes in the Sunday School. In many churches the Sunday School offering is much larger than the offering in the worship services. I recognized that our worship services tended to be devoid of meaningful offerings except in a few cases. Then I looked within. I realized that my wife usually writes our check to the church. Although we have always given at least ten per cent of our income to the Lord through the church, I did not have cause to think about my offering except when we talked about how much we would give at the beginning of the year or with regard to some special offering. Even then I thought more of an amount than I did of identifying with my offering or focusing on the Lord. The ancient offerings, however,

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were central to worship and highly symbolic. The sacrifice of Jesus is central to our faith and most meaningful to each of us. Would our offerings

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be better given if we gave thought and heart to what we are doing, when we do it, and the way we do it?

When the worshiper had identified with the unblemished animal, it was slain. The blood was sprinkled according to the ritual prescription God gave Moses. With the burnt offering, described in Leviticus 1:1–17; 6:8–13, everything else was to be burned. The entire offering was to be consumed by fire. This fire was to burn continually (6:9).

The constant burning kept the aroma of sacrifice continually rising from the altar and honoring God.

God's People Express Gratitude to Him (2:1–16; 6:14–18)

The grain offering, described in Leviticus 2:1–16; 6:14–18, required “fine flour” (2:1). This grain offering has been given various names including “meat offering” (KJV, meaning *food*) and a “cereal” or “meal” offering. Oil and frankincense were poured over it, probably to help it burn. The priest took a handful as a “memorial portion” and burned it on the altar (2:2).

Sacrifices

The Hebrew word for altar means *slaughter place*. Although most of the Hebrews' sacrifices were animals, some were grains, fruit, wine, and incense. Some altars were made of earth (Exodus 20:24). Others were uncut stones (Exod. 20:25) or even a large stone (Judges 6:19–23). The central altar in Solomon's temple was made of bronze (2 Chronicles 4:1). The altar of incense was made of acacia wood and overlaid with copper or gold (Exod. 30:1–6). The altars represented the presence of God.

The sacrifices used on the altars were a significant part of the Hebrews' worship. These sacrifices linked their lives with the Creator God who gives life and all the blessings of life. The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem in AD 70 ended the Jewish sacrificial system. The death of Jesus on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice for the Christian. Today's Christian offers the sacrifice of a life committed to Christ (Romans 12:1–2).

This offering recognized that the Lord is the Creator of everything and all we have comes from the Lord.

Psalm 50 reminds us that God has “no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills” (Psalm 50:9–10). Years ago rural churches celebrated “Soil Stewardship Sunday.” In those days men and women who tilled the land stopped to thank the Creator of the land for all that had been given to them. Their closeness to the land made them aware of the provision of God. We would do well to allow our study of the “grain offering” to send us to the market so we can stand in the produce aisle and thank God for the many kinds of produce God provides, stand in the bread aisle and thank God for the bread we can enjoy, and perhaps stand at the butcher counter and thank God for the meat God provides.

The ancient Hebrews respected God too much to give defective or worn-out animals to him.

When I came to Hong Kong to serve as pastor, I was amazed with the many Chinese holidays on our calendars. However, I found no equivalent for Thanksgiving. On Thanksgiving Day, we gathered with other Americans and enjoyed turkey and dressing, but I missed the emphasis. We found another time to thank God for the things that had happened in our church and in our lives during the past year.

A part of God’s provision for the priest was the worshiper’s gift of grain from the grain offering for the priest’s table in the Holy Place. One of the blessings ministry has provided for this pastor has come from the hands of generous people thankful for the kindness of God, as they have shared from their abundance. More than once a person has gone out of her or his way to share food, clothes, and even a place to take a break from ministries’ endless demands.

God’s People Celebrate Relationships (3:1–17; 7:11–36)

The “fellowship offering” (Lev. 3:1–17; 7:11–36) expressed gratitude to God for the people’s health, welfare, and peace. Leviticus 3 gives instructions for using three different animals in these offerings—cattle (3:1–5), sheep (3:6–11), and goats (3:12–17). These offerings generally occurred at three separate times, The Feast of Weeks (23:19–21), at the fulfillment of

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a Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:17–20), and during the installation of priests (Leviticus 9:18–22). These offerings could be made with male or female animals. The unique admonition with this offering was the burning of the fat. The fat was considered the choice part of the offerings, and it had to be burned in the sacrifice. The order of the offering required the burning of the burnt offering before the burning of the fellowship offering. Sins

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had to be addressed before the people could enjoy their relationship with God.

Today's worshiper would do well to recognize this order in worship. If one's sin is not addressed correctly with God and other people, then fellowship and worship will not take place (Matthew 5:23–24). The witness

of churches to the communities in which they are located is severely crippled by a Christian's unwillingness to address fractures in fellowships. Many people, even those who do not know Jesus, have been exposed to the words of the Lord's Prayer, "Father . . . forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" (Matt. 6:12). However, Christian battles over pride, prejudice, and personal opinions, in which we refuse to forgive, stand as formidable obstacles for some people in the path to faith in Jesus Christ.

The priests sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice around all sides of the altar (Lev. 3:2) and burned the fat and specific portions for the Lord (3:3–4). Leviticus 7:11–36 gives specific instructions with regard to the additional offerings of cakes that went with the fellowship offering (7:14). Those eating the fellowship offering were to eat the offering the first or second day of the feast (7:16). No one who was unclean was allowed to eat the offering (7:21).

The fellowship offering and meal remind us of the Lord's Supper. Paul's admonition regarding taking the Lord's Supper in the wrong way reflects the prohibition given to people who are unclean (1 Corinthians 11:17–34).

God's People Address Sin (4:1—5:13; 5:14—6:7; 6:24–30; 7:1–10)

People sometimes sin "unintentionally" (4:1). Unintentional sin may refer to general sins that occur when one wanders into the wrong place, makes

an error in judgment, misses a standard, or accidentally goes astray of the law.

I was driving to a dinner meeting with some friends and found myself unable to get in the correct lane due to the heavy traffic. I was forced to take an exit I knew was wrong but I could not prevent the mistake. When I saw a place to turn around I left the roadway, only to discover I was on a private road, surrounded by monkeys. Everyone else in the car was excited to see the monkeys. I was just trying to get back on the right road. I had made two bad turns in a row. No one was concerned about my mistakes except me. However, my mistakes caused a change in plans later in the evening due to time constraints.

When sin occurs, all people need to admit their sin and find God's forgiveness.

When the priest made a mistake his mistake affected the people of God, whether it was intentional or not. The sin offering brought cleansing to the priest and to the altar that was contaminated by the leader's sin.

God saw the priest's sin as significant and demanded an expensive sacrifice, a young bull. The priest identified with the sacrifice by placing his hand on the head of the young bull. After the bull was slain, the blood was sprinkled "seven times before the Lord" (4:6). The sevenfold sprinkling was also a part of the ritual used on the Day of Atonement (16:14–15, 19). The blood was poured at the base of the altar (4:7), reflecting the seriousness of the leader's sin.

Those who would need the "sin offering" (4:3; see 4:1 to 5:13; 6:24–30) included the Israelite community (4:13) as well as the priest (4:3). No one is exempt from sin. Everyone sins. When sin occurs, all people need to admit their sin and find God's forgiveness.

Of the specific sins mentioned in the text, one is particularly striking. Leviticus 5:1 speaks to the person who chooses not to speak to an issue when he or she knows the right thing is not being said or done. Even in the church, people are prone to think they are doing right by refusing to get involved. However, silence is not always golden. Not to witness to the truth is a sin.

Sins had to be addressed before the people could enjoy their relationship with God.

The fifth kind of offering, the "guilt offering" (5:17; see 5:14 to 6:7; 7:1–10), was closely identified with the sin offering. However, the guilt offering related to wrongdoing for which restitution could be made. It required a sacrifice, restitution, and a fine of 20 percent (5:16).

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God expected the people to maintain a living relationship with him. Any break in that relationship required a sacrifice with which the worshiper identified. Unfortunately, the people developed the habit of giving sacrifices while their hearts and minds were somewhere else doing something else. Jeremiah and Amos addressed the mockery of thoughtless sacrifices (see Jeremiah 7:21–23; Amos 5:22–23).

Jesus paid the price for our sins and became the ultimate sacrifice. No longer do we burn cattle, sheep, goats, birds, or grain as sacrifices.

Many of us worship in beautiful worship centers. I wish I could say that all our worship focuses on the Lord Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, sometimes our hearts are not in our worship. Perhaps our studies in Leviticus can remind us to bring a prayerful heart to worship.

QUESTIONS

1. What do you think about when you write your check to the church?
2. How does the way you handle the offering time in worship help you identify your commitment to Christ with your offering?
3. What is your definition of sinning “unintentionally”?
4. In which areas of your life do you know better but sin anyway?
5. Can you recall a time when you knew what was being said or done was wrong but you kept your mouth shut?