

Leviticus

Chapter 1

Burnt Offerings

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As the intrepid crew filled their ship with supplies, they had no idea what would happen. Their maps stopped about 100 nautical miles off the coast. They made sure that they kissed their families, and the whole port was filled with well-wishers, praying for their safe return. For no-one knew what lay beyond the horizon. Others had gone, and not returned. Would they come back safely? With anxious thoughts, they set sail.

Today, we are going to set sail into what for many is uncharted water. There are parts of the Bible that are not very well known, and not often read, if at all. They have a reputation, and people may warn new Christians to avoid those parts until they have understood the rest in a better way.

But today we will hoist the mainsail, and float out into Leviticus. It's a long journey, lasting for at least 7 weeks. But, having read the book many times, it is not totally uncharted. And since it is part of the Bible, we can also be certain that God does want us to read and understand it.

Chapter 1 of Leviticus is mainly about burnt offerings. As we will see with a lot of Leviticus, we are given the "how to" of sacrifices, not much on the "why". It is almost like a user's manual, saying when you approach God to offer a sacrifice, do this.

Well, what did they have to do?

In talking about burnt offerings, the chapter is divided into 3 sections. Verses 3-9 speak about offering a bull.

Verses 10-13 speak about offering a sheep or goat.

Verses 14-17 speak about offering a dove or pigeon.

For a bull, it had to be a young male without defect. The man making the offering had to present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (or later on to the Temple). He was to lay hands on the head of the bull, and then slay it. The priests would then sprinkle the bull's blood over all sides of the altar. The man would then skin and carve up the carcass. The priests would then arrange the fire, wash off any spilt offal on the legs, and burn the whole carcass, including the head and fat. This burnt offering was, we are told, a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

For a sheep or goat, it had to be a young male

without defect. The man making the offering had to slay it on the north side of the altar. The priests would then sprinkle blood over all sides of the altar. The man would then carve up the carcass. The priests would arrange the fire, wash off any spilt offal on the legs, and burn the whole carcass, including the head and fat. This burnt offering was, we are told, a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

For a bird, it had to be a dove or young pigeon without defect. The priest was to take it to the altar, wring off its head, and drain its blood on the side of the altar. The crop and contents, which is a holding bag of food in the neck, was removed and thrown onto the ashes. The priest would then tear the bird apart, and burn it. This burnt offering was a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

There are several things to note straight away:

1. The Tent of Meeting (and later on, Temple of the Lord) was not for the faint hearted. The sights, actions, smells and splashes would make many queasy.
2. The priest did not do most of the work. The man offering the bull or sheep or goat did.
3. There was not much left of the animal after the burnt offering. Other types of offerings could be eaten, but not this one.
4. The offering was expensive. A prime bull calf was extremely expensive. A young ram or male goat would cost a lot. A bird was much more affordable. A burnt offering was never to be seen as anything but costly. The man offering it had to make a substantial sacrifice of assets. The bird was for the poorer person.
5. The detail of who does what, where, and with what bit, shows that this had a definite structure and process which needed to be followed.
6. The aroma brought pleasure to God... is that because of the aroma? Or is it the obedience which brings that?

Hidden away in the description are a couple of clues as to why they should sacrifice animals that way.

Verse 3 says that the animal without defect had to be presented at the Tent of Meeting, so that it would be acceptable to the Lord. These were God's

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regulations, and the burnt offering had to be acceptable to God. Verse 4 says that the man had to lay his hand on the head of the offering, so it would be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.

By laying his hands on the animal, realising this was for atonement, and then killing and cutting up the animal, the man offering a burnt offering was very personally involved. He realised that atonement was achieved through the animal's death, and that he had brought, identified with and killed it.

This animal died for the sins of that man and his family (as ladies could not offer it). Other sacrifices deal with specific sins, but the burnt offering dealt with the offerer's general state of sinfulness. It reminded the Israelite that he had not lived as God fully wanted, and they needed forgiveness. Atonement involves forgiveness and reconciliation, so some have said atonement is the AT-ONE-MENT. By offering burnt sacrifices, the Old Testament person was forgiven and made right with God.

But we are told in Exodus 29 and Numbers 28, that burnt offerings were to be made every morning and evening, with an extra one every Sabbath day, the beginning of each month, and with many major Festivals. Leviticus 5 also says that burnt offerings accompanied most other sacrifices.

This sacrifice was the most common sacrifice of all in Israel.

So why do we not still bring a bull or goat or sheep or bird to church? Why do we not splash blood all over the front ends of our churches?

The answer is because of Jesus. He was a young male without defect. As he was sacrificed for us on the cross, his blood was shed for us.

As John the Baptist saw Jesus, he says in John 1:29 *Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*

Hebrews 10:1-18 gives an excellent summary of why we do not need the twice daily burnt offering. It says:

Since the law has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered year after year, make perfect

those who approach. Otherwise, would they not have ceased being offered, since the worshipers, cleansed once for all, would no longer have any consciousness of sin? But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sin year after year. For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'See, God, I have come to do your will, O God' (in the scroll of the book it is written of me). When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "See, I have come to do your will." He abolishes the first in order to establish the second. And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God", and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet." For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified."

That is why Christians do not sacrifice burnt offerings. Instead, because of our gratitude for His sacrifice for us, as Romans 12:1-2 puts it, we offer ourselves as living sacrifices to God. So live for him.