

The Sacrificial System

The sacrificial system was a key component of the Mosaic Law. Entire chapters of the Bible are dedicated to the regulations that surround sacrifices, and they played a key role in the day-to-day life of ancient Israel. Today, however, most Christians know almost nothing about the sacrificial system. Since we no longer need to sacrifice lambs and goats in our quest for holiness, we have come to ignore this entire facet of the Bible.

However, ignoring the sacrificial system creates its own set of problems. Some parts of the Old Testament are very difficult to understand without a good working knowledge of sacrifices. People usually assume that all sacrifices were the same, but that is not the case. There were actually different types of sacrifices, and they accomplished different things. Once you understand the purpose of each type of sacrifice it will be easier to understand what the Bible is saying. In fact, entire passages will take on new meaning. It is vital for Christians to understand this system – and the more we understand it, the better we will understand the sacrifice that Christ made for us.

Instead of going into great detail about every single sacrifice that is mentioned in the Bible, I'm going to give a high-level overview of the six different types of sacrifices. Of these six types, only two of them dealt with sin and forgiveness – but all six dealt with one's relationship with God.

These six types fall into three major categories:

Offerings of commitment: burnt offering, meat offering, drink offering.

Offerings of communion: peace offering.

Offerings of cleansing: sin offering, guilt offering.

Commitment Offerings

One of the three basic categories of offerings are the commitment offerings. These offerings were focused on expressing one's commitment and dedication to God. They were *not* designed to obtain forgiveness for sins. If you sinned you were supposed to offer a *cleansing* offering, not a commitment offering. (Cleansing offerings will be discussed later.)

The first type of commitment offering was the **burnt offering**. In that offering, an animal was sacrificed in order to express a person's dedication to God. These offerings were given voluntarily and had nothing to do with atoning for sin. The regulations that governed burnt offerings varied depending on the type of animal that was being offered. In the burnt offering one could offer a bull, a sheep, a goat, or a bird. Different regulations governed the sacrifice of each type of animal, but they all had to be a male and without a blemish of any kind. (In other words, they had to offer a perfect sacrifice.)

These are the regulations that governed the offering of a bull:

Leviticus 1:2: “Speak unto the children of Israel, and say unto them, If any man of you bring an offering unto the Lord, ye shall bring your offering of the cattle, even of

the herd, and of the flock.

3 If his offering be a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish: he shall offer it of his own voluntary will at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before the Lord.

4 And he shall put his hand upon the head of the burnt offering; and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.

5 And he shall kill the bullock before the Lord: and the priests, Aaron's sons, shall bring the blood, and sprinkle the blood round about upon the altar that is by the door of the tabernacle of the congregation.

6 And he shall flay the burnt offering, and cut it into his pieces.

7 And the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire upon the altar, and lay the wood in order upon the fire:

8 And the priests, Aaron's sons, shall lay the parts, the head, and the fat, in order upon the wood that is on the fire which is upon the altar:

9 But his inwards and his legs shall he wash in water: and the priest shall burn all on the altar, to be a burnt sacrifice, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor unto the Lord."

To perform the offering, the person who brought the animal would kill it (yes, the person had to kill it themselves), and the priest would sprinkle its blood around the bronze altar that was in the outer courtyard of the tabernacle. The person would then cut the animal into pieces and the priests would take those pieces and place them into the fire to be consumed. After the animal had been burned its ashes were taken to a ceremonially clean place outside the camp; they were not thrown away because they were too holy.

In the ritual of the burnt offering, the person who was offering the animal was commanded to place his hand on the animal's head. This signified that the animal represented them, and it transferred their sin and guilt to the animal (even though this was not a sin or guilt offering). By doing this they were telling God that just as the animal was completely consumed in the fire, they were likewise completely giving themselves over to Him.

The fire in which the offerings were burned was kept burning continually. It is possible that the original spark that started the fire was provided by God Himself.

One striking example of a burnt offering can be found in 2 Chronicles:

2 Chronicles 1:1: "And Solomon the son of David was strengthened in his kingdom, and the LORD his God was with him, and magnified him exceedingly.

2 Then Solomon spake unto all Israel, to the captains of thousands and of hundreds, and to the judges, and to every governor in all Israel, the chief of the fathers.

3 So Solomon, and all the congregation with him, went to the high place that was at Gibeon; for there was the tabernacle of the congregation of God, which Moses the servant of the LORD had made in the wilderness. ...

6 And Solomon went up thither to the brasen altar before the LORD, which was at the tabernacle of the congregation, and offered a thousand burnt offerings upon it.

7 In that night did God appear unto Solomon, and said unto him, Ask what I shall give thee."

If you are not familiar with the sacrificial system then it is easy to read this passage and think

that Israel had gathered to confess their sins. However, verse 6 tells us that Solomon offered *burnt offerings*. The burnt offering was an offering of *dedication*, not an offering for sin. What Solomon actually did was gather the entire nation together (including all of its leadership) and offer sacrifices that expressed their dedication to God. Solomon was telling God that all of Israel was going to follow Him. They were wholly committing themselves to following the Lord – and after they did that, God appeared to Solomon and asked him what he wanted.

Do you see how important it is to understand the sacrificial system? Once you realize the significance behind burnt offerings, the entire passage comes into focus. When reading the Old Testament it is very important to remember that burnt offerings are offerings of dedication. If you keep that fact in mind you'll be surprised at how many passages it illuminates.

The **meal offering** was another type of commitment offering, but flour was offered instead of an animal. (This offering is also called the “meat offering”, even though no meat was involved. A long time ago the word “meat” simply meant “food”.) This offering could never be given by itself; it had to be accompanied by an animal sacrifice. While this may seem strange, it actually makes sense if you think about it. After all, if your sin hasn't been atoned for then anything else you offer God will not be accepted. You can only approach God and offer your gifts *after* your sins have been forgiven.

There are several different types of meal offerings; they varied, depending on the ingredients of the offering. One type of offering is described here:

Leviticus 2:1: “And when any will offer a meat offering unto the Lord, his offering shall be of fine flour; and he shall pour oil upon it, and put frankincense thereon:
2 And he shall bring it to Aaron's sons the priests: and he shall take thereout his handful of the flour thereof, and of the oil thereof, with all the frankincense thereof; and the priest shall burn the memorial of it upon the altar, to be an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor unto the Lord:
3 And the remnant of the meat offering shall be Aaron's and his sons': it is a thing most holy of the offerings of the Lord made by fire.”

This offering is treated differently from the burnt offering. In the burnt offering the entire animal was burned and its ashes were then taken outside the camp and placed in a designated area. In the meal offering, however, the priests only burned a handful of flour (the memorial portion for the Lord). The rest of it was given to the priests, who were commanded to eat it in the Holy Place of the tabernacle.

There is some important symbolism present in the meal offering. The frankincense that is burned represents prayer:

Psalms 141:2: “Let my prayer be set forth before thee as incense; and the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.”

Revelation 5:8: “And when he had taken the book, the four breasts and four and twenty elders fell down before the Lamb, having every one of them harps, and golden vials full of odors, which are the prayers of saints.”

It's also worth noting that Jesus claimed to be the Bread of Life, the very thing that was being offered in the meal offering:

John 6:35: “And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.”

The meal offering had to be accompanied by oil (either poured on it or mingled with it) and it had to include salt, both of which can be seen as representing portions of Christ's work. Christians, after all, are called to be the salt of the earth, and in the Bible oil is symbolic of the Holy Spirit.

Leaven and honey could not be included in the meal offering (Lev. 2:11):

Leviticus 2:11: “No meat offering, which ye shall bring unto the Lord, shall be made with leaven: for ye shall burn no leaven, nor any honey, in any offering of the Lord made by fire.”

In the Bible leaven always represents sin. You would certainly not want to include sin in your offering to the Lord! (As far as I can tell, the reason honey was restricted was because it has the ability to act like leaven.)

There is also the **drink offering**, which is very similar to the meal offering except that it consisted of wine instead of flour. Although the meal offering was consumed by the priests, it is important to note that the priests did *not* drink the wine. Instead the entire amount was poured out onto the altar. Like the other commitment offerings, this offering symbolized being poured out in dedication to the Lord.

The sacrifice of Christ fulfilled the dedication offering. The Bible tells us that He was poured out:

Psalms 22:14: “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels.”

Isaiah 53:12: “Therefore will I divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death; and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.”

Interestingly, the Bible calls us to be living sacrifices, *dedicated* to Him:

Romans 12:1: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”

That is indeed our “reasonable service”.

Communion Offerings

Communion offerings were also called fellowship offerings. Whereas commitment offerings

expressed one's dedication to God and cleansing offerings were offered to obtain forgiveness, communion offerings were about fellowship – fellowship with God and with man. Communion offerings were offered to express thanksgiving, to perform a vow, or simply as a freewill offering. If you wanted to show God that you were grateful for a blessing then you would come to the Temple and offer a communion offering.

When a burnt offering was offered, the entire animal was consumed in the fire. Communion offerings, though, were quite different. While a small portion of the animal was still burned, a large part of it was given to the priests to eat and the rest was eaten by the family who offered it. This meant that part of the animal was offered as a sacrifice and the rest became a meal. In the Middle East meals held a special significance. Having dinner with someone meant that you were ending hostilities with them. It made the person you were dining with your friend and it demonstrated unity.

As a side-note, the Jews did not usually eat their animals because they were too valuable. Eating a dinner of meat (which, of course, you would do when you offered a peace offering) would have been a special occasion.

The only communion offering was the **peace offering**. Compared to other types of sacrifices, the regulations governing peace offerings were very relaxed. Other offerings required a male animal, but with peace offerings a female animal was acceptable. Other offerings required a perfect animal, but with peace offerings you were allowed to sacrifice animals that had blemishes.

Peace offerings could consist of either animals or bread. One example of the regulations surrounding peace offerings can be found in this passage:

Leviticus 7:11: “And this is the law of the sacrifice of peace offerings, which he shall offer unto the Lord.

12 If he offer it for a thanksgiving, then he shall offer with the sacrifice of thanksgiving unleavened cakes mingled with oil, and the unleavened wafers anointed with oil, and cakes mingled with oil, of fine flour, fried.

13 Besides the cakes, he shall offer for his offering leavened bread with the sacrifice of thanksgiving of his peace offerings.

14 And of it he shall offer one out of the whole oblation for a heave offering unto the Lord, and it shall be the priest's that sprinkleth the blood of the peace offerings.”

The offering was to be eaten that day. The only exception was in the case of vows, where the remainder could be eaten the next day. Anything that still remained on the third day could not be eaten:

Leviticus 7:15: “And the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving shall be eaten the same day that it is offered; he shall not leave any of it until the morning.

16 But if the sacrifice of his offering be a vow, or a voluntary offering, it shall be eaten the same day that he offereth his sacrifice: and on the morrow also the remainder of it shall be eaten:

17 But the remainder of the flesh of the sacrifice on the third day shall be burnt with fire.

18 And if any of the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings be eaten at all on the third day, it shall not be accepted, neither shall it be imputed unto him that offereth it: it shall be an abomination, and the soul that eateth of it shall bear his iniquity.”

If any part of the offering touched something that was unclean, that part had to be burned instead of eaten:

Leviticus 7:19: “And the flesh that toucheth any unclean thing shall not be eaten; it shall be burnt with fire: and as for the flesh, all that be clean shall eat thereof.”

Also, no one who was unclean was allowed to eat of this offering. The penalty for taking part in a peace offering when you were unclean was very severe:

Leviticus 7:20: “But the soul that eateth of the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings, that pertain unto the Lord, having his uncleanness upon him, even that soul shall be cut off from his people.

21 Moreover the soul that shall touch any unclean thing, as the uncleanness of man, or any unclean beast, or any abominable unclean thing, and eat of the flesh of the sacrifice of peace offerings, which pertain unto the Lord, even that soul shall be cut off from his people.”

An example of peace offerings can be found in the book of 1 Kings. When Solomon dedicated the Temple he offered 142,000 peace offerings:

1 Kings 8:63: “And Solomon offered a sacrifice of peace offerings, which he offered unto the Lord, two and twenty thousand oxen, and an hundred and twenty thousand sheep. So the king and all the children of Israel dedicated the house of the Lord.

64 The same day did the king hallow the middle of the court that was before the house of the Lord: for there he offered burnt offerings, and meat offerings, and the fat of the peace offerings: because the brasen altar that was before the Lord was too little to receive the burnt offerings, and meat offerings, and the fat of the peace offerings.

65 And at that time Solomon held a feast, and all Israel with him, a great congregation, from the entering in of Hamath unto the river of Egypt, before the Lord our God, seven days and seven days, even fourteen days.”

As you can see, the Israelites feasted on them for two weeks.

Interestingly, no one was allowed to eat the fat or the blood from offerings:

Leviticus 3:17: “It shall be a perpetual statute for your generations throughout all your dwellings, that ye eat neither fat nor blood.”

Instead it was always given to God.

Cleansing Offerings

There were two types of offerings in the levitical system that dealt with being cleansed from

sin: the guilt offering (also known as the trespass offering) and the sin offering. The **sin offering** focused on the person's *guilt before God*, and dealt with accidental violations of the Law. The **trespass offering** focused on *damage done to other people*. When some sort of cleansing offering was required, the person would go before a priest and the priest would examine the offense and determine what type of sacrifice was needed.

It is very important to realize that both of these offerings dealt with *accidental* violations of the law. Neither of these sacrifices were able to forgive someone who had intentionally and knowingly sinned. When David committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered her husband he was not committing an accidental violation of the law – and that is why David couldn't just offer a sacrifice and move on. Also, cleansing offerings were only available in cases where the person was aware of the law *but did not realize that they had broken it*. This is *not* talking about people who were unaware of the law. (After all, if it was then people could get off free and clear by making sure they never studied the law or learned anything about it!)

The **sin offering** (which focused on guilt before God) is described in Leviticus 4. One of the interesting things about this sacrifice is that it varied depending on your position in society. Basically, the higher a person's position in society, the more expensive the sacrifice:

Leviticus 4:3: “If the priest that is anointed do sin according to the sin of the people; then let him bring for his sin, which he hath sinned, a young bullock without blemish unto the Lord for a sin offering.”

Leviticus 4:13: “And if the whole congregation of Israel sin through ignorance, and the thing be hid from the eyes of the assembly, and they have done somewhat against any of the commandments of the Lord concerning things which should not be done, and are guilty;

14 When the sin, which they have sinned against it, is known, then the congregation shall offer a young bullock for the sin, and bring him before the tabernacle of the congregation.”

Leviticus 4:22: “When a ruler hath sinned, and done somewhat through ignorance against any of the commandments of the Lord his God concerning things which should not be done, and is guilty;

23 Or if his sin, wherein he hath sinned, come to his knowledge; he shall bring his offering, a kid of the goats, a male without blemish:”

Leviticus 4:27: “And if any one of the common people sin through ignorance, while he doeth somewhat against any of the commandments of the Lord concerning things which ought not to be done, and be guilty;

28 Or if his sin, which he hath sinned, come to his knowledge: then he shall bring his offering, a kid of the goats, a female without blemish, for his sin which he hath sinned.”

As you can see, the priest was to bring a young bullock, the whole congregation had to bring a bullock, the ruler had to bring a male kid of the goats, and a common person was to bring a female kid of the goats or a female lamb. A poor person could bring a dove or a pigeon, and a very poor person could bring fine flour.

The person who was making the offering had to identify with it by laying his hands on it:

Leviticus 4:4: “And he shall bring the bullock unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation before the Lord; and shall lay his hand upon the bullock's head, and kill the bullock before the Lord.”

When the whole nation had sinned, the elders of the land did this.
After the animal was slain, its blood was presented to God:

Leviticus 4:5: “And the priest that is anointed shall take of the bullock's blood, and bring it to the tabernacle of the congregation:

6 And the priest shall dip his finger in the blood, and sprinkle of the blood seven times before the Lord, before the veil of the sanctuary.

7 And the priest shall put some of the blood upon the horns of the altar of sweet incense before the Lord, which is in the tabernacle of the congregation; and shall pour all the blood of the bullock at the bottom of the altar of the burnt offering, which is at the door of the tabernacle of the congregation.”

In the case of the priest and the nation, part of the blood was sprinkled before the veil and the horns of the altar of incense in the holy place, while the rest was poured out at the base of the altar. In the case of leaders and the common people, the blood was applied to the horns of the brazen altar at the door of the tabernacle.

The fat was burned on the altar, but the rest of the sacrifice was burned at a clean place outside the camp:

Leviticus 4:8: “And he shall take off from it all the fat of the bullock for the sin offering; the fat that covereth the inwards, and all the fat that is upon the inwards,

9 And the two kidneys, and the fat that is upon them, which is by the flanks, and the caul above the liver, with the kidneys, it shall he take away,

10 As it was taken off from the bullock of the sacrifice of peace offerings: and the priest shall burn them upon the altar of the burnt offering.

11 And the skin of the bullock, and all his flesh, with his head, and with his legs, and his inwards, and his dung,

12 Even the whole bullock shall he carry forth without the camp unto a clean place, where the ashes are poured out, and burn him on the wood with fire: where the ashes are poured out shall he be burnt.”

This was quite different from the burnt offering, where the animal was burned at the temple and only the ashes were disposed of outside the camp. Interestingly, the book of Hebrews says this:

Hebrews 13:12: “Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate.

13 Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.”

The sin offering focused on one's guilt before God and was burned outside the gate. The death of Christ also focused on our guilt before God – and He was crucified outside the gate.

The **trespass offering** (which focused on damage done to other people) is described Leviticus 5. This offering is for those who have sinned through *ignorance* – they knew the law but violated it accidentally, without knowing what they had done. It's worth noting that even though the sin was done in ignorance, the person was still guilty before God and had to offer a sacrifice in order to be forgiven. Sinning through ignorance was no defense: the sin still had to be paid for, and that meant a sacrifice had to be made. The Lord never simply overlooks sin. All sin, accidental or otherwise, must be paid for.

This sacrifice involved confessing the sin, making restitution for the damage, paying a 20% fine on top of that, and offering a ram to the Lord. The priest valued the ram in order to verify its value. (The restitution and fine were first given to the priest so that the priest could verify that everything was in order and it was permissible to offer the sacrifice.)

Leviticus 5:15: “If a soul commit a trespass, and sin through ignorance, in the holy things of the Lord; then he shall bring for his trespass unto the Lord a ram without blemish out of the flocks, with thy estimation by shekels of silver, after the shekel of the sanctuary, for a trespass offering;

16 And he shall make amends for the harm that he hath done in the holy thing, and shall add the fifth part thereto, and give it unto the priest: and the priest shall make an atonement for him with the ram of the trespass offering, and it shall be forgiven him.

17 And if a soul sin, and commit any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the Lord; though he wist it not, yet is he guilty, and shall bear his iniquity.

18 And he shall bring a ram without blemish out of the flock, with thy estimation, for a trespass offering, unto the priest: and the priest shall make an atonement for him concerning his ignorance wherein he erred and wist it not, and it shall be forgiven him.

19 It is a trespass offering: he hath certainly trespassed against the Lord.”

If the offended party wasn't available to receive the restitution then it could be paid to a relative. If there were no relatives then it remained with the priest.

The trespass offering emphasized the fact that it was a costly thing for people to sin, and it was a costly thing for God to forgive it. Forgiveness comes only by the death of an innocent substitute.

Conclusion

I think this quote sums it up well:

“Jesus provides all that we need. He is our burnt offering, and we must yield ourselves wholly to Him. He is our meal offering, the seed crushed and put through the fire, that we might have the bread of life; and we must feed upon Him. He is our drink offering who poured Himself out in sacrifice and service, and we must pour ourselves out for Him and for others. He is our fellowship offering, making life a joyful feast instead of a painful famine. He is our sin offering and our guilt offering,

for He bore our sins on His body and paid the full price for our sins.

“The nation of Israel had to offer six different sacrifices in order to have a right relationship with God, but Jesus Christ 'offered one sacrifice for sins forever' and took care of our sin problem completely.” (Warren Wiersbe, *Be Holy*, pg. 29)