

Offering a Sweet Aroma to God

Devotional Reading: Romans 12:1-8
Background Scripture: Leviticus 1:1-17; 6:8-13

Leviticus 1:3-17

³ “If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you are to offer a male without defect. You must present it at the entrance to the tent of meeting so that it will be acceptable to the LORD. ⁴ You are to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you. ⁵ You are to slaughter the young bull before the LORD, and then Aaron’s sons the priests shall bring the blood and splash it against the sides of the altar at the entrance to the tent of meeting. ⁶ You are to skin the burnt offering and cut it into pieces. ⁷ The sons of Aaron the priest are to put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. ⁸ Then Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, including the head and the fat, on the wood that is burning on the altar. ⁹ You are to wash the internal organs and the legs with water, and the priest is to burn all of it on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.

¹⁰ “If the offering is a burnt offering from the flock, from either the sheep or the goats, you are to offer a male without defect. ¹¹ You

are to slaughter it at the north side of the altar before the LORD, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall splash its blood against the sides of the altar. ¹² You are to cut it into pieces, and the priest shall arrange them, including the head and the fat, on the wood that is burning on the altar. ¹³ You are to wash the internal organs and the legs with water, and the priest is to bring all of them and burn them on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.

¹⁴ “If the offering to the LORD is a burnt offering of birds, you are to offer a dove or a young pigeon. ¹⁵ The priest shall bring it to the altar, wring off the head and burn it on the altar; its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. ¹⁶ He is to remove the crop and the feathers and throw them down east of the altar where the ashes are. ¹⁷ He shall tear it open by the wings, not dividing it completely, and then the priest shall burn it on the wood that is burning on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.

Key Text

“You are to wash the internal organs and the legs with water, and the priest is to burn all of it on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.” —Leviticus 1:9

Costly Sacrifices

Unit 1: Tabernacle, Sacrifices, and Atonement

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify God’s key expectations for burnt offerings.
2. Compare and contrast the expectation of an unblemished sacrifice with that of 1 Peter 1:19.
3. Recruit an accountability partner for mutual support in giving God the best of the learner’s service.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Book of Worship?
- B. Lesson Context

I. An Offering from the Herd (Leviticus 1:3-9)

- A. Preparing the Animal (vv. 3-6)
Opportunity Cost

- B. Presenting the Sacrifice (vv. 7-9)

II. An Offering from the Flock (Leviticus 1:10-13)

- A. Preparing the Animal (vv. 10-12)
The Perfect Tax Return

- B. Presenting the Sacrifice (v. 13)

III. An Offering of Birds (Leviticus 1:14-17)

- A. Preparing the Sacrifice (vv. 14-16)
- B. Presenting the Sacrifice (v. 17)

Conclusion

- A. Burnt Offerings in the Old Testament
- B. The Smell of Worship
- C. Prayer
- D. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. Book of Worship?

If you were to ask a group of people today with a fair degree of Bible knowledge to name a book of the Bible dealing with worship, the majority response would likely be Psalms. Some might name Revelation because of the scenes of worship and praise described within the book.

Few, if any, would suggest Leviticus. Leviticus contains no hymns of praise to the Lord. The text focuses on ritual observances, sacrificial rites, and the preservation of boundaries between the sacred and profane and the pure and impure. Yet under the covenant of Sinai, these rituals were integral parts of the proper worship of God (Exodus 3:15; compare 7:16). Leviticus instructs God’s people under the old covenant how they are to approach, honor, and offer sacrifices to him so that their covenant relationship remains firm. Today’s lesson text comes from the opening chapter of Leviticus, which covers the appropriate procedures for carrying out the burnt offerings.

B. Lesson Context

The book of Leviticus is one of the five books, collectively known as the Pentateuch, traditionally ascribed to Moses. The contents of the Pentateuch as a whole are best viewed as deriving originally from Moses and carrying his authority (see Leviticus 26:46).

This quarter’s previous lessons, taken from the book of Exodus, emphasized that God would dwell with his people and receive their worship in the tabernacle. Leviticus contains the most thorough instructions on the proper forms and procedures for the worship of God: the “where” and “how” for worship. The book’s divine authority and purposes are emphasized from the start (Leviticus 1:1-2). These are the Lord’s regulations and instructions for his people and how they must conduct themselves in relation to him.

Leviticus takes its name from the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. The title reflects the fact that the book relates to the tasks of the Levites, who assisted the priests in carrying out duties associated with wor-

ship at the tabernacle. (We recall that all priests were Levites, but not all Levites were priests.)

A key word in Leviticus is the word *holy*. Of its 600-plus occurrences in the Bible, more are found in Leviticus than in any other book of the Bible. *Holiness* refers to a state of being set apart, including both ritual and ethical purity. The words “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (Leviticus 19:2) are directed not only to all the people of ancient Israel but to all of God’s people through time (1 Peter 1:15-16, quoting that verse).

With so much emphasis in Leviticus on *holiness*, perhaps we might think that teachings on *love* would take a back seat and be stressed elsewhere. But one of the most often quoted Old Testament passages in the New Testament is Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus even cited this as one of the two greatest commandments (Matthew 22:39; compare 5:43; 19:19; Mark 12:31-33; Luke 10:27; Romans 13:9; Galatians 5:14; James 2:8).

God deserves the best of one’s herds rather than the worst. Leviticus 22:17-33 gives an extended warning against unacceptable sacrifices. Centuries later, the prophet Malachi would charge God’s people with violating this prohibition (Malachi 1:8, 13-14). The added specification that the blemish-free sacrifice be *male* foreshadows the sacrifice of Jesus (Hebrews 9:14; 1 Peter 1:19).

What Do You Think?

Which most motivates you to worship: the “where” or the “how”?

Digging Deeper

Which of these passages help you most: John 4:23-24; Acts 2:46-47; Romans 12:1; Hebrews 9:1; 10:25; 12:28?

What Do You Think?

What are some ways to ensure that you offer “the best” to Christ?

Digging Deeper

How do passages such as Genesis 4:2-5; 2 Corinthians 8:12; 9:7 help you answer that question?

I. An Offering from the Herd
(Leviticus 1:3-9)
A. Preparing the Animal (vv. 3-6)

3a. “If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you are to offer a male without defect.

In the verse just before this one, the Lord permitted that animal sacrifices could come from either a person’s herd (of cattle) or flock (of sheep and goats). The verse before us narrows the focus specifically to that of a *burnt offering* that comes from *the herd*.

The directive to sacrifice only animals *without defect* is repeated in Deuteronomy 15:21. This command reflects a key distinction between profane and sacred things. It also emphasizes that

3b. “You must present it at the entrance to the tent of meeting so that it will be acceptable to the LORD.

The burnt offering could not be presented just anywhere the giver desired. The worshipper had to bring it to the place specifically designated for such a sacred purpose: the tabernacle. Only then would the sacrifice be considered acceptable to the Lord, what conforms to his requirements, and what pleases him (Leviticus 19:5; 22:19-21, 29; 23:11) The Lord was to be worshipped on his terms and at the sole place designated for that purpose. He instituted strict penalties for performing sacrifices in any other location (17:1-4, 8-9). Deuteronomy 12:11-14 reiterates the necessity of a centralized worship site, anticipating the future temple in Jerusalem. This requirement forced the Israelites to worship the Lord alone in a consistent way and prevented them from continuing their practices of sacrificing to “goat idols” (Leviticus 17:5-7).

Opportunity Cost

The average cost of a beef cow in 2023 in the United States was in the neighborhood of \$3,000. That was also about how much an average US homeowner spent on home maintenance that year. Neither cost was trivial for most people. And for an ancient Israelite, giving up a head of cattle for a burnt offering was significant.

Look at the level of your financial giving, and ask yourself, *What am I giving up the opportunity of buying when I put this amount of money in the offering plate or devote X amount of time to ministry activities?* The resulting “opportunity cost” will be quite revealing!

—R. L. N.

As the reader works through the procedure specified for the various types of sacrifices, several similarities are seen. The first is the instruction to put a *hand on the head of the burnt offering* (compare Exodus 29:10, 15, 19; Leviticus 3:8, 13; 4:4, 29, 33; 8:14, 18, 22). This is the first of a multistep procedure. The placement of the hand symbolizes the person's submission of the animal as a sacrifice on the person's behalf. Commentary on Leviticus 1:9, below, summarizes the entirety of the steps.

As the procedure continues to the following steps, we may wonder who did the hands-on work to *slaughter the young bull*. The context implies that it was the one who had brought the animal to be sacrificed; after that, *Aaron's sons the priests* (ordained in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8), took over to perform the rest of the tasks regarding *blood*. But Leviticus 14:19-20 mentions a priest who was to slaughter the animal. In any case, a priest had to be present to officiate.

and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life" (Leviticus 17:11).

The next step was the removal of the animal's hide. This might be either prior to or simultaneous with cutting the carcass *into pieces*. Both would speed up the burning process. Leviticus 7:8 directed that the priest officiating at the burnt offering should receive the animal's hide.

Only priests were allowed to carry out the act of sacrificing the animal prepared for the burnt offering. The phrase *put fire on the altar* does not mean “to start the fire,” because the fire for this *altar* was to burn continuously (Leviticus 6:9-13; Numbers 28:1-8). The idea, instead, is to stoke the fire.

Exodus 29:13 and Leviticus 8:20; 9:13 specify *the pieces* in greater detail.

In what ways can you discharge your new-covenant priestly role (Isaiah 61:6; 1 Peter 2:5)?

How do you expect your answers to differ from those of other Christians? Why?

This verse concludes the description of the ritual that began in Leviticus 1:4, above. The resulting smoke that creates *an aroma pleasing to the Lord* attributes a human characteristic—a sense of smell—to God. This is anthropomorphic language. Even though God is spirit (John 4:24), the Scriptures speak of him as having physical characteristics (examples: Psalm 34:15-16; John

12:38). Here, the sense of smell depicts how the Lord was pleased with the burnt offering as presented in the manner set forth in the text (compare Amos 5:21).

To summarize, the ritual involved these steps:

1. Place hand on the animal's head
2. Slay the animal
3. Splash animal blood against the sides of the altar
4. Remove the hide from the carcass
5. Dismember the carcass
6. Stoke the altar fire
7. Arrange wood on the altar
8. Arrange body pieces and fat on the altar fire
9. Wash internal organs and legs
10. Burn all except hide to create smoke pleasing to the Lord

II. An Offering from the Flock (Leviticus 1:10-13)

A. Preparing the Animal (vv. 10-12)

10. “If the offering is a burnt offering from the flock, from either the sheep or the goats, you are to offer a male without defect.

For this kind of offering, *sheep* or *goats* that were *male without defect* were interchangeable with young bull, just discussed. We see male goats and sheep themselves as interchangeable for Passover in Exodus 12:5. Either goats or sheep were acceptable for fellowship offerings, with either male or female allowed (Leviticus 3). Either bulls, male or female goats, or female lambs are allowed for sin or trespass offerings, depending on the nature of the sin (4:14, 24; 5:6).

The Perfect Tax Return

One of the editors of the book you are now holding moved from Ohio to Colorado in 2016. As April 15 of the following year approached, he spent several days preparing his five income tax returns (one federal, two state, and two city returns). The result was 17 total pages of income tax returns!

Knowing that the government requires that tax returns be devoid of omissions, he was scrupulous about accuracy (compare Romans 13:6-7). To his dismay, however, the 17 pages should have been 18—he had neglected to file one particular form



Visual for Lessons 3 & 4. As you discuss the commentary on verse 17, point to this visual and ask, “How will your life be a pleasing sacrifice to God?”

with his Colorado return, thinking that that page was just a worksheet. And so he had to pay a five-dollar fine.

Reading the book of Leviticus may cause us to think that the Old Testament system of sacrifices was as complicated as modern tax codes, not to mention the Old Testament’s consideration of the relative value of animal sacrifices (1 Samuel 15:22; Hosea 6:6; Micah 6:6-8). But as we sift through the requirements of the old covenant, the one element we dare not lose sight of is the requirement for an unblemished sacrificial animal. That requirement describes Jesus, upon whose perfection our salvation depends (1 Peter 1:18-19). That standard must also be ours (Matthew 5:48; 2 Peter 3:14). Is this your priority? —O. P.

11. “You are to slaughter it at the north side of the altar before the LORD, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall splash its blood against the sides of the altar.

Here a specific instruction was given as to where the animal was to be slain: *at the north side of the altar*. Why this was required is not entirely clear, although it may have something to do with the fact that the tabernacle and the gateway into its courtyard faced east (Numbers 2:3; 3:38; 10:14). This rationale may also combine in some way with a need to distinguish this offering from the one taken from the herd; other than that, the procedure at this point is the same.

12. “ ‘You are to cut it into pieces, and the priest shall arrange them, including the head and the fat, on the wood that is burning on the altar.

Again, the procedure is the same as that designated for the bovines (Leviticus 1:5-8, above).

B. Presenting the Sacrifice (v. 13)

13. “ ‘You are to wash the internal organs and the legs with water, and the priest is to bring all of them and burn them on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.

Yet again, the procedure is the same as with the bull (Leviticus 1:9, above).

III. An Offering of Birds
(Leviticus 1:14-17)

A. Preparing the Sacrifice (vv. 14-16)

14. “ ‘If the offering to the LORD is a burnt offering of birds, you are to offer a dove or a young pigeon.

This option for a *burnt offering* was provided for people who could not afford to bring the aforementioned offerings from a herd or flock (Leviticus 5:7-10). Such an option was also provided for women after childbirth who could not afford to offer a lamb for the burnt offering of purification (12:8). One may recall the sacrifice that Joseph and Mary offered following the birth of Jesus (Luke 2:24).

15. “ ‘The priest shall bring it to the altar, wring off the head and burn it on the altar; its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar.

The procedure for offering a bird as a burnt offering differed from that prescribed for offerings from the herd or the flock (compare Leviticus 5:7-10). Whereas the blood of the animals that were sacrificed was sprinkled around the

altar of burnt offering, the bird’s blood was to be *drained out on the side of the altar*. Though the bird’s blood would not be nearly as abundant as that of the other animals, the need to separate its blood from its body must be completed. Israelites were forbidden to eat blood (7:10-14; compare Genesis 9:4).

16. “ ‘He is to remove the crop and the feathers and throw them down east of the altar where the ashes are.

The meaning of a bird’s *crop* is uncertain. It may refer to the pouch near the gullet or throat (the *craw*) where the bird stores food temporarily before digestion. Another option is that it may refer to the lower intestines. Its removal may be compared to removing the intestines from the animals of the herd or the flock.

The place of *ashes* that was beside *the altar* seems to have been a temporary location for ashes; the ultimate destination for that refuse was outside the camp (Leviticus 4:12; 6:10; 8:17; Numbers 4:13).

B. Presenting the Sacrifice (v. 17)

17. “ ‘He shall tear it open by the wings, not dividing it completely, and then the priest shall burn it on the wood that is burning on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.

Further instructions regarding the sacrifices of birds conclude this portion of our text. The anatomy of a bird is quite different from that of sheep/goats and bovines, thus the sacrificial procedure was quite different. *The priest* was solely responsible for preparing and presenting the bird as a burnt offering. Though not as monetarily valuable as something offered from the flock or the herd, this offering still produced *an aroma pleasing to the Lord*. Whether the worshipper was well-to-do or impoverished made no difference to the Lord, who treats everyone alike (Acts 10:34; compare Deuteronomy 10:17).

As followers of Jesus, our duty is to offer to God, not burnt sacrifices of animals or birds, but our lives as a “living sacrifice” (Romans 12:1). Our sacrifices do include the monetary (Hebrews 13:16; 2 Corinthians 8:3-4; Philippians 4:18) but

How to Say It

anthropomorphic	<i>an-thruh-puh-more-fik.</i>
Pentateuch	<i>Pen-ta-teuk.</i>
Septuagint	<i>Sep-too-ih-jent.</i>

are primarily spiritual (1 Peter 2:5), consisting of “the fruit of lips” offering our thanks to God (Hebrews 13:15) and the good deeds we do as salt and light in our spheres of influence (Matthew 5:13-14).

What Do You Think?
What steps can you take to help others understand the foreshadowing nature of Levitical sacrifices?

Digging Deeper
Which elements of foreshadowing can you list right now?

Conclusion

A. Burnt Offerings in the Old Testament

The burnt offering is the first of several kinds of sacrifices in the book of Leviticus. The burnt offering is mentioned first, perhaps because it was the most committal: the one presenting the sacrifice received nothing tangible back. At first glance, Deuteronomy 12:27 would seem to contradict that statement. But this exception applied to Israelites who lived too far from the tabernacle to make the trip there (Deuteronomy 12:21).

Burnt offerings are mentioned about 270 times in the Old Testament. Their association with atonement makes study of them important in light of New Testament passages such as Mark 12:33 and Hebrews 10:1-14.

B. The Smell of Worship

One day, in a class I was teaching, we discussed the sacrifices the Israelites were required to bring as part of their worship of the Lord. Someone asked, “How did those people stand the smell of all of those animals being burned up day after day?”

Yes, to our modern way of thinking, the sacrificial system prescribed in the Old Testament and covered in today’s text may seem odd, wasteful (killing all those animals), and even offensive. And, as mentioned earlier, the book of Leviticus does not make for the most captivating reading in the world!

Whatever ugliness we may see or disgust we

may feel about the sacrificial system, with all its bloodshed and the continual smell coming from the sacrifices being offered, God saw things differently. The sacrificial offerings constituted, as our lesson title states, “a sweet aroma.” This is why it is so important to allow him to dictate what kind of worship is acceptable to him.

Through the sacrificial system, God demonstrated the necessity of total commitment to him, his desire to be present with his people, and the seriousness of sin. And he wanted people to understand that, as Paul puts it in Romans 6:23, “the wages of sin is death.” But God, in his grace, has always provided a substitute so that we do not have to pay those wages. In the Old Testament system, the substitutes were the animals or birds. Those substitutes foreshadowed the ultimate Substitute who God in time would provide: Jesus, whose sacrifice at the cross was also a “fragrant offering” (Ephesians 5:2), the once-for-all sacrifice that fulfilled what (and who) the Old Testament sacrifices pointed toward. Indeed, as Paul puts it, our lives are to “spread the aroma of the knowledge of [Christ] everywhere” (2 Corinthians 2:14).

What Do You Think?
How would you respond to the claim that the book of Leviticus has no value for modern-day Christians?

Digging Deeper
How has this lesson changed your answer?

C. Prayer

Our Father, help us to see the meaning of the word *offering* as more than money. May we demonstrate the commitment and obedience to bring our best before the Lord. Thank you for the sacrifice of Jesus, who gave himself unreservedly to be the sacrifice needed to remove our sins and provide full atonement that we might be reconciled with you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

Always worship God on his terms, not ours.