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## The Burnt Offerings

### Leviticus 1:1-17

**Intro:** As my introduction, I want to explain my intention for handling the material in this book. 1<sup>st</sup>, after a short intro, I'll attempt to explain the meaning of the passage in relation to its immediate context. Then, we'll look at what it could mean for us in modern Christianity. Finally, we'll see how the passage relates to Jesus Christ. This is my goal, only time will tell if I will be able to stick to that approach each week. But, In order to understand Leviticus properly, it's important for us to think of it in the context of the story that precedes it. This can be accomplished in 2 ways: by reading Lev in light of its immediate literary and historical context.

The story immediately before Leviticus is where the Lord redeems Israel from slavery in Egypt (Ex 1-15) and then enters into a covenant relationship with them (Ex 20-24). They're to be His treasured possession and fulfill a special role: that of being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation and as such, they were to spread the Lord's kingdom of justice, mercy, goodness and love over all the earth. What's more, they're to do this with the Lord dwelling in their midst in the tabernacle (Ex 25-31). If you were an Israelite, all of this would lead to some burning questions: How can the holy and pure King of the universe dwell among His sinful and impure people? How can He live here, in our very midst, without His holiness obliterating us in our sin and impurity? How can we live as His people in such a way that we really do extend His holy kingdom throughout the world?

Leviticus answers these questions and as it does so, it provides us with a workable outline. It begins by explaining the sacrifices that address sin and enable the Israelites to worship this King correctly (1-7). It provides Israel with a priesthood to intercede on their behalf and lead them to worship before their King (8-10). It gives them laws to teach them how to properly deal with impurity (11-15). It provides a yearly ceremony to remove every single speck of sin and impurity from the kingdom (16). It then provides a whole series of laws in other areas to show them how to live as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation; to establish a society where God's character and wishes for humanity could be seen in the corporate life of the nation. So, while many Christian regard Leviticus as boring, the Israelites saw it as

a blessing. For them it was life-giving instruction that answered life's most important questions: How are we to live before our covenant King, and how do we reflect His holy character to the watching world?

There are several points of interest in our text and the most shocking is seen right here in vs<sup>1</sup>. We might think this would be an amazing opportunity but I'm sure the average Israelite was so excited about this new development. A quick glance at Ex 20:18-21 will give us some insight to their collective attitude. When they arrived at the foot of Mt. Sinai and witnessed the Lord's presence from a distance, they wanted no part of it. Now the Lord lives in their hood!

In Exodus, the Lord's glory descended upon Mt. Sinai twice and each time, the Lord called Moses up and gives him laws for the Israelites. This same pattern is repeated here: the Lord's glory descends on the tabernacle and the Lord calls Moses and gives him laws for the people. The tabernacle has become a sort of portable Sinai, a place of both the Lord's presence and His revelation; a place that will travel with in Israel's midst.

In biblical times, a king who entered into a covenant relationship with a people would give them laws to help them know how to live as citizens of his kingdom. The Lord does that very same thing in this book. He gives covenant laws to His covenant people so that they can be faithful members of His covenant kingdom. These laws informed Israel how maintain covenant fellowship with the King who now dwelt in their midst and it also informed them how to reflect the holiness of their covenant King before the rest of the world. In both instances, the goal was relational: to guide Israel in their relationship with their covenant King and in their relationship with all humanity. The goal was to fulfill the 2 greatest laws: love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

There were 3 major parts in the covenant God made with Israel at Mt Sinai. The covenant included the law Israel had to obey, sacrifice to provide for breaking the law and the choice of blessing or curse that would become Israel's destiny throughout history. The sacrificial system was an essential part of the Mosaic covenant because it was impossible to live up to the requirements of the law. No one could perfectly obey the law, so sin had to be dealt with through sacrifice. The focus of ch<sup>1-7</sup> is the sacrificial system. Now that the tabernacle was completed, the sacrificial system could be put

into operation.

There are several types of sacrifices listed in this section and each was significant, each had a different meaning and purpose and they all pointed forward to the perfect sacrifice Jesus would offer by His crucifixion. Our text focuses specifically on the burnt sacrifice. The purpose of the burnt offering was to allow the worshipper to express a total commitment to the Lord. While the exercise of a sacrificial system is quite foreign to us and not a little off-putting, there are some interesting points to be made and some striking similarities to our own worship and spiritual walk.

First, we need to understand that this was not the beginning of God's sacrificial system. Adam knew about animal sacrifice ([Gen 3:21](#)) as did Cain and Abel ([Gen 4:3-4](#)) and Noah ([Gen 8:20-21](#)), Job ([1:5](#)) Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The Israelites even offered sacrifice at the first Passover ([Ex 12](#)). The concept of animal sacrifice wasn't unique to Israel either. Other nations and cultures practiced it, often leading to abominable of human sacrifice. The universality of sacrifice is evidence that this concept was known before the Flood and was carried to different cultures from the descendants of the survivors of the flood in Noah's day.

So, because sacrifice was already known to Israel, these instructions are mostly a clarification or codification of the traditions handed down from the patriarchs. But notice, the Lord is very specific about how Israel is to perform this multitude of sacrifices. The first requirement is seen in [v2](#) – the offering must come from the livestock, either the herd or the flock. We might think this was common knowledge but why does God insist on it? Why couldn't you just find a large stag, a mountain goat or a pair of nice rabbits to offer as a sacrifice?

This requirement prevented an Israelite worshipper from offering a wild or non-domesticated animal; they could only bring domesticated livestock. Each animal listed as an "acceptable offering" was part of Israel's inventory of animals that were used for fabric, milk and all related dairy products and meat. Israel was not yet in the Promise Land so they were not yet an agrarian society. You could say that all their wealth was tied up in the stock market – the livestock market. Giving to God of the herd or the flock meant that a sacrifice must cost them something. If it didn't cost them anything then it wasn't a sacrifice, if it wasn't a sacrifice then it wasn't an offering and

if it wasn't an offering then they weren't actually worshipping their covenant King.

The next requirements for the burnt sacrifice are seen in v3. The animal had to be a male and it couldn't have any obvious defects. Male animals from the herd or flock were thought to be stronger and thus, more valuable. A rancher could part with a few heifers but don't mess with his prize bull! And, of course, God wouldn't accept any defective sacrifices. A priest had to examine each animal to affirm that it had no obvious blemish or defect. Just as with the previous requirement, the sacrifice must come from something that was very highly prized by the worshipper.

This demonstrates the point that God wants and deserves our very best. A farmer might happily give God a diseased and useless animal because it costs him nothing. There was a farmer whose cow gave birth to twins and he swore he would give one of the calves to God but He couldn't decide which one to give until one day, one of the calves died. He said to his wife, "Guess what? God's calf died today!" Why does God insist of receiving our best? It's because He wants to be our most prized possession, not the things He's blessed us with. Too often Christians tend to cling to and highly value the gifts we have received more than the One who gave those gifts. This should not be!

The next requirement was that the offering was to be brought and given by the worshipper of their own free will. God didn't want the offering of the burnt sacrifice to be forced. Each animal had to be freely offered. This illustrates the principle that God wants our hearts, freely given to Him. We also see that the Lord had an appointed place and order for Israel's sacrifice. These sacrifices couldn't just be made at the home of each individual Israelite or at the locations they later called the high places. The mere fact that God gave so much specific instruction on how to properly offer sacrifices shows us that this was not a matter to be left up to the creativity of the individual Israelite. They were not free to offer sacrifices any way they pleased, even if they did it sincerely! What God demanded, first and foremost even before the sacrifice, was the humility and obedience of His people in the sacrificial system. The sacrifices must be carried out in a way that was God-centered, not man-centered.

There's a strange requirement in v4: the worshipper had to place their

hands on the head of the sacrifice. In fact, the Hebrew verb used here suggests that the act of laying on hands implied the exertion of some pressure and could even be translated “to lean upon.” This was clearly meant to allow the worshipper to identify with the animal that was about to be the sacrificial victim. Through this symbolic act, the guilty party transfers their guilt to the sacrifice that would die and be completely consumed for the sin of the one bringing the offering. In effect, the offerer was saying, “This is my substitute. It will die in my place. It will go up as a sweet-smelling savor to Jehovah, as my life should.” By this gesture, the worshipper identifies himself as the one offering the animal and, in a sense, is offering himself to God through the animal.

Was all this theatrics necessary? It was necessary because it wasn’t enough that the victim merely died. The one receiving atonement had to actively identify himself with the sacrifice. In the same way, it’s not enough to know that Jesus died for the sins of the world. The one who desires to receive His forgiveness, His atonement must reach out and identify himself with Jesus. The idea behind the Hebrew word atonement (kophar) is to cover. The idea was that a person’s sin and guilt were covered over by the blood of the sacrificial victim. This is a major theme in Leviticus as the Hebrew word rendered as to make atonement (kipper) is used almost 50 times in the book, while it is only used about 50 times in the entire rest of the OT.

But there’s a big difference between the OT concept of atonement and the NT concept. In the OT, sin was merely “covered over” until the ultimate redemption was completed by Jesus on the cross. In the NT, sin is done away with completely and a true “at-one-ment” was accomplished by Jesus’ sacrifice. The Christian is therefore right with God on the basis of what Jesus has done at the cross, not on the basis of what the believer does. Charles Spurgeon put it this way, “There are 2 ruling religions around us at this day, and they mainly differ in tense. The general religion of mankind is “Do”, but the religion of a true Christian is “Done!” “Jesus paid it all/ All to Him I owe/ Sin had left a crimson stain/ He washed it white as snow.” It’s significant, though, that the burnt offering isn’t the sin offering. The burnt offering was more about total surrender to God than about sin. Yet, this shows that when we come to God with the greatest surrender possible for us, we are still marked by sin and in great need of atonement. All efforts of greater devotion and surrender to God should, if done properly, drive us to

greater dependence on God's perfect sacrifice of atonement in and through Jesus Christ.

If v4 was strange then v5 is shocking! Of course, the animal had to die. Although it was without any blemish, that in itself didn't atone for sin. It wasn't enough that it was dedicated to the Lord. It may even have been a helpful, productive, valuable animal but none of that mattered. It had to die in order to properly atone for sin. We understand this, it's a given. But what is shocking is, while the priests would certainly assist where necessary, doing the heavy work of skinning and butchering the meat; it was the one who brought the offering that delivered the deathblow!

The individual Israelite worshipper had to cut the jugular vein of the bull, in the presence of the priests, at the door of the tabernacle. This was a solemn testimony of the need for sacrifice. It was a clear confession of the fact: "I need atonement for my sin" and a graphic example of the terrible horror that sin actually is. We'll see this many times in our study. Every place the laying on of hands on a sacrificial victim is mentioned, the one who put his hands on the head is the one responsible for killing the sacrifice.

We should also notice that this killing was to be done before the Lord. We've only made it to v5 and this is the 2<sup>nd</sup> occurrence of this phrase (3b) in the book. It will occur more than 60 times, more than in any other book of the Bible. Every thing that happens in Leviticus happens before the Lord and every sacrifice that was made was to be made before the Lord. This should also be the case for the modern Christian today. It is appropriate for us to live our entire life in the conscious presence of God (Col 3:17). But, this is especially true of our spiritual exercises: our acts of worship, prayer and receiving instruction from God's Word. It would transform the meaning and impact of those acts if we were to consciously do them before the Lord.

The end result of the sacrifice was that it was a sweet aroma to the Lord. Now, I can't think of a better smell than meat grilling on the pit. In fact, if I just smell lighter fluid burning on charcoal, I get excited! But this isn't a cookout at the tabernacle; this sacrifice was burnt to ash and that can't smell too good. So what is Moses referring to here? It wasn't the burnt flesh that was a sweet aroma but the surrendered condition of the heart of the one who brought the sacrifice to be burnt. It was the desire to give everything (my best, my all) to God, an "I surrender all" attitude. When



everything was burnt before the Lord, nothing was set aside, reserved or held back. This is stated for all aspects of the burnt offering. The atoning for sin and the giving of all, in obedience to God's instruction, pleased God just as a sweet aroma pleases the senses. You ladies like your essential oils; my favorite essential oil is bacon grease.

The last point to consider is the variety of animals that were acceptable to God as sacrifices. Clearly, there would be some Israelites who could only afford to bring a dove or pigeon. Yet, the fact that God would accept a bull, a goat, a sheep or a bird shows that He was more interested in the heart behind the sacrifice than in the actual animal being offered. If the sacrifice was made with the right heart, God would accept the poor man's bird as much as the rich man's bull. The simple sacrifice of a poor man could still be a sweet aroma to the Lord. Still, the sacrifice had to correspond with what one could afford. It was wrong for a rich man to only offer a bird as a burnt offering. The greatness of the offering had to correspond to the greatness of the one who brought the offering. Thus, when God made His offering for sin, He gave the richest, most costly thing He could – Himself!

How does all of this relate to the modern Christian no longer living under the law but under the grace of God? Well, for starters, while the sacrificial system is no longer in effect, the concept of giving as laid out in our text has carried over to the NT almost verbatim (1 Cor 16:2). We can see in Paul's instructions that NT giving is also considered an act of worship because it was to take place at church on Sunday. We know this is worship because the church isn't a bank, banks aren't open on Sundays. This also means that NT giving was to be systematic, given consistently over time. NT giving is also personal: Paul said, let each one of you... He expected each believer to share in the giving as all would share in the blessing. NT giving is also to be proportional – as he may prosper. There's no mention of a certain percentage because it's not so much that your giving should reflect your income as it is that your giving should reflect your love, trust and dependence on God. For some, 10% is a real stretch; for others, it's barely a dent; but for most modern Christians, 10% is simply a stumbling block. But, of course, God's not after your wallet.

While the offerings mentioned in ch 1-3 are all considered "voluntary" we should qualify this somewhat and think of them as "voluntary but expected." Although there was no specified set times to bring a burnt offering, they

were not optional. There was a certain must-ness to these offerings as they signified the complete self-surrender and total subjection to the Lord of the one who brought it. Christians today are called to embrace this same self-surrender to the Lord who bought them ([1 Cor 6:19-20](#)). We're not to consider ourselves to be our own persons; rather, we belong to Jesus Christ. No, we don't bring animal sacrifices as offerings to the Lord; we have a greater responsibility, we're to present ourselves as living sacrifices, holy, acceptable (pleasing) to God, which is our reasonable service or our true and proper worship ([Rom 12:1](#)). Paul urges us to do this in view of God's mercy. Again, this is not a suggestion by the apostle – it's an expectation. Modern Christians can emulate the faith of OT saints and learn from those who expressed their faith in God and their devotion to Him by bringing their offerings before Him.

It's true that we no longer live under the law but, as we have seen in ch1, it wasn't the sacrifice that necessarily pleased God but the humility and obedience of the worshipper that brought the sacrifice. Sadly, too many today believe that since we're no longer under law, we can do what we want. But nowhere does the Bible teach that God's grace is a license to sin. Nowhere does the NT teach that just because we've been saved by God's grace and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit that we can now live our lives on autopilot and that there's nothing we can do to displease the Lord. Instead, there are plenty of passages that actually tell us to give diligent attention to living a life that pleases God. We just referred to [Rom 12:1-2](#) but we've also learned this in [Eph 5:8-10](#). Time won't allow a look at all of them, just suffice it to say that Leviticus and the NT are of the same mind on this issue.

How does our text point to Jesus? We've seen several references to His person and work already but the first parallel is found in the very first verse ([1](#)). There is a deliberate link between this tabernacle of meeting and the incarnate Jesus Christ. [John 1:14](#) says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" the word dwelt literally means He "tabernacle-d" among us. As the tabernacle of meeting was a symbol of God's presence among His people; in the same way, Jesus Christ was God present on earth.

Still, the entire chapter lays out God's gracious plan in redeeming lost sinners back to Himself. We can see that not only does God desire to speak His truth to us, but He also invites us to meet with Him. Now, of course, our sin, like the ancient Israelites, requires atonement but God graciously



provides the means for accomplishing that atonement. Ultimately, Jesus Christ was and is the final and perfect means of atonement for all those who will come to Him in repentance and humble themselves to accept His offering of salvation. Have you? Will you? 😊