



The Whole Burnt Thing

Kicking It Off

What is something you have paid a lot for and gotten nothing practical (key word practical) back from, and would you do it again?

Read

Leviticus 1:1-17

Summary

Leviticus opens right after the rescue, not before it. Israel is already out of Egypt. They did not earn their way out, God brought them out because He loved them, and now they are camped in the wilderness with His tent in the middle of them. So the book is not a manual for getting saved. It is a manual for how a people who are still sinful can live close to a God who is holy. That is the question the burnt offering answers.

The Hebrew word for offering comes from a root that means to draw near. You bring something because you are coming close, and you do not come to God empty handed. The word we read as burnt offering is olah, which comes from a word about going up. The picture is not meat being destroyed, it is smoke rising, and the smoke is what God receives. What makes this particular offering strange is that nobody gets anything back from it. Other offerings feed the priest or the family. This one goes up whole. The worshiper walks away with no meat, no leftovers, no return on a very expensive animal. What he walks away with is acceptance and access.

And he does the work himself. He lays his hand on the animal, he kills it, he cuts it apart, he washes it. The priest handles the blood, but the worshiper cannot hand off the costly part. It is physical and it is messy and it is meant to be felt.

And look at how God handles the cost associated with the sacrifice. A wealthy man brings a bull, a poorer man brings a sheep, a man with almost nothing brings two birds, and after each one the text says the same thing: a pleasing aroma to the LORD. Same verdict, different cost. God scales what He asks to what you have and gives everyone the same acceptance. All of it points forward. Christ gave Himself as a fragrant offering, once for all, and He is the offering we bring when we come near.

Discussion Questions

1. Was there anything from the sermon or the passage that stuck out to you?
2. Israel was already rescued before Leviticus was given, so the offerings were about living near God rather than getting saved by Him. When you think about your own faith, do you spend more energy on being saved or on being close to God?
3. The word for offering comes from a root meaning to draw near, and the worshiper never came empty handed. What do you actually bring with you when you come into a time of worship or prayer?
4. The person bringing the bull had to kill it, cut it apart, and wash it himself before handing anything to the priest. Where are you tempted to let someone else do the costly part of your spiritual life for you?
5. The burnt offering was the one offering nobody ate, so the worshiper gained nothing from it except acceptance. Is there something you have given to God that felt like a loss at the time, and what did you find on the other side of it?
6. A bull, a lamb, and two birds all received the same verdict from God, because He measures the cost against the life of the person giving. What would change for you if you stopped comparing what you give to God with what others give?

Significant Quotes from Sermon

"God's not a part of your family. You're a part of His family."

"Humility is knowing how much greater your God is in comparison to you, or how insignificant you are in comparison to Him. And the beauty of this humility is knowing that even though there is this gap of holiness, God looks at you with loving eyes and affection saying, I want you."

"If you still were required to bring a physical animal offering, and you had to lay your hand on that animal and slit its throat and let its blood drain out, I don't think you would be complaining so much about how someone else was doing their job. I think you would be so concerned with how you are doing your job."

"You have one offering. His name is Jesus. Your responsibility is to come into the presence of God bearing Christ, wearing Jesus."

Sermon Notes**Leviticus 1**

The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock.

“If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord. He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. Then he shall kill the bull before the Lord, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. And Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

“If his gift for a burnt offering is from the flock, from the sheep or goats, he shall bring a male without blemish, and he shall kill it on the north side of the altar before the Lord, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall throw its blood against the sides of the altar. And he shall cut it into pieces, with its head and its fat, and the priest shall arrange them on the wood that is on the fire on the altar, but the entrails and the legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall offer all of it and burn it on the altar; it is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

“If his offering to the Lord is a burnt offering of birds, then he shall bring his offering of turtledoves or pigeons. And the priest shall bring it to the altar and wring off its head and burn it on the altar. Its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. He shall remove its crop with its contents and cast it beside the altar on the east side, in the place for ashes. He shall tear it open by its wings, but shall not sever it completely. And the priest shall burn it on the altar, on the wood that is on the fire. It is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

Outline

1. God Names the Purpose Before He Gives the Procedure
 - a. Israel is already out of Egypt. Salvation happened in Exodus, by grace, before a single law was given.
 - b. Leviticus answers the question that comes after rescue: how does an unholy people live with a holy God in the middle of their camp?
 - c. The Hebrew word for offering, corban, comes from a root meaning to draw near. You do not approach the Lord empty handed.
 - d. Acceptance and atonement in Leviticus 1:3-4 serve dwelling, not rescue. The blood that atones is the blood that makes fellowship possible, and without that logic the cross has nothing to fulfill.
2. The Whole Animal Goes Up and Nothing Comes Back
 - a. Olah comes from a root meaning to go up. The point is the smoke rising, not the meat being destroyed.
 - b. The worshiper lays his hand on the animal, kills it, flays it, and washes it (Leviticus 1:4-9). The priest handles the blood. Worship is not handed off to professionals.
 - c. Alone among the offerings, nothing of the olah comes back to anyone. No one eats it. The worshiper gains no benefit except acceptance and access.
 - d. We complain about how others lead worship while bringing nothing of ourselves to it. A man holding a knife over his own bull would be thinking about his own hands.
3. God Grades the Cost and Does Not Grade the Verdict
 - a. Bull, sheep, or two birds, the verdict is identical: a pleasing aroma to the LORD (Leviticus 1:9, 13, 17). God scales the cost to the worshiper's life and gives everyone the same acceptance. Mary and Joseph brought two pigeons (Luke 2:24).
 - b. Christ gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:2). He is the olah.
 - c. The sacrifice has been made once for all time and He sat down (Hebrews 10:12). The system has ended, the logic has not.
 - d. You still need an offering to draw near, and you already have one. Present your bodies as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1). Generosity, kindness, and good works follow from access, they do not purchase it.

Notes

I want to start where the book itself starts, which is with the holiness of God, because I think that is exactly where I am most likely to get in my own way. There is a point in the Christian life, usually after enough years and enough training, where I begin to think I have a decent grasp of God. I know good theology from bad theology. I know how the Spirit works. I came back from the youth retreat in Texas aware that some part of me was standing there thinking I was leagues ahead of those kids in biblical literacy. That attitude is the thing that keeps me from understanding holiness. Our culture puts enormous weight on knowledge, and we like to hold up a flag and say we have the truth, and the result is that we quietly close the distance between ourselves and an infinite God until He becomes a buddy. God is my friend, God is part of my family. Every bit of that is well meant, and some of it is true, but I would flip the sentence. God is not part of your family. You are part of His.

Humility is not saying I have no gifts and no abilities. That is closer to self pity. Humility is knowing that what I know is real and still small, that my God is higher than my mind can reach, that there are things He has not revealed and things I could not comprehend if He did. And the strange beauty is that across that gap He looks at me with affection and says He wants me. I have never solved that. The question I keep asking is why God would care about someone as insignificant and as unholy as I am, and the answer does not resolve. He simply says that He loves us, and He leaves it there. That is where faith becomes necessary, and faith here is not credulity about fairy tales. It is the settled decision to believe what He has said about Himself when I cannot get to the bottom of it.

What He has said, woven through this whole book, is this: to the people I have saved, I want to dwell with. Leviticus is the instructions for how that happens.

This is the piece of context that changes how the whole book reads. Leviticus does not teach anyone how to be saved. No Israelite would have read it that way. Their salvation already happened. They were slaves under Pharaoh and God brought them out, not because they were impressive, but because He loved them and cherished them, and I cannot explain that any better than I can explain why He loves me. They came out of Egypt by grace, and then He gave them a book about how a sinful people can live in proximity to a holy God without being consumed.

So when the word offering appears, I want it heard the way they heard it. The Hebrew is *corban*, and the root has to do with drawing near. The offering is the thing you bring in order to come close. They were not going to wander up to the tent of meeting disheveled, late, half distracted, treating it like an errand. This was the day they got to meet with the God of the universe, the God whose name they were careful not to even

say, and He was inviting them into His presence. Of course you bring something. Notice too that chapter 1 does not command an offering. It says when you bring one, this is how it is done.

Then there is the word we translate burnt offering, which is olah, and it comes from a root about going up. The English makes me picture destruction, meat consumed, waste. The Hebrew points at the smoke. What rises is the offering. The fragrance goes up, and the Lord is pleased with it.

Leviticus 1:3 says that if the offering is from the herd, it must be a male without blemish, brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD. He lays his hand on its head, and it is accepted for him to make atonement for him. A herdsman is bringing one of his good animals, and cattle were expensive then the way they are expensive now. He knows exactly what is about to happen. Acceptance and atonement are the point, and neither one has anything to do with getting saved. He is already saved. This is about dwelling. God is holy, and a holy God can only dwell with what is holy, so a system is given in which shed blood counts for atonement. That matters enormously for us, because if blood does not count for atonement, the cross means nothing. When we take communion and speak about the body and the blood, Jesus is not inventing a symbol He happened to like. He is reaching back into this law. Israel had already watched blood work this way on the doorposts in Egypt.

Something in verse 5 caught me this time in a way it never had. I grew up assuming the priest did everything, that you handed over your expensive animal and the professional took care of it and you walked away square with God. That is not what the text says. The priests handle the blood, and they throw it against the sides of the altar. But the man who brought the bull kills the bull. He flays it. He cuts it into pieces. He washes the entrails and the legs. Then he hands it over. Worship here is participatory and physical, and it is meant to be felt. It is messy and it is costly and you cannot outsource it. We are so removed from where our food comes from that most of us could not do this, and I say that knowing there are hunters in the room. My meat arrives in plastic wrap with no face on it. I grew up eating the face, and the eyeballs, and I like it, and my wife does not, but that is not the point. The point is that God built the offering so that the one bringing it had blood on his hands.

I think about that when I hear complaints about worship. The worship team is not singing it the way I like. This is not my style. They are not doing it in a way that blesses me. Sometimes those complaints are fair. Priests carry real responsibility, and Leviticus is severe with priests who handle holy things carelessly, more severe with them than with anyone else. But the worshiper has a job too. People come in hung over, come in treating the morning as the last priority of the day, come in as though a few hours of praising

God were an inconvenience, and then have the audacity to grade someone else's work. If you still had to lay your hand on an animal and open its throat and stand there while it bled out, knowing that this was your access to acceptance and atonement, I do not think you would be evaluating the priest. You would be thinking about your own hands. We read this book and wonder why they went through so much trouble to be near God. They went through it because they understood what was on the other side of it.

There is one more thing the burnt offering does that none of the other offerings do. Nobody eats it. Grain offerings and fellowship offerings feed somebody. This one goes up entirely. By any ordinary accounting it is waste, an entire animal burned with no return. What comes back is smoke, and the smoke is the point, because the smoke is a pleasing aroma to the LORD. Not because He enjoys the smell of burnt meat. Look at how the chapter is built. A herdsman brings a bull, someone else brings a sheep or a goat, someone poor brings two turtledoves or two pigeons, and every single time the verdict is the same words: a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD. God scales the cost to the life of the worshiper and He does not scale the acceptance. A day laborer would need a year to afford a bull, so God tells him to bring birds, and his birds are received exactly as the bull is received. Mary and Joseph brought two pigeons when they presented Jesus at the temple. Nearness to God has never been a function of how much you brought.

If you want to feel what a burnt offering would be in our terms, imagine a pile of cash at the front of the room, and you set it down, and the priest lights it, and you watch it go up in smoke. There is no way to call that good stewardship. There is no line where it benefits the community. And the Israelite standing there is not watching his assets burn. He is watching the smoke rise and hearing that the Lord is pleased and knowing that he may now come close. That is what he wanted. He brought something total, with no ulterior motive and no share coming back to him, and what he receives is acceptance and access.

Here is where Jesus comes in, and He has been the subject of all of this from the beginning. Paul tells the Ephesians to walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. That phrase is the olah. Christ is the burnt offering, the whole one, the one that goes up. Hebrews adds that when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God. We do not live in the sacrificial system anymore, and the logic of the sacrificial system has not been repealed. It has been fulfilled. It is beautiful to me that the Hebrew idea is a rising, and that His body was lifted up and received.

So the question is not what you have to give up to get access. Your 401k, your house, your car, the cash in your wallet, none of it is an acceptable offering, because

everything you own carries blemishes. You have one offering, and His name is Jesus. Your job when you come into the presence of God is to come bearing Christ, confessing that you need His body and His blood, and that apart from Him you have no way in. I do not think we make a big enough deal of that. Communion is not a nice ritual we are fond of, it is the offering that gives us access.

That does not end in apathy. If you had killed and butchered and washed and handed over something expensive, you would not shrug. You would be watching to see what God does next, how He meets you, what changes in your house because of it. God has provided everything needed for a proper sacrifice, and it cost you nothing because it cost Him His Son. The only question left is whether you will actually bring what He gave you, and then live as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Bring Christ, and the Spirit dwells in you, and you become the tent. And then generosity comes, and kindness comes, and good works come, not as payment for entry, but as the life of someone who is already inside.

Blog

One of the reasons why I wanted to do a sermon series on the book of Leviticus is because I wanted to better understand myself what the burnt offering was.

Leviticus chapter 1 describes the burnt offering in three distinct ways. First for someone who brings a bull, second for a person who brings a sheep or a goat, and third for someone who brings two birds. When we read this passage carefully we will notice that each of these offerings end the exact same way, that a burnt offering is a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Leviticus is generous in that it adjusts what you bring according to what you have, and it does not adjust what God says about it. The bull was the most valuable asset that a household in Israel could own, and two pigeons were what a day laborer could catch. But God accepts these various burnt offerings in the same way, and Leviticus makes it clear by repeating the same phrase three times for each offering.

The Hebrew word for this offering is olah, and it comes from a verb that means to go up. When I first thought of a burnt offering, my focus always had been on the destruction of the offering, and the fact that a burnt offering is completely consumed by the fire. But in the Hebrew, the idea behind a burnt offering is more pointed at the fact that the smoke goes up to the Lord and the fragrance is pleasing to Him.

What is fascinating is that the worshiper kills the animal himself. Verse 5 is explicit, and verse 11 as well. The priests handle the blood and the fire and the altar, because those are the holy things which are their responsibility, but the killing belongs to the person the offering is for. You brought your own bull, you laid your hand on its head, and you cut its throat in the courtyard while the priests stood by with basins. Israel was an agrarian society, and so they understood how to slaughter animals. We today live in a society in which the killing of animals is so separate from our lives, that even when we go grocery shopping, the stores make sure to make the meat look completely different than the animal they came from. The same today goes for our offering and worship. Many times we fail to recognize that God is asking us to offer ourselves up as a living sacrifice, in that we need to make sure we are the one who is actively and personally involved in the act of worship. Whatever the cost, you paid it with your own hands and could not watch from a distance.

Whole burnt offerings were not something unique to Israel. Many of the surrounding nations burned animals completely for their gods, and the assumption underneath most of those rituals was that the gods needed to be fed. In the Babylonian flood story the gods have gone hungry while the waters covered the earth, and when the survivor finally offers a sacrifice they crowd around the smell of it like flies. Genesis 8 uses that same picture after Noah's offering, and it is not an accident, but what God

does with it is completely different. He smells the pleasing aroma, and then He makes a promise never again to curse the ground. Generations later the psalmist says it even more plainly, that if God were hungry He would not tell us, because the world and everything in it already belongs to Him. The nations around Israel were maintaining their gods. Israel was being received by theirs.

Verse 3 says the worshiper brings the animal to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord. Verse 4 says that he lays his hand on the animal's head, and it shall be accepted for him, to make atonement for him. God tells us the purpose of the entire ritual before He gives a single instruction about how to carry it out, and the purpose is that a person would be accepted. The verb in verse 3 is passive, which means the worshiper is not accomplishing his own acceptance, he is receiving it. Everything from verse 5 forward is method, and the reason for it was settled two verses earlier.

This is the same order we have been seeing since we started this series. God rescued Israel out of Egypt before there was a law for them to keep, and Leviticus opens with God breaking the silence rather than Israel finding a way into the tent. Here that same pattern shows up inside a single paragraph. Purpose first, and then procedure. If we want to read Leviticus as a system for earning our way into being acceptable, we have to skip over verse 3 in order to do it.

Something else worth noticing is that the word for atonement shows up here in chapter 1, attached to the very first offering, before sin has even been mentioned. Many of us were taught that atonement belongs to the sin offering in chapter 4, and that the burnt offering is more of a gift that we bring. The text does not divide it that way. The burnt offering is the foundational offering, the one that secures our standing in front of God, and the more specific offerings that come later deal with particular failures and particular debts. If we have been carrying around a picture of God in which He handles our sin in one place and receives our worship in another, this chapter puts the two of them together on the first page.

The other thing that separates this offering from every other offering in the book is that nothing comes back. That is easy to miss unless you already know the others. In the grain offering the priests eat. In the fellowship offering the priests and the worshiper and his family share a meal together in God's presence, which is one of the warmest pictures in the entire Old Testament. Even in the sin offering there are portions that get eaten. The burnt offering alone goes up completely, and chapter 7 tells us that the officiating priest keeps the hide, so the man who brought a bull went home with nothing at all. He walked out of that courtyard poorer than he walked in, and more secure than he had ever been.

I want to be careful here, because there is an obvious sermon in this chapter that is not actually the sermon this chapter is preaching. The obvious one is that God wants all of us, so we should give Him everything. That is true, and Paul says as much in Romans 12, and I already brought it up a few paragraphs ago. But it is not the claim that Leviticus 1 is making. If we jump straight to it, we take a chapter that is telling us what sin costs and we turn it into a chapter about how motivated we ought to be. The completeness of the burnt offering is a measurement before it is a metaphor. It tells us the price of standing at that door, and the price is everything, and then God hands the worshiper an animal so that he does not have to pay it himself.

If you have time this week, read Genesis 22 alongside Leviticus 1. Abraham is told to take his son and offer him as an olah, and it is the same word and the same offering. Isaac carries the wood for the olah up the hill. He asks his father where the lamb for the olah is, and Abraham tells him that God will provide for Himself the lamb. Then a ram shows up caught in a thicket and goes up in his son's place. Everything that Leviticus 1 lays out as law is already sitting inside that story as narrative, including the substitution, the completeness, and the provision that comes from God's side rather than ours. Israel had that story in their hands for generations before they were ever given this chapter.

And if you want to know where all of this is going, Paul says it in one line in Ephesians 5, that Christ gave Himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. The phrase he uses for a fragrant offering is the exact phrase the Greek Old Testament uses at the end of each of the three sections in Leviticus 1. Paul is not reaching for a pleasant image. He is putting Jesus on that altar and telling us that the smoke went up and that it was accepted. Which means that when we are asked to present ourselves as a living sacrifice, we are not being asked to purchase anything. We are being asked to respond to an offering that has already gone up on our behalf and has already been received.