

Atonement Sacrifices (Part 1)

THEOLOGICAL THEME: The burnt offering was for the removal of the people's guilt before God; the grain offering restored Israel to serve God and neighbor; and the peace offering was for the reconciliation between God and His people.

In countries that celebrate Valentine's Day, people are accustomed to seeing red heart displays in stores and online. The Valentine's Day tradition, however, began not because of romantic love but because long ago—so the tradition says—an early Christian named Valentine died as a martyr around the year 270 on February 14. For his followers, the bloody heart was a violent reality. How a bloody martyrdom transformed into a celebration of love and sexuality is as strange as how Saint Nicholas became today's Santa Claus.¹

Consider “the cross” as another symbol removed from its literal equivalent.



How do you see “the cross” used in church and society today?



When was the last time you saw a cross shape and thought of an instrument of torture and bloody death?

People of the first century could never escape the harsh cultural reality signified by the cross. Christians, however, quickly came to use the cross symbolically, as a representation of everything Jesus' death accomplished. And Jesus' death pointed to an earlier blood-spattered certainty—the countless thousands of animal sacrifices offered over many centuries on the great altar in front of the Israelite tabernacle and later the temple in Jerusalem.

In this session, we focus on the first three kinds of sacrifices. The burnt offering was for the removal of the people's guilt before God; the grain offering restored Israel to serve God and neighbor; and the peace offering was for reconciliation between God and His people. Because of Christ's ultimate sacrifice, we celebrate the removal of our guilt before God, the freedom to serve God on His mission, and the restoration of our relationship with God.



Voices from Church History

"There is a fountain filled with blood
Drawn from Immanuel's veins;
And sinners, plunged beneath that flood,
Lose all their guilty stains."²

—William Cowper (1731-1800)

1. We need atonement to remove our guilt (Lev. 1:3-9; Heb. 9:12).

³ "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. ⁴ He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, ⁷ and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. ⁸ 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; ⁹ 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.

The details for this offering seem bizarre. Most of us have never been around slaughtered animals; we are used to packaged meat in the supermarket aisle. But the Israelites were largely herdsmen. They were used to participating in the process of preparing animals for human consumption. Yet the requirements for the burnt offering were something the Israelites must have found quite distinctive.

Observation of these verses suggests the following:

- Where was the animal to come from? It was to be a domestic animal owned already by the offerer. It was "from the herd" (1:3) and therefore personal. A wild animal trapped by someone would be neither personal nor expensive. A bull, ram, male goat, and birds were acceptable sacrifices for the burnt offering (1:5,10,14).

- What kind of animal was it to be? Physically perfect. It must be “without blemish,” therefore more costly than other similar animals (1:3).
- Where was it to be offered? At the required place, “the entrance of the tent of meeting” (1:3).
- How was the offerer to identify with the animal? He was to “lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering” (1:4). The offerer was continually involved in the process of the offering, even though only the priests carried out certain functions (1:9).
- How would the Lord respond to the offering? The offering would be “a pleasing aroma to the LORD” (1:9). This implies that the Lord would find this sacrifice acceptable. The apostle Paul later used this language to refer to Jesus’ crucifixion as “a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Eph. 5:2).³

? Why do you think the offerer was supposed to identify with the animal (by laying his hand on the head)?

? What did this communicate about the nature of the atonement?

99 Essential Christian Doctrines

59. Christ as Sacrifice

There are several signs, symbols, and pointers in the Old Testament that foreshadowed Christ as being the sacrificial Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. However, unlike the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, whose sacrifices were unable to take away sin (Heb. 10:4), Christ’s sacrifice on the cross was able to permanently, “once and for all,” take away sins.

Israelites could offer this offering at any time, but on one day of the year, atonement came into sharper focus—the Day of Atonement (“Yom Kippur” in Hebrew). This was the only time of the year when Israel’s high priest was allowed to enter the most holy place of the tabernacle (later, the temple), where the ark of the covenant was kept. There he would carry the blood of a specially slaughtered bull and make atonement (Lev. 16:14,34).

The New Testament writer of Hebrews, fully aware of this ritual, explained how the Day of Atonement—indeed, all the animal sacrifices offered by the Israelites—were merely a shadow and a prefiguring of Christ’s atoning death on the cross:

¹² he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.

Jesus offered His own blood on behalf of others, not needing the blood of another because He had no sin. He entered the heavenly “most holy place” rather than the earthly copy (see the previous session). He obtained “eternal redemption” rather than a temporary atonement. He removed our guilt forever through the bloody offering of Himself to God (Heb. 10:14,18).

How does the burnt offering inform your understanding that Jesus' death removed the guilt of your sins?	How might you incorporate into your evangelism any insights from the burnt offering of the Israelites?

2. We need atonement to restore us to service (Lev. 2:1-3; John 12:24).

¹ “When anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to the LORD, his offering shall be of fine flour. He shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it² and bring it to Aaron’s sons the priests. And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense, and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD. ³ But the rest of the grain offering shall be for Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the LORD’s food offerings.

Like the burnt offering, the grain offering was costly for the offerer, both in the ingredients and in the preparation. The description here mentions “fine flour,” but it must also include olive oil and frankincense, a costly spice. The Lord expected (and required) the very best from His people.⁴

 Why do you think it was important for these offerings to be costly?

 What did the cost of the offering communicate about the seriousness of sin?

The purposes for this offering are not directly stated, yet we may deduce the following:

- The portion of the grain offering which was burned on the altar was the Lord’s “memorial portion” (2:2), suggesting the offerer was asking God to remember him with favor.
- When the various grains began to be harvested, such as barley or wheat, the “firstfruits” were to be offered as a special grain offering (2:14-16). This suggests that thanksgiving to God for the harvest of the earth was part of the purpose (see Num. 15:18-20).
- The grain offering, however, was offered voluntarily at other times. Because grain was the basis of the everyday diet of the Israelites, it reminded people that everyday life was a gift from God.⁵

Because people ate grain daily (in the form of flour baked into bread), the grain offering reminded the worshiper that the very daily-ness of life depended on God’s provision. Their ability to serve God—or even restoration to service after sin or sickness had disrupted service to Him—was demonstrated in this offering.

 What is the difference between doing something from a sense of duty or a sense of delight?

In John 12, Jesus drew on the agricultural concept of grain in one of His significant teachings on the meaning of His coming sacrificial death:



Voices from Church History

“And so, like a sheaf of grain, the firstfruits of the earth, he offered himself to the Father for our sake.”⁶

—Cyril of Alexandria
(circa 375–444)

²⁴ Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.

In other biblical texts, His death is compared to the death of a sacrificial lamb; here He directly compared it to planting a grain seed—a sacrifice that would serve to benefit a people without number, a sacrifice of death to bring life.

How does the grain offering inform your understanding that Jesus' death restored you to service?	How might you incorporate into your evangelism any insights from the grain offering of the Israelites?

3. We need atonement to reconcile us to God (Lev. 3:1-5; Eph. 2:13).

¹ “If his offering is a sacrifice of peace offering, if he offers an animal from the herd, male or female, he shall offer it without blemish before the LORD. ² And he shall lay his hand on the head of his offering and kill it at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall throw the blood against the sides of the altar. ³ And from the sacrifice of the peace offering, as a food offering to the LORD, he shall offer the fat covering the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails, ⁴ and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins, and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys. ⁵ Then Aaron’s sons shall burn it on the altar on top of the burnt offering, which is on the wood on the fire; it is a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD.

Unlike the burnt offering, only the fat and certain internal organs were burned. The offerer could eat the cooked meat of this sacrifice, but only on the day of the sacrifice or the next day (7:16-18). In other words, it was a kind of fellowship meal between God, the priests, and the offerer.

Leviticus 7:11-21 provides further details about the peace offering. In this passage we learn about specific purposes that might cause an Israelite to offer this voluntary sacrifice:

- Thanksgiving to God, presumably for answered prayer or for unexpected divine favor, was a reason for the peace offering (7:12-15; see Jer. 33:11 as an example).
- As a “vow” (7:16), which meant expressing gratitude to God because a solemn oath had been completed. The apostle Paul presented such a sacrifice during his last visit to Jerusalem after his third missionary journey (Acts 21:26; see Prov. 7:14 as a hypocritical example).
- As a “freewill offering” (Lev. 7:16), simply because the offerer felt inclined to do so (see Ps. 54:6).

The animal offered in sacrifice and then eaten symbolized that there was now a right relationship with God. (In most cultures, those who share a meal together do so only if a certain level of friendship is present; in this instance God was, as it were, inviting the worshiper to enjoy a friendship meal with Him.)



Why is it important not only to see atonement as covering our sin but also restoring us to a right relationship with God?



What are ways we express a restored relationship with others today?

The peace sacrifice foreshadowed Jesus’ death in that it overcame the previous hostility that had existed between God and the sinner. We were outside of a relationship with Him. Now, as believers in Jesus Christ, we have been reconciled. The apostle Paul spoke about this in Ephesians 2:

¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.



Voices from the Church

“We are reconciled first to God in Christ, then to one another in covenant community, and third to what God is doing in the renewal of all creation.”⁷

—Matt Chandler

In the original setting, Paul’s reference to “you who once were far off” meant Gentiles (Eph. 2:11). Yet whatever one’s ethnic background—Jew or Gentile; red or yellow or black or white—“all...are under sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one’” (Rom. 3:9-10). All humans, by nature and by choice, are estranged from God. The only remedy is “the blood of Christ.”

<p>How does the peace offering inform your understanding that Jesus’ death reconciled you to God?</p>	<p>How might you incorporate into your evangelism any insights from the peace offering of the Israelites?</p>
Empty space for reflection	Empty space for reflection

Conclusion

The three offerings we have studied in this session have presented complementary understandings of what atonement sacrifice accomplished. All these offerings showed the seriousness of sin and the costliness of salvation. Yet all of them were merely anticipatory. They looked forward to the real atonement sacrifice—the bloody, violent death of Jesus.

As noted in the opening for this study, we do not know how much the original “valentine” reflected the meaning of Jesus’ death as an atoning sacrifice. One thing we can know, however, is that Jesus’ “valentine” to the world was His death. He offered Himself in love. This means that we can offer ourselves as little valentines. Because we have been freed from our guilt and restored to service, we are free to serve God by serving others.

CHRIST CONNECTION: Because of Christ’s ultimate sacrifice, we celebrate the removal of our guilt before God, the freedom to serve God on His mission, and the restoration of our relationship with God.

HIS MISSION, YOUR MISSION

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Because we have been freed from our guilt, God calls us to serve Him by serving others.

1. How has freedom from guilt through faith in Christ enabled you to serve others? How will you serve others in the coming days?

2. What are some ways we can express our gratitude to God today?

3. How does the peace offering speak to our life together as believers in Jesus?
