

Study 0048

Scripture Text: *Leviticus 1—7*

After describing the sanctuary and the priesthood, we have now come to a very significant aspect of worship in the Old Covenant Era: The Sacrifices.

The Old Covenant Era: The Sacrifices

The tabernacle in the Old Covenant Era was a beehive of activities essentially of animal sacrifices. These sacrifices took place on a daily, weekly, and monthly basis; as well as on a personal, and national level. It is safe to say that the life-blood of the tabernacle was the animal sacrifices that took place in the courtyard of the sanctuary. The sacrificial animals were not just animals that were randomly chosen, but they had to strictly adhere to God's standards to be acceptable as sacrifices. The following helps us to have a better understanding of these animal sacrifices:

- (a) The sacrificial animal had to be one of the animals that would qualify as a clean animal (**Leviticus 17:1-45**), that is, one that will be acceptable to God as a sacrifice, otherwise, the priest was to reject it.
- (b) The sinner had to place his hands upon the head of the sacrificial animal, thus transferring his sins unto the animal. The sacrificial animal was thus the substitute for the sinner; meaning that it was killed for the sins of the sinner, and thus made the sinner free of sin and able to worship God.
- (c) Although animal sacrifice was practiced by the nations around Israel of old, their sacrifices were not to take the form of the other nations, but according to the word of God (**Leviticus 18:21, 24-30; Deuteronomy 18:9-14**).
- (d) The sacrificial animal had to come from the flock of the sinner/worshipper. It had to be something that was going to cost him something (**2 Samuel 24:24**).
- (e) All the sacrificial animals had to be killed at the altar of burnt offering, by the priests (or the Levites in certain cases) for the sacrifice to be accepted by God.
- (f) The kind of sacrificial animal brought depended on the socio-economic status of the worshipper. For the leaders and the wealthy, it was a bullock; and for the poor, a pigeon (which was within their reach) would do.

All these sacrificial animals were used in making sacrifices unto God. As a sacrifice, they played two roles: gifts (as something presented to God in acknowledgement of His supremacy and provision), and sacrifices (as something offered to God by a sinful man on account of his sins). The kind of sacrificial offerings which were brought to the altar of burnt offerings were of two broad categories: the first category was the voluntary or freewill offerings, while the second was the mandatory offerings. As the names suggest, the former were offerings brought to God voluntarily by the worshipper, without coercion or compulsion; while the latter were offerings that were mandatory, and the worshipper had no choice in the matter. The voluntary offerings were burnt offerings, meal offerings, and peace offerings; while the mandatory offerings were sin or guilt offerings, and trespass offerings. Let us now look at these offerings in some detail:

The Burnt Offering was a voluntary offering made to God by a worshipper. It stood out among all the other sacrificial offerings, because, it was the only offering in which the entire sacrificial animal was completely burnt on the altar of burnt offering. It was described as “*an offering made by fire, of a sweet savour unto the LORD*”. It signified the total dedication and devotion of the worshipper to God.

The Meal Offering was another voluntary offering presented to God by the worshipper. This was also unique in that it was the only offering which did not require the shedding of an

animal's blood. It could however, not be offered with honey or yeast (all items that fermented—a mark of sin). It was nonetheless offered in conjunction with burnt offerings, and was considered a gift to God, as represented by the priests to whom it was given. Thus, while a portion was burnt unto God, the rest was given to the priests, who ate them. By presenting this offering, the worshipper recognized God as his Provider, and was merely presenting to God, a token of the abundance with which God had blessed him. All meal or grain offerings were presented with salt, to remind the worshipper of his covenant with God.

The Peace Offering was also a voluntary offering and was presented to God by the worshipper as a sacrifice seeking the restoration of peaceful relationship, fellowship, or the establishment of a relationship with God. It was an offering that sought forgiveness and re-establishment of fellowship where this was broken on account of sin. One thing that distinguished this sacrifice from the burnt offering was that it was not wholly burnt, and the worshipper ate a part of this offering along with the priests, signifying the establishment or re-establishment of fellowship between the worshipper and God.

The Sin Offering was a mandatory offering, and was offered unto God for sins which were unintentionally committed, or those made solely on the basis of the weakness of the human nature. What is important here is that no provision seemed to be made for wilful sins or outright rebellion against God. The sin offering emphasized the severity of God's judgment against sin, and the fact that sin must be dealt with in the individual before he could ever approach God for anything whatsoever, thus, it was mandatory. No other offering could be offered acceptably without the sin offering first being offered.

The Trespass Offering was also a mandatory offering which did not seem to vary much from the sin offering, except that it seemed to be targeted at trespasses against others (which itself was a sin against God). It was required to be offered in addition to the payment of compensation or restitution to the person wronged, as determined by the priest.

It is important that we never lose touch with the reality that was presented to the Old Covenant Era worshipper, who was not just expected to offer these offerings, but was also expected to have a heart attitude toward God, as per sorrow for sin, or, genuine repentance from sin, not to be repented of (**1 Samuel 15:22-23; Psalm 51:16-17**). The failure of many of the Old Covenant Era worshippers to be genuinely repentant, led to the abuse of the sacrificial system which was intended to make the worshippers realize the suffering of an innocent animal for their own sin, and thus desist from committing sins. Somehow, it seemed that the more the people had access to sacrificial animals or the ability to get a sacrificial animal to pay the penalty for their sins, the more they went right on committing sins.

Be that as it may, the sacrificial system gave some lessons to the would-be Old Covenant Era worshipper:

- (a) No man can approach a holy God without first dealing with sin in his heart.
- (b) God has a zero tolerance for sin, hence, the mandatory sin offering for all who must approach Him.
- (c) The severity of the punishment for sin.
- (d) God's love for mankind, in making an innocent animal a substitute for sinful man.
- (e) The establishment of the framework for the sacrificial essence of Jesus, for the sins of mankind.

EXERCISE

Please state true or false to the statements below:

1. In animal sacrifices, any animal is okay for the sacrifice provided it is expensive.
2. The more expensive the sacrificial animal, the more accepted the sacrifice for sin.
3. A man could borrow an animal from another person's flock to offer God.
4. A worshipper blessed the animal to be sacrificed by laying his hands on it before it was killed.
5. Anyone could kill the sacrificial animal, what is important is that it is killed at the altar of the burnt offering.
6. There were volunteer offerings and mandatory offerings under the Old Covenant Era.
7. The burnt offering restored relationship between the sinner and God.
8. The meal offering was one that involved the sharing of meals between God and man.
9. The animal sacrifice showed God's tolerance for sin.
10. Sin has never really been an impediment to God; man has always been the problem.