

SET BEFORE

Leviticus 1:3-9; 2:1-3; 3:1-5

If we had received an invitation to visit the White House during the time Kennedy was in office and have a meeting and a meal with the President and his family, then we would have liked to have known what might be the proper protocol or etiquette for such an occasion. Things changed when Johnson was president and for each succeeding administration the protocol was modified. The idea of “respect for the office” would have dictated that we learn some of the basics of proper decorum before having such an encounter.

If we had an ongoing relationship which resulted in frequent encounters, then we would have learned what the appropriate behavior would be in various situations. In society, in general, we used to be taught such ideas of how to address an older person and how to answer questions. An appropriate affirmative response to a question was not “yeah” but was “yes, ma’am” or “yes, sir.” Businesses also had expectations for interactions with various people. If a sales person visited a purchasing agent or a person of influence, they would dress appropriately and would show respect as they interacted with their potential clients.

Even interactions among peers were governed by generally accepted societal expectations. For example, if someone was invited to another family’s home for whatever reason, then the invited guest would usually bring a token gift. It might be something as simple as a small bouquet of flowers.

If we realize that such demonstrations of respect are important for acceptable interactions with presidents, kings, leaders, elders, and friends; then, should we not be aware of how to approach and interact with the sovereign God of all Creation? Apparently, YHWH thought so and gave Moses specific instructions regarding interactions for various encounters that His people would have on an ongoing basis. This is what the Book of Leviticus does. It is the etiquette manual for interacting with God Who was dwelling in their midst. Because of its importance to the culture of the Israelites, these teachings were the first lessons that a child learned as part of their training and upbringing. That should not be surprising when we consider that etiquette was a large part of what our parents taught us. We were to say “please” and “thank you.” We were to say “ma’am” and “sir” when addressing elders. We were to not take the largest cookie on the tray. Guys were taught to stand up when a lady entered the room.

Leviticus is probably the last book in the Bible that most Christians read, if they read it at all. We are likely to think that since the sacrificial system of the Law of Moses and the Aaronic priesthood is not the way things are done today that we can just ignore what these protocols teach us about how we should approach and interact with God who indwells us by the Holy Spirit. As we look at the various sacrifices and offerings, let’s watch for principles that have not changed and also look for practices that pointed to the ultimate sacrifice of Christ on our behalf.

There were a total of six types of sacrifices or offerings specified for Israel. These were Burnt, Grain, Drink, Fellowship, Sin, and Guilt. Drink offerings are not addressed in Leviticus but are mentioned in Numbers 15:1-10. The Grain offerings were bloodless and the other four (Burnt, Fellowship, Sin and Guilt) involved the shedding of blood. In all of these except the Guilt offering, the presenter laid his hands on the head of the animal before it was killed.

In general we can say that the Burnt Offering was an expression of total commitment or dedication to God. The Fellowship (or Peace) Offering was related to communion with God and the Sin and Guilt offerings were dealing with cleansing from God.

Again, speaking generally, all these offerings involved bringing something of value that

“cost” the person something or these were literally sacrifices. In those offerings that involved the shedding of blood, the idea of atonement was involved. This involved components of expiation and propitiation. Expiation has the idea of paying a penalty or making restitution while propitiation is related to satisfying the just requirements under the terms of the relationship or what we might call “appeasing the judge.” It can be argued that these are the same; however, the first part seems to focus on what the guilty persons do and the second part is related to the impact on the one who was wronged by the error.

The Burnt Offering – 1:3-9

³ ‘If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer it, a male without defect; he shall offer it at the doorway 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, that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf. ⁵ ‘He shall slay the young bull before the LORD; and Aaron’s sons the priests shall offer up the blood and sprinkle the blood around on the altar that is at the doorway of the tent of meeting. ⁶ ‘He shall then skin the burnt offering and cut it into its pieces. ⁷ ‘The sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. ⁸ ‘Then Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head and the suet over the wood which is on the fire that is on the altar. ⁹ ‘Its entrails, however, and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall offer up in smoke all of it on the altar for a burnt offering, an offering by fire of a soothing aroma to the LORD. Leviticus 1:3-9 (NASB95)

As we attempt to gain insight into what these instructions are telling us, we should note that the word “offering” used in various translations can typically mean three different ideas. Some times it means “that which is dedicated to the Lord.” The Hebrew word for this is qorban which is rendered as “corban” in the New Testament passage (Matt 7:11) where Jesus was teaching the people about the need to take care of their elderly parents but claimed they could not do so because they had dedicated their resources to the Lord by calling it “corban.” Another meaning of the word “offering” is “that which is brought or presented.” The third meaning is the idea of “sacrifice.” In the third verse of Leviticus chapter one we see all three of these ideas. Using these meaning that first verse could be rendered as follows:

If what is dedicated to the Lord is a burnt sacrifice, he shall bring it, a male without defect; he shall present it at the doorway of the tent of meeting.

The burnt offering is considered by some to be the major atoning sacrifice since it seems to carry with it the idea of everything is dedicated to God. Since everything (except the hide) was burned up totally by the fire it represented total commitment. The hide was given to the priests for their use.

Some have related this offering to Christ being offered up on the cross in that nothing was held back except His robe. The act of the one offering the sacrifice putting his hand on the head of the animal was symbolic of transferring the sins of the person to the animal in anticipation of offering the animal instead of the person. This same symbolism as related to Christ on the cross is seen in New Testament passages such as 1 Peter 2:24 where Peter quoted from Isaiah that “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.” Paul remarked in 2 Corinthians 5:21 “For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

We tend to think that the instructions in Leviticus were just for the priests; however, we see that the person who offered the sacrifice was very involved in presenting and preparing the animal before it was placed on the altar. The one presenting the sacrifice killed it, removed the hide, cut it up in pieces, and washed the parts that needed to be washed. The involvement of the priest was to collect the blood and sprinkle it on the altar, add wood to the fire and then place the parts of the animal on the altar where the fire consumed it.

The Burnt offering is the symbolism that is evoked by Paul’s admonition in Romans 12:1

to present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God. In relationship to the link of the Burnt offering to the Cross of Christ, we could think about the means of presenting ourselves as “taking up our cross daily.” Also, the word “holy” in Romans 12:1 would be linked to the requirement for the animal presented for the Burnt offering to be “without defect.”

It is obvious that for the church, the believer is the presenter of the sacrifice and is also the priest. Of course, the sacrifices we bring are not the bodies of dead animals, but our own bodies, our whole selves. These are described as “a living sacrifice.” The contrast between “living” and “dead” sacrifices would carry over to the comparison we can make regarding “dead works” verses “works of faith.”

We also see that in practically every sacrifice that involved fire that the aroma of what was being burned was a pleasing or soothing aroma to YHWH. This statement is what is called an anthropomorphic reference to God having a basic human response to something physical. Of course, we realize that God looks upon the heart of the person making the offering and is pleased if the action of the person is motivated by faith and a desire for holiness rather than just going through the motions or routines of a ritual. The pleasing aroma metaphor is picked up by Paul in Ephesians 5:2 where he described the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross in that terminology. Paul also used the “pleasing fragrance” idea with regard to the gifts Christians give to help others as seen in Philippians 4:18.

The Grain Offering – 2:1-3

¹ ‘Now when anyone presents a grain offering as an offering to the LORD, his offering shall be of fine flour, and he shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it. ² ‘He shall then bring it to Aaron’s sons the priests; and shall take from it his handful of its fine flour and of its oil with all of its frankincense. And the priest shall offer *it* up in smoke as its memorial portion on the altar, an offering by fire of a soothing aroma to the LORD. ³ ‘The remainder of the grain offering belongs to Aaron and his sons: a thing most holy, of the offerings to the LORD by fire. Leviticus 2:1-3 (NASB95)

The differences in the Burnt offering and the Grain offering are significant. The Burnt offering was the substitutionary presentation of the total person exclusively to the Lord. This burnt offering recognized the complete abandonment of our rights and privileges and the acknowledgment of the sovereignty of God as Lord and Master. The Grain (or meal) offering was given (borrowing terminology from Colossians 3:23 and Ephesians 6:7) “as unto the Lord.” The main beneficiaries of this gift, however, were the priests. A token amount (a memorial portion) was put into the fire on the altar as an acknowledgment of God being the Source. The grains were blessings from the Lord. The flour (or meal) was the product of the fruit of their labor (grinding the grain) on the blessing from the Lord. (Even the labor was enabled by God.) The addition of the oil enhanced the usefulness of what was produced and the frankincense made the combination both pleasing (aroma) and had multiple health benefits as an additive to foods.

If we read further along in the Scriptural text of chapter two, we see that the grain offering could also be presented in four other formats. In addition to the fine flour, cooked cakes (oven-baked, pan baked or on a griddle) and crushed roasted heads of new grains could be presented. The cakes would be similar to baked pie crust or flat bread. These were broken up in pieces and the officiating priest put only a portion of the offering on the altar—the “memorial portion” for the Lord—where it was consumed in the fire. The rest of the offering went to the priests for their own personal use. Only the males in the family could eat it, and they had to do it in the holy place of the tabernacle.

The Grain offering was not offered by itself, but was a part of the four offerings that involved the shedding of blood and the memorial portion was added to the fire that consumed all

or part of the Burnt, Fellowship, Sin and Guilt offerings. Also, (as seen in verse thirteen of chapter two) the Grain offering was to always include salt and to never include leaven or honey (as mentioned in verse eleven).

The significance of the requirement that this offering was made along with the four atoning (blood) offerings points to the truth that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. The exclusion of leaven and honey (both of which cause fermentation) was a possible reference to the need to exclude any influence of worldly or pagan nature from what is offered to God. Apparently, honey was used in many pagan religious offerings. Including salt has been said to be a reference to the preserving nature of salt and its ability to enhance the flavor of food. The spiritual connection to this requirement could be what Paul wrote in Colossians 4:6 about our speech being gracious as seasoned with salt. Another connection is that the inclusion of salt is a reference to the “salt covenant” (see Lev 2:13) which represented friendship. The sharing of a meal (which would include salt in the food) was a witness of the friendship that existed among people. Also, men typically carried a small bag of salt with them and when a friendship was established, the “friends” would exchange a small amount of salt to represent that their lives were intermingled.

The Fellowship Offering – 3:1-5

¹ ‘Now if his offering is a sacrifice of peace offerings, if he is going to offer out of the herd, whether male or female, he shall offer it without defect before the LORD. ² ‘He shall lay his hand on the head of his offering and slay it at the doorway of the tent of meeting, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall sprinkle the blood around on the altar. ³ ‘From the sacrifice of the peace offerings he shall present an offering by fire to the LORD, the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails, ⁴ and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, which is on the loins, and the lobe of the liver, which he shall remove with the kidneys. ⁵ ‘Then Aaron’s sons shall offer *it* up in smoke on the altar on the burnt offering, which is on the wood that is on the fire; it is an offering by fire of a soothing aroma to the LORD. Leviticus 3:1-5 (NASB95)

In the first verse of this chapter we see the three different ideas related to the word “offering” that was mentioned regarding the Burnt offering. We also see a new use of the word in what is generally translated as “peace offering.” The Hebrew word for this was derived from their word for wholeness, welfare and peace. That word is “shalom” which is a typical greeting used by Jews today and it means peace. The root of these words (salem) is also found in the name of the major city in Israel that we know as Jerusalem.

Some have pointed out that the title of “peace offering” is a focus on this activity being directed toward God to affirm a good relationship that we have with Him. In later chapters in Leviticus we learn that the purpose of this offering could be thanksgiving, celebration of the fulfillment of a vow, or practically any other free-will offering.

The idea of this being a fellowship offering is related to the practice of being inclusive of all the members of a family and that would include the servants associated with the family. Also included in the meal eaten from this “offering” were those in the community who were not able to participate because they did not have a herd, a flock or even a goat. The final inclusiveness was that they were not to forget the Levites of their community since they did not own land and did not have a source of meat.

The procedure for presenting the animal for this offering was similar to what was done for the Burnt offering. The differences included the fact that the animal to be sacrificed could be male or female. Another significant difference was that only certain portions (fat, liver, and kidneys) were to be burned on the altar and the rest of the animal was divided between the priests and the family. The priest got the breast and the right thigh joint and the family got the rest of it. The family’s portion was to be eaten (in the presence of the Lord) by the family and others they

might include as mentioned in the comments on the “fellowship” aspects of this observance. Another difference was that the Burnt sacrifice mentioned that a bird could be offered by those who were poor and there is no mention of that here. Some have suggested that the Israelites did not have any ritually clean birds that were large enough to provide food for a family and friends meal.

The connection of this fellowship offering to the practices of the early church when the members came together for times of fellowship and shared their food and other resources with other Christians is easy to see.

These three offerings give us an understanding of the importance of being totally committed to God and living in such a way that (as we interact with God) the holiness that God is working within is also working out in our actions and the lifestyle that we live. We also see that we are expected to take the blessings that God has bestowed upon us and to use these in such a way that we make them suitable for use in the work of the kingdom. Finally, the importance of fellowship and caring for others in the church should cause us to look for opportunities to celebrate what the Lord has done for us (thanksgiving), to recognize milestones in our lives and other special occasion and use these are reasons to share the Lord’s blessings with others.