

Worship God with Sacrifices

Numbers 15 (excerpts) • Hebrews 10:1-18

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Dear Congregation of Christ: In Chapters 11 through 13 of the book of Numbers, we read about the people of Israel grumbling about their wilderness journey against Moses, which is actually rebelling against their covenant God. Our text today is a review of God's instructions to the people regarding sacrifices and offerings required for different times and occasions.

This chapter was inserted by Moses between the narratives of Israel's two rebellions against God to show them how their sins could be atoned for by their offerings and sacrifices. There are various sacrifices and offerings mentioned in the books of Moses. These include the incense offering, the guilt offering, the sin offering, the whole burnt offering, the fellowship (or peace) offering, the grain (or meal) offering, the drink offering, and the wave offering.

In all of these sacrificial offerings, the most significant principle is the substitutionary death of an animal in place of the offending sinner. This sacrificial rite also symbolizes the offender's identification or union with the animal. Second only to the idea of substitutionary atonement is the requirement of the offering of the best, the unblemished, and the firstborn or firstfruits. A third important principle is that the sacrifice must be offered in absolute conformity with God's prescribed instructions, "as the Lord has commanded" and "according to the rule." Fourth and last, the blood of animals is required for the sacrifices, for "*without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins*" (Lev 17:11; Heb 9:22).

The three sacrifices most commonly offered in their worship are the sin offering, the burnt offering and the fellowship or peace offering. The most common order in which the sacrifices were offered was the sin offering first, the burnt offering second, and the fellowship offering last (Num 6:16, 17). Why do we study this slaughter of animals for worship many hundreds of years ago? Because this pattern of sacrifices applies to our worship today.

Today, we will dwell on the theme, "**WORSHIP GOD WITH SACRIFICES,**" under three headings: first, **Sin Offering as Confession to God**; second, **Burnt Offering as Consecration to God**; and third, **Fellowship Offering as Communion with God**.

Sin Offering: Confession to God

The sin offering is an offering for sins committed unintentionally by an individual or by the whole congregation, by mistake, in ignorance, or in the weakness of his flesh, and for which there was true repentance. Leviticus tells us that the offending individual, or the tribal leaders representing the whole congregation, or an offending tribal leader laid his or their hands on the sacrificial animal (Lev 4:1, 13, 22).

However, Numbers 15:27-31 says that there is no sacrifice for “defiant” or “high-handed” sin. What is “defiant” sin? The Scriptures use two other words to explain this kind of sin: “deliberate” and “presumptuous.” Hebrews 10:26-27 warns about “*sinning deliberately.*” Scriptures also refer to these sins as “presumptuous,” that is, they are committed in arrogant disregard of divine commands in the face of God (Deut. 17:12; Psa 19:13).

Therefore, when a person thinks he could sin at his pleasure or he could lift his hand up and shake his fist in defiance of God’s laws, and then presumes that God will forgive him by performing sacrifices, he is committing a deliberate, presumptuous sin. He makes a mockery of God’s provision of mercy and grace for him when he offers sacrifices, yet his heart is unrepentant. In the Book of Numbers, we read about this defiant sin in the rebellion of the ten spies and of the first-generation Israelites, and the Sabbath-breaker’s sin.

But for those who truly repent of their sin and seek mercy from God, their sin offerings are acceptable and pleasing to him. How are their sins forgiven? Could the blood of sacrificial animals really atone for the sins of the Israelites in the wilderness? No, for Hebrews 10:4 says, “*For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*” All of the sin offerings performed by the Israelites in the Old Testament only foreshadow the once for all sin offering made by Christ our Passover Lamb on the accursed cross in order that God’s wrath on us may be appeased.

This is why those who teach that Old Testament saints were saved by obedience to the Law of Moses contradict the clear teaching that the blood of bulls and goats has no efficacy in itself to forgive sin. Only the blood of Christ can remove sin, whether for Old Testament or New Testament believers. The Old Testament faithful, such as Moses, Joshua and Caleb, looked forward, while we, the New Testament saints, look back to Christ’s one final sacrifice for all sins.

What is our proper response to God’s grace and mercy in forgiving us of our sin? We are to consecrate our whole lives in the service of our Savior, in the same manner that God commands Israel to “*remember and do all my commandments and be holy to your God*” (Num 15:40), symbolized by the whole burnt offering.

Burnt Offering: Consecration to God

The whole burnt offering is the most fundamental and characteristic sacrifice of all (Lev 1). From other texts, we learn that burnt offerings are performed during occasions such as thanksgiving, penitence, vows, and self-dedication. When a man brought a burnt offering to the tabernacle (or later, the temple), he would place his hands upon its head, and the priest would then slaughter it, sprinkle its blood upon the altar, and there burn the entire animal, so that its smoke should rise as “a pleasing aroma” to God. For instance, after the flood, Noah offered burnt offerings which appeased the Lord as he smelled the “pleasing aroma,” causing him to vow not to curse the ground again because of man’s wickedness (Gen 8:20-21).

How could the smell of the burning flesh of an animal be a pleasing aroma to God? Because it appeases the wrath that he would have poured out on sinners like us. And when the sweet-

smelling savor of the sacrifice reaches his place in the high heavens, he is well pleased to accept the offering and count the sinner as righteous before his eyes.

Who is our sweet-smelling sacrifice? It is Christ, who *“loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”* (Eph 5:2). As our Substitute, he was the One who was consumed by God’s wrath on us. It was the costliest, but priceless, sacrifice of all. Because of Christ’s sacrifice, God would be pleased with us, and would accept us again. As believers in Christ, what burnt offerings do you offer to God? You are to offer and devote your whole lives to the Lord, to *“present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”* (Rom 12:1). We are “living” sacrifices, not slaughtered sacrifices, because Jesus himself was the meek lamb slaughtered in our place.

In what ways can we offer our lives as a sweet-smelling sacrifice to God? Paul says that lives that do not conform to this fallen world (Rom 12:2), minds that are transformed and renewed by the Spirit, and behavior that is according to God’s will—good, acceptable and perfect in his sight—are our fragrant offerings to God. Hebrews 13:15-16 adds that we are to continually praise God in our preaching, prayers and songs; not tire in doing good; and share generously what we have with others in need. These are the sacrifices that are well pleasing to God.

When we worship, we first confess our sins to God. Then we offer our whole lives to God in consecration. Finally, after being purified of our sins and consecrating our lives to God, we can have communion and fellowship with him.

The Fellowship Offering: Communion with God

The fellowship or peace offering is an offering given in thanksgiving for some specific mercy or blessing, or in fulfillment of a vow. Also, an Israelite who simply desires to commune with God will give this offering (Lev 7:11-21). But the most common occasion for this offering was a time to remember and renew the covenant relationship between God and his people (1 Cor 11:25).

The peace offering is different from the other offerings in that it includes a time of joyous feasting upon the sacrificial animal in the presence of and in fellowship with God himself. When you read about the food required in a peace offering, you can get a sense of a sumptuous feast complete with meat, bread and wine. It usually includes a bloodless food offering such as flour mixed with oil, sprinkled with incense and seasoned with salt, but never contains leaven or honey (Lev 2). Only a small portion of the animal, the fat, was to be burned before Yahweh for a “memorial,” while the blood was to be thrown on the altar as atonement for sin. The rest of the offering was to be eaten by the offerer and the priests in fellowship with God (Lev 2:2-3).

Are these ingredients mentioned in order that we may take pleasure in imagining this succulent meal? No, the ingredients of this accompanying meal and its ingredients have significant symbolism for us who live on this side of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. The bread is Christ’s body broken for us, while the oil is the Holy Spirit whose power enabled Jesus to accomplish his sacrificial work (Isa 61:1).

The additives also represent important aspects of Jesus' sacrifice. The incense represents the priestly prayers with which Jesus offered up his own body, a pleasing aroma acceptable to his heavenly Father. Salt preserves the eternal and unchanging covenant which Jesus fulfilled, and in so doing, the Father fulfills all his covenant promises to us. Two other ingredients are conspicuous in their prohibition from being added to the bread. The absence of leaven signifies that Jesus offered himself up as a lamb with no sin or spot of any kind. And the omission of honey means that nothing more—whether good works or other sacrifices—can be added to make Christ's sacrifice more sweet-smelling and acceptable to God.

Dear friends, all the sacrifices listed in Chapter 15 of Numbers were not written for just for good historical information. These sacrifices point forward to two significant things about how we are to worship God with our own sacrifices.

First, when we worship God together every Lord's Day, we are to follow the pattern of Old Testament sacrifices. You are to come with your **sin offerings**, asking God for his forgiveness. You cannot come to God as you are, dirty and wretched sinners, without forgiveness, you will be consumed by his holiness. This is why we start our worship services with the Reading of God's Law and Confession of Sin.

After you confess your sin, God forgives you. This is why we read Scriptures in the Assurance of Pardon. Then you hear his Word read and explained in the preaching. You then consecrate your lives to God, making vows of obedience to his covenant laws, the fulfillment of Israel's **burnt offerings** to signify their vow of consecration to God.

Your covenant vows are then ratified and sealed with your **fellowship offering** as you feast with joy on the body and blood of Christ in the presence of God. We do this every time we partake in the Holy Communion, remembering Christ our sin offering and being spiritually nourished with his body and blood.

What is the general order of worship? You can remember it this way: Confession, Consecration, and Communion. We see the same order of worship at Mount Sinai (Exo 19-24). After calling the people to assemble to meet him, God commanded them to consecrate themselves and wash their garments, signifying purification from sin (Exo 19:10-15). After God explained His commandments for holy living (Exo 20-23), the people consecrated themselves to obey it by means of a vow (Exo 24:7) and a burnt offering (Exo 24:5-8). Finally, the representatives of the people "ate and drank," a fellowship meal, in God's presence (Exo 24:9-11). We see the same pattern of worship during the dedication of Solomon's Temple in 2 Chronicles 5-7.

This is why we worship the way we worship, not because it is traditional or solemn, but simply because it is the Biblical way of worship.

Second, our worship sacrifices are only acceptable and pleasing to God only if we come with broken and contrite hearts. This means that all our sacrifices are meaningless without true faith that is accompanied by obedient lives, as Samuel told King Saul after the king usurped

Samuel's priestly responsibility by offering a sacrifice, *"to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams"* (1 Sam 15:22). Even the legalistic scribe confessed this truth to Jesus, *"To love [God] with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices"* (Mark 12:33).

You can go to church every Sunday and go through all the singing, praying, reading of the Word and preaching, but if your life is not right with God, then all of these things would be unacceptable and displeasing to God. God's desire is for you to have faithful hearts and lives, not just your quiet time, offerings, Bible studies, meetings, mission trips, and all other things that a busybody in the church does. Obedience to God's will must accompany right worship. Only then will your sacrifices be a sweet-smelling aroma to your Father in heaven. *Amen.*