

Studies in Leviticus

The Sin Offering (Leviticus 4:1-45, Leviticus 5:1-13)

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Background

Our series of Bible Studies in the Book of Leviticus continues, as we begin to take a look at the sin (hattāt) offering, the account of which spans Chapter 4 and into Chapter 5. Our first study, in Chapter 1, focussed on the burnt-offering (‘ôlâ). The second study, in Chapter 2, focussed on the cereal or meal offering (minhâ), an offering of dedication or consecration. The last study, in Chapter 3, focussed on the fellowship or peace offering (zebah).

The Message

Features of the Sin Offering

Four classes of people involved in committing unintentional sins (or sins in ignorance¹) are listed:

- The ‘anointed priest’ (Verses 3 - 12)
- The ‘whole Israelite community’ (Verses 13 - 21)
- A ‘leader’ (Verses 22 - 26)
- A ‘member of the community’ (Verses 27 - 35)

With knowledge comes responsibility, such that when we become aware of sins that we have committed in ignorance in our lives it is also sin not to bring them before the Lord to be dealt with. This should become apparent when we draw near to the Lord to take communion, in which we have to be ‘right’ with the Lord and ‘right’ with each other. The Bible tells us *“A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup”* (1 Corinthians 11:28).

Perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of unintentional sin is that we may simply be unaware of this type of sin in our lives - literally a sin of ignorance. One of the hardest things for us to do within the Church is speak the truth in love. For many this is akin to ‘being rude with a smile on your face’. Spend a few minutes thinking about and discussing (if in a group) any encounters you might have had when people have spoken the truth in love to you. Was it a message that you wanted or needed to hear? How did it make you feel? The point to be made here is that it is only through an encounter with the wider body of Christ that we might become aware of this type of sin. In this there needs to be 3 key facets:

- Love
- Humility
- Forgiveness

The Bible gives us clear guidance on how to resolve differences.

The fact that there are four classes of people involved in this manner of unintentional sin implies that there is both corporate as well as individual responsibility, whilst acknowledging that those in leadership also have a part to play. Furthermore, the anointed priest had to sacrifice one bull which was the same sacrifice required for a sin by the whole community (verses 13-14). The reason for this is that in effect the anointed priest represented the whole community before God, something that those in leadership positions within the church need to remember.

¹ Hebrews 9: 7 speaks of sins ‘committed in ignorance’ in referring to the Day of Atonement

It is clear that for those in positions of responsibility (as in the case of the 'anointed priest') that their sins will bring guilt on the people (v3). This also is a pointer to the great sacrifice that God made through His son Jesus, who was without sin and gave his life to take on the sin of the world. Jesus is the only high priest who is without sin (Hebrews 5: 1-3, Hebrews 7: 26-28).

Seven features constituted the ritual of the Sin offering, as follows:

1. The presentation, vs. 1, 2. (hiqrîb)
2. The laying on of hands, v. 2. (sāmak)
3. The slaying of the victim, v. 2. (šāhat)
4. The sprinkling of the blood, v. 2. (hizzâ)
5. The separating of the pieces, vs. 3, 4. (Not washing)
6. The burning of the fat (the select parts), vs. 3 - 5. (hiqtîr)
7. The eating of the remainder, 7: 15. ('ākal)

The sin offering had to fulfil certain criteria (presupposing a sanctuary, an altar, and an officiating priesthood), which included:

- i. It could be a young bull for the high priest and the congregation, a male goat for a leader, a female goat or lamb for a common person, a dove or pigeon for the poor and a tenth of an ephah of fine flour for the very poor.
- ii. It had to be perfect (without blemish).
- iii. It had to be out of the herd.
- iv. After slaughter, the blood was scattered in specific locations.
- v. All the fat (the select or choice parts) had to be sacrificed.
- vi. The sacrifice had to be classed as clean (see also Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14).
- vii. The select or choice parts were sacrificed to the Lord, and the rest was taken outside the camp to a place ceremonially clean and burnt.
- viii. None of the sacrifice was consumed by the offerer or the priest.
- ix. The offering could only be presented at the door of the Tabernacle or Tent of Meeting. See Matthew 10: 32; Romans 10: 9 - 10.

Other references related specifically to the sin offering include Leviticus 5: 1 - 13, 6: 24 - 30, 8: 14 - 17, and 16: 3 - 22.

Other Information

Due to the nature and content of the other offerings we have studied so far, it is clear that they too cover some aspects of restitution from sin. The difference that we find with the sin offering, however, is that this is the only offering dealing with actual transgressions in a person's life. The other offerings touch upon the inherent sinfulness of man's nature.

In Hebrew, the word for 'sin' is the same as the word for 'sin offering'. This emphasises our understanding of the sin offering becoming so charged with sin that it actually becomes the sin itself. This context is expanded further in Romans 8: 3, 2 Corinthians 5: 21 and Galatians 3: 14 where we can see the incredible truth that this also applied to our substitute Jesus Christ.

Despite other nations knowing of the preceding offerings before the time of Moses (compare Genesis 31: 54, Exodus 18: 12, Exodus 32: 6, and 1 Corinthians 10: 6), the practice of the sin offering was somewhat unique with Israel, since no other nation knew of this form of offering. This shows us the unique relationship that Israel had with God.

The fat (select parts) had to be sacrificed to God. This means that the best of the offering had to be given to God, putting the Lord first. Our lives are to be a sacrifice to God, but do we always give Him the best of ourselves - always putting Him first? We must note the fact that the eating of the fat of all animals was not prohibited, only those to be used in sacrifice. The prohibition of the eating of blood, however, applied to all animals and in all cases (Leviticus 17: 10 - 12).

The offering is an expression of a desire to maintain and demonstrate right relations between God, man and his neighbour. This harmony might be expressed as an offering which accompanied a vow of some kind (Leviticus 22:21) or as a thank offering (Leviticus 22:29) or a free will offering (Leviticus 22:21). The offerings expressed the individual's gratification to God for His goodness, or were simply spontaneous expressions of devotion.

It is clear from 7: 28 - 34 that certain parts of the peace offering belonged to the priests. The ceremonial show in which the 'parts' featured, was a token of their dedication to God first, and their being received back again from Him by the priests. By comparison of 7: 15, 22: 29 - 30 and other texts, it will be seen that the offerer himself had for his portion all that remained. It also will be seen that he was at liberty to invite his friends to the feast, which must always be eaten at the sanctuary and which was an occasion of joy (Deuteronomy 12: 4 - 7, 17, 18). The only condition for partaking of the feast was that of ceremonial cleanliness (Leviticus 7: 20, 21).

In our studies so far we have seen the significance of the sacrifice that Christ made for us, and how that sacrifice is intricately linked with the sacrifices that we read of in Leviticus. Christ is our five-fold offering, on the basis of which alone we are saved and have our standing before God. We must acknowledge in our faith that in the burnt offering and meat offering of Christ we are accepted and blessed of God, that in His peace offering we have the right to commune with Him, that through His sin and trespass offering every defect is remedied and every fault will find pardon.

Since Christ is the "author and finisher of our faith", then we must follow His example. What we have learnt from these offerings and the ultimate sacrifice that He made, we must apply in our lives. We know that He is our burnt offering, a perfect dedication to God, but we too are instructed in Him to present our bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is our reasonable service (Romans 12:1). Furthermore, He is our meal offering, presented to God for the service of man, but then we must be also since "every one of us to please his neighbour for his good to edification" (Romans 15:2). He is also our peace offering, making and maintaining peace between God and us, but we are to be peacemakers, not in the sense in which He alone is our peacemaker but in that human sense in which we can bring man and man together and so be called "the children of God". He is our sin and trespass offering, and in this too we may follow His example. It is impossible that we should make atonement for sin as He did, but there is a sense in which we may "bear one another's burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). In other words, our lives are to reflect what we have received and are receiving from Christ, a surrendered will, a loving walk, a life of blessing, a heart of compassion, a spirit of patience. So, "with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, we are changed into the same image from glory to glory as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Questions

1. How can a person sin unintentionally? (See Leviticus 5: 15 - 18, Romans 7: 14 - 25).
2. What kind of sin is referred to in 4:22.