Seeing Christ in the Old Testament Offerings

- Study 1: **THE BURNT OFFERING: GIVING OUR ALL**
  Leader’s Guide — Participant’s Guide

- Study 2: **THE GRAIN OFFERING: GIVING OUR BEST**
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- Study 3: **THE FELLOWSHIP OFFERING: GIVING THANKS**
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- Study 4: **THE SIN OFFERING: CLEANSING OURSELVES**
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- Study 5: **THE GUILT OFFERING: CLEANSING OURSELVES**
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Leader’s Guide

The Burnt Offering: Giving Our All

Discovering what it means to be wholly consumed for God.

The burnt offering is in one sense the most “complete” of all the sacrifices offered to God. In every other type of offering, only a small portion is burnt on the altar. The rest is consumed by the priests, sometimes shared with those who brought the offering. But the burnt offering is to be entirely consumed by flame, as a “sweet aroma to the Lord” (Leviticus 1:9, 13, 17).

Scripture: Leviticus 1
Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide included at the end of this study.

During the days of Herod’s temple, the burnt offering was a twice-daily ritual, during which public prayers were said. It is clear from the Book of Acts that Jesus’ disciples continued to view the temple worship as a part of their faith (Acts 2:46–47; 3:11), and it appears that they took part in the prayers which accompanied the burnt offering (Acts 3:1). As believers in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, they would not have attended for the purpose of cleansing their sins. They were there for another reason.

So if it is not for the remission of sins, what is the purpose of the burnt offering? According to Jewish tradition, it is to draw near to the Lord. The offering is a symbol of total, complete submission to the will of God. Everything is burned up and consumed on the altar. Nothing is left but the aroma produced by giving something completely and utterly to God.

Atonement and propitiation for sins is almost a by-product of the burnt offering. The purpose of the offering is to draw near to God in obedience, but we must be pure, free of sin, in order to draw near to God. In Judaism, purity of heart is always accompanied by ritual purification. Thus, the burnt offering serves not only to demonstrate willingness to obey God unswervingly, but also to expiate sins so that one may stand in God’s presence.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Since Jesus is the propitiation for our sins, what is the point (if any), for a Christian, of sacrificing to God?

[Q] What is the difference between a sacrifice and an offering? Can they be one and the same?

[Q] Clearly, an omnipotent God has no real use for burnt offerings. So why did he require them?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

In Christianity, we tend to see sacrifice from a single perspective: the shedding of blood for the remission of sins. We see Christ as the ultimate sacrifice and the end of ritual sacrifice. While this is a true picture, it is by no means the whole picture.

Sacrifice in the Old Testament is multifaceted. Some sacrifices are offered as a means of giving thanks to God for blessings. Some, such as the burnt offering are offered out of obedience to
God and are thought to expiate sins incidentally. The Hebrew word corban is translated as “sacrifice” or “offering,” but both of these words in English indicate loss. Corban actually comes from a root word which means “to draw near.” The core purpose of sacrifice and offering, according to the Old Testament, is to draw near to God.

Jesus rebuked those who misused the tradition of corbanot (plural) in order to avoid material loss. Read Mark 7:9–13.

Thus we see that although material loss is not the point of sacrifices and offerings, neither is it to be avoided. When we choose to draw near to God, our material goods must lose their significance to us, as obedience becomes the most important aspect of our service to God. As God said through the prophet Hosea, “… I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6, NASB).

**Teaching Point One: To obey is better than sacrifice.**

When Saul disobeyed God by keeping some of the spoil of the Amalekites as well as capturing their king, instead of utterly destroying everyone and everything as the Lord had commanded, the prophet Samuel rebuked him. Read 1 Samuel 15:22. Samuel then went on to strip the kingship from Saul for his disobedience.

But the idea that we must choose between obedience and sacrifice is as false as the idea that we must choose between faith and works. Just as faith without works is dead, so sacrifice without obedience is dead.

These days, we don’t offer up a fatted ram on the altar any more, nor are we likely to be commanded to utterly destroy the camp of the Amalekites. But there are offerings and even sacrifices which we make to God: offerings of praise, of tithes, of thanksgiving. Sometimes our financial offerings are also sacrificial, because we will have to do without in order to give a tithe or cash offering.

At the same time, our acts of obedience are not quite the same. We no longer attempt to follow every one of the 613 commandments enumerated in the Old Testament, nor do we scrupulously engage in ritual cleansing before prayer. Just as our corbanot have shifted into different forms, so our obedience to the Law of Moses has been superseded by obedience to the Law of Christ: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

Although the statement “to obey is better than sacrifice” doesn’t carry the same meaning for us as it did for Saul and Samuel, it’s still a principle to follow. God is more concerned with our obedience to him than our sacrifices of time, money, comfort, and so on. Those sacrifices should be a result of our obedience, not a means to please God or get his approval.
If obedience is better than sacrifice, does that mean we can stop living sacrificially?

What does obedience to God look like? How can we tell if someone is obeying or disobeying God?

What might it look like to sacrifice in a way that is disconnected from obedience to God? Give examples.

Teaching Point Two: I surrender all.

Perhaps the best-known example of a burnt offering in the Bible is found in the story of Abraham and Isaac, in Genesis chapter 22. Abraham signals his willingness to completely trust God by offering his only son as a burnt offering, to be completely consumed by the flames. As anyone with children can tell you, it would have been easier if God had told Abraham to offer his own life rather than that of his child. Yet Abraham desired closeness with God, no matter the price.

This story seems incomprehensible today: what could Abraham have been thinking? How could he be so certain that it was the voice of God he heard, and not a trick of the devil, or a hallucination brought on by the desert heat? Abraham's unflinching obedience to such a radical command makes him seem somehow more than human; surely such a degree of surrender could not be found in the world today.

In fact, when we look for stories of complete surrender to the will of God today, most involve giving up one's own life, not the life of a beloved. Mother Theresa gave her entire life to the service of the poor. Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave up his freedom and ultimately his life in order to speak the gospel to Nazi Germany. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn risked his life and freedom, and eventually gave up his homeland, in order to tell the world the truth about the Russian Gulag.

But to surrender a beloved to God is much harder than to give up one's own life. I would throw myself in front of a truck to save my children; but throw my children in front of a truck to draw near to God? The concept is unthinkable. It seems that God forced Abraham to face this terrible prospect in order that we all might understand the degree of surrender and desire for fellowship needed to offer up an only begotten Son.

How is the Crucifixion similar to a burnt offering? How is it different?

In what way(s) can Christians give total and complete sacrifice(s) to God?

We often sing of giving ourselves completely to God. Does thinking about the burnt offering change how you understand such lyrics?
Teaching Point Three: Sacrifice in the Old Testament was to change us, not God.

Sacrifice in the ancient world was offered, in most cultures, to an idol or a totem representing a god. It was thought that by giving food or valuables to the gods they would be appeased and more likely to deal with us favorably. Intrinsic to this kind of sacrifice was the idea that the gods could somehow make use of the offerings—eating the food or using clothing, weapons, jewelry, or other items. Judaism was the exception to this rule.

YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, is qualitatively different from all the “gods” of the other nations. He is all-knowing, all-seeing, all-powerful. The Bible makes it clear that God has no need of anything from us. There is no action, no sacrifice, no offering we can make that will fill a need of God’s or cause him to deal with us more favorably. God looks on the heart.

Yet the Old Testament is filled with commands to sacrifice, tithe, and otherwise give service to God. Since God has no need of anything, this cannot possibly be for God’s benefit. The burnt offering makes this abundantly clear, since there is nothing left of the offering for God to “use.”

So the point of the burnt offering must be what it does for or to us, rather than what it does for God. In some way the total giving of ourselves in offering to God transforms us as we draw near to him. Since God looks at the heart, it is reasonable to conclude that the point of the burnt offering is to change the heart of the giver.

[Q] Have you ever given up something for God? What was the result?

[Q] Think of the most precious thing in your life (apart from God), and then think of what it would be like to give that up. What kinds of thoughts and feelings does that create in you?

[Q] If we love God and one another, how can we then move on to the complete and total dedication which is expressed as a burnt offering? Is such a complete surrender to God even possible in these post-temple times?
Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** To draw closer to God.

**Activity:** Perhaps the most precious thing to all of us in the Western world is our time. We never seem to have enough of it and tend to cherish whatever “alone time” we can get.

As a group, discuss a project you can do together that will take precious time. This could be volunteering at a community center, visiting a local hospital, or any number of other activities. The only restriction is that it must be something you do in addition to Bible study, rather than instead of it.

When you have settled on an activity, prayerfully offer up the time you will spend as corban, an offering to the Lord. As you give of your time together, be aware that the purpose is not to give something to God which he needs, but rather to change something in you. Allow the sacrifice of your time to bring you closer to God.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

The farther we move from temple worship and an agrarian lifestyle, the more foreign the idea of slaughtering and burning an animal as an act of worship begins to seem. Farmers are more familiar with the act of slaughtering an animal than most of us, and can even imagine killing an animal as a gift for a friend, which is not too far removed from ritual sacrifice. But the idea of doing such a thing on a regular basis out of a desire to know God is simply not part of our modern world.

As a result, we have almost lost the habit of any kind of sacrificial acts of worship. Most of us do not even want to deal with mild discomfort, let alone sacrifice. Yet the Bible tells us that such acts can bring us into a closer relationship with God.

Far from being a time of hardship or suffering, the offering of sacrifices at the temple was a time of rejoicing. The Hebrews felt privileged to be able to draw near to God through sacrifice. It was an honor and a joy. Think of what a difference it would make in our lives to recapture this view of sacrificial worship.

**Action Point:** Set aside an hour this week to look for ways that you can give the things you value most as a “sweet fragrance” to God. Our time, our privacy, our gifts—all of these are worth far more as offerings than they are when kept to ourselves.

— Study by S. Aaron Osborne, who lived in Jerusalem for seven years with his Jewish wife and kids, learning basic Hebrew and the art of shrugging eloquently.
Recommended Resources

- Check out other Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

- [http://www.jewfaq.org/qorbanot.htm](http://www.jewfaq.org/qorbanot.htm) JewFAQ is a site dedicated to answering the “frequently asked questions” about Judaism. This page covers the basics on the place of sacrifice and offerings in contemporary Jewish thought.

- [*Full Service: Moving From Self-Serve Christianity to Total Servanthood*, by Siang-Yang Tan (Baker, 2006). Leadership has its place in Christian ministry, but God calls us, first and foremost, to servanthood.]

- [*Normative and Sectarian Judaism in the Second Temple Period*, by Moshe Weinfeld (Continuum International, 2005). A collection of essays on Second Temple Judaism. It examines topics such as liturgy, law, theology and ideology—issues that established Jewish religious forms for normative, Rabbinic Judaism.]

- [*Jewish Believers in Jesus, the Early Centuries*, edited by Oskar Skarsaune and Reidar Hvalvik (Hendrickson, 2007). An overview of the beliefs and practices of Jewish Christians in the days before, during, and after the destruction of the temple.]

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Teaching Point Two: I surrender all.

Teaching Point Three: Sacrifice in the Old Testament was to change us, not God.

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The Grain Offering: Giving Our Best

Firstfruits, best fruits

This is the second in our series on sacrifices and offerings. In this study, we will examine the uniqueness of the grain offering—the significance of offering to God the work of our hands, and the role of purity. We will see how the various elements of the grain offering fit together and discuss the symbolism of each element. Finally, we will relate the grain offering to our Christian life in the post-temple world.

Scripture: Leviticus 2
Part 1 Identify the Issue

**Note to leader:** Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide included at the end of this study.

The grain offering is unique among the offerings discussed in this series. For one thing, it does not involve the spilling of blood. For another, it is the only offering in which the people of God are able to participate directly in the creation of the thing offered, since the grain must be mixed with oil and salted, and may be ground into flour and made into unleavened bread.

The grain offering is also associated with the Firstfruits offering given on the Festival of Weeks (Pentecost), with the unleavened bread of Passover, and with the offerings given on the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur).

The purpose of the grain offering is multi-layered. There is the simple act of obedience to God. There is the more involved act of making something with our own hands as an offering to God. And there is the act of supporting the priesthood. Since only a token portion of the offering is burnt on the altar, the bulk of the offering is eaten by the priests. This portion, which goes to support the temple workers, is called a “most holy” thing (Lev. 2:10).

Offering to God the work of our hands is a familiar concept to anyone who has ever done volunteer work. Perhaps the closest parallel to the grain offering today would be volunteering to clean, paint, or repair our local church building; volunteering to usher; or working in the nursery or youth ministry. It is a hands-on gift of our time, skills, and labor for the support of our place of worship.

**Discussion Starters:**

[Q] Imagine making bread for a grain offering: you would want to offer only the best bread you were capable of making, with the finest ingredients. How does this change the way you think about volunteer work for your church or a parachurch group?

[Q] The grain offering is connected with some of Judaism’s most holy observances, and is called a “most holy” thing. Why, then, do you think God famously rejected Cain’s grain offering (Genesis 4:1–12)?

[Q] The ingredients for a grain offering are spelled out in detail: it must include oil and salt, but cannot include leaven or honey. What does this attention to detail suggest about the way we should approach our work for God?
Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Most of our offerings today are like the animal sacrifices described in Leviticus: we give of our material wealth (money), and that’s the end of our part of the transaction. But when we volunteer our time and effort, we are entering into the spirit of the grain offering, in which we strive to create something acceptable to God through the work of our hands.

The idea of “making something for God” should cause us to stop and reflect. When a craftsman is commissioned to create something for a king, he will strive to do his very best work, putting care and attention into each and every step. How much more then, should our work for God be the very best we have to offer?

Every offering described in the Bible has this in common: the thing offered must be perfect, unblemished. Yet we are imperfect, flawed humans, prone to making mistakes. Even when attempting to offer our best to God, we cannot succeed without God’s help. We need God to take us by the hand and guide us every step of the way if we want to create for him the “perfect offering.”

Teaching Point One: The anointed offering—give out of love and devotion, not rote obedience.

Read Leviticus 2.

“When someone brings a grain offering to the LORD, his offering is to be of fine flour. He is to pour oil on it, put incense on it” (Lev. 2:1).

Three things are specified right at the beginning of Leviticus chapter 2: the offering must be made with fine flour, i.e. the very best; it must be anointed with oil; and the portion which is burned must be accompanied by incense. It is not enough simply to offer the very best of our grain, or even to grind it with our finest millstone. It must be anointed with oil and made to give off a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

The anointing with oil is symbolic of royalty and ritual purity. It is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit, the presence of God with us. If we want to give our best to God, we cannot do it without his help. Whether serving in the nursery or mowing the church lawn, we cannot truly do anything as a gift for God unless we are asking for his help, his anointing. Repainting the sanctuary? Paint while praying. Pulling weeds from the flower beds? Make a joyful noise as you weed, giving thanks for the gift of service.

All of our best offerings should be anointed with the Spirit of God and dedicated as a sweet fragrance to the Lord. The King deserves no less. A holy, anointed offering is an offering given
in love and devotion, not out of rote obedience but out of a desire to draw closer, to be purer, to become more like Jesus.

[Q] Think of some of the specific ways we serve the Lord with the work of our hands. How can we “anoint” these offerings?

[Q] How can we remain “in the Spirit” while working on the mundane things of the world? Can one clean the church bathrooms “as unto the Lord”? Explain.

[Q] Although the bulk of the grain offering was for the nourishment of the priests, a portion was to be mixed with incense and burned, as an “aroma pleasing to the LORD.” How is this reflected in the works we do as an offering to God?

Teaching Point Two: The pure offering—in order to give our best, our offering must be pure and untainted.

“Every grain offering you bring to the LORD must be made without yeast, for you are not to burn any yeast or honey in an offering made to the LORD by fire” (Lev. 2:11).

A quick word about honey: this most likely refers to the natural juice of fruits, rather than honey made by bees. In either case, both are leavening agents, encouraging the growth of yeast. This is most likely why honey is mentioned alongside leaven.

The first prohibition against leaven in the Bible is found in the Book of Exodus, when the Hebrews are told to bake bread without leaven as they prepare to leave Egypt. And when God decrees that there shall be a yearly commemoration of the Passover, this edict against leaven is included as a part of the commemoration. The very next mention of leaven is here, in the second chapter of Leviticus.

Leaven in Judaism is a symbol of impurity. All impurity must be scrupulously avoided when making an offering to the Lord. In biblical times, this meant purity in the physical sense; today, it can be extended to purity of heart, purity of mind, purity of motive. In order to give our best, our offering should be pure, untainted by any hint of selfishness or pride.

But here we encounter that age-old paradox: how can an impure person give a pure offering? Jesus held up the most righteous people of his day (according to the law) as an example, and told his disciples that it still was not enough: “…unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:20). We simply cannot be righteous enough for God—at least, not on our own. We need help.
We need to be certain that our hearts are clear and our lives free of deliberate sin if we are to give a pure offering. But we also need to be certain that we are humble before the Lord, admitting our inability to live pure lives. Only through continual cleansing in prayer, repentance, and forgiveness can we remove the leaven from the works of our hands. It is an ongoing process.

[Q] What is the most common “leaven” in your life?

[Q] When working alongside other Christians in a volunteer capacity, what are some common impurities that can corrupt the pure heart of service? How can we address these things?

[Q] If our righteousness is as “filthy rags” to God, what’s the point of even trying to be righteous? Can we ever hope to submit a pure offering to God if we ourselves are inherently impure? Explain.

**Teaching Point Three: The perfect offering—when we dedicate our actions to the Lord, we must be continually conscious of both his presence and of our intention.**

Look again at Leviticus 2:13–16.

The grain offerings are described in Leviticus with great attention to detail. Every t must be crossed, every i dotted in pursuit of the perfect offering. This requires the supplicant to pay unwavering attention during the process of preparing the offering, in order to ensure that every aspect of the finished product is exactly as the law requires.

Perhaps Cain’s mistake was not simply that he did not offer the life of an animal, as some think, but that he did not prepare his offering with true attentiveness. Or it simply could have been that his heart attitude was all wrong. Either way, he did not truly give God his best.

When we are truly dedicating our actions to the Lord, we must be continually conscious of both his presence and of our intention. We are not used to this kind of thinking in our multitasking world, but the ancients knew of this intimately. Meditating on the Word, fasting and prayer, submitting offerings to the Lord—each of these required a single-minded devotion and diligence.

This kind of attention to the task at hand is sometimes called “mindfulness.” It is the practice of focusing our thoughts and understanding on the present moment, and of keeping our awareness on one single thing. As Paul wrote, “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace” (Rom. 8:6).
Meditation, awareness, and mindfulness are terms we don’t use often in the Western church. For many of us, they have connotations which invoke “New Age” practices. For others, they are simply unfamiliar ideas which have little to do with life in Christ. Yet the tradition of Christian meditation and mindfulness of God is an ancient one, and if we wish to prepare a truly “perfect” offering, it is a tradition worth studying. This is one path to worshiping God in spirit and in truth.

[Q] When our children bring us their clumsily-made, often lopsided gifts, we cherish them for the heart behind the gift, not the craftsmanship. Do you think God feels the same way? Why or why not?

[Q] It’s easy to get frustrated, fed up, and annoyed in the middle of trying to offer service to the Lord and his modern-day “temple servants.” How can we help to remember that it is God we are serving, not only his people? What difference would that make in your attitude?

[Q] The Bible tells us that God looks on the heart. Is it possible to have a “perfect” heart before God? If so, what would that look like?

Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** To get a glimpse of what meditation, awareness, and mindfulness are.

**Activity:** Provide a few moments to let everyone “sit with God.” Instruct the group to keep their minds from wandering for five minutes. Encourage them to open to a Psalm or favorite passage of Scripture and to discipline their minds to think about what it means for them. Or have them review passages or prayers they have memorized (such as Psalm 23 or the Lord’s Prayer), and to dwell on the power of those words.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

The grain offering holds a very special place in the temple services. As a part of the offerings made on the holiest days of the year, it helps to remind us that God is not something we fit into our schedule if we can; he is to be the center of our lives, not a footnote. As an offering made by the skill of our hands, it serves to remind us that we, too, play a vital part in the kingdom of God. And as a pure, anointed, sweet-smelling offering, it can lead us to worship in spirit and in truth.
We need to remember the importance of crafting gifts with our hands, even if we are not the most skilled or talented people in the room. Holding a door for someone, helping a child to her feet, speaking a kind word to a tired-looking cashier—all of these can be offerings to God if we approach them with mindfulness in a spirit of love.

We need also to remember that attention to detail is prized by the Lord. This is especially difficult in our fast-paced, 24/7 society. Giving our full attention to one thing or one person, to the exclusion of all else, is a learned art. Today more than ever, we need to regain the ancient practice of meditation and prayer in the midst of work.

**Action Points:**

- **Take time this week to meditate on God.** Even if you can only find five minutes, set aside everything else just for that time and give him your full, undivided attention. Don’t ask questions, or read the Bible, or pray (although of course you can and should do all these things as well), but simply sit and think on God. His glory. His majesty. His creation. His presence.

- **Try to incorporate a “moment with God” into every day, or every week if you cannot manage a daily time of reflection.** In time, you will find yourself able to be mindful of God in the middle of working, driving, shopping.

- **No matter where you live or what you do, there is work that needs doing at your local church or parachurch organization.** Even if you can only commit to one day a month, find a place to plug in and offer your services, in the spirit of the grain offering. And while you are there, do your best to remain mindful and prayerful, dedicating each moment of your service to the Spirit of God.

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Recommended Resources

- Check out other Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com
  - Seeing Christ in the Jewish Feasts

- An Introduction to Early Judaism, by James C. VanderKam (Eerdmans, 2000). Based on the most recent archaeological research, this illustrated volume provides scholars and students with a thorough exploration of important literature, groups, institutions, practices, and events of the Second Temple period.


- The Jewish Study Bible, by Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, Michael A. Fishbane, Jewish Publication Society (Oxford University Press, 2004). This study Bible gives the Jewish perspective on Old Testament texts, including rabbinic commentary in the margins and details of ancient Jewish practice. No Hebrew is needed to understand this clear, unique study aid.

- http://www.bible.org/ Bible.org is a resource site with study tools, blogs, forums, articles, and a whole lot more.

- http://www.biblegateway.com/ Bible Gateway is an online tool for searching multiple translations of the Bible. It is the ultimate concordance.
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Teaching Point Three: The perfect offering—when we dedicate our actions to the Lord, we must be continually conscious of both his presence and of our intention.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

The grain offering holds a very special place in the temple services. As a part of the offerings made on the holiest days of the year, it helps to remind us that God is not something we fit into our schedule if we can; he is to be the center of our lives, not a footnote. As an offering made by the skill of our hands, it serves to remind us that we, too, play a vital part in the kingdom of God. And as a pure, anointed, sweet-smelling offering, it can lead us to worship in spirit and in truth.
Action Points:

• Take time this week to meditate on God. Even if you can only find five minutes, set aside everything else just for that time and give him your full, undivided attention. Don’t ask questions, or read the Bible, or pray (although of course you can and should do all these things as well), but simply sit and think on God. His glory. His majesty. His creation. His presence.

• Try to incorporate a “moment with God” into every day, or every week if you cannot manage a daily time of reflection. In time, you will find yourself able to be mindful of God in the middle of working, driving, shopping.

• No matter where you live or what you do, there is work that needs doing at your local church or parachurch organization. Even if you can only commit to one day a month, find a place to plug in and offer your services, in the spirit of the grain offering. And while you are there, do your best to remain mindful and prayerful, dedicating each moment of your service to the Spirit of God.

— Study by S. Aaron Osborne, who lived in Jerusalem for seven years with his Jewish wife and kids, learning basic Hebrew and the art of shrugging eloquently.

Recommended Resources

• Check out other Bible studies at: ChristianBibleStudies.com

  • Seeing Christ in the Jewish Feasts

  An Introduction to Early Judaism, by James C. VanderKam (Eerdmans, 2000). Based on the most recent archaeological research, this illustrated volume provides scholars and students with a thorough exploration of important literature, groups, institutions, practices, and events of the Second Temple period.

The Jewish Study Bible, by Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, Michael A. Fishbane, Jewish Publication Society (Oxford University Press, 2004). This study Bible gives the Jewish perspective on Old Testament texts, including rabbinic commentary in the margins and details of ancient Jewish practice. No Hebrew is needed to understand this clear, unique study aid.

http://www.bible.org/ Bible.org is a resource site with study tools, blogs, forums, articles, and a whole lot more.

http://www.biblegateway.com/ Bible Gateway is an online tool for searching multiple translations of the Bible. It is the ultimate concordance.
The Fellowship Offering: Giving Thanks

Making Peace with God

This is the third in our series on sacrifices and offerings. In this study, we will examine the fellowship offering, also called the peace offering. We will look at the relationship of fellowship, peace with God, and thankfulness, along with the idea that sacrifices and offerings need not always involve atonement for sin. Sometimes an offering is simply a gift of love.

Scripture: Leviticus 3
Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide included at the end of this study.

The fellowship offering is also called a peace offering: in Hebrew, it is the *shlamim* offering, from the same root as *shalom*, peace, and *shalem*, whole(ness). The “fellowship” in question is fellowship with God, which brings perfect peace.

The fellowship offering is a response to God’s blessing, or an act of obedience in faith that God will bless. The first fellowship offering recorded in the Bible was the Passover lamb, which constitutes a special kind of fellowship offering. Unlike the other offerings in this study series, the fellowship offering does not serve to cleanse the supplicant of sin—in fact, the one who makes the offering must be ritually clean before bringing the offering.

Only a small portion of the fellowship offering is burned on the altar: the fat, kidneys, and liver. These were considered the best parts of the animal, to be set aside for God. The rest of the offering is cooked and eaten by the person making the offering, along with his family and the priests. It is a festive, thankful offering, bringing people together to feast and praise the Lord.

Since this offering has nothing whatsoever to do with sin, the Talmud states that in the Messianic age, this is the only type of offering that will be made, because there will be no more sin. This seems to echo Revelation 21:4: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

The fellowship offering is therefore not only an offering which looks back to those things which God has done for us, but it also looks forward to a time when all offerings to God will be those of praise and thanksgiving. The fellowship offering is both a promise and a foretaste of the age to come.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] Since the fellowship offering is not intended to expiate sins, what is your best guess as to why it required the death of an animal and the shedding of blood?

[Q] How is it that an offering which was mostly consumed by the people was still considered to have been given to God?

• Are there any modern-day parallels to this?

[Q] Are there times of fellowship and celebration in today’s church which seem to point toward heaven or the Messianic Age? If so, what are they?
Family meals, church potlucks, and having guests over for a meal are so much a part of our lives that we don’t even think of these things in terms of sacrifice. Yet this is really the modern equivalent of the fellowship offering: we give of our time and resources to prepare a meal that we might have fellowship with one another while giving thanks to God. The North American Thanksgiving holiday is perhaps the closest thing we have today to a fellowship offering, but in fact every time we come together to break bread, fellowship, and praise the Lord is, in essence, a time of offering.

Simply coming together to share food and fellowship doesn’t usually cause us to think in terms of temple worship. After all, most of us grew up with picnics and potlucks. These things seem very ordinary to us—just as temple worship must have seemed ordinary to the ancient Jews. Yet from our perspective in the 21st century, we tend to imbue those scenes with awe and reverence. When we picture a time of offering on the altar in Jerusalem, we expect a big production with special effects and a pervading sense of the presence of God.

These things were likely present to some degree in those days. But when bringing a fellowship offering, there would also have been an air of celebration, of shared laughter and conversation over a special meal. In a sense, the fellowship offering was the church potluck of the time.

In order to enter into the spirit of the fellowship offering, let’s imagine the scene: Families and friends are gathered together at the temple to share in joyous gratitude for what the Lord has done. Perhaps a long-awaited child has at last been born, or a son has grown his first successful crop, or a lifelong dream to study Scripture has been realized. Whatever the occasion, an offering has been made to God out of a grateful heart, and now the smell of roast fills the air as people celebrate, along with their spiritual leaders.

This is the fellowship offering: a time of celebration, of taking stock together of the goodness of God. Read Leviticus 3.

[Q] Can you think of a celebration in your life that fills the role of a fellowship offering? How might thinking of it as an offering change the way you approach the celebration?

[Q] How can giving to one another within the church also be a form of giving to God? Are there ways to reinforce this view of fellowship?

[Q] Does re-framing temple worship as a kind of “church service” change the way you read the Old Testament? If so, how?
Teaching Point One: Offering gratitude—every feast can be a feast “unto the Lord.”

A deeper understanding of the fellowship offering can be found by examining the first offering of this kind mentioned in the Bible: the Passover lamb. Considered a type of fellowship offering, the Passover lamb shares many aspects with the fellowship offering. The lamb was to be roasted and eaten by the family which offered it, and only a small portion, the blood, was used symbolically in obedience to God.

The Passover lamb is seen as a type of Christ, the “Lamb of God, slain for our sins.” Yet the fellowship offering is most emphatically not a sin offering. A closer examination of the Passover lamb indicates that it was not intended as a sacrifice for remission of sins, but rather as a covering, with the blood of the lamb setting apart the people of God.

The Passover lamb also brings out another aspect of the fellowship offering, which is to give thanks for what God has promised, and not only for what he has done. The first Passover lamb was offered in trust that God would release the Hebrews from bondage, as well as in gratitude that God had sent Moses as a deliverer. This illustrates that gratitude to God includes giving thanks for what we trust him to do as well as for what he has done.

The fellowship offering is included alongside nearly every other offering which is described in the Bible. Whenever a burnt offering or a sin offering was given, almost always a fellowship offering was also made. In the midst of obedience to God and repentance, it is more than appropriate to show gratitude, and to laugh and share in fellowship with one another. Whenever we approach God for any reason at all, a measure of joy and love of life has a place in his presence.

By the same token, whenever we are celebrating for any reason at all, we can bring a measure of offering and sanctification to the event simply by being conscious of God’s part in our lives. Dinner with friends is a gift from God; give thanks! Children graduating from college? Let your joyous celebration be a fellowship offering to the Lord.

[Q] How is it that the Passover lamb is a foreshadowing of Jesus if it was not intended to atone for sins?

[Q] The fellowship offering was a regular part of temple worship. How might we incorporate the spirit of the fellowship offering into our church services?

[Q] Think about the times when we gather for celebration, such as weddings, housewarmings, and so on. How might we remember that this is a type of fellowship offering without making the occasion too “churchy”? 
Teaching Point Two: Offering extravagantly—our most generous offerings are the ones we share with one another.

Read 1 Kings 8:62–64.

When Solomon dedicated the temple, he naturally consecrated it with offerings: burnt offerings, grain offerings, and fellowship offerings. In this passage the fellowship offerings are mentioned first, even though they are always given after the burnt offerings and grain offerings in the order of service. It is also interesting to note that the only offering which is enumerated in 1 Kings 8 is the fellowship offering: it merely mentions that Solomon also made burnt offerings and grain offerings, but when recording the fellowship offering it was apparently deemed significant that Solomon gave twenty-two thousand cattle and a hundred and twenty thousand sheep and goats.

This is almost incomprehensible wealth by today’s standards. Solomon, after all the work of building the temple and returning the Ark of the Covenant to its rightful place was done, felt it appropriate to give an extravagant, bountiful offering by way of thanking the Lord.

Remember this offering was divided up among the people after the fat was removed to be burned. Not only was Solomon giving with overwhelming generosity to the Lord—and incidentally giving the best of his offering to God—he was also sharing his joy over the completion of the temple with the people of Israel. This was a way of saying “come, celebrate with me!”

Solomon did not hold back when it came time to give thanks. Perhaps this was something he learned from his father, David, who once danced so hard before the Lord that he ended up stripped down to his skivvies. However he learned it, Solomon knew that there can be no such thing as “too much” when it comes to thanking God.

**[Q]** We don’t sacrifice cattle and sheep to God any longer, or hold feasts at the temple. How can we show our extravagant thanks in a modern setting?

**[Q]** Extravagance in giving to God does not always need to be material. Name some ways we can give an extravagant fellowship offering that isn’t monetary.

**[Q]** Have you ever held back in a worship service because you felt it was inappropriate to be too extravagant? Is it ever inappropriate? Why or why not?
Teaching Point Three: Offering in purity—God looks on the heart, not only on the altar.

The fellowship offering was always preceded by a burnt offering, and generally a grain offering as well. This was for the purpose of ritual cleansing: since the fellowship offering had no power to cleanse sins, or to make clean again a person who was ritually unclean, a separate offering needed to be made which would deal with the sins of the supplicant.

Because the fellowship offering was not considered a sin offering, it is unique in that there is a curse on those who partake of the meat of the fellowship offering while they themselves are ritually unclean. The curse is a fairly dire one: “… if anyone who is unclean eats any meat of the fellowship offering belonging to the LORD, that person must be cut off from his people” (Lev. 7:20).

This tells us that the fellowship offering, although it was accompanied with feasting and rejoicing, was not to be taken lightly. It was, after all, an offering to the LORD. Jesus emphasized the seriousness of giving one's offering with a pure heart as well. Read Matthew 5:23–24.

Paul similarly warns against taking communion with an impure heart. Read 1 Corinthians 11:27–29. This ties the fellowship offering once again to Passover, during which Christ instituted the practice of communion.

Even in the midst of a joyful commemorative feast, it is important to remember the line between celebration and debauchery. This is not to say that we should not have fun in our times of fellowship and communion. Song, dance, praise, even whooping and hollering can all be done in a spirit of purity combined with extravagant thanksgiving. There can be no greater joy than giving thanks with a pure heart.

[Q] We no longer follow the laws of ritual purity. How, then, can we be sure that we are “pure” when bringing our offerings before God?

[Q] Why do you think there were such dire consequences for giving a fellowship offering while ritually unclean?

[Q] Paul believed that some of the Corinthians were getting sick and even dying as a result of their cavalier attitude towards communion. Does this still apply today? Why or why not?
Optional Activity:

Purpose: To offer thanks to God.

Activity: Make a fellowship offering together, following the sense of the temple rituals. First, make certain you are in obedience to God (burnt offering). Take a moment to pray silently, searching your heart for wrongs or sins, and repent. Next, apply Jesus’ admonition to be reconciled to your brother (or sister). Is there anyone in the group you need to reconcile with? Finally, in the spirit of a fellowship offering, break bread together (this can be as simple as crackers or cookies), giving thanks to God for all that he has done. Make it a time of celebration.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

The fellowship offering bridges the divide between the sacred and the secular, showing us that there really is no divide at all. Celebration, family, church, worship, and feasting all belong together. Every celebration is potentially a fellowship offering, and every feast can be dedicated to the Lord.

Giving to God and giving to one another in his name should be done with a pure heart, overflowing with gratitude and not holding back. This is the spirit of making our lives a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. As we love one another, we love him who made us, and who promises more than we can imagine. Celebrate!

Action Point: Plan a fellowship offering. This can be in the setting of a church picnic, a potluck, a Thanksgiving meal, or any other festive occasion. Use this study, along with the studies on the burnt offering and the grain offering, as a template.

For example, a financial offering for a local community need could be combined with a celebratory meal. Or a church work day could be capped by pizza and soda, with a brief teaching on the fellowship offering. Be creative in applying the principles of these offerings. Above all, celebrate.

—Study by S. Aaron Osborne, who lived in Jerusalem for seven years with his Jewish wife and kids, learning basic Hebrew and the art of shrugging eloquently.
Recommended Resources

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  - Seeing Christ in the Jewish Feasts

- The Law of the Offerings: The Five Tabernacle Offerings and Their Spiritual Significance, by Andrew Jukes (Kregel Classics). Andrew Jukes explores the offerings of Leviticus as types of Christ’s work in providing for the believer's access to and fellowship with God.

- Sharing Food: Christian Practices for Enjoyment, by L. Shannon Jung (Augsburg Fortress, 2006). Jung explores the larger dimensions of personal and group eating, the great resonance that feasting and food and fasting have within the Christian tradition, and how all this figures very practically in a Christian lifestyle.

- http://www.jewfaq.org/qorbanot.htm JewFAQ is a site dedicated to answering the "frequently asked questions" about Judaism. This page covers the basics on the place of sacrifice and offerings in contemporary Jewish thought.

- http://bible.org/seriespage/fellowship-offering -leviticus-31-17-711-34-195-8-2229-30 This article contains significantly more detail on the fellowship offering for those who are interested in an in-depth view.

- http://www.threejews.net/ Three Jews, four opinions. A Reform Jew, a Conservative Jew, and a Post-Modern Jew Walk Into a Blog .... This site is a useful source for insight into the (sometimes conflicting) branches of contemporary Jewish thought and practice. Articles on nearly every topic imaginable, from biblical questions to global warming.
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Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: Offering gratitude—every feast can be a feast “unto the Lord.”

Teaching Point Two: Offering extravagantly—our most generous offerings are the ones we share with one another.

Teaching Point Three: Offering in purity—God looks on the heart, not only on the altar.

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Leader’s Guide

The Sin Offering: Cleansing Ourselves

Staying Right with God

This study examines the sin offering, which—along with the guilt offering—is often seen as prophetic of the role of Christ as the redeemer of sin. We will examine the ways in which sin was viewed differently in the Old Testament, and also the ways in which the Old Testament is similar to the Christian view. We will see how the sin offering sets a standard for our lives today.

Scripture: Leviticus 4
Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: Provide each person with the Participant’s Guide included at the end of this study.

The first thing that must be understood about the sin offering in Leviticus is the meaning of the word *sin* in this context. Today we think of sin as the deliberate infraction of God’s laws, and tend to conceive of things such as lying, stealing, cheating, adultery, and so on. The traditional Christian list of the seven deadly sins is a perfect example of this definition: that list is comprised of lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride.

Yet none of these would have been cause for a sin offering as outlined in Leviticus. Sin in the Old Testament sense of the word is the breaking of the law of Moses; specifically the 613 commandments listed throughout the Pentateuch. The word sin in Hebrew is *khet*, which also means “to miss the mark.” The mark in this case is perfect obedience to the law.

The sin offering is similar in some ways to the guilt offering outlined in Leviticus 5. The key difference is that the sin offering covers those transgressions of which the “sinner” was *unaware* at the time. For example, touching anything unclean is forbidden in Leviticus 7:21. If a Jew were to unknowingly brush against an unclean object, such as a garment that had blood on it, and only later discover that he had done so, that transgression of the law would merit a sin offering.

The sin offering was also made for those transgressions which the supplicant never became aware of. The Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement) prayer to this day includes a section which can be loosely translated “and for all the sins which we committed that we were unaware of, forgive us.” Although breaking any of the Mosaic laws is considered sinful, the sin offering was specifically prescribed for those laws which held the penalty of being “cut off” from the people of God.

The idea of giving an offering for the deliberate breaking of the law is unknown in the Jewish Bible. In the case of damaging another’s goods, restitution could be made, but in every case of law-breaking there were specific consequences. Jews who deliberately broke the more serious parts of the Torah law were either exiled from the community or put to death: there was no forgiveness or atoning sacrifice for such behavior. This makes the idea of sin in the Old Testament very different from the Christian concept of sin today.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] The giving of the law on Mt. Sinai was in response to the Hebrews complaining that they had no way of knowing what God expected of them. Do you think the law made things better or worse? Explain.
Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Read Isaiah 1:11–20.

Although the idea of sin in Judaism was very different from today’s Christian understanding, the Bible presents a consistent message from God regarding sin. In 1 Samuel 16:7, God tells Samuel “…The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” And in Isaiah 1:17 God pleads with Israel to “…Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.” The Bible makes it clear that sin is a state of the heart, rather than an action.

For over 1,000 years, however, the Jews saw sin as primarily the breaking of the law. If you kept the law, you were sinless. If you inadvertently broke the law, you would go to the temple and present an offering, after which you would once again be sinless. Rather than see people as inherently sinful they saw sin as a matter of religious law, easily rectified through the legal process spelled out in Leviticus.

Jesus changed all that.

When Jesus taught the Sermon on the Mount, he brought up examples of obedience to the law and proclaimed that this was insufficient to be righteous. “You have heard it said … but I say to you …” Each time, Jesus taught that it was the state of a person’s heart rather than their actions which made them unclean.

This was not a new teaching. In fact, it was a very old teaching, and one which many of the prophets had reiterated. But by the first century, Judaism had become largely a matter of keeping ritual laws rather than keeping one’s heart right before God. Jesus’ primary disagreement with the Pharisees was not a matter of doctrinal teaching—he tended to agree with them more often than not on basic doctrines. When Jesus chastised the Pharisees, he did so based on their rigid obedience to the law at the expense of having humble and contrite hearts.

[Q] What did the Mosaic Law accomplish for the Israelites? What did it leave lacking?

[Q] Which is easier for you: following rules or purifying your heart?
Did God’s standards for judging sin change from the Old Testament to the New? Explain.

Teaching Point One: Obedience does not make us righteous—erring on the side of legalism.

The sin offering was made in an attempt to return to a place of righteousness, so that God’s blessings would continue to be given to the supplicant. On the face of it, this seems to be a good idea: when a law is broken, the lawbreaker should make restitution. Yet restitution alone is not enough. If there is no change in the supplicant’s heart, they are likely to commit the same sin again—thus making the sin offering essentially useless.

This issue of obedience without repentance comes up time and again in the writings of the prophets. We see it in Isaiah 1:11–20, and again in Isaiah 29:13, where God says, “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.” God is displeased with empty obedience.

This doesn’t mean that obedience to God doesn’t matter; it does. But when we elevate obedience at the cost of repentance, we undermine the very purpose of the law. Unfortunately, this is all too common behavior. It seems to be a human failing to look for loopholes which allow us to act unrighteously while claiming piety. And the more public a person’s demonstrations of piety, the more likely it seems that they will eventually be exposed as unrighteous.

What, then, is the place of obedience to God? It can act as a kind of barometer of the state of our hearts: if we are looking for “legitimate” ways to disobey, or if our obedience is grudging rather than joyful, then our hearts are probably out of touch with God. Obedience should be a joyful outgrowth of our life in Christ; if it is not, then something is wrong, either with our hearts or with our idea of the law.

It is all too easy to lose the balance between obedience and joy. Legalism kills joy, but so does disobedience. God, however, weaves the two together in his dealings with us: “I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve” (Jer. 17:10).

What are some common examples of legalistic teachings in the church today?

Are there areas where you personally tend to concentrate on the rules and miss the heart?
Teaching Point Two: Our hearts do not make us righteous—erring on the side of emotion.

The opposite of legalism is emotionalism. Knowing that “God looks on the heart,” we can rely too much on our emotional state as a measure of our righteousness. When we are overflowing with praise and love towards God, we feel close to him and “clean.” This is good and natural, but that feeling should not become an end unto itself.

Some who are caught up in the emotional “high” of religious experience begin to chase that experience from one venue to another. Constantly on the lookout for the next inspirational Christian speaker or concert or other event, they exhibit all the signs of classical addictive behavior without ever being aware of what they are doing. After all, if it’s for Jesus, how can it be wrong?

An emotion-based view of sin can also cause real problems. On the one hand, people can be convinced that they are sinning because they don’t “feel good” about themselves or about church, etc. This can lead to self-flagellation and create a situation in which it seems impossible to ever find true forgiveness. On the other hand, it is possible to justify almost any action based on feelings. Some Christians claim that “God told them” to do any manner of sinful things, and that they knew it was God because it “felt right.”

How, then, can we balance the injunction to keep our hearts right towards God with the awareness that our hearts are deceitful and wicked? How can we experience the joy of the Lord without allowing it to become an obsession? In this, the temple model has much to teach us. The sin offering was not made in a vacuum; the supplicant would first approach the temple priests to ensure that such an offering was needed. The ritual was a community affair, shared in by the priests.

In the New Testament, we are told that we are the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16), and also that we are a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). This would seem to indicate that offerings are now to be presented to the church rather than the temple. We are also told to confess our sins to one another (James 5:16), which further strengthens the analogy with regard to the sin offering. If we feel that we have sinned; therefore, we can avail ourselves of the fellowship of believers in confessing our sin, asking for guidance, and—if necessary—making restitution.
[Q] Jesus commanded us to love, and he himself expressed emotion. How can this be reconciled with the teaching that our hearts are deceitful and wicked?

[Q] Can you think of a time when you were caught up in the pursuit of emotional experience?

[Q] Why is it that we cannot trust our hearts to discern sin?

Teaching Point Three: The righteousness of Christ—how Jesus redefined sin.

When Jesus told the crowd that they had to exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20), he was holding up the most perfect followers of the letter of the law as an example of what not to do. The scribes and Pharisees saw sin as primarily a legal problem, which could be addressed by strict adherence to the law. Jesus takes us back to the original meaning of sin, which is a state of the heart. It is not enough to abstain from murder, you must avoid even hatred.

The first reaction to this pronouncement could easily be despair. Our hearts are wicked and deceitful, and all of us sin in our hearts, often several times a day! How can we possibly measure up to the standard laid out by Christ? If not only our deeds but also our emotions and thoughts must be perfect, then none of us can possibly hope to be found righteous.

By redefining sin as the state of our hearts, Jesus strips away any pretense that we can attain righteousness through lawful living. Yet almost in the same breath, he tells us not to worry—to look at the sparrow and the lilies of the field, whom God cares for, and to know that we are cared for even more. Reading between the lines, the message appears to be “you cannot attain righteousness, but righteousness can be given to you freely.”

The sin offering in Christ is no longer connected with the presentation of a sacrificial animal, which can sometimes be mistaken as a way to appease God. It is not an offering made because we unknowingly broke a law and must be cleansed or cut off from the church. It is, rather, a sacrifice of vulnerability as we open our hearts one to another and expose the truth of ourselves. It is a reaction to our human condition, a condition of deceitful hearts and murderous thoughts. It is an admission that we are not pure and cannot possibly ever cleanse ourselves. We can only confess our sins and ask Christ to forgive them.

“If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all
unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives” (1 John 1:8–10). Confession and forgiveness are linked. This is the process which has taken the place of the sin offering, and the path to righteousness.

[Q] Does the idea of confessing your sins to other believers make you uncomfortable?

[Q] Do you feel you can trust others with your unconfessed sin? Why or why not?

[Q] Many Christians have been hurt by other Christians in the past, causing them to “shut down” and keep a safe distance. How might we create a safe environment in which to confess our sins?

[Q] Have you ever shared a secret and later regretted it? Why?

Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** To practice confession of sins one to another.

**Activity:** Using a call-and-response format, confess and forgive one another’s sin. If at all possible, move everyone into a single circle so that all faces can be seen. One at a time, starting with the leader and moving around the circle clockwise, each person will confess a sin. These should not be detailed confessions of specific actions, but rather simple statements of a wrong heart, such as “I have been jealous,” or “I have been greedy.” After each confession, the group will say in unison, “God forgives you.”

*It is best to take a few moments in silence beforehand so that each person might search their heart.*

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Sin is more than the breaking of rules, it is a setting of our hearts against God—or perhaps more tellingly, against love. We cannot hope to cleanse ourselves of a wrong heart by simple actions, such as offering a sacrifice or doing penance. Unless our hearts are changed, we remain in sin. And we cannot change our hearts through obedience to the law. In fact, we cannot change our hearts at all. Only God can do that.

Since righteousness is not attained through works, is the message of the sin offering obsolete? Not at all. When we bring our sins to the living temple made of believers and seek absolution, we bring the offering of ourselves, our honesty, and our desire to live as Jesus commanded. The Mosaic Law may not hold literal sway over us any longer, but the commandments to love God with all of our being and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves are still in effect.
The answer to a heart filled with pride, jealousy, or hatred is love. Love God. Love one another. And love implies trust and vulnerability. Only when we lower our barriers and truly learn to love can we openly confess our sins without fear of rejection. It really is an offering of ourselves upon the altar of love. It can be very scary, but also very rewarding.

**Action Point:** Make an offering of your confessions to each other.

Pass out a blank sheet of paper and a pencil to each group member. Ask each person to briefly write down a sin that they have left unconfessed, and fold the paper in half. Pass the papers to the group leader. Have the leader read the papers aloud, one at a time. After each confession, repeat, as a group, “God forgives you.” This is designed as an anonymous exercise in confession.

Close with prayer, specifically including a prayer that your group would learn to trust and to be trustworthy.

— Study by S. Aaron Osborne, who lived in Jerusalem for seven years with his Jewish wife and kids, learning basic Hebrew and the art of shrugging eloquently.

### Recommended Resources

- Check out other Bible studies at: [ChristianBibleStudies.com](http://www.christianbiblestudies.com)

  - **Seeing Christ in the Jewish Feasts**


- [http://www.jewfaq.org/613.htm](http://www.jewfaq.org/613.htm) This is a list of the 613 commandments in the Old Testament, organized according to type. A brief overview of this list can be very useful in understanding the Levitical laws.

- [http://www.ou.org/shabbat_shalom/article/the_sin_offering/](http://www.ou.org/shabbat_shalom/article/the_sin_offering/) This is a commentary on the sin offering from the Orthodox Union website—a useful website for those curious about the beliefs and practices of mainstream Orthodox Judaism.
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The Sin Offering: Cleansing Ourselves

Staying Right with God

This study examines the sin offering, which—along with the guilt offering—is often seen as prophetic of the role of Christ as the redeemer of sin. We will examine the ways in which sin was viewed differently in the Old Testament, and also the ways in which the Old Testament is similar to the Christian view. We will see how the sin offering sets a standard for our lives today.

Scripture: Leviticus 4
Part 1 Identify the Current Issue

The first thing that must be understood about the sin offering in Leviticus is the meaning of the word *sin* in this context. Today we think of *sin* as the deliberate infraction of God’s laws, and tend to conceive of things such as lying, stealing, cheating, adultery, and so on. The traditional Christian list of the seven deadly sins is a perfect example of this definition: that list is comprised of lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, wrath, envy, and pride.

Yet none of these would have been cause for a sin offering as outlined in Leviticus. Sin in the Old Testament sense of the word is the breaking of the law of Moses; specifically the 613 commandments listed throughout the Pentateuch. The word *sin* in Hebrew is *khet*, which also means “to miss the mark.” The mark in this case is perfect obedience to the law.

The idea of giving an offering for the deliberate breaking of the law is unknown in the Jewish Bible. In the case of damaging another’s goods, restitution could be made, but in every case of law-breaking there were specific consequences. Jews who deliberately broke the more serious parts of the Torah law were either exiled from the community or put to death: there was no forgiveness or atoning sacrifice for such behavior. This makes the idea of sin in the Old Testament very different from the Christian concept of sin today.

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

**Teaching Point One:** Obedience does not make us righteous—erring on the side of legalism.

**Teaching Point Two:** Our hearts do not make us righteous—erring on the side of emotion.

**Teaching Point Three:** The righteousness of Christ—how Jesus redefined sin.

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Sin is more than the breaking of rules, it is a setting of our hearts against God—or perhaps more tellingly, against love. We cannot hope to cleanse ourselves of a wrong heart by simple actions, such as offering a sacrifice or doing penance. Unless our hearts are changed, we remain in sin.
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The Guilt Offering: Cleansing Ourselves

Dealing with the dust of the world

This is the final study in our series on the major temple offerings as described in Leviticus chapters 1–5. The guilt offering, which deals specifically with issues of ritual uncleanness, might seem on the surface to have little to do with modern Christianity. This study will examine how the concept of ritual cleanliness was treated in both the Old and New Testaments, and its place in the church today.

Scripture: Leviticus 5
At first glance, the guilt offering would seem to have very little to do with life in Christ. It is an offering made after the petitioner has come into contact with someone or something which has caused him to be ritually unclean. The guilt offering might be better understood as a “dirt” offering, since the sort of guilt involved is not what we generally associate with the word today. It is the “guilt” of being ritually impure, and thus barred from participation in temple worship.

A guilt offering was required any time that it was necessary to come into contact with persons or objects that were deemed “unclean.” One example would be contact with a corpse: in Numbers 19:11, we are told that touching a dead body makes a person unclean. Yet someone had to do the job of preparing the dead for burial, and this meant that there had to be a way to cleanse oneself after such contact.

Another example can be found in childbirth: the placenta is not only considered unclean, but the house in which there is a placenta is unclean. Yet women must give birth, and midwives must be in contact with the ritually unclean products of the birthing process. The “guilt” of the guilt offering refers to the deliberate contact with an unclean thing or person in the performance of one’s duties.

Being unclean in this way is not something we think about very often in the church. It seems archaic, even superstitious to believe that, for example, eating a cheeseburger would cause God to reject you. Yet this was a serious issue for the first-century church: Peter’s vision in Acts 10:9–16 caused him to reject the idea that Jews were clean and Gentiles were unclean. Even so, Paul later found cause to rebuke Peter for treating Jews and Gentiles differently (Gal. 2:11–16). Similarly, issues such as circumcision and other aspects of ritual cleanliness were grappled with by believing Jews.

Jesus did not dismiss the idea of being unclean, but he did clarify the concept: “What goes into a man’s mouth does not make him ‘unclean,’ but what comes out of his mouth, that is what makes him ‘unclean’” (Matt. 15:11). He went on to say that what we say is a reflection of our hearts, and that this is where the true impurity lies. Ritual purity, it seems, was implemented as a symbol of true, inner purity.

Discussion Starters:

[Q] If the guilt is unintentional, is it really guilt? Explain.
Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles


Although we no longer consider many things to be intrinsically unclean, there are nonetheless many people and things that we “brush up against” in our daily lives which draw forth unclean responses. Driving to work, we get cut off in traffic and think unclean thoughts about the other driver. A co-worker tells an off-color joke and we smile weakly so as not to make waves. Every moment of every day, there is a possibility that the dust of the world will seep into our hearts and cause impurity.

But is it really the world that makes us unclean? Or is it our response to the world? The driver who cuts me off is not unclean; it is my ugly, hateful thoughts (and sometimes words) which are unclean. The sensuous woman on the billboard doesn’t make me impure, but I can allow myself to linger on her image and indulge in impure thoughts.

The penalty for being unclean in Moses’ day was exclusion: exclusion from the life of the people, and exclusion from temple worship. Being unclean meant that you could not approach God. We see this idea echoed in the words of Jesus: “… if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23–24). The state of our hearts and minds can be a barrier between us and God.

Q What are some examples of unclean things you encounter in an average day?

Q What are some examples of things to which you often react in an unclean manner?

Teaching Point One: Ritual cleanliness is next to ritual godliness: The pharisaical approach to the problem.

Read Matthew 15:1–2.

The tradition the Pharisees were referring to in this passage is not the removal of dirt from one’s hands before eating, but rather a ritual cleansing which involves pouring water over each hand while reciting a prayer. This tradition is still practiced by Orthodox Jews today. In fact, the mikvah (cleansing water) is absolutely essential to an understanding of Orthodox Judaism. Ritual cleansing in running water has taken the place of the guilt offering today.

First-century Judaism was comprised of a large number of disagreeing factions. Of these, the Pharisees were perhaps the most obsessed with the concept of ritual cleanliness. They were
convincing that in order to be close to God, one must adhere strictly to the laws of Moses, as well as to the Oral Law that had developed over the centuries. The thought was: Surely, if the Torah says that we cannot approach the temple unless we are ritually clean, nobody who ignores these traditions could be a godly person.

This detail-oriented approach to worship caused clashes between Jesus and the Pharisees on more than one occasion. They accused his disciples of breaking the Sabbath by snapping off grains of wheat and casually munching them as they walked, and accused Jesus himself of the same “crime” for healing on the Sabbath. Even though there were those among the Pharisees who wondered if Jesus might be the Messiah, they could not fathom why he could treat the law so cavalierly.

This approach can be found among some Christians today. In fact, all of us are guilty of missing the purity forest for the ritual trees from time to time. We see another Christian wearing clothes we would not wear, or working at a job we would not do, and think “unclean.” We have a tendency to expect others to conform to the rules and limits we have set out for ourselves.

In the end, this kind of thinking not only has us unfairly judging others, but it results in an inability to become clean ourselves. When we allow ourselves to judge the hearts of our fellow believers, no matter what the standard, we run the risk of corrupting our own hearts. The tragedy of the Pharisees was not simply that they rejected Jesus, but that they were unable to get past their own rules in order to see him for who he was.

[Q] Does your church or denomination have rules that might be considered judgmental? How might you deal with these rules while continuing to respect your particular church tradition?

[Q] Do you personally have any “rules” that you sometimes apply to others unfairly?

[Q] The baptismal pool is derived directly from the mikvah. How might Christians turn the good command of baptism into something pharisaical?

Teaching Point Two: Purity and impurity in the New Testament: What Jesus and Paul had to say.

Jesus taught quite a bit on the subject of purity, but he identified it as a state of the heart rather than the body. The entire Sermon on the Mount deals with this idea of a pure heart. When confronted by the Pharisees for healing on the Sabbath, he responded that it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:12). He rebuked the Pharisees for focusing on the letter of the law to the detriment of the spirit: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you
hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former” (Matt. 23:23).

It is interesting to note that Jesus did not tell the Pharisees that it was wrong to tithe even their spices, but that they should also follow the heart of the law. In other words, he was not condemning the idea of adhering to the rituals, but rather the motive for doing so. Jesus himself took part in Jewish rituals, going to the temple on holy days and partaking of the Passover meal.

Paul expanded on the relationship between ritual purity and a pure heart. Read 1 Corinthians 11:27–31. Here we see the ritual of communion given a place of honor, yet subject to being conducted with a right heart, and for the right reasons. This theme of actions being secondary to thoughts, or pure action being a result of a pure heart, is repeated over and over in the New Testament. In Romans 14, Paul writes perhaps the most succinct advice regarding the way we judge “correct” behavior in others. Read Romans 14:2–3.

Some churches teach that we must not use musical instruments in congregational worship. Others teach that we must abstain from eating non-kosher meat. Still others have strict rules regarding clothing, hair length, who may or may not receive communion, and so on. Jesus tells us that adhering to these rules will not make us pure. Paul goes on to tell us that we should accept those whose rules are different from our own—in fact, he goes so far as to tell us that our own hearts cannot be right if we condemn others for the rules they follow.

[Q] Just as Jesus reproved the Pharisees on the issue of tithing their spices, what might he reprove the modern church on for having a good idea that got sidetracked in the rules?

[Q] What do you think of Paul’s assertion that partaking of the Lord’s Supper from wrong motives caused some people to become sick or even die? Is that possible today?

[Q] What are some current issues that may be similar to meat sacrificed to idols that those in Paul’s day worried about?

Teaching Point Three: Getting clean on the inside: Purity and the throne of grace.

Jesus gave some rather surprising instructions to the woman caught in adultery: “Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11). Not only was this woman “impure” as a result of her actions, she was also worthy of death according to the law of Moses. Yet Jesus simply refused to condemn her and bade her go and sin no more.
Interestingly, Jesus was more scrupulous about the laws of ritual purity when it came to healing a man with leprosy. After healing the man, Jesus told him to go to the priests and give the offering commanded in Moses, as a testimony to them (Mark 1:44).

What sort of testimony was this supposed to be? If it were merely a testimony that Jesus can cleanse leprosy, then it would have been sufficient simply to tell everyone—including the priests—that he had been healed. But instead, Jesus told the man to “tell no one” except the priests, to whom the former leper was to present his offering. It looks as though the “testimony” in question is that Jesus honors the law of ritual cleansing, rather than that he can heal.

The difference between the woman caught in adultery and the man with leprosy is the difference between an unpardonable sin (for which the penalty is stoning) and an unavoidable contact with uncleanness, which requires a guilt offering. In the first case, Jesus offers grace. But in the second, he prescribes a ritual cleansing. Why?

Perhaps it is because, when we are made dirty through contact with the unclean things of the world, we need some sort of ritual process in order to feel clean again. The performance of ritual is a way of translating our willingness to obey God into physical action. God does not need ritual in order to forgive us; we need ritual in order to “reset” our hearts in accordance with the will of God.

Consider the words of Jesus: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 7:21). The doing is important. In another passage, Jesus tells a parable of two sons, one who says he will obey but does not, and another who refuses verbally but later does as he was told (Matt. 21:28–32).

Our obedience through action displays the true state of our hearts. At the same time, simply forcing ourselves to act according to God’s will can change our hearts, opening them to Christ so that he may wash away the dust of this world. Ritual cleansing is not a requirement for the grace of God; it is a gift to us, a key to the throne of grace.

[Q] What sorts of ritual cleansing does your church participate in? Do you feel that this helps you draw near to God? Why or why not?

[Q] How do you see the ritual of immersion in a mikvah—is it appealing, or strange, or perhaps irrelevant? Is it something you think you would enjoy participating in? Explain.

[Q] Can you think of any other “cleansing” rituals you’ve participated in, perhaps in other churches, or others you may have heard of?
Optional Activity:

**Purpose:** To practice ritual cleansing.

**Activity:** Use the following liturgical prayer as a means of ritual cleansing. Liturgy is a form of ritual that has been practiced in both Judaism and Christianity for millennia. The following is a combination of modern prayer, ancient traditional Christian prayer, and the words of Psalm 150.

_All:
We confess, O Lord, that contact with the world has soiled our hearts.
We choose to approach you in praise and thanksgiving, that your presence may wash us clean.

_Leader:
Grant, we beseech You, Almighty God,
that we may attain with the understanding of a purified mind,
the things we are celebrating with solemn observance.

_All:
Praise the LORD.
Praise God in his sanctuary;
praise him in his mighty heavens.

Praise him for his acts of power;
praise him for his surpassing greatness.

Praise him with the sounding of the trumpet,
praise him with the harp and lyre,

praise him with tambourine and dancing,
praise him with the strings and flute,

praise him with the clash of cymbals,
praise him with resounding cymbals.

Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.
Praise the LORD (Psalms 150).

_Leader:
Our gifts and prayers having been received,
we beseech You, O Lord:
both cleanse us by these heavenly mysteries,
and mercifully hark to us.

_All:
Amen.
Part 3 Apply Your Findings

We cannot live in this world without brushing up against uncleanness in others, or encountering things which draw out uncleanness in us. In fact, most of us have positions which are similar to that of the grave digger: we have no choice but to come in contact with unclean things in the regular performance of necessary duties. We will be made unclean in the course of an average day.

We can only deal with our own uncleanness, not anyone else’s. Breaking rules did not make us unclean, and following them will not keep us unsoiled. As always, the state of our hearts is the real core of the matter.

We cannot go to the temple and offer a sacrifice in order to be made whole again, but we can offer the sacrifice of our obedience to God. We can partake of the life of the church, admit that we are unclean, forgive one another, and above all, love.

**Action Point:** Keep a journal for the next week, focusing specifically on those things that cause you to become “unclean” in your heart and mind. This does not need to be detailed: a simple notebook in which to jot down quick thoughts will do.

At the end of the week, read over the journal. If possible, share your journals together as a group. Pray over each entry in the journal, asking both forgiveness for past transgressions and awareness for future brushes with the dust of this world.

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