Leviticus 1 — Burnt Offering

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Have you tried reading through the Bible? Starting in Genesis is fun.

When we get to Exodus, it is exciting. Then we hit Leviticus. Everything comes to a screeching halt. We read about sacrifices that are no longer offered, a priesthood that no longer exists, and Old Testament laws we no longer obey. It is the book of Leviticus that makes most of us give up when it comes to reading through the Bible. Has anyone experienced the screeching halt of Leviticus?

Leviticus is a challenging book. Since it is hard to understand, it is one of the most neglected books in the Bible. Leviticus isn't a book we should ignore. The New Testament quotes frequently from Leviticus. When Jesus told us to love our neighbors as ourselves, he was quoting Leviticus 19:18. Paul's instructions on sexual ethics in the Corinthian letters come from the book of Leviticus. For centuries rabbis saw Leviticus as so important that they taught the Hebrew language to their students by making them memorize the book of Leviticus in Hebrew. It was the one book they didn't want their students to forget. Unfortunately, for Christians, it is the one book we don't know. It is book filled with hidden gems.

This Christmas season, we are studying the first seven chapters of this challenging book to look at the types of offerings prescribed in Leviticus. We are probably the only church in the country studying Leviticus for Christmas. I trust God will bless us for our courage to study these neglected chapters that point to Jesus in a season that is about remembering Jesus.

This morning, I want to accomplish four goals. First, I will share a brief overview of Leviticus. I want us to understand how the book is put together. Second, I want us to have an overview of the five sacrifices in the first seven chapters that we will study this Christmas season. Third, we will jump into our study of the first sacrifice, the burnt offering, and we will see how it points to Jesus. Fourth, I have one practical point of application to take into our week.

1. An Overview of Leviticus

After Israel left Egypt, it took the new nation only 10 weeks to arrive at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:1). There, God gave Moses his laws and instructions for building the tabernacle. On the one-year anniversary of their liberation from Egypt, on the first day of the first month of the second year of their liberation, Moses erected the tabernacle (Exodus 40:7). The book of Numbers, which comes after Leviticus, starts on the first day of the second month of the second year of their liberation. That means the book of Leviticus, which is sandwiched between Exodus and Numbers, was written in the one-month period between these two books. It was written on the beginning of the second year of Israel's exodus from Egypt. One month is a short time to go from pen to publish.

How is Leviticus organized?

Leviticus is divided in two parts. Leviticus 1-16 talks about maintaining holiness. It is God prescribing a detailed system of worship for his people so they can approach him and know him. Leviticus 17-27 talks about living in holiness. It describes what it looks like to live a holy life and avoid the sin that separates us from God. The first half of the book is about how to worship God. The second half of the book is how to live for God.

Who wrote Leviticus?

Leviticus says 56 times "God spoke to Moses." That tags Moses as the author. In addition, Jesus said the first five books of the Bible were written by Moses (Luke 24:27). I am going to go with Jesus on this one. Moses wrote the book. While he wrote it, that doesn't mean he made it up. God is the author.

The book starts off by saying, "Then the Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from inside the tent of meeting." Most of Leviticus is Moses transcribing God's words as God instructed his people how to worship and how to live.

Lest we think Leviticus is simply a pile of rules and regulations, we need to remember that Leviticus is a gospel book. The theme of Leviticus is God inviting people to be with him. It is God restoring a measure of the harmony that existed between God and man in the Garden of Eden that was broken though sin.

Through the sacrificial system, God was temporarily covering that sin to enable the people he loved to come to him. Don't think of Leviticus as rules and regulations. It is God's invitation to be with him and God providing instructions on avoiding sin and a way to cover sin to make a relationship with him possible.

2. What sacrifices did God command to give to cover sin and meet with his people?

The first seven chapters describe five offerings God gave for his people to cover their sinfulness and restore with him what we were created to enjoy. These five offerings fall into three categories.

- Dedication to God Burnt Offering and Grain Offering
- Communion with God Fellowship (or Peace) Offerings
- Cleansing from God Sin and Guilt Offerings

Each offering was a portion of our relationship with God. There are other offerings in the Old Testament but these are the major offerings we need to know. Sometimes these offerings were offered by people on a personal basis, as part of their personal worship of God, which is what Leviticus teaches. They were also offered on a corporate basis, as part of the nation of Israel's corporate worship. Let's look at the first offering.

3. What is the Burnt Offering?

The burnt offering was the most common offering in the Old Testament. It was a way a person or a nation expressed its total dedication to God. It was also a covering for general sinfulness so men and women could have a relationship with God. Let's break this down. The burnt offering was not offered for specific sins but for the basic sinfulness of a person or society. Since most people need to seek forgiveness for specific sins before general sins, in practice, the sin offering—which was offered for specific sins that can be brought to memory, was usually offered before the burnt offering. After people confessed their specific sins, they offered a burnt offering for their general sinfulness. The key difference is the sin offering dealt with specific sins we can remember. The burnt offering dealt with general sins we don't even know. The burnt offering is a great reminder that even if we can't think of a recent sin, we are still sinful. There needs to be an offering not just for our specific sins but our general sinfulness, irritableness and selfishness. We are sinful people, even when we don't realize it.

Leviticus 1 is about an individual seeking to dedicate his or her life to God and have his or her sin covered before God. Before we look at the burnt offering

on an individual basis, as seen in Leviticus 1, let me show you the burnt offering when it was offered on a corporate or national basis.

The burnt offering was a way to confess corporate sin.

Just as the choices of our government makes us as individual members of society responsible, so the general sinfulness of society makes everyone responsible. For example, when our nation changed health care, all of us were touched by it, even if we didn't choose it. When our nation goes to war, all of us are seen as legitimate targets by the enemy. In a similar way, the general sinfulness of ancient Israel needed to be covered.

To cover this sin an animal was offered as a burnt offering to cover corporate sin every morning and evening at the tabernacle (Exodus 29:38-42; Numbers 28:3, 6). On the Sabbath, it was doubled to four animals offered a day instead of two (Numbers 28:9-10). On the first day of the month another animal was offered as a burnt offering to cover corporate sin (Numbers 28:16). On special holidays, or days of fasting, like the new moon, the Passover or the Feast of Weeks many more animals were offered as a burnt offering in worship to cover corporate sin and for the nation to rededicate themselves to God.

For example, the week-long celebration of the Feast of Booths sounds like you were singing the song "The 12 days of Christmas." On the first day they sacrificed 13 bulls, two rams and 14 male lambs as a burnt offering. The next day they counted down and sacrificed 12 bulls, two rams and 14 male lambs. They kept counting down on the bulls all week long. Ancient Israelites were constantly offering whole burnt offerings to cover their sin and rededicate themselves to God because they were aware of how easily they drifted and the

general deep sinfulness of their heart. In addition, the burnt offering only covered sin. It was only a temporary covering. That is why it was offered repeatedly.

The burnt offering was a way of celebration.

Sometimes a burnt offering was not just a way to atone for sin but it was a way of celebrating God's goodness and expressing your total dedication to him. When the ark was released from the Philistines the people celebrated with whole burnt offerings in 1 Samuel 6:14. The ark was returned to Israel on a cart pulled by bulls. They broke up the cart and used it for a fire then sacrificed the bulls as a burnt offering in the flames as a way of celebrating the ark's return and rededicating themselves to God.

The burnt offering is the oldest form of worship.

Noah offered a burnt offering of the clean animals when he came off the ark, that is the first occurrence of a burnt offering in the Bible (Genesis 8:20-21). Moses told Pharaoh that the Israelites needed to take their cattle with them into the wilderness to worship God because they needed to offer burnt offerings (Exodus 10:25-26). This was before the establishment of the sacrificial system at Mt. Sinai. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, offered burnt offerings to God (Exodus 10:25-26). Burnt offerings were the oldest type of offerings in the Bible.

The burnt offering was the starting point of personal worship.

Leviticus 1 gives the details on how an individual was to offer a burnt offering. This chapter is not describing describing how this offering was done corporately, although the procedure was the same. It is talking about a person taking the initiative to ask God to cover his or her individual sinfulness and bring him or her into a relationship with God.

If you were an Israelite, and you were just going along with the cultural program of what your family did on the holidays, like most young people you went to the temple on the weekend simply because your parents did, but there comes a point in your life when you must decide to make your faith your own. You must move from piggybacking on your parent's faith to having your own faith. There comes a point when you decide you are going to dedicate your life to God. The burnt offering for an individual was the way someone publicly dedicated is or her life to God. You could call this an ancient form of the altar call. In our culture young men and women go forward at the campfire at the last night of summer camp to dedicate themselves to the Lord.

In the ancient culture people went to the field and grabbed a bull, something from the flock or birds. They came to the tabernacle and they offered these as burnt offerings to dedicate their lives to God.

Just as the animal they were offering was dedicated to God and completely consumed by the fire on the altar, they offered their lives dedicated to God and gave their futures to be completely consumed as an offering to him.

This was the only offering that was completely consumed. All of it was burned up and given to God. This was a symbolic way of completing committing your life to God.

Let's jump into Leviticus 1.

The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock. Leviticus 1:1–2 (ESV)

The first thing to notice is what follows is not Moses' instructions. These were God's direct instructions to his people.

In addition, he told them these offerings were never to be given on the cheap. If you happen to find road kill, that didn't count. You had to offer your burnt offering from your herd or your flock. You couldn't give it from somebody else's flock. You can't have anybody else give it for you. It had to come from your wallet. It had to cost you something. It had to be a choice you made. Not a choice your parents made for you. From this we learn that all true commitment to God costs us something. In addition, commitment to God is a choice we must make on our own. Nobody else can do it for us. True worship will cost us financially. It will cost us in time. It will cost us in mental effort. If it costs us nothing, it isn't true worship. It isn't a true dedication of our lives to him. King David understood this.

But the king said to Araunah, "No, but I will buy it from you for a price. I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God that cost me nothing." So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. 2 Samuel 24:24 (ESV)

David refused to offer free bulls on a free threshing floor because David realized that if a burnt offering cost him nothing, it didn't count. The first thing we learn about this offering is it must cost us. If it costs us nothing, it isn't acceptable worship. It isn't an acceptable dedication of our lives to God.

The story continues. God detailed what animals must be offered for a burnt offering. In a moment we will see that God specified three different types of animals that were acceptable to upper, middle and lower class. Each one was to be costly for the worshipper but there was no burnt offering to dedicate oneself to

God that was out of the financial reach of a worshipper. This first animal was for those in the upper class. It was a costly bull.

If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord. He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. Leviticus 1:3–4 (ESV)

Why was it a male? A female was valuable. A female cow gave milk for your breakfast cereal. A female cow gave birth to more animals in the herd. The male was valuable in that the male represented the rest of the herd. This was the stud bull. It was the male over the herd.

It was to be a male without blemish. It couldn't have any defect. Leviticus later details what a blemish looked like. It included any kind of birth defect, sores, blindness or warts. Why couldn't there be any defect in the animal? As we shall see in a moment, this sacrifice represented Christ and what God did for us through him. Just as Christ was perfect, and he died to take away our sinfulness, so this offering—which represents him—must also be sinless and unblemished, just like Jesus.

It said the purpose of this offering was that someone would be *acceptable* to the Lord. This offering makes atonement. What does atonement mean? Atonement means at-one-ment. It is taking two parties that are separated and bringing them together as one. This offering is the way a worshiper was to have his relationship with God restored by the death of an intermediary that gave over its life in your place. Just as you received the benefit of this substitute for your life by completely dedicating your life to God, so this animal would be completely dedicated to God by burning up on the altar.

The New Testament says this offering is about what Jesus came to do.

He came to offer himself as a sacrifice of atonement. This offering, which is the first step in a relationship with God—which is dealing with our general sinfulness, was completely fulfilled by Jesus. He is the once-for-all sacrifice of atonement.

These sacrifices just covered our sin but Jesus' death actually took away our sins. Look how Paul put what Jesus did in Romans and how he connected it to the burnt offering, the sacrifice of atonement.

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement (burnt offering), through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished.— Romans 3:25 (NIV)

This is telling us that all the Old Testament sacrifices did was picture what Christ came to do. Larry Osborne calls them interest only payments. None of these sacrifices actually paid for sin. They simply temporarily covered sin. They were potent visual reminders that pointed to what Jesus came to do. They painted a picture of why Christ came at Christmas.

Jesus Christ came to be the one true sacrifice of atonement. Jesus Christ came to be the one true burnt offering that no longer needs to be offered multiple times a day plus many times on holidays plus numerous times individually to take away our general sinfulness and bring us into a relationship with God.

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins. Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.' "When he said above, "You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings" (these are offered according to the law), then he added, "Behold, I have come to do your will." He does away with the first in order to establish the second. And by that will we have been sanctified

through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. Hebrews 10:4–10 (ESV)

Let's finish looking at the first type of burnt offering — the upper class offering of the perfect male bull.

The offering of the bull — Upper Class.

He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. Then he shall kill the bull before the Lord, and Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. And Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Leviticus 1:4–9 (ESV)

The worshipper brought the bull to the temple. Then he laid his hand on the head of the bull. This was not a light touch. The words literally mean they were to press down on the head to have a strong identification with the animal. I don't know if they used one



hand or two hands. My guess is one hand. They probably needed the other hand to keep the animal under control.

While it doesn't say it in Leviticus, Jewish tradition tells us the worshipper typically admitted his sinfulness before God with his hand on the animal's head. He called out to God asking God to save him from his sin and asking God to accept this animal's death in his place to cover his sin. Jewish literature tells us that they sometimes also quoted from a Psalm such as Psalm 40, 51 or 66. The animal was about to suffer the death for sin the worshipper deserved.

Next the worshipper took a knife and slit the throat of the animal. The animal figuratively died in his place. As the bull's heart pumped, blood spurted everywhere. It splashed on the clothing of the worshipper. It hit the priest. It was all over the ground. The priest tried to catch as much of it as he could in a bowl. Imagine the impression that left on someone dedicating his life to God. Because he was so selfish and sinful, this bull needed to die in his place. The only way for him to know God was for this costly substitute to die in his place. That animal died for his sin.

Some of you have helped our family and given us deer you shot. Others of you helped us butcher the deer. The result is a lot of meat in my deep freezer and saving a lot of money on the family food bill.

Can you imagine the cost to sacrifice a perfect bull? One website I checked said bulls range from \$3,500 to \$7,500 in value. That is a lot of money to pay just for your general sinfulness and to dedicate your life to the Lord. We are not talking about a specific sin but just general sinfulness.

Next the blood caught in a bowl by the priest was taken to the altar. The priest splattered the blood on the sides of the altar. The blood represented that the life of the animal died in your place. The blood covered your sin.

Next the offerer disassembled the animal. Lots of valuable meat was cut into pieces by the worshipper. That was a lot of work. It was a lot of money that was about to go up in smoke. One website I looked at said an adult bull weighs approximately 2,500 pounds. That is a lot of hamburger. The worshipper cut up the entire animal, and as he did, the priest brought all of it to the altar and placed

all of it on the altar where there was a fire burning. The insides and the legs of the animal were washed to make sure no dung was on the meat. It was to be a pure and perfectly complete sacrifice.

Remember that the offering represented the offerer. Just as the offerer completely dedicated himself to God, so the offering was completely given to God. Just as there was no way for the worshipper to approach God unless someone died in his place for his sin, so this perfect animal died to figuratively cover the worshipper's sin.

The only thing not burned on the altar was the skin, which was given to the priest.

Once on the altar the entire animal burned slowly as it went up in smoke. The word for burning in the Hebrew describes a slow burning, like incense. The result was a pleasing aroma to the Lord. I suspect it smelled like BBQ, and that is definitely a pleasing aroma.

You might wonder where the fire came from for the offering. The fire on the altar of the tabernacle was lit by God. That is why the fire was kept burning continually. It was God's fire. It was not allowed to go out. When an animal burned on the altar, that was a way of God's acceptance of your offering.

Let me show you how the fire on the altar was lit. We find it a little later in Leviticus.

And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces. Leviticus 9:24 (ESV)

If you tried to offer an offering using any other fire, it did not go well. In Leviticus 10 we find Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu tried to offer an offering with

unauthorized fire. God torched them in a backdraftish explosion that left them torched like a burned marshmallow. God's fire was unique and not something to treat casually.

The fire on the altar in Solomon's temple was lit the same way.

As soon as Solomon finished his prayer, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. 2 Chronicles 7:1 (ESV)

This same fire was what consumed your bull. The fire burning your bull was God accepting your offering to cover your sin. The idea is a highly valuable perfect sacrifice, that was totally given to God, died in the worshipper's place to pay for his sin and bring him back into a relationship with God. Does anybody see how this all points to Jesus? It was the faith in this temporary offering that covered sin and brought people into a relationship with God. It is faith in Jesus Christ that doesn't just cover our sin but it pays for our sin once and for all.

The offering from the flock — Middle Class.

If you were middle class, the procedure was similar but it involved a sheep or a goat. That was costly but it was something you could afford.

If his gift for a burnt offering is from the flock, from the sheep or goats, he shall

bring a male without blemish, and he shall kill it on the north side of the altar before the Lord, and Aaron's sons the priests shall throw its blood against the sides of the altar. And he shall cut it into pieces, with its head and its fat, and the priest shall arrange them on the wood that is on the fire on the altar, but the entrails and the legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall offer all of it and burn it on the altar; it is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Leviticus 1:10–13 (ESV)



The offering of turtle doves or pigeons — Lower Class.

If you were too poor to offer a sheep or a goat, you could offer turtle doves or pigeons. For the destitute, this was costly but it was within their financial reach.

If his offering to the Lord is a burnt offering of birds, then he shall bring his offering of turtledoves or pigeons. And the priest shall bring it to the altar and wring off its head and burn it on the altar. Its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. He shall remove its crop with its contents and cast it beside the altar on the east side, in the place for ashes. He shall tear it open by its wings, but shall not sever it completely. And the priest shall burn it on the altar, on the wood that is on the fire. It is a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Leviticus 1:14–17 (ESV)

This offering was slightly different.

Instead of the worshipper cutting up the bird,
the priest tore the head off the bird by the
altar. This was presumably because there
was so little blood in the bird that you didn't



want to lose any of it before splattering it on the ground next to the altar.

Just as the worshipper cut up the bull or animal from the flock, in a similar way the worshiper gutted and de-feathered the bird before he or she tore it open but not in half.

This was very emotional for the worshipper. The dismembering of the bull, sheep, goat or bird was a way someone said, "I deserved to be dismembered and destroyed for my sin. I ask this offering to cover my sin and in brokenness; I offer myself completely to God."

The burnt offering was a critical part of everyone's worship in the Old

Testament. This is why God made it possible for everyone, no matter his or her

financial status, to make this offering. The burnt offering was a way everyone could dedicate himself or herself fully to God.

In both the Old Testament and in the New Testament, the way a relationship with God begins is by someone dedicating himself or herself fully to God and looking to a perfect substitute to cover his or her sin.

A relationship with God has always involved confessing our general sinfulness and helplessness to save ourselves from our sin. It has also always involved confessing our need for a perfect substitute to die in our places for our sin. Here in Leviticus 1, the burnt offering only temporarily covered sin, which is why it was offered repeatedly. Jesus is the burnt offering, the sacrifice of atonement that doesn't just cover sin temporarily, he paid for all our sin permanently. He doesn't need to be offered repeatedly. He is offered once and for all.

The heart of the offerer was more important than the offering.

The Bible tells us repeatedly that what was most important in this offering was not the act of offering the sacrifice but the heart of the worshipper that called out to God to have his sin covered by the sacrifice.

For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; <u>you will not be pleased with a burnt offering</u>. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. Psalm 51:16–17 (ESV)

God doesn't want people simply going through the motions when it comes to offering burnt offerings. God doesn't want people just going through the motions at church. Raising your hand to receive Jesus is not what God is looking for. That is just an external observance, like the offering of an animal. A heart that is broken and contrite over sin and is honestly calling out to God for mercy in

that sacrifice to take away sin is what matters, just as what matters this morning is not raising your hand or signing a card. God is looking for hearts that want to dedicate themselves completely to him and look to him for his sacrifice, Jesus, to take care of their sin. This is a challenge for all of us every Sunday. When we come to worship Jesus, God doesn't want us simply going through the motions while we check Facebook or post on Snapchat. He wants our hearts seriously seeking him and his grace. That is what counts as true worship. That was true in the Old Testament times. It is true in our time as well.

How does this change the way we live?

The New Testament reaches back into the old and talks about the burnt offering of Leviticus 1 numerous times. Now that you understand the background of the burnt offering and what Jesus did on the cross, it unravels some of the mysterious New Testament language. As we leave, I will show you one example and make it our point of application for the week. Paul said:

Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. Ephesians 4:31–5:2 (ESV)

Let us not be people known for fighting, arguing, bickering or that dream of revenge. We are to be people known for our kindness, tenderness and forgiveness. We forgive each other, just as God forgave us.

Then he explains it this way: We are to be like God. Just as Christ loved us and gave his life up for us to cover our sin as a burnt offering, and in his covering our sin and paying for our sin he produced a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God, just like the burnt offering. In a similar way, when we refuse to

become bickering vengeful people but instead are tenderhearted and kind and we cover and pay for the sins of others, just as Jesus covered and paid for our sin, our lives produce a fragrant offering that is pleasing to God, just like the burnt offering of the Old Testament, just like the sacrifice of Christ.

This week, as we celebrate Thanksgiving, it will be a great time to have family and friends around the table. Sometimes when family gets together it is easy for tempers to flare and anger to simmer. Let your life be a fragrant offering to God. Overlook the sins of others. Be tenderhearted. Be kind. Don't become bitter and vengeful.

This Christmas remember the burnt offering. Jesus came to be the burnt offering that all other burnt offerings only pointed to. This week, let your life be a fragrant offering as you cover and even pay for the sins of others, just like Christ did for you.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the Evangelical Free Church of America. He enjoys reading, writing, time with his family and wrestling with his sons. His favorite topics are preaching and ancient rhetoric. Feel free to contact him at www.christ2RCulture.com (www.c2rc.com)

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