

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today is part three of the series on the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Leviticus hardly gets any “airtime” in the readings we have each week in the service and is generally disregarded in weekly Bible studies. However, without a basic understanding of what happens in this book, much of what is written in the New Testament will be lost on us. And that is not acceptable! So, let’s dig in a little deeper today and see how the Old and New testaments really do fit together seamlessly.

Many put an “iron curtain” of sorts between the Old Testament and the New. They look to the Old Testament for some history, some wisdom, and for help in giving thanks and praise to God in the Psalms. As far as worship and everyday spirituality, they pretty much stick with the New Testament for all of that. This is possible, of course, but our faith and experience may lack the depth that we often want. In Leviticus, we find instructions on many offerings made to the Lord. The offerings are usually completely burnt up on the altar and God says the resulting smoke is a pleasing aroma to him. There is a formula, or pattern behind all the offerings that makes it all work. When people brought bulls, sheep, goats, birds, grain and everything else and they were burnt on the altar, God said the smoke created a pleasing aroma before him and the people for whom the offering was made had God’s favor. Why did these offerings bring God’s favor? It was not because God was recognizing that the people gave up something valuable to him. It was not because of some magical powers associated with the rituals. It was not because the offerings somehow satisfied God. The only reason why all these offerings brought God’s favor to the people was that they all “reminded” God of the offering of his Son. In the history of all time, it was only the sacrifice of Jesus Christ that created a pleasing aroma to God and brought his forgiveness, favor, life, and blessing to all. All the offerings made on the altar before Jesus’ once-for-all sacrifice found their purpose and importance in bringing out the goodness of God towards the people because of the future work of Jesus Christ.

Now let’s get back into the offerings of Israel. Let’s take a look at the grain offering.

When anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to the Lord, his offering shall be of fine flour. He shall pour oil on it and put frankincense on it and bring it to Aaron's sons the priests. And he shall take from it a handful of the fine flour and oil, with all of its frankincense, and the priest shall burn this as its memorial portion on the altar, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. But the rest of the grain offering shall be for Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the Lord's food offerings. Leviticus 2

Households would bring grain offerings to the priests either as whole grain or cooked into some form of unleavened bread. The priest would take the offering and put a portion of it on top of the burnt animal offering already placed on the altar. Along with the grain there were also salt and frankincense. That portion would be sent up in smoke. With the frankincense burning on the altar, you can easily understand how the smoke from the offering would be a pleasing aroma to God. The remaining portion of the grain offering would become food to support the priests who were serving at the tabernacle.

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The bread would be eaten right there in the temple courtyard. Since the Lord said this bread was most holy – the holiest anything on earth could possibly be – when the priests ate it, they were also holy.

Now let's compare this with what is going on in the New Testament and with Jesus.

When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And he vanished from their sight. Luke 24

One of the first things Jesus does after his resurrection is to share bread with two disciples in Emmaus. When Jesus gave thanks for the bread, it became holy, just like the bread at the grain offering. This is why the disciples eyes were then opened to see that the man who was until now a stranger to them was actually Jesus.

When they got out on land, they saw a charcoal fire in place, with fish laid out on it, and bread. Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them ... John 21

Some days later, Jesus also offered bread to the disciples one morning on the shoreline of Galilee. In John it actually says that Jesus "shared salt" with his disciples. Remember the salt that was added to the grain offering? That is where that comes from. As high priest, Jesus was again giving his disciples to eat of the most holy bread, making them holy and assuring God's favor. That was a very long time ago. How does that affect us today? The writer of Hebrews teaches us about this. He says,

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. Hebrews 13:10

This means that the bread we eat from the altar here in this church is indeed most holy, and it supersedes the bread of the grain offering eaten by the priests of the Old Testament. When

we -who Jesus says are all priests along with him - eat this most holy bread we are holy and are assured of God's favor.

The next offering is the peace offering. Of all the offerings, I think this is the greatest one for us to know, because it closely connects with our faith today.

“If his offering is a sacrifice of peace offering, if he offers an animal from the herd, male or female, he shall offer it without blemish before the Lord. And he shall lay his hand on the head of his offering and kill it at the entrance of the tent of meeting, and Aaron's sons the priests shall throw the blood against the sides of the altar. And from the sacrifice of the peace offering, as a food offering to the Lord, he shall offer the fat covering the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails, and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins, and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys. Then Aaron's sons shall burn it on the altar on top of the burnt offering, which is on the wood on the fire; it is a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. Leviticus 3

And the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving shall be eaten on the day of his offering. He shall not leave any of it until the morning. But if the sacrifice of his offering is a vow offering or a freewill offering, it shall be eaten on the day that he offers his sacrifice, and on the next day what remains of it shall be eaten. But what remains of the flesh of the sacrifice on the third day shall be burned up with fire. Leviticus 7

The peace offering was voluntary and was probably made at the chief feasts of Israel – Passover, Pentecost, and Booths. It was popular because with the peace offering, the priest would give back the meat part of the offering. Then the household that made the offering would have a banquet with the holy food and celebrate. First the blood of the animal was thrown against the altar in the rite of atonement. This cleansed the one bringing the offering so their offering could be brought forth before the Lord and be accepted by him. Next, the kidneys, liver, and fat from the animal were sent up in smoke as a pleasing aroma to the Lord. When this was done, the priest announced that the offering was accepted by God. This meant that they had peace with God: forgiveness; wellbeing; life; and salvation. Sound at all familiar? I hope so. The meat from the offering was now holy. Those who ate the meat were holy and could have a good conscience toward God and rejoice they had his grace and favor.

This setting reflected another scenario that was well-known and typical in the lives of people who lived at that time. Vassals and officials would periodically be invited to bring their land rent or offerings to their Lord or King and join him at a banquet table. Their offerings would be accepted, the Lord or King would hear their requests, he would give them his blessing, and their relationship was affirmed. This was all done in the setting of the meal. For Israel, this was the peace offering. Here God, the land, and the people were brought together and

harmonized. In the Old Testament, God had already signaled he was going to make more of this peace offering. In Isaiah 25 God says,

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the Lord has spoken. Isaiah 25:6-8*

Here the Lord will host a meal celebrating the death of death and the bestowing of the favor of God. When Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms, he thanked God that he had seen God's peace offering, his salvation for all the world. Jesus is God's peace offering. His blood is thrown against the altar of God's justice, and we are made acceptable to approach God. The offering of himself on the cross became a pleasing aroma to God showing his sacrifice was acceptable. His flesh is now given us to eat to receive God's holiness and rejoice in his favor.

In the Lord's Supper Jesus is the priest that presides over the peace offering that is himself. As our Lord and King, he now invites us to join him at his banquet table where, as his people, he will hear our requests and reaffirm our good relationship with him, offering us forgiveness of sins, wellbeing, life and salvation. Jesus is our peace, as Paul insists;

And he [Jesus] came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. Ephesians 2:18

I plan to take one more week to cover the other main offerings God instructed his people to make at the tabernacle before we get into the design of the divine service, which we still use today. God bless you as together we uncover the past and find new meaning for today. Amen.

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Note: These sermons are usually updated between the time of this printing and Sunday mornings. For an updated version of these sermons, visit christlutheranfh.org.