

Leviticus Bible Study #5

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 4:1-35

1 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **2** “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If anyone sins unintentionally in any of the LORD's commandments about things not to be done, and does any one of them, **3** if it is the anointed priest who sins, thus bringing guilt on the people, then he shall offer for the sin that he has committed a bull from the herd without blemish to the LORD for a sin offering. **4** He shall bring the bull to the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD and lay his hand on the head of the bull and kill the bull before the LORD. **5** And the anointed priest shall take some of the blood of the bull and bring it into the tent of meeting, **6** and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle part of the blood seven times before the LORD in front of the veil of the sanctuary. **7** And the priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense before the LORD that is in the tent of meeting, and all the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. **8** And all the fat of the bull of the sin offering he shall remove from it, the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails **9** 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 **10** (just as these are taken from the ox of the sacrifice of the peace offerings); and the priest shall burn them on the altar of burnt offering. **11** But the skin of the bull and all its flesh, with its head, its legs, its entrails, and its dung— **12** all the rest of the bull—he shall carry outside the camp to a clean place, to the ash heap, and shall burn it up on a fire of wood. On the ash heap it shall be burned up.

13 “If the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally and the thing is hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they do any one of the things that by the LORD's commandments ought not to be done, and they realize their guilt, **14** when the sin which they have committed becomes known, the assembly shall offer a bull from the herd for a sin offering and bring it in front of the tent of meeting. **15** And the elders of the congregation shall lay their hands on the head of the bull before the LORD, and the bull shall be killed before the LORD. **16** Then the anointed priest shall bring some of the blood of the bull into the tent of meeting, **17** and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle it seven times before the LORD in front of the veil. **18** And he shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar that is in the tent of meeting before the LORD, and the rest of the blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. **19** And all its fat he shall take from it and burn on the altar. **20** Thus shall he do with the bull. As he did with the bull of the sin offering, so shall he do with this. And the priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven. **21** And he shall carry the bull outside the camp and burn it up as he burned the first bull; it is the sin offering for the assembly.

22 “When a leader sins, doing unintentionally any one of all the things that by the commandments of the LORD his God ought not to be done, and realizes his guilt, **23** or the sin which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring as his offering a goat, a male without blemish, **24** and shall lay his hand on the head of the goat and kill it in the place where they kill the burnt offering before the LORD; it is a sin offering. **25** Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out the rest of its blood at the base of the altar of burnt offering. **26** And all its fat he shall burn on the altar, like the fat of the sacrifice of peace offerings. So the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin, and he shall be forgiven.

27 “If anyone of the common people sins unintentionally in doing any one of the things that by the LORD's commandments ought not to be done, and realizes his guilt, **28** or the sin which he has

committed is made known to him, he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female without blemish, for his sin which he has committed. **29** And he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and kill the sin offering in the place of burnt offering. **30** And the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar. **31** And all its fat he shall remove, as the fat is removed from the peace offerings, and the priest shall burn it on the altar for a pleasing aroma to the LORD. And the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven.

32 “If he brings a lamb as his offering for a sin offering, he shall bring a female without blemish **33** and lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and kill it for a sin offering in the place where they kill the burnt offering. **34** Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar. **35** And all its fat he shall remove as the fat of the lamb is removed from the sacrifice of peace offerings, and the priest shall burn it on the altar, on top of the LORD's food offerings. And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven.

Introduction

Moses has written God's commandments regarding burnt offerings, grain offerings, and peace offerings. These are respectively concerned with scheduled sacrifices, offerings to accompany other sacrifices, and devotions which invite God and one's community to a moment of harmonious fellowship. Now however it is time to address the matter of sin, which receives much more attention, and for good reason. The sin of golden calf incident led to the establishment of a priestly tribe and class in the first place, with the Israelites having by and large abdicated their priestly rights through that act of apostasy. From that moment on, Aaron and his family were no longer the first among equals in a nation of priests,¹ but now the sole functioning intermediaries between men and God.² As animal sacrifices were the chief means of dealing with sin while under the Old Covenant, utmost importance is placed on the sin offering as a core (and perhaps most frequent) aspect of Israelite religious life, and this expands on the sacerdotal role of Aaron.

Vs.1-3

1 And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **2** “Speak to the people of Israel, saying, If anyone sins unintentionally in any of the LORD's commandments about things not to be done, and does any one of them, **3** if it is the anointed priest who sins, thus bringing guilt on the people, then he shall offer for the sin that he has committed a bull from the herd without blemish to the LORD for a sin offering.

In the matter of dealing with sins, the text provides a clarification regarding the particular nature of the offenses covered by the blood of animals. These are sins which are committed “unintentionally,” not those done with full assent of someone's will. Voluntary sins, that which arises out of our concupiscence, are those with **עֲוֹן**,³⁴ sins of guilt or iniquity which are dealt with later in the book and typically by the death penalty (if the offense is deemed to be casting the Mosaic Law aside entirely).⁵

1 Exodus 19:6

2 Not the other way around of course – it should go without saying that God did not have to go through the priests to interact with people independently, as He does plenty of times in the Old Testament. However, if any Israelite man wanted to approach God properly outside of mere prayer and observance of the Law, he had to do so through the priesthood.

3 Transliterated “Avon,” Strong's #5771

4 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/5771.htm>

5 Hebrews 10:28, Numbers 15:30

These sins which merit sin offerings are **שְׁגָגָה**,⁶⁷ which denote *mistakes*, those violations which are not done by active decision. A man could accidentally take something that does not belong to him, or touch priestly implements which are not lawful for him to touch, etc., necessitating this sort of offering to mitigate the violation of sacred space.

The concept of sacred space is mysterious and not well understood, but we shall make the attempt. When the universe was created by our Lord, He observed that it was “very good.”⁸ The entirety of creation was devoted to God in such a way that there were quite literally *no problems*. But after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in Eden, God pronounces the earth to be cursed on account of Adam's transgression;⁹ creation was no longer “very good” by nature. Whereas once the whole world was sacred, now it is not: in order for proper worship to be observed, space had to be dedicated to God, or made *sacred*, most often accomplished with sacrifices. Moses first encounters this doctrine personally when he meets God at the burning bush in Midian, wherein our Lord tells him “take your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”¹⁰ Later on in Leviticus, God informs the Israelites that they are conquering Canaan because the previous inhabitants rendered it unclean on account of their sins.¹¹ Sin defiles a place, while proper sacrifices render it holy once more; the morning and evening sacrifices maintain the sacred nature of the space the Israelites inhabit while sin offerings restore it when it is violated. Before the Atonement, which greatly eased the process of forgiveness and restoration of holiness to the Lord,¹² these sacrifices had to happen frequently if the people wanted to have anything like a national relationship with God.

In the Mosaic code, there is no appeal to being unaware of one's sin or ignorant of God's Commandments. Morality is absolute according to the deed and its nature. Yet because of man's frailty and the effects of sin upon the mind, sacrifices such as these were of utmost necessity. One may forget that he had sinned, only to remember it later; a sin may be committed without one being in his right mind; one could violate laws concerning cleanness without realizing that he or she was unclean.¹³ All sins, whether with assent of the will or not, violated sacred space during these times.¹⁴

The priest is first in line in the requirements for sin offerings, because his unintentional sins bring “guilt” on the people. This “guilt” is **אֲשָׁמָה**,¹⁵¹⁶ a state of trespass which must be redressed in order to be right with God once more. This is not about moral condemnation, and the people are not morally blamed for the priest's sin. It is more about *substantive* condemnation; the sin the priest commits is placed on the people in such a fashion as to taint them, because his sin stains all the sacrifices he conducted before atoning. The conception of sin in Leviticus and elsewhere in Scripture is as a foreign entity, a sort of negating *substance* which disrupts the life and soul of the person who has it as well as the space in which the people live. It is in line with “sin and concupiscence as indwelling entity” in St. Paul's writing as well,¹⁷ but the exact nature of it is mysterious. One may liken the “sin entity,” or the moral stain of sin, to a kind of fungus that can only be detected in human perception by worsened behavior – sin leading to more sin – yet perfectly perceptible to God, who demands a cleansing

6 Transliterated “shgagah,” Strong's #7684

7 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/7684.htm>

8 Genesis 1:31

9 Genesis 3:17

10 Exodus 3:5

11 Leviticus 18:24-25

12 Matthew 27:51

13 An easy example would be the husband and wife who lie together in the middle of the night, not realizing that the wife's menstrual cycle had begun and thus being in violation of Leviticus 18:19

14 Sacred space is won much more easily under the New Covenant, in that the absolution of the saints clears away their sin without the sacrifice of animals and happens both in and out of the Divine Service.

15 Transliterated “ashmah,” Strong's #819

16 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/819.htm>

17 Romans 7:7-20

sacrifice to remedy the corruption. The priest's sin violates the sacred space around the Tabernacle, rendering peace offerings and sin offerings and burnt offerings that he performs *all* tainted until his sin is dealt with. Here the necessity for sacrificing a spotless bull is more sharply understood; the spotless individual animal is slain on behalf of the stained populace.

Vs.4-12

4 He shall bring the bull to the entrance of the tent of meeting before the LORD and lay his hand on the head of the bull and kill the bull before the LORD. **5** And the anointed priest shall take some of the blood of the bull and bring it into the tent of meeting, **6** and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle part of the blood seven times before the LORD in front of the veil of the sanctuary. **7** And the priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense before the LORD that is in the tent of meeting, and all the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. **8** And all the fat of the bull of the sin offering he shall remove from it, the fat that covers the entrails and all the fat that is on the entrails **9** 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 **10** (just as these are taken from the ox of the sacrifice of the peace offerings); and the priest shall burn them on the altar of burnt offering. **11** But the skin of the bull and all its flesh, with its head, its legs, its entrails, and its dung— **12** all the rest of the bull—he shall carry outside the camp to a clean place, to the ash heap, and shall burn it up on a fire of wood. On the ash heap it shall be burned up.

Animal atonement is not as simple a matter as a burnt offering or a peace offering. Whereas the animal for a burnt offering is slaughtered and its blood is splashed on the altar before the body of the animal is arranged, sin offerings required a more in depth process with more of a *message*. The hand is laid on the animal and the priest slaughters it before the Lord, showing a life being taken in his stead. Blood is sprinkled before the veil of the sanctuary and on the altar of incense to attach the life of the animal¹⁸ both to the presence of God (whose special presence was within the Most Holy Place with the Ark), and to the incense which represents the prayers of the saints; it is a physical way of saying “with the life of this animal we humbly approach You and seek Your forgiveness.” In other words, it is not the sacrifice itself which makes the space sacred, but God is being *asked* to rededicate the man and the space unto Himself. The author of Hebrews informs us that the priesthood serves “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things,”¹⁹ meaning that the sacrifice was intended to mimic heavenly realities; by this we understand that they were looking forward to the Atonement.

The best parts of the bull are offered to the Lord for accepting the offered animal, and the rest is summarily burned – without anyone taking its meat. In the immediate context, expiation of unintentional sins, this ensures that the person who makes the sacrifice is *actually sacrificing* something; even the priests have to give their own bulls, demonstrating that they are not “above” the other Israelites and certainly not above the Law. Yet the prohibition on having any meat left over from the sin offering looks forward to the superior priesthood of Christ. The priest can only sprinkle blood on the altar of incense, while the Christian is entirely covered by the Blood of Christ and joins Him in bearing one's Cross. And as for the meat itself, as Hebrews says:

10 We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. **11**
For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by
the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. **12** So Jesus also
suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.
13 Therefore let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he
endured.²⁰

18 The blood is considered the life of the animal – Genesis 9:4

19 Hebrews 8:5

20 Hebrews 13:10-13

Vs.13-21

13 “If the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally and the thing is hidden from the eyes of the assembly, and they do any one of the things that by the LORD's commandments ought not to be done, and they realize their guilt, **14** when the sin which they have committed becomes known, the assembly shall offer a bull from the herd for a sin offering and bring it in front of the tent of meeting. **15** And the elders of the congregation shall lay their hands on the head of the bull before the LORD, and the bull shall be killed before the LORD. **16** Then the anointed priest shall bring some of the blood of the bull into the tent of meeting, **17** and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle it seven times before the LORD in front of the veil. **18** And he shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar that is in the tent of meeting before the LORD, and the rest of the blood he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. **19** And all its fat he shall take from it and burn on the altar. **20** Thus shall he do with the bull. As he did with the bull of the sin offering, so shall he do with this. And the priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven. **21** And he shall carry the bull outside the camp and burn it up as he burned the first bull; it is the sin offering for the assembly.

Typically we think of sin as something done by an individual, and something done with intent. Not only does God require sacrifices of each Israelite for unintentional sin, but also for the nation *corporately*.²¹ The Israelites could be led astray by bad practices, blight on their crops for food offerings, mistaken trends in sacrificing cattle (that is, masses of sacrifices being blemished and therefore unacceptable), etc. This excludes horrendous national sins like apostasy, as with the Balaam incident or the golden calf debacle; those were punished directly by God. But when Israel sins mistakenly, the correction is relatively mild, with only one bull sufficing for the entire assembly. If this were not the case, then the Israelites would have run out of cattle in short order, as unintentional sins happen every day. There is every reason to suspect that these communal sin offerings were made with some regularity on account of that fact, and the elders of Israel met frequently to represent their tribes as they placed their hands on the bull.

The sufficiency of the bull for the sins of all the people is a typological matter as well. Christ's death on the Cross paid for all the sins of humanity, every man and woman and child who ever was and ever will be.²² If one unblemished bull pays for the unintentional sins of a single nation, how much *more* shall the Son of God pay for *all* sins, both intentional and unintentional, by *His* spilled blood? Every sacrifice Moses writes about is consciously a forward-looking prophetic moment which proclaims the future, greater, perfect sacrifice of the Son of God.

Vs.22-35

22 “When a leader sins, doing unintentionally any one of all the things that by the commandments of the LORD his God ought not to be done, and realizes his guilt, **23** or the sin which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring as his offering a goat, a male without blemish, **24** and shall lay his hand on the head of the goat and kill it in the place where they kill the burnt offering before the LORD; it is a sin offering. **25** Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out the rest of its blood at the base of the altar of burnt offering. **26** And all its fat he shall burn on the altar, like the fat of the sacrifice of peace offerings. So the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin, and he shall be forgiven.

27 “If anyone of the common people sins unintentionally in doing any one of the things that by the LORD's commandments ought not to be done, and realizes his guilt, **28** or the sin which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female without blemish, for his sin which he has committed. **29** And he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and kill the sin offering in the place of burnt offering. **30** And the priest shall take some of its blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of

21 The Scriptures answer the question of the one and the many with “yes.” Both individuals and collectives exist and are mutually accountable.

22 John 1:29

burnt offering and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar. **31** And all its fat he shall remove, as the fat is removed from the peace offerings, and the priest shall burn it on the altar for a pleasing aroma to the LORD. And the priest shall make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven.

32 “If he brings a lamb as his offering for a sin offering, he shall bring a female without blemish **33** and lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and kill it for a sin offering in the place where they kill the burnt offering. **34** Then the priest shall take some of the blood of the sin offering with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out all the rest of its blood at the base of the altar. **35** And all its fat he shall remove as the fat of the lamb is removed from the sacrifice of peace offerings, and the priest shall burn it on the altar, on top of the LORD's food offerings. And the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed, and he shall be forgiven.

The sins of the priest were considered worse than those of an individual, and thus a smaller sacrifice is required for both tribal leaders and “common people” alike. A priest sinning requires a more valuable sacrifice, a bull, on account of the potential for his sin to stain the people, whose sin collectively is taken care of by a bull as well; as goes the priest, so goes the people. But when it comes to individual Israelites, whether aristocrat or pauper, they are treated the same.

In the next chapter there is a provision for the poor to offer turtledoves or pigeons instead of goats or lambs, but in this moment the emphasis is placed on the relative status of both leader and commoner. Just as the priest is no better than the average Israelite in needing his sins forgiven, a tribal chieftain is no better than the average farm worker in God's eyes. The two are unequal *coram mundo* or “facing the world,” with the leadership having greater privileges, wealth and authority than the commoner; but *coram Deo*, facing God, they are considered equals entirely. No one can say they are above the Law on account of their high social status, nor can they say they are beneath it because they are too lowly. Here, God demands faithfulness from *everyone*.

Moses takes for granted that the experience of being a sinner is universal among the children of Israel. Though he writes many “if” statements, so that if someones sins then the rules for sacrifice are readily available, the process is given in such detail that the text clearly assumes this shall happen. In other words, the exegete may read each “if” statement regarding sins as “when” statements, highlighting the universality of sin in humanity. This becomes evident over time, such that David appeals directly to God for cleansing him of all his sins,²³ and St. Paul says in no uncertain terms that everyone is a sinner.²⁴ The Mosaic sacrifice system ameliorated the effects of sin on sacred space and granted *some* absolution, but if it did any more than that then the sacrifices would have stopped on account of the people no longer sinning. Yet here we see that the system could not remove their sinfulness itself, nor make them righteous, nor truly win the favor of God.

23 Psalm 19:12

24 Romans 3:23