

The Sin Offering

Leviticus 4:1-5:13; 6:24-30

I. Exposition

- A. The sin and the guilt offerings are distinct from the first three offerings. The text gives several indications to this fact:
1. The phrase, “Then Yahweh spoke to Moses” (4:1) initiates a new section and sets it apart from chs. 1-3 (cf. 1:1). This is a standard macrosyntactical phrase used throughout the book to introduce new sections.
 2. These offerings focus on the various circumstances that initiate them, whereas in chs. 1-3, the procedure of the ritual itself is the focus.
 3. This also indicates that these latter sacrifices are made in response to certain offenses, while the first three sacrifices were voluntary.
 4. These last two sacrifices introduce new terms not found in the chs. 1-3:
 - a) “Sin”
 - b) “Unintentional”
 - c) “Guilt”
 - d) “Forgive”
 5. This indicates that a major shift has taken place, and that the remaining sacrifices deal with concepts and circumstances not yet explored in the previous offerings.
- B. The name “sin offering” translates the term חַטָּאת (*hattā't*)
1. The traditional name is a literal rendering of the phrase, since the same term also refers to the basic idea of “sin”
 2. At its root, the term has in mind the idea of missing the mark. This is seen quite clearly in the use of the term in reference to special unit of left-handed Benjaminites whose skills with a sling allowed them to “sling a stone at a hair at *not miss*” (Judg 20:16).
 3. In moral and covenant contexts, then, sin refers to straying from Yahweh’s commandments. It deals with the violation of the covenant and the consequent disruption of covenant relationship and harmony that occurs.
 4. This traditional name, however, may not fully capture the thrust of the offering.
 5. The term actually derives from the piel stem of the verb. While in the qal, the verb means to “sin, err, miss the way,” in the piel, the verb means “to cleanse, purify, decontaminate” (cf. Ps 51:7; Num 8:7).

6. When we look at what this sacrifice actually accomplishes, it becomes clear that the name “sin offering” doesn’t seem to capture the purpose and the effects of the sacrifice.
7. Thus, numerous scholars refer to this instead as the “purification offering.” We’ll see why as in the remainder of the lesson.

C. The Occasions for the Sin Offering

1. Unlike the first three offerings, the sin offering (and the guilt offering) were mandatory offerings presented on specific occasions.
2. The liturgical calendar of Israel, outlined in Numbers 28-29, specified a number of festivals when the sin offering was to be presented:
 - a) New Moon (Num 28:15)
 - b) Passover (um 25:22-24)
 - c) Pentecost (Num 28:30)
 - d) Rosh Hashanah (Num 29:5)
 - e) Day of Atonement (Num 29:11)
 - f) Feast of Tabernacles (Num 29:16, 19)
3. Additionally, the sin offering was presented in circumstances where an individual had been unclean for a period of time, but was seeking purification and entrance back into corporate worship:
 - a) Women after childbirth (Lev 12:6)
 - b) Serious skin disease (Lev 14:19)
 - c) Bodily discharge (Lev 15:15)
4. On less frequent occasions, the sin offering accompanied certain ceremonial rituals:
 - a) Dedication of the priests (Lev 8:14)
 - b) Dedication of the altar (Num 7:16)
 - c) Dedication of the Levites (Num 8:8)
 - d) Completion of a Nazirite vow (4:3-12)
5. In Leviticus 4, however, the focus of the sin offering is not private occasions, not corporate gatherings and rituals.
6. The sin offering was occasioned by the act of a unintentional or inadvertent sin—**בִּשְׂגָגָה** (*bishgagah*), “by straying.”
 - a) These refer to sins that were committed without premeditation. They were unintentional, and often occurred without the knowledge of the individual.

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- b) “These were routine sins and overlooked failures that through various means came to a person’s attention. When conviction gripped one’s conscience, then a purification offering was made. The only prerequisite for making this offering were knowledge of the sin and remorse for it” (Ross, 129).
 - c) This contrasts with defiant sins, or sins committed **בְּיָד רְמוּהָ**, “with a raised hand” (Num 15:30). These sins pictured the sinner as raising his fist in presumptuous defiance against Yahweh. No sin offering could be brought for these types of sins.
 - d) “This is not to say that these sins could not be forgiven, for God clearly intervened through prophets and priests to grant forgiveness in these cases (2 Sam 12:13). Forgiveness for any sin could be granted for the free act of God’s grace on the basis of (1) true repentance and contrition (Ps 51:16-17) and/or the (2) intercession of the priest (Exod 32:11, 13, 20-25) or (3) direct, divine intervention (Isa 6:5-7; 2 Sam 12:13). No purification offering was made for these sins; the applicable ritual was the Day of Atonement when all the sins of the nation were placed on the scapegoat (Lev 16)” (Ross, 129).
7. Four occasions are listed in this section that prescribe the necessity of a sin offering. They involve four different parties, and move from high levels of responsibility and accountability to lower levels.
- a) Unintentional sin committed by the high priest (4:3-12). These sins were particularly serious because they brought guilt on the people (4:3).
 - b) Unintentional sin committed by the congregation (4:13-21)
 - c) Unintentional sin committed by a leader (4:22-26)
 - d) Unintentional sin committed by an individual (4:27-35)
8. Additionally, the text includes an appendix of certain scenarios which fall outside of these four categories (5:1-13). Here, unintentional sin doesn’t seem to be in view, as the term doesn’t occur. Instead, what is in view are sins of omission, where the individual knew what ought to be done, but failed to act accordingly. **Note the chiasmic arrangement of these scenarios:**
- a) Failure to testify in a legal case (5:1)
 - b) Touching an unclean animal (5:2)
 - c) Touching an unclean human (5:3)
 - d) Making a haphazard oath (5:4)

D. The Procedure for the Sin Offering

The procedure for these offerings depends on the category of offense. Just as with the burnt offering, there is a gradation in the sacrifice and the ritual. But here, the gradation reflects the level of leadership responsibility and requisite accountability of the offerer.

1. Animals

- a) When the high priest or the congregation sinned, a young bull was required. This was the costliest animal and reflected the seriousness of the offense.
- b) When a leader sinned, a male goat was required.
- c) When an individual sinned, a female goat or female lamb was offered.
- d) For sins of omission, a female goat or lamb could be offered. However, for individuals who couldn't afford these animals, two turtledoves or doves could be brought, one as a sin offering and the other as a burnt offering. For individuals in extreme poverty, one could glean wheat from a field in order to bring a tenth of an ephah of fine flour (yet without oil or frankincense, which represent joy and were intended to produce a soothing aroma).

2. Blood

- a) Depending on the individual, the blood was manipulated in very specific ways.
- b) For an offering for the high priest or the congregation, the priest took the blood of the slaughtered bull, dipped his finger into the blood, and sprinkled it seven times against the veil inside the sanctuary. He then put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of incense that stood before the entrance into the most holy place. The rest of the blood was poured out at the base of the altar of burnt offering.
- c) For an offering for a leader or an individual, the priest dipped his finger in the blood and applied it to the horns of the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard. The rest of the blood was poured out at the base of the altar.
- d) For sins of omission, where an individual brings birds as an offering, the priest pinched the head off (yet without severing it), sprinkled some of the blood on the wall of the altar, and squeezed out the remainder at the base of the altar.
- e) Note that with the latter two offerings, the blood is not sprinkled inside the sanctuary. This stems, once again, from the level of severity of the sins committed by the high priest and the congregation. They were serious enough to penetrate into the sanctuary itself, requiring the blood to cleanse the inner sanctuary.
- f) In contrast, sins of a leader or an individual, while serious and requiring cleansing of the altar, did not require blood to be applied inside the tent itself.
- g) Nevertheless, any blood that spatters on a garment had to be washed completely clean in a holy place (6:27).

3. Fat

- a) In every instance, the fat of the animal was removed and burned on the altar.
- b) In one instance (4:31), the text indicates that the burning fat created a "pleasing aroma to Yahweh"—the one instance of this phrase outside of the first three sacrifices.

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- c) Here, the phrase probably indicates, as with the fat of the peace offering, that Yahweh had accepted the offering, now that the impurities produced by sin had been cleansed.
4. Remainder of the animal
- a) The hide, flesh, head, legs, and entrails of the young bull sacrificed for the high priest and the congregation were taken outside the camp and burned at a ceremonially clean place (4:12).
 - b) This ritual was intended to signify the complete removal of the impurity from the camp. It was as if the sin of the high priest or the congregation was so serious that the offering could not remain in the camp. It certainly could not be eaten (6:30).
 - c) However, the flesh of the offering for the leader or the individual was to be eaten by the priest who offered it (6:26), but the vessels in which the meat is boiled must either be broken or rubbed out and rinsed with water (6:28).
 - d) The birds offered for sins of omission were not eaten, but burned completely.
- E. Purpose of the Sin Offering

Ross summarizes the purpose of the sin offering in this way: “The purpose of purification offering was...to restore the broken relationship between God and the guilty person. It was to provide forgiveness for regular sins by cleansing the pollution and defilement of those sins, so that the sinner could be restored to full communion with God” (Ross, 134).

1. Purification

- a) Perhaps the most important aspect of the sin offering is not forgiveness for sin as much as purifying the defilement created by it.
- b) This purpose is revealed most clearly when we see the various scenarios in which the sin offering was employed in dealing with people with various instances of impurity and uncleanness (Lev 12:8; 14:19).
- c) In these cases, the sin offering was the means of purifying the individual *so that they did not contaminate the tabernacle* (15:31).
- d) The OT concept of sin goes beyond the Western notion. It conceived of sin as that which not only constituted a breach of morality, but carried with it a contaminating effect.
- e) “These verses clearly express the notion that sin defiles men and particularly God’s sanctuary, and that the proper means of purification is animal blood” (Wenham, 94).
- f) “The purification offering dealt with the pollution caused by sin. If sin polluted the land, it defiled particularly the house where God dwelt. The seriousness of pollution depended on the seriousness of the sin, which in turn related to the status of the sinner. If a private citizen sinned, his action polluted the sanctuary only to a limited extent. Therefore the blood of the purification offering was only

smear on the horns of the altar of burnt sacrifice. If, however, the whole nation sinned or the holiest member of the nation, the high priest, sinned, this was more serious. The blood had to be taken inside the tabernacle and sprinkled on the veil and the altar of incense. Finally over the period of a year the sins of the nation could accumulate to such an extent that they polluted even the holy of holies. Where God dwelt. If he was to continue to dwell among his people, this too had to be cleansed in the annual day of atonement ceremony” (Wenham, 96).

2. Forgiveness

- a) The term “forgiveness” first appears in the book in chapter 4. It is a unique term in the OT, derived from an Akkadian term meaning “to wash away,” and only used with God as the subject (this may explain the Pharisees’ shock in Mark 2:7 when Jesus declared the paralytic man to be forgiven).
- b) Ross explains that when the sin offering was applied to someone who was impure, it declared them clean—it purified them so that they were no longer impure (12:8). But when it was applied to someone who had sinned, it declared them forgiven (4:20, 26, 31, 35).
- c) The sin offering clearly made atonement for the individual, which led to forgiveness, indicating that the relationship broken by sin had been restored.
- d) However, the relationship of forgiveness to purification must be understood.
- e) “Someone guilty of sins needed forgiveness..., not so much because of the act, but because of the consequences of the sin—they defiled the sanctuary. This is why throughout Lev. 4, the blood of the sacrifice is applied to various sancta in the sanctuary, but not to the sinner.... Either form of the ritual provided cleansing or forgiveness for the guilty—but that cleansing came with the purification of the sancta and the sanctuary” (Ross, 125).
- f) In other words, the defiling effects of sin had made God unapproachable. Before the sinner could have forgiveness, his access to God needed restoration, which required that the impurities brought by his sin be cleansed from the sanctuary.

3. Confession

- a) A third purpose of the sin offering was confession to God for impurities and offenses.
- b) Leviticus 5:5 indicates that the individual must “confess how he has sinned.” In reality, the sin offering provided the individual with a tangible expression of confession. Rather than hide his sin or treat it as trivial, he confessed it as sin and offered a sin offering in recognition of the breach of covenant that it was.

II. The Sin Offering and the New Covenant

A. Relationship to Christ

1. Clearly, the sin offering sacrifice points to Jesus’ death on the cross as the believer’s substitute for sin, and means of reconciliation to God (2 Cor 5:20-21).

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2. The removal of the sacrificial victim outside the camp to be burned prefigures Christ's death outside the city (Heb 13:11-12).
3. The death of Christ not only pays the penalty for sin, but constitutes the shedding of blood necessary to cleanse the believer from sin (1 John 1:7).
4. And even while Christ's death was a once-for-all sacrifice never to be repeated, the continual nature of the sin offering points to the continual cleansing of believers throughout life through Christ's blood (1 John 1:9).
5. Yet Christ's sacrifice is superior to the sin offering sacrifice, for it accomplished what the sin offering never could—internal purity (Heb 9:12-14; cf. 1 Pet 1:2).
6. Similarly, Hebrews makes it clear that the theological realities of the rituals of the sin offering have direct correspondence to the ministry of Christ. Since purification and forgiveness come through the shedding of blood (Heb 9:22), so Christ cleansed the heavenly sanctuary with his blood, making it possible for believers to have forgiveness and fellowship with God (Heb 9:23-24).

B. Application for Christians

1. The sin offering teaches us about the nature and seriousness of sin.
 - a) Sin involves anything wherein we stray from God's command, impugn his character, or misrepresent him.
 - b) "No religious or civil leader was so prominent that sin was condoned, nor any man so insignificant that his sin was ignored" (Schultz, 67).
 - c) We must take sin seriously. Even the smallest of sins contaminates. We cannot afford to take sin lightly, as it sent the only sinless person in history to death (2 Cor 5:20-21).
2. The sin offering reminds us that there is both a vertical and horizontal dimension to sin. Our sin contaminates, and its defilement effects our relationship with God and with others (1 Cor 8:9-13; cf. Lev 4:27). Thus we're reminded of the NT command to cleanse ourselves of everything that defiles in order to accomplish holiness (2 Cor 7:1).
3. The sin offering reminds us that our sin defiles God's sanctuary. In the NT, the believer is God's sanctuary where the Holy Spirit lives. Thus we are called to live in such a way that we honor God with our bodies so as not to defile his temple (1 Cor 6:19-20).
4. The sin offering reminds us that God has graciously made forgiveness and purification available for anyone, regardless of social class or economic means.
5. The gradation of offerings teaches us that leaders will incur a stricter judgment, and that failure as a leader has greater consequences (1 Tim 5:20; Jas 3:1; cf. Lev 4:3).
6. Confession is the key to forgiveness and repentance. Without it, there is no forgiveness, salvation, nor cleansing (Rom 10:9-10; 1 John 1:9).

- a) The sin offering reminds us that forgiveness without confession is tantamount to magic—it's based on ritual procedure and presumption.
- b) “The ritual alone did not cleanse sin. Forgiveness came with the acknowledgement of and remorse for sin. Performing the ritual was necessary for the full restoration of forgiveness; it purified the sanctuary and made the restoration possible. Bringing this offering was an expression of faith in God's willingness to forgive and restore the sinner who comes before him with a repentant heart. Not to follow through on the ritual—whether because of indifferent or rebellion—was great folly, for this left the sanctuary defiled and the relationship not restored. The individual in that case had only the sense of relief that human forgiveness can bring; there was no clear response from heaven that all was well once again” (Ross, 134).