

The Peace Offering

Leviticus 3:1-17; 7:11-36

I. Exposition

A. The term “Peace offering” translates זֶבַח שְׁלָמִים (*zēbah shēlamim*).

1. The term זֶבַח (from the verb meaning “to slaughter”) refers to a particular type of ancient sacrifice whose distinguishing characteristic was the eating of its meat at a communal feast.
2. The term שְׁלָמִים is debated but most likely derives from the root verb “to have peace” and the related noun *shalom*.
3. The idea of peace is intrinsically theological. It speaks of blessing, prosperity, health, and harmony—all things which characterize salvation from God. Peace is inextricably linked with covenant relationship to Yahweh.

B. The peace offering is the last of the communal offerings which are marked by the phrase “a pleasing aroma to God.”

1. It is closely associated with the burnt offering, both in the procedure and in the priest’s manipulation of the blood, and frequently appears alongside it (Exod 24:5; 32:6; Josh 8:31; 22:23; 1 Sam 10:8; 1 Kgs 3:15).
2. However, it is distinct in that, after giving a portion to be burned on the altar and a portion to be eaten by the priest, the worshiper and those around took part in eating the meat of the sacrifice and celebrating.
3. “This sacrifice was probably one of the most anticipated occasions of all the rituals because of its nature as a communal meal—it was a great feast” (Ross, 110).

C. Leviticus 7 describes three separate types of peace offerings:

1. Thank offerings (7:12-15): these were presented in response to a particular blessing experienced by the worshiper. God had delivered the individual, and they wished to demonstrate their gratitude through a deed of generosity by providing a meal which could be shared.
2. Votive offerings (7:16; 22:21): Israelites often made vows to Yahweh in times of peril or distress. A votive offering was presented when the individual fulfilled the vow, often accompanied by a public proclamation (cf. Jon 2:10).
3. Freewill offerings (7:16; 22:21): “a spontaneous act of generosity by the worshiper, prompted by God’s goodness” (Wenham, 79).

D. Additionally, three instances are given when a peace offering was mandated:

1. Nazarite vow (Num 6:17-20)
2. Installation of the Aaronic priesthood (Lev 9:18, 22)
3. Feast of Weeks (Lev 23:19)

E. The Elements of the Peace Offering

1. The peace offering could be cow (3:1-5), a sheep (3:6-11), or a goat (3:12-16), just as in the burnt offering. Here, however, sheep and goats are distinguished most likely because specific regulations are given on how to treat the broad, fatty tail unique to the sheep.
2. One differentiating element of the peace offering is that it does not include the option of offering birds. While the text doesn't provide a rationale, this is presumably because they would not offer sufficient meat to allow for a communal meal.
3. Unlike the burnt offerings, these animals could be male or female (3:1, 6). Some commentators connect this to the relative importance of the offering. The burnt offering dealt primarily with atonement, and so required the best and most expensive animal. The peace offering, however, was not as weighty and thus allowed for either sex.
4. The animal must be flawless, just as with the burnt offering (3:1, 6). However, we learn later that an exception is made for freewill offerings, where less than perfect animals were acceptable (Lev 22:23). This is most likely because it was an offering occasioned by an unexpected and unasked for act of generosity by God for the worshiper. Thus, he could respond with whatever animal he had available.
5. In addition to the animal sacrifice, the regulations spell out certain grain offerings which are to accompany the peace offering. These offerings are "contributions" given to the attending priest as payment. Note here that these grain offerings include both unleavened and leavened breads, which would be part of a normal ANE meal.

F. Presentation of the Peace Offering

1. The procedure for presenting the peace offering is almost identical to that of the burnt offering.
2. The worshiper brought his peace offering to the Lord, and the text specifies that it must be brought "from his own hands" (7:30). He then pressed his hand upon the head of the animal, identifying with it not only as a substitute for him, but as an expression of his heart to God.
3. He then slaughtered the animal, and the priest collected the blood and splashed it against the sides of the altar. Although the text does not specify it, we can presume that the worshiper proceeded in kind with the burnt offering regulations. He would skin the animal, quarter it, and dress out its innards.
4. At this point, however, the procedure diverges from the burnt offering. The worshiper removed the fat that surrounded the entrails and internal organs, as well as the kidneys and liver themselves. If offering a sheep, the worshiper also removed the fatty tail.
5. The fat portions, along with the kidneys and liver, were given to the priest, who offered them as a "food gift" to Yahweh (3:11).

The Peace Offering

6. Then the worshiper invited guests—his family and friends, and perhaps even those in the tabernacle courtyard as well—to join him in celebrating the joy of his fellowship with God.

G. Special Regulations

1. Time limitations on eating the peace offering

- a) Certain limitations were prescribed for when the peace offering could be consumed.
- b) Thank offerings had to be eaten on the day the offering was presented, and none of it could be eaten the next day.
- c) Votive and freewill offerings, however, could be eaten on the same day or the day after, but anything that remained the third day had to be burned in the fire.
- d) Serious consequences would be incurred if an individual consumed the meat outside of these prescriptions (7:18).

2. Purity concerns

- a) The meat of the peace offering had to remain ceremonially pure.
- b) If it touched something that rendered it unclean, it could not be eaten. It had to be burned up in the fire (7:19a).
- c) Likewise, all who partook of the peace offering meat had to ensure they were ceremonially clean as well (7:19b).
- d) Anyone who ate the peace offering meat while unclean would “be cut off from his people” (7:20). This element is so important that it is repeated and expanded in the very next verse (7:21).
- e) It’s unclear what it meant by being “cut off from his people.” Some have taken it to mean execution, either by God or by the community. Others have proposed that the individual would be excommunicated from the tabernacle worship, or perhaps lose his property and access to community benefits. Perhaps the most extreme view is that extirpation—the man’s entire line would be terminated by God. Whatever the meaning, Hartley rightly states that “this phraseology depicts one of the worst fates for a person who has been a member of the covenant community” (Hartley, 100).

3. Prohibition on eating fat and blood

- a) Fat is an important part of the peace offering, although it shares this emphasis with the sin offering as well.
- b) The fat, as the richest and choicest part of the animal (cf. Gen 45:18), belonged to God. He required and deserved the very best, since all of it belonged to him anyway (Ps 50:10-12).

- c) Thus, the text prohibits the consumption of fat, at the very least from the peace offering sacrifice (7:22-24). The person who broke this ordinance would be “cut off from his people” (7:25).
 - d) Likewise, there was a strict and universal prohibition against consuming blood, with the similar consequence for disobedience (7:26-27).
 - e) NOTE: It remains unclear if all fat was excluded from consumption. The wording of 7:24 seems to imply that it was. However, Rooker suggests that since the prohibition against eating blood was applied universally (Lev 17:13) while the prohibition against eating fat seems to be differentiated between the peace offering sacrifice and that of animals which had died naturally or had been killed by wild animals, then it may suggest that the prohibition was limited to the fat of the peace offering.
4. Priestly portions
- a) Leviticus 7 indicates that certain portions of the peace offering belong to the priest.
 - b) The breast was presented to the priest as a “wave offering” (7:30) which “was placed in the offerer’s hands, and then the priest placed his hands beneath those of the offerer, moving them upward and downward, forward and backward, thereby symbolizing the consecration of the gift of God in the sight of all. It was, in a sense, transferring the offering to God, showing that it belonged to him first” (Ross, 192).
 - c) The right thigh was presented to the priest as a “contribution offering” (7:32), which indicated a portion of the offering that was set aside to be offered to the priest.
 - d) Both of these allotments were important enough to warrant an emphatic repetition (7:35-36) which culminated in the phrase “a perpetual allotted portion throughout their generations” (7:36).

H. Purpose of the Grain Offering

1. Celebration

- a) The name of the offering reveals its overall purpose—it offered a way for the believer to celebrate the peace they enjoyed with God through his provision of blessings, prosperity, favor, and salvation.
- b) “The main emphasis of the peace offering must be on celebrating all the benefits of being at peace with God” (Ross, 111) and thus indicated that “all was well between the worshipers and God. They had evidence; and they came to celebrate it together” (Ross, 116).
- c) At the same time, built into the peace offering was the reminder that fellowship with God existed only on the basis of the blood atonement. Thus the peace offering was always presented *atop* the burnt offering. And even the blood of the peace offering sacrifice was applied to the altar.

The Peace Offering

- d) “The theme was taught over and over again: no one could approach God apart from the forfeiture of life—albeit by the grace of God through the life of a substitute. The point was that the shed blood of the sacrifice was both the basis and the means of celebrating what it meant to have peace with God. To enter the sanctuary and celebrate with a communal meal still required that blood be applied to the altar” (Ross, 117).
- e) The impetus for celebration could be based on the worshiper’s gratitude for God’s blessing or deliverance, or for expressing God’s covenant faithfulness through the fulfillment of a vow, or simply because of one’s overflowing joy at having covenant fellowship with Yahweh. In any of these cases, the peace offering was the means of expressing their joy and recognition of fellowship with God.

2. Fellowship

- a) The peace offering was more than a communal meal with God. It was a meal shared by the people. The worshiper desired to share his joy by inviting the covenant community to rejoice *with him* in the peace he (and they) had with God.
- b) “That the communal meal was received from the sacrifice is striking. In almost all other sacrifices it was the offerer giving to God; but here it is as if God was returning a portion of the sacrifice for the faithful to eat in his presence. This indicates the LORD’s gracious bounty to his people and the peaceful relationship that existed within the covenant” (Ross, 119).
- c) “It was a meal in which God’s presence was recognized as specially near, and this made it a particularly joyful occasion (cf. Deut. 12:7)... The enjoyment of eating the meat was a physical reminder of all the other blessings that attended the faithful observance of the covenant (Lev 26:3ff; Deut 28:1ff). A people that kept the law would enjoy peace at home and abroad, abundant crops, large families, and general economic prosperity. It was right and proper for men to look forward to the peace offering. It was a pledge and physical illustration of all the benefits that may be enjoyed by those at peace with God” (Wenham, 81).

II. The Grain Offering and the New Covenant

The specific term for the peace offering (זֶבַח שְׁלָמִים) is not used in the NT, though we can infer from certain contexts that it was in mind at specific instances (Acts 21:23-26). Its theological emphases, however, form a foundation for how we understand salvation and fellowship with God in the New Covenant.

A. Relationship to Christ

- 1. Just as the peace celebrated by the peace offering was based on the atonement, so the peace that believers experience with God is based on the atoning death of Christ on the cross (Rom 5:1-8).
- 2. The numerous affirmations of peace that introduce the NT epistles find their basis in the peace accomplished through the death of Christ (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2;

Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Tit 1:4; Philem 3; 2 Pet 1:2).

3. The chief expression of our fellowship with God and with the new covenant community is through participation in the Lord's Supper.
 - a) The closest parallel of the peace offering in the New Covenant is the celebration of the Lord's Supper. While it is introduced in the context of the Passover meal, there is great overlap between the theology of the peace offering and the observance of communion.
 - b) Both the blood of the old covenant and the new covenant were inaugurated with blood. "When the Sinai covenant had been agreed to by the people, Moses took the blood of the burnt offerings and peace offerings and threw it over the people and said, 'Here is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you.' The last supper was more like the peace offering than a burnt offering in that the peace offering and the last supper were both meals, while the burnt offering never was. Christ's death on the cross is a closer parallel to the burnt offering. His sharing of his body and blood with his disciples forms the closer parallel to the peace offering" (Wenham, 82).
 - c) "For Christians the great joy of being at peace with God through Jesus Christ is captured by the celebration of the communal meal of the new covenant, the Lord's Supper, which is rightly called Eucharist—thanksgiving. But this was not a common food—it is the body and blood of the Lamb of God (John 6:51-58). The wine is the blood of the covenant; and the bread is the body of our Lord broken for us. When we 'eat his body' and 'drink his blood'...we are in a sense doing what the Israelites did—eating the food that represented the prophetic form of the sacrifice of Jesus the Messiah. To eat this holy food is a celebration and a witness of our faith that we have been justified by his sacrificed body and blood" (Ross, 120).

B. Application for Christians

1. We should rejoice in and frequently celebrate the peace we have with God in Christ.
2. We should maintain an attitude of thankfulness for God's mercy and an awareness of his blessings and favor in our lives.
3. We should invite others to celebrate with us in the joy we have for salvation in Christ and the blessings that God provides. "The devout believer will turn every experience of receiving a gracious benefit from God into an occasion of worship in communion with the fellowship of believers" (Ross, 121).
4. In the same way the OT saint celebrated God's blessing in his life by sharing his peace offering meal with others, so we are called to share the overflow of God's blessings in our lives with those who are in need (Heb 13:15-16; 2 Cor 8).
5. Just like the OT saint expressed his peace with God by giving him the very best part of the sacrifice, so we are called to give the very best of what we have to God on the basis of the peace we have with him in Christ (Rom 12:1-2).

The Peace Offering

6. We should anticipate and rejoice in our opportunity to celebrate the Lord's Supper together, as it is the most tangible expression of our peace with God in Christ and fellowship together as the new covenant community.
7. We must be careful of how we participate in the Lord's Supper, and not treat it as empty ritual.
 - a) Food has always been a cultural and biblical expression of communion between believers and communion with God. Thus, we understand better Paul's warning that those who partake of a sacrifice offered to idols is the same as having fellowship with the demons who empower the paganism of the sacrifice (1 Cor 10:16-22).
 - b) Just as the OT worshiper must be clean in order to eat the peace offering meal, so the NT emphasizes that believers must approach the Lord's Supper in moral and spiritual purity (1 Cor 11:27). There are spiritual and even physical consequences for participation in communion in a spiritually unclean condition, i.e., with unconfessed sin (1 Cor 11:30).
 - c) "The most striking contrast with the old peace offerings is in the use of the blood. Under the old covenant the drinking of sacrificial blood was sternly prohibited. Under the new it is expressly commanded, albeit under the guise of wine. It is blood that makes atonement for sin, and by drinking it the Christian is constantly reminded that he is saved by God and not his own efforts. According to the OT, the life enshrined in the blood was sacred because it was God-given. Man had no right to take God-implanted life. It must be returned directly to its creator. Now, in the NT era, this atoning and life-giving power may be drunk by the creature to purge him of his sins and assure him of God's salvation. The Lord's supper should therefore be, like the peace offering, at once a solemn and joyful occasion: solemn because no human being can lightheartedly enter God's presence and pledge to keep his laws, joyful because God's grace and his promise exceed all that we can ask or think in this life and the next" (Wenham, 83).