

FOURTH SUNDAY IN LENT

Christ Our Savior Lutheran Church

Sin Offering – Restoring the Relationship

Leviticus 4:27-31

²⁷“If any member of the community sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD’s commands, when they realize their guilt ²⁸and the sin they have committed becomes known, they must bring as their offering for the sin they committed a female goat without defect. ²⁹They are to lay their hand on the head of the sin offering and slaughter it at the place of the burnt offering. ³⁰Then the priest is to take some of the blood with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar. ³¹They shall remove all the fat, just as the fat is removed from the fellowship offering, and the priest shall burn it on the altar as an aroma pleasing to the LORD. In this way the priest will make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven.

Our Season of Sacrifice series comes to the most important of Old Testament sacrifices: The Sin Offering. Israel’s other covenant sacrifices were expressions of the relationship they had with God Almighty. Remember a few weeks ago we learned how their daily sacrifices consecrated everyday life to their ever-present God. The burnt offering, we discussed last week, expressed Israel’s total devotion to the God who was totally devoted to them. But what happened when Israel’s life and devotion were less than they should be? What happened when they somehow broke their covenant with God? Was the relationship over? Irreparably damaged by their violating of the terms they had agreed to at Sinai? Should they expect the smoke and fire of God’s holy wrath that they terrifyingly witnessed there to now be unleashed against them because of their sins?

The answer to all those questions is the Sin Offering God included in the sacrificial system of covenant with Israel. It was for restoring their relationship with him. For dealing with the sin that ruptured it. Necessity alone, to say nothing of what it foreshadowed, made this sacrifice the most important of all Israel’s Old Testament sacrifices.

So, what I’d like to do today is take you through some of the particulars of the Sin Offering and show you how amazingly Jesus was prefigured in it. And finally, I’ll give you a few other lessons to learn from this sacrifice.

The Sin Offering was one of two blood sacrifices God gave Israel for restoring their covenant relationship with him. The other was called the Guilt Offering, which was to be brought for specific sins where restitution was possible, such as cheating or theft. Guilt Offerings sacrificed a ram or a lamb and returned the ill-gotten property with a 20% indemnity. The Sin Offering, on the other hand, was more general. It was for sinners to confess their sinfulness and for God to express to them his atonement of those sins. Nine times in the verses about the Sin Offering spread through Leviticus chapters four and five it says, “and they will be forgiven” (ie Le 4:31). The relationship would be restored.

As such the occasions for making sin offerings were many, ranging from an individual Israelite’s repentance to special occasions for the whole nation such as the consecration of priests and the start of festivals, any time atoning for previous sins was deemed necessary. Also because of the sheer number of Israelites and far-flung geography people didn’t go to the temple or tabernacle daily or even weekly. Their visits were dictated by personal circumstances and by Israel’s annual religious calendar. Think of Samuel’s parents Elkanah and Hannah’s trips or even Mary and Joseph’s. Whenever they did come, then, they usually had multiple types of sacrifices to offer, but the Sin Offering was always first because restored their relationship with God.

Another important feature of the Sin Offering was it differed from person to person not by the size of their sin but by the rank of the sinner. For instance, the First Lesson described the Sin Offering for an average Israelite. It required the sacrifice of a female goat with some of its blood on the four corners of the altar of burnt offering outside the tabernacle. Additionally, the fat was to be removed from the animal and burnt on the altar. In later verses, which we didn’t read, God mandates that the rest be given to the priests to eat. A civic leader’s offering was proscribed to be a little more expensive: a male goat, sacrificed according to the same process. A poor Israelite was to bring doves or pigeons (Le 5). A very poor Israelite was to bring a measure of grain (Le 5).

But a priest’s Sin Offering had to be a bull – the largest and most valuable animal in Israel’s herds. Its blood was taken inside the tabernacle or temple and sprinkled seven times in front of the curtain behind which the Ark of the

Covenant was housed and smeared on the altar of incense with the rest poured outside in front of the altar of burnt offering. The symbolism here was that the priest's sin had polluted the holy habitation of God and had to be atoned for, which literally means covered by blood, if God was going to continue dwelling there. Like with other people's Sin Offerings the fat would be put on the altar of burnt offering, but the rest of the animal would be taken outside the camp or city and burned to ashes, signifying the complete removal and destruction of everything sinful.

The New Testament writer to the Hebrews describes the sacrifice of Christ on the cross chiefly in the terminology of the Sin Offering. He says Jesus is the ultimate High Priest, who "entered the [Temple] once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls ... sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ ... cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God!" (He 9:12-14). In the thirteenth chapter the writer makes the point that Jesus died outside the gate of Jerusalem in to make people holy through his blood and urges us to also "outside the camp" (13:13) and continually offer up "a sacrifice of praise" (13:15).

The sacrificial death of Christ has made the Old Testament Sin Offering obsolete. Christ's blood has redeemed us from sin completely and has restored our relationship with our God. No more shedding of blood is necessary. This is the main thing to learn about this sacrifice.

But there are some other things worth noting. The first is how sin destroys the relationship between God and his people. Though the Israelites were God's chosen people, when they sinned they no longer enjoyed the benefits of his presence. Their rebellious sinning would literally drive his presence out of his earthly dwelling thereby separating them from him. In the New Testament God dwells in the hearts of his people but warns us through the Apostle Paul to not "grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Ep 4:30) and drive him from our lives by willful sinning. Instead, the Apostle encourages us to avoid sin and "be filled with the Spirit" (Ep 5:18).

Another thing worth noting is found in the fact that all Sin Offerings were for "unintentional" sins (ie Le 4:27), or sins of weakness. While you and I might classify sins in degrees of size or evilness or intent, God considers all sin to be equally deserving of death. That the Sin Offering was intended for sins of weakness does not mean there's no forgiveness for sins done in defiance of God. The forgiveness pronounced by the prophet Nathan to a penitent King David is an example of this. There are many passages in both Testaments that clearly teach repentant sinners receive full forgiveness through the blood of Christ no matter what their sins have been.

That said, the third thing to note is that because of the effect their actions would have on the people, the sins of Israel's leaders were dealt with differently by God. More valuable animals had to be offered for them, more blood had to be sprinkled in more places. Likewise, God's requirements of Christians today are proportionate to their responsibility and means. Jesus said, "From the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Lk 12:48). This is true of pastors entrusted with the things of God for the care of others and in the stewardship of our time, talents and treasure.

The fourth thing to note is the personal nature of the Sin Offering. Every Israelite, from the greatest to the least, could receive personal assurance of their forgiveness through this sacrifice. Like us, they knew the Gospel promise that God forgives sinners. Like us, they benefitted from the personal assurance that God forgives me and so restores my own relationship with him. Isn't that a big part of the blessing we receive in the body and blood of Christ in this Sacrament? The personal assurance that our sins no longer separate us from God, that all his forgiven and I am his!

Finally, the Sin Offering tells us something about the gracious nature of God. Remember, he included it in the terms of the covenant up front. As if to say, "I know you are going to fall short, but I still want to be your God." So, in a sense its not our sinning that surprises and frustrates God so much as our not caring enough about our relationship with him to use the means he's gracious provided for restoring it. For an Old Testament Israelite the means was the Sin Offering. For a New Testament Christian the means is the Gospel in Word and Sacrament ... both are about Jesus whose blood atoned for our sins and makes us right with God! In the end that's really what our relationship with God is all about.

Amen.

Prayers of the Church

Lord God, who loved the world in such a way as to give your only Son as its Savior, hear our prayers those whose health is failing them or who are recovering. We pray especially for

- Shirley Raymond
- Karen Fuelleman
- Judy Nickelsburg
- Sofia McKnight

Grant healing to their bodies and strength to bear their infirmities with patience and grace.

We also pray for those who mourn, especially

- The family and friends of our sister Phyllis Kapp, whose funeral was here at COS yesterday
- The family of Mark & Jane Hess, as Jane's mother Joanne was laid to rest this week as well

Help them find comfort in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body.

Finally, heavenly Father, you have held Jonathan Brussow in your loving arms since his Baptism. As you have always helped and guided him, we pray that you would be with him now and bring him back to his parents. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, who calmed the wind and waves, our Lord and Savior. Amen.

Prayer of Thanksgiving [p.4]

Lord's Prayer [p.4]

Words of Institution

Leviticus 4:27-31

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John 3:14-21

¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. +