



Gospel / life

Toward A Spirituality Of Freedom

New Creation Teaching Ministry: Tuesday Night Studies 2011, Seacliff Anglican Church

Study 19: The Burnt Offering

The basic “creed” for Israel was called *The Shema* and was taken from Deuteronomy. The first, and most crucial part, of the Shema was from Deuteronomy 6:4-9:–

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door frames of your houses and on your gates.

Essentially Israel’s life was to be seen as a whole-hearted, whole-souled and whole-bodied love for and devotion to the LORD, a devotion and love that was expressed in a clear and consistent obedience to the commands that He gave. When we come to the matter of the burnt offering in Leviticus, we have in that offering a ritual and symbolic way of declaring the worshipper’s determination to live such a life to the Lord. Now, of course, the call to love the LORD did not come as a bare, unprecedented demand from heaven. All of the LORD’s commands come to us from Him who acts for us in creation, redemption and sanctification. His loving us precedes our loving Him.

When Jesus was asked about the way of eternal life, he reiterated this command, with its natural companion about the love of the neighbour. As we consider the burnt offering as a pattern for Christian devotion over the course of this term, we will give much attention to the demands and necessities that the love of God in Jesus Christ make upon us. For tonight though, we will give our attention to the actual procedure and meaning of the burnt offering.

The regulations for the burnt offering

The regulations for this offering are found in **Leviticus 1:3-17** and **6:8-13**.

In Leviticus 1:3-17, the focus is on the responsibilities of the offerer. As with the other sacrifices that we have considered, the offerer was to:

- bring a male animal without defect (1:3, 10);
- present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting (1:3);
- lay his hand on the head of the animal (1:4);
- and then slaughter it in the Lord’s presence (1:5, 11).

The kind of animal that was permitted to be offered varied, allowing both rich and poor to offer to the Lord this sign of love and devotion. The animal could be a bull, a ram (either sheep or goat), or a dove or young pigeon. If the offering was a bird, the priest was to kill it at the altar by wringing off its head and draining the blood on the

side of the altar, taking out the inner parts, and then splaying it open before burning it on the wood on the altar (1:14-17)

If the offering was an animal, the priests were to:

- collect the blood when it was slaughtered and sprinkle the blood on all sides of the altar of burnt offering (1:5);
- skin the carcass, and butcher it into pieces (though possibly this was done by the offerer: the text does not seem so clear) (1:6);
- ensure the fire on the altar is burning well—it is never to go out (1:7; 6:12-13);
- arrange the pieces of the animal on the fire, including the head and the fat after washing the legs and inner parts of the animal (1:8-9);
- leave the offering there until the next morning, making sure the fire does not go out (6:9);
- in the morning, the offering priest was to clothe himself in his priestly robe and, so dressed, remove the ashes of the burnt offering from the altar (6:10);
- and then change into ordinary clothes and take the ashes outside the camp to a ceremonially clean place (6:11).

The occasions for offering these sacrifices is not spelled out here, but through the Old Testament they seem to have been offered primarily at *the start* of things. Burnt offerings were offered in the morning and the evening every day, and on the first day of every month, as well as at the regular festivals. They were offered at the inauguration of the priesthood (Lev. 8:8:18ff; 9:1-4) and of the Tabernacle (Num. 7:15 etc), and at the start of Solomon's reign as king (1Kings 3:15). When Noah emerged with his family from the Ark after the floods had subsided, he offered burned offerings of the clean animals to mark both the redemption he had experienced and the beginning of life in a kind of new world (Gen. 8:20). In this way, the burnt offering was a kind of symbolic way of indicating the desire to be devoted to the LORD in all that lay ahead, as well as seeking His blessing on the future.

But the whole burnt offering could also be offered after things, especially at the fulfilment of a vow, or in thanks for help received. The burnt offerings are closely linked with the freewill offerings, and so could be offered without any preceding or following occasion: they simply expressed love for the LORD.

Significant features

The descriptions of the three kinds of offering (bull, ram, bird) each end by saying, “It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD. (1:9, 13, 17). The whole point of the offering is to please the LORD, to act in a way and to bring something to Him that gives Him pleasure. Properly done, that is by following His commands, the offering would do just that, be a pleasing aroma to Him. As the smoke of the offering ascended, the worshipper could be sure that this gift was received by the LORD, and so he too, with those for whom he offered this sacrifice, was received and accepted (1:3) by the LORD.

This offering is distinctive in that the whole animal is completely burned up on the altar. No person received benefit from the making of this offering. The drink offering is linked with the burnt offering in some places (e.g. Lev. 23:17; Num. 15:5). This offering involved pouring out a quantity of wine. Again, no person got benefit from the offering: it all flowed out to bless the LORD.

The ministry of the priests in the offering of the burnt offering (as with all the offerings) points significantly to some aspects of the holiness of the worship. The

worshipper, even though coming in love and devotion to the LORD in this offering, was not permitted to do all the actions himself: he need the ministry of a mediator-priest. Moreover, he could not offer the sacrifice just as he felt like, but only according to the command and regulations of the LORD. The sacrificial system was God's gift to His people before it was His demand upon them. He provided this means by which they could approach Him in His holiness and offer sacrifices that would please Him. He provided the priests, and sanctified them for their ministry, who could complete the offering of the worshippers. In this we see that the main actor in the sacrifices of Israel was neither the offerer, nor the priests, but actually God the LORD Himself.

Some reflections

All of the sacrifices were fulfilled in the priestly ministry of Jesus Christ. He is the one man in all history whose life has matched the symbols of worship: he offered himself as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. Our worship of God must be in and through Him. "*Through Jesus*, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. (Heb. 13:15)"

He is the priest who now, because of the work of redemption in us, "completes" our acts of love to God. Undoubtedly all of us who are in Christ are also still those in whom sin dwells in our mortal members. All of our acts of love to our Father God are imperfect. The good we want to do we don't do; the evil we don't want to do we find close at hand. But Jesus takes up the pieces of our offerings and sanctifies them on the altar of his cross. We can be sure of the pleasure of the Father in our actions of love, not because of the perfection of our offering, but because of the perfection of Jesus'.

We should be very wary at criticising the love and devotion of others to the Lord. At the end of the offering, even the ashes of the offering were to be treated in a holy and reverent manner.