

Blood's Cleansing Power

A sermon on Leviticus 4 by Coty Pinckney, Community Bible Church, Williamstown, MA 6/28/98

Imagine this situation: You have a friend who committed her life to Christ several years ago, and for a time seemed deeply concerned about matters of faith. She read her Bible, attended church, took part in other activities, and appeared to grow. But that enthusiasm faded; she turned to other activities, and quit coming to church. You prayed for her, and invited her back several times, but she always had some good reason why she couldn't come.

Now she comes to you, saying she wants to come back to the Lord, but doesn't know if He will take her. She accepted him, then ran from him. She understands the serious nature of forsaking Christ. He accepted her once; can He accept her now, after she turned her back on Him? What would you say to this friend? Would you say, "Oh, running away from God -- that's no big thing; I've done it lots of times. Just say you're sorry, go to church every week for a few weeks, and everything will be fine."

Or would you say, "You did what? You turned your back on God? Hebrews 6 talks about people like you:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (HEB 6:4-6)

You have been crucifying the Son of God all over again! You have been publicly disgracing our Savior! Do you think you can do that and then just say you're sorry and expect all to be like it was before?" Would you react to your friend's statement in one of those two ways?

The question the girl asks is at heart, "How do I deal with sin? Once I have accepted Jesus as my Savior, is sin important? Need I be concerned with sin in my life? Can sin lead me to lose my salvation?" Today we return to our series on Leviticus, this misunderstood book of God's grace. Recall from our introductory message on this book that the Israelites had agreed at Sinai that they would follow all the laws God gave them. They respond to hearing the law with the statement, "All that you have commanded we will do." But in a matter of a few hours, the Israelites grossly violated those very commandments. They sinned in a way they had promised not to. Did this end their relationship to God?

Note that this is a situation with close parallels to the question your friend raises: I was in a close relationship with God. I broke the law. Is that then the end of the relationship? Leviticus provides God's answer to that question. And the answer corresponds to neither of the two suggested above. God's answer is that sin is a very serious matter; we should never take it lightly. But God provides a way out for those who fall into sin -- a way that costs him great sorrow and pain, but a way out.

The first five chapters of this book describe **five offerings** which are God's provision for dealing with human weakness, God's provision for meeting man's most basic needs. The Israelites, despite their good intentions, could not live up to the law. But God met them at their point of weakness, and instituted these offerings

The **burnt offering** is the first. In this offering, God says to the people, "You are mine! You belong to me wholly, completely." In the **grain offering**, or the present offering, we respond by saying, "Yes, I belong to you, and I offer the very stuff of which I am made back to you!" This is a living sacrifice; no death is involved, no life-blood is poured out on the altar. In the **peace offering**, we celebrate this relationship, even when -- especially when -- the circumstances of our life seem to deny this truth. We depend upon God's love and God's strength, when to natural eyes there is no evidence for a loving and powerful God.

We can also see how Jesus is the embodiment of all these sacrifices. God sending Jesus into the world exemplifies His love, his choosing us as His people, His selecting from every tribe and nation a people for his own possession. Second, Jesus as our representative offered himself fully and completely back to God, making his life a living sacrifice. And Jesus embodies the peace that is ours in the midst of strife, being the perfect expression of God's love and God's strength. So the burnt offering deals with our need to belong, the grain offering with our need to respond, and the third offering with our need for peace in the midst of trials and difficulties. Through these offerings God pictures his gracious granting of love, joy, and peace to our troubled lives. So we see through these offerings that God's relationship to the people of Israel was NOT legal in character; nor is God's relationship to us legal in character. His acceptance is not based upon our living up to a standard. Instead, God himself is the initiator of the relationship. He begins by choosing us, by calling us as his. Then we respond, and God stays right with us through the challenges that face us in this fallen world.

But once we present ourselves to God, there are implications for the way we live. He calls us then to live lives worthy of his calling, for he called us for a purpose -- that the world would be blessed through us. God told the Israelites "You shall be holy for I am holy." God tells us, "Be perfect, as your father in heaven is perfect." He gives us the Spirit within us, he renews our mind, he gives us access to resurrection power to enable us to show the love of Christ to the world -- but we instead, unintentionally or intentionally, step out in our own power and fail. The offering in Leviticus 4 describes God's provision for dealing with one type of sin.

So we've come to the topic of sin. But note that God does not start with sin. The first three offerings do not deal with sin. God starts by establishing a relationship with us -- and then he deals with the sin in our life. God's love and acceptance come first -- then his loving rebuke. We get this backward often, usually when dealing with someone who struggles with a different sin than our own. We judge before we love. We communicate condemnation rather than care and concern. We hate the sin, but instead of loving the sinner we despise him. We want sinners to get their act cleaned up, to make themselves presentable, and then we will be willing to meet with them

But this never works, for *no non-Christian is able to live a life worthy of the calling of the Lord, and we should not expect them to do so!* Furthermore, we can't speak effectively against someone's sin unless they know of our love. God loves the world -- Do you and I love the world? So in Leviticus, God starts not by talking about sin but by talking about

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love, joy, and peace. This is what the world so much desires, and what people who have everything the world has to offer still lack. God never ignores sin -- here it is in chapter 4 -- but God's method is to establish the love relationship first, and then deal with sin.

So now that we've talked about love, joy, and peace, we need to turn our attention to sin. We'll spend the rest of our time together looking first at some of the distinctives of this sin offering, and then look at the implications for our attitude towards sin. Please turn with me in your Bibles to **Leviticus chapter 4**. We'll read the first 12 verses:

1 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 2 "Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'If a person sins unintentionally in any of the things which the LORD has commanded not to be done, and commits any of them, 3 if the anointed priest sins so as to bring guilt on the people, then let him offer to the LORD a bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed. 4 And he shall bring the bull to the doorway of the tent of meeting before the LORD, and he shall lay his hand on the head of the bull, and slay the bull before the LORD. 5 Then the anointed priest is to take some of the blood of the bull and bring it to the tent of meeting, 6 and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood, and sprinkle some of the blood seven times before the LORD, in front of the veil of the sanctuary. 7 The priest shall also put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense which is before the LORD in the tent of meeting; and all the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering which is at the doorway of the tent of meeting. 8 And he shall remove from it all the fat of the bull of the sin offering: the fat that covers the entrails, and all the fat which is on the entrails, 9 and the two kidneys with the fat that is on them, which is on the loins, and the lobe of the liver, which he shall remove with the kidneys 10 (just as it is removed from the ox of the sacrifice of peace offerings), and the priest is to offer them up in smoke on the altar of burnt offering. 11 But the hide of the bull and all its flesh with its head and its legs and its entrails and its refuse, 12 that is, all the rest of the bull, he is to bring out to a clean place outside the camp where the ashes are poured out, and burn it on wood with fire; where the ashes are poured out it shall be burned.

This is the way the offering is to be administered if the high priest sins. The chapter continues with a description of the offering in the cases of the congregation as a whole, a leader of the people, or one of the common people. We won't read all those here, but will point out some of the differences between them. So let us turn our attention to the ways that the sin offering differs from the first three offerings. We'll highlight five differences.

DISTINCTIVES OF THE SIN OFFERING

The Sin Offering is Required The first three offerings are all voluntary offerings; the priests offered them regularly for the entire people, but individuals brought these offerings whenever they so desired. Consider the way each of the first three chapters begins:

- **LEV 1: If the offering is a burnt offering, he is to . . .**
- **LEV 2: When someone brings a grain offering to the Lord, his offering is to be . . .**
- **LEV 3: If someone's offering is a fellowship offering . . .**
- But **LEV 4: When anyone sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden . . . he must bring to the Lord...**

Similar phrases occur four times in this chapter, in verses 3, 14, 23, and 28. This is not a freewill offering. As soon as an Israelite became aware of his sin, he was to bring this offering. The relationship with God is violated by the sin, and must be restored.

The Sacrifice is Available to All Individuals As in the case of the burnt offering, God makes provision for different socioeconomic groups. Since everyone who sins must bring an offering, God varies the requirement depending upon the income of the person who sinned. As shown in the last few verses of chapter 4 and the first half of chapter 5, common people could offer a female goat, or, if this was too expensive, two doves or pigeons, or, if the birds were too expensive, two quarts of flour. Note that the type of offering varied with the person who sinned, not with the sin. God didn't say that there were some sins that required a goat and other sins that required only flour. No. God's gracious provision here ensures that every person who sinned had access to Him, was able to act in such a way that the relationship would be restored. But each person also had to perform this rite, showing that sin has consequences.

God Determines the Sex of the Sacrificial Animal As we pointed out in the introductory sermon on Leviticus, in the Old Testament, the male is the symbol of initiative, and the female the symbol of responsiveness, perhaps in part because of the picture provided by the different sexual organs. So the priest, the congregation as a whole, or the leader -- those who are initiators, leaders -- must present a male animal; the common people, the followers, present females.

The Blood Ritual The most distinctive aspect of the sin offering is the blood ritual that accompanies the sacrifice. The sacrifice begins in exactly the same way as the burnt offering and the peace offering. The offerer brings the animal to the entrance of the tent of meeting and lays his hands on the animal, leaning on it to identify it with himself, to put his sins on the animal. Then, the offerer himself kills the animal. Note that the priest does not kill the animal, but the offerer -- showing that the offerer's sins are responsible for the death of the animal. As with the peace offering, the fat of the animal is removed and burned before the Lord.

But the main distinction of this offering is what the priest does with the blood. As in the grain and peace offering, most of the blood is poured out at the base of the altar. Some of the blood, however, is sprinkled seven times on the incense altar or the altar of burnt offering (depending upon what type of person committed the sin). And then blood is smeared on the four horns of the altar. To us this seems very strange and gory. We'll come back to the meaning later, but note now this common refrain, which appears four times in Leviticus 4:

In this way the priest will make atonement for them and they will be forgiven.

The blood ritual is somehow tied to the atonement, the forgiveness of the sin.

The Use of the Animal's Body At this point in the ritual, the blood and fat are gone. What is done with the rest? If the High Priest or the congregation as a whole committed the sin, the remaining parts of the animal's body are burned

in their entirety outside the camp, at a place which is ceremonially clean. This is the same place which the priests take the ashes left over from the burnt offering (Leviticus 6:11).

The instructions given beginning in 6:25 cover the other cases:

25 "Say to Aaron and his sons: 'These are the regulations for the sin offering: The sin offering is to be slaughtered before the LORD in the place the burnt offering is slaughtered; it is most holy. 26 The priest who offers it shall eat it; it is to be eaten in a holy place, in the courtyard of the Tent of Meeting. 27 Whatever touches any of the flesh will become holy, and if any of the blood is spattered on a garment, you must wash it in a holy place. 28 The clay pot the meat is cooked in must be broken; but if it is cooked in a bronze pot, the pot is to be scoured and rinsed with water. 29 Any male in a priest's family may eat it; it is most holy. 30 But any sin offering whose blood is brought into the Tent of Meeting to make atonement in the Holy Place must not be eaten; it must be burned.

So the priest and males in his family eat the boiled meat. Note that the body is not unclean; it is no longer identified as sin. Instead, God declares, "It is most holy." Anyone who touches the meat will become holy, and a garment that gets blood on it must be washed in holy place, not just anywhere.

You see why? This meat from the sin offering is a picture of the body of Jesus, the sacrifice that draws us near to God. This is most holy. Even a clay pot which has been used to cook this food must never be used again -- not because it is unclean, but because it is holy, it has served the most exalted of purposes and can never be used for a common purpose again.

These are the primary distinctives of the sin offering. Let's now turn our attention to what the offering tells us about sin itself. I'll highlight four points:

(1) Every Sin is Serious

God has called you His, you have responded to that love, and have depended upon God's love and strength to give you peace in the middle of trials. But even one sin breaks down that relationship, even when that sin is unintentional. Several weeks ago I was biking home from the office, coming down the hill past the Savings Bank toward the intersection of Main St and Water St. Some of you know that many people turning right on Main St at that intersection don't stop at the stop sign (Do you?). Knowing that, I was braking, keeping an eye on cars that might be turning left in front of me or turning right onto Main St without stopping. Sure enough, a car went right through the stop sign, going at least 15 mph. Had I not already been braking, I would have been hit -- and, since I was traveling maybe 25mph, possibly killed. Even though I was braking, I had to grip hard, skid, and almost fall.

As it turned out, the stop light 200 yards away turned red, so I caught up with the car just a few seconds later. The driver called out to me through the open window, "I didn't see you!" She was saying, "I wasn't intentionally trying to kill you!" To tell the truth, that wasn't much comfort. Whether she meant to or not, had I not been biking defensively, she would have seriously injured me. The moral of that story is not that you should stop at that stop sign (though I hope you will, at least when I'm biking home!). The moral is that unintentional sin is still sin. Unintentional sin still has serious consequences. So we pray with the Psalmist,

Search me, O God, and know my heart; Try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me (Ps 139:23,24)

Every sin is important, every sin breaks down our relationship with God. We need to deal with every sin.

(2) Sin Requires a Death to Restore the Relationship with God

This point emphasizes the first. Sin is not something trivial. We cannot simply say, "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to do that," and go on our merry way. The Israelite who sinned unintentionally *was required* to present a sin offering to the Lord, he *was required to kill an animal*. And *he himself* must draw the knife across the animal's throat, causing the animal's death. Just so with us: Even our smallest sin would separate us for all eternity from a holy and righteous God -- had Jesus himself not paid the penalty. Just as the Israelite bringing his sin offering kills the animal, *we kill Jesus with each sin we commit*; we drive nails through his hands, we thrust the spear into his side with each sin we commit. God provides for the restoration of the relationship after we sin, but that restoration requires the death of a perfect substitute, that restoration comes at an incredibly high price paid by God himself. God forbid that we take that for granted; God forbid that we think sin is unimportant because our sins are already forgiven.

(3) Every Confessed Sin is Forgiven

When we don't confess, our relationship with God is undermined. We lose the peace, we lose the sense of our acceptance before God. David relates this in **PSA 32:3** When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. 4 For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. But David goes on to say what happens when he confessed:

5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD"-- and you forgave the guilt of my sin. . . . Rejoice in the Lord!

God views our sins seriously; when we don't confess, he will lean on us, he will sap our strength. But God has provided the only way out! He has given the perfect sacrifice in Jesus himself, so that he can be both just and the one who justifies us. Paul puts it this way:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (2 Cor 5:21)

Now, recall that Paul was writing in Greek, and that he generally quotes the Old Testament from its Greek translation, the Septuagint. In the Septuagint, the sin offering is simply referred to as "sin" twice in chapter 4 of Leviticus. So we could understand Paul's statement here to mean that God made Jesus who had no sin to be a *sin offering* for us -- so that we might be in him, and so that we might become God's righteousness. We who are sinners become God's righteousness! The forgiveness is complete when that takes place.

How does God do this? By the shed blood of Jesus, our last point:

(4) The Blood of Jesus Cleanses Us From All Sin

Blood -- we sing songs about the blood, we hear talk of the cleansing nature of the blood, but for 20th century Americans this is a strange and difficult concept. Indeed, a church choir director once told me, "I wish we'd get rid of all those gory hymns that talk about the blood of Jesus!" For most of us, blood is a nuisance. Our main contact with blood is when someone has an accident of some type, and starts to bleed. Assuming that the person's life is not in danger, the main problem is cleaning up the mess. Even a little blood is hard to clean; if not treated properly it can destroy our nice clothes. So blood to us is something that makes a mess.

But the picture in Leviticus is the opposite: Blood is the best cleaning agent in existence! Blood is necessary to cleanse us from the defilement of sin. So the priest sprinkles the altar seven times with the blood -- seven being the number of completeness, of perfection, indicating that the cleansing is perfect. Then the blood is smeared on the highest points of the altar, on the horns of the altar. I believe God ordained this act in part so that the blood was clearly visible to all concerned. The blood covered the horns of the altar. Atonement had been made. Forgiveness was complete. If I presented the offering, I only needed to look up, and there was the cleansing blood, indicating that God accepts me, that God has restored the relationship. The author of the book of Hebrews brings this out clearly:

11 But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; 12 and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. 13 For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb 9:11-14) . . . 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins . . . 14 For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. (Heb 10: 4,14)

As remarkable as this sin offering is, that animal blood sprinkled on the altar and smeared on the horns of the altar could never take away sins. But the sin offering is a startlingly clear picture of what Jesus accomplished through shedding his blood. Like the Israelite looking at the bloody altar and knowing he is cleansed, we can look to Jesus' blood, look at his great sacrifice, and know that we are perfected for all time; we can know that we are cleansed from all guilt; we can know that we need not worry about making ourselves acceptable to God; we can know that we are cleansed for the purpose of serving the living God.

We need to acknowledge that forgiveness. Satan will try to dredge up old sins, telling us, "Look what you did! You can't be forgiven for that!" And we then confess the sin again and again to God, and continually feel terrible. But you see why that is wrong? Confessing the same sin again and again is saying that the blood of Jesus is not sufficient to cover that sin! If you have truly confessed, if you have truly trusted in the blood of Jesus, you can *know* that God forgives you.

Conclusion: Let's get back to your friend who asked about coming back to the Lord. Of the two answers I suggested you might have given, the first was flippant: "Oh, don't worry about that." This answer does not accurately reflect the gravity of sin, the seriousness of sin. Every sin leads to Christ's death! Every sin thrusts a spear in his side! We can't take sin lightly. Yet the second answer was equally wrong. This second answer misinterprets Hebrews 6, saying that there is no hope for the person who falls away. (Hebrews 6, by the way, is challenging us to ensure that we really give evidence of salvation; we must not simply assume that we are Christians because we have gone through a ritual.) There is a tension here between two truths: The enormity of sin, and the enormity of God's grace. We must never belittle either of those truths. Sin is serious. Every sin. But the blood of Jesus is sufficient to cover all our sins, so that He might present us to himself a glorious church, holy and blameless, without spot or wrinkle or blemish of any kind.

So where are you? If you trying to get as close to the line as possible without sinning, than you have reason to question the nature of your relationship to the Lord. Obedience and striving after perfection are signs of sonship. Make your calling and election sure by growing in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

But if you find yourself caught up in sin, if you once walked with the Lord but have not been doing so, you can know that complete forgiveness is available. Turn to the Lord. Turn your back on your sin. Confess your weakness and your sinful ways. As John writes: **1JO 1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

He is *just* to forgive us our sins! How? Justice requires punishment! But Jesus accepted the punishment through the shedding of his blood. Because he paid the penalty, God can be just in forgiving every confessed sin. Know that. Depend upon it. Before we close, I want to let you know that the story of the friend asking a question is not imaginary. We have this friend worshiping with us this morning. And she rededicated her life to the Lord this week. She now understands that sin is serious, that sin requires death. But she also knows that confessed sin is always forgiven, as we can be completely cleansed by the shed blood of Jesus. You too can know these truths, can know this forgiveness. Won't you ask for it?

Let us pray: Our most precious Savior, we praise you for choosing to shed your blood on the cross for sinners such as us. We know that we do not deserve your mercy, but you have offered us love, joy, and peace; you have offered us forgiveness from all our sins, whatever they may be. May we take to heart the gravity of sin, yet may we also understand the cleansing power of your blood. May we both live out and communicate these truths to the world around us. Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.