THE BURNT OFFERING

Leviticus 1:1-17

Key Verse: 1:9b

“It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.”

Thank God for giving us an opportunity to study Leviticus. This book reveals that the LORD is a holy God and teaches us how to live as his holy people. God says repeatedly, “I am the LORD your God…be holy, because I am holy” (11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7; 1 Peter 1:15-16). God’s purpose for his people Israelites is well expressed in Exodus 19:6, “You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” A holy nation means a holy people. “Be holy, because I am holy” is the theme of Leviticus. We cannot be holy by ourselves, but through coming to the holy God. This book shows us the way of holiness in chapters 1-16 and the way of the holy life in 17-27. God wants us, his people, to be holy as a bride to Christ.

This book of Leviticus is very specific in that it is full of God’s voice with almost no historical event (with only two events in Chapter 8; 24:10-23). No book of the Scriptures is like this. Jesus said to the Jews in John 5:39, “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me.” Particularly this Scripture of Leviticus testifies about Jesus. Five offerings are presented in chapters 1-7, the burnt offering, the grain offering, the fellowship/peace offering, the sin offering and the guilt offering. These offerings are the most substantial in the Bible as the shadow of Christ’s one offering of sacrifice. Today’s passage of chapter 1, concerning the burnt offering, is the most essential and general offering, though it is a volunteer offering along with the grain offering and fellowship offering, while the sin offering and guilt offering are compulsory. The true and deep meaning of this burnt offering is found in Jesus.

Verse 1 says, “The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting.” In the KJV, this verse starts with the conjunction, “And…” Leviticus is the continuation of Exodus. In Exodus 40:1-2 the LORD said to Moses: “Set up the tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, on the first day of the first month.” The tabernacle was completed and set up on the first day of the first month in the second year. And in 40:34-35 it says, “Then the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting because the cloud had settled upon it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.”

Now here in Leviticus the LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting. What a grace! In Exodus, God descended on Mt. Sinai in fire and the whole mountain trembled violently (Ex. 19:18). Those who heard the voice of God begged that no further word be spoken to them. The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear” (Heb 12:19-21). Now God is speaking from the Tent of the Meeting. It seems to be a preview of God the Incarnate. Then what a tremendous blessing it is that we can hear the voice of God from the written words of the Bible! May God speak to us through the words of Leviticus!

Numbers 1:1 says, “The LORD spoke to Moses in the Tent of the Meeting in the Desert of Sinai on the first day of the second month of the second year after the Israelites came out of Egypt.” We can see that Leviticus was the collection of the words of God through Moses from the first day of the first month to the end of the first month. The Israelites did not move but stayed at the foot of Mt. Sinai and heard the words of God through Moses. Leviticus 7:37-38 says, “These, then, are regulations for the burnt offering, the grain offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering, the ordination offering and the fellowship offering, which the LORD gave Moses on Mount Sinai…” And 26:46 says, “These are the decrees, the laws and the regulations that the LORD established on Mount Sinai between himself and the Israelites through Moses,” and 27:34, “These are the commands the LORD gave Moses on Mount Sinai for the Israelites.” And according to Numbers 10:11-12, the Israelites set out from the Desert of Sinai on the twentieth day of the second month of the year.

In verses 1 and 2, “He said, ‘Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When any of you brings an offering to the LORD, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock.’” In these words of God we see that God opened a way for sinners to come to Him through the offering system. The offering is an animal from the herd or flock, not silver or gold or jewels or other valuable things. The offering is to be a living thing, not a non-living thing. And the offering is not to be any wild animal but a domestic animal/livestock, very close to human life and living, even not a dog or donkey, or any other animal. The animal is to be sacrificed. At a glance people may wonder what kind of God this is, wanting animals to be killed. He seems to be an unholy cruel God with no respect for the life of animals. Yet, he is a truly holy God who wants animal sacrifice in deep consideration of the sacrifice of his own Son to solve man’s sin problem.

Verse 3 says, “If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect. He must present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting so that it will be acceptable to the LORD.” A male without defect is the most valuable one cherished in the family. It must be presented at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, that is in the courtyard before entering the Holy Place, not any place.

Verse 4 says, “He is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.” Here, the of laying hands is not to be taken lightly but with pressure by which the offeror identifies with the animal. It is the act of transmuting his sin onto the offered animal, which is to become his substitution. What a process of identification and transferiing and substition! They say that when the animal feels the pressure of the laying of the hand, the animal cries with tears, sensing that something awful is happening. This burnt offering is to make atonement for the offeror/worshiper, which is temporary and ultimately points to Jesus. Isaiah 53:6 says, “The LORD laid upon him the iniquity of us all.” In Genesis 22, God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burnt offering. Interestingly, in that chapter, the term “burnt offering” is written 6 times and Isaac was so obedient until he was bound and laid on the altar. At that time, God prepared a ram which was sacrificed instead. In Isaac, we see the picture of Jesus, who would be sacrificed as a burnt offering for the atonement for the sin of mankind, born as sinners. So John says in 1 John 2:2, “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins,” and in 4:10, “…he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.” And Paul said in Romans 3:25, “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of the blood—to be received by faith.”

Then verse 5 says, “He is to slaughter the young bull before the LORD, and then Aaron’s sons the priests shall bring the blood and sprinkle it against the altar on all sides at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.” How difficult and painful it must have been when the offeror slaughtered his innocent bull because of his sin! Undoubtedly it is a heart-breaking act. In doing so, he is penitent for his life of sin before God. Consequently, the blood is shed and the priest sprinkles it against the altar on all sides. Hebrews 9:22 says, “the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of the blood there is no forgiveness.” The slaughtering is what the offeror should do, but the sprinkling of the blood is solely the priests’ job, signifying that forgiveness comes from God. The blood is sprinkled all around on the altar. In this passage, the word “altar” is written 13 times. This reminds us of Jesus’ shedding his whole blood on the cross. A hymn song “The Old Rugged Cross” says, “In the old rugged, stained with blood so divine, A wondrous beauty I see…” Praise Jesus for the cross stained with his holy blood!

And verse 6 says, “He is to skin the burnt offering and cut in into pieces.” This act is practiced only to the burnt offering. Why does God want such an act to be done to the animal? It seems to be too cruel. Again, it reminds us of Jesus, whose body was torn by flogging and totally broken on the cross, bearing all our shame and guilt. It also shows that God hates sin and Christ Jesus had to be thoroughly punished in the place of sinners with no mercy at all.

Then verses 7 and 8 say, “The sons of Aaron the priest are to put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. Then Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, including the head and the fat, on the burning wood that is on the altar.” The bull has horns on his head symbolizing the bull’s strength. Man has a brain in the head. With the brain, man powerfully sins against God. Romans 1:30 says, “they invent ways of doing evil…”/“inventors of evil.” We are so amazed by man’s intellectual power that has brought incredible technological development to the point of having iPhones or smart phones at hand and much more. Probably, in a few years, people will not need to carry around such devices but everything will be inside the human body. With such development, human life has greatly enhanced, yet we cannot deny that sin also has immeasurably increased. Nowadays, I see a sign of the word “immortality” on a pole on the streets. It seems that the human brain aims at immortality in the midst of uncontrollable imorality. 1 Timothy 1:17 says, “Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honour and glory for ever and ever,” and again 6:15-16 says, “…God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal…” But the human mind challenges God to the end since building the Babel Tower. Surely, God has no pleasure in putting the bull’s head on the burning wood to be burnt. Again, God deals with man’s sin utterly, and the fat may be related to man’s greed. Hebrews 9:26 says, “…he (Christ) has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself…” How can we imagine the suffering of Christ Jesus who was entirely sacrificed because of man’s sin? Yet how powerful his sacrifice is to do away with sin once for all! In this grace, we may love God with all our hearts and heads and minds and strength. We should not use our head to sin skillfully, but fully to serve the Lord. Thank God that S. Ian uses his head and uploads sound bites of each Sunday message. Paul says in 2 Timothy 4:4-5, “They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. But you, keep your head in all situation, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist…” The work of an evangelist is to preach the gospel of the cross. It is as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:23-24, “…we preach Christ crucified…Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.” Amen!

Now verse 9 says, “He is to wash the inner parts and the legs with water, and the priest is to burn all of it on the altar.” Here, also, the offeror’s job and the priest’s job are distinguished. Washing the inner parts, inner organs, is a dirty job, including washing offals and dung. It can refer to the inner cleansing. Men sin internally and externally. Romans 3:15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood.” The legs easily go towards the world. It is good to remember what the offeror has to do; he is to slaughter the bull and skin the burnt offering and cut it into pieces. This can indicate our clear repentance and our attitude toward sin, thorough hatred to sin with no compromise: hypocrisy, lust, pride, disobedience, greed, wicked thinking to be cut into pieces. And the priest is to burn all of it on the altar.

God says finally in this burnt offering of the bull, “It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.” This expression is written 3 times in this passage (9, 13, 19). In Hebrew the word, “burnt” has two meaning, “whole” and “going up.” In Genesis 8:20-21, when Noah sacrificed burnt offerings after coming out of the ark, the LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man…” In saying this, God was looking forward to sending his Son to be the burnt offering for man’s sin. Here, the burning smell through the whole sacrifice is an aroma pleasing to the LORD. For it was likely that sin was completely burnt. A pleasing aroma is a sweet savour or a soothing aroma. It is soothing and appeasing God’s wrath and so satisfying God who is holy and righteous through the entire sacrifice. What a precious offering! Hebrews 10:7 says that Jesus came to do God’s will that was to sacrifice his body. And 10:10 says, “And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ one for all.” And 10:14 says, “by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.” May we live in this marvelous grace of Jesus!

In verses10-13 is written the case of the burnt offering from the flock, from either the sheep or the goats. In the description, of that burnt offering, the shorter version of the same message from God is addressed again, for it is very significant. “If the offering is a burnt offering from the flock, from either the sheep or the goats, he is to offer a male without defect. He is to slaughter it at the north side of the altar before the LORD, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall sprinkle its blood against the altar on all sides. He is to cut it into pieces, and the priest shall arrange them, including the head and the fat, on the burning wood that is on the altar. He is to wash the inner parts and the legs with water, and the priest is to bring all of it and burn it on the altar. It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.” Here, one specific thing is that the offeror is to slaughter the sheep or the goat at the north side of the altar, before the LORD. Isaiah 14:13 says, “You said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; above the stars of God; I will set my throne on high; I will sit on the mount of assembly in the far reaches of the north.” (ESV; KJV) This is about Satan and his downfall because of his pride. Man sinned against God through the temptation of Satan. So the sheep being slaughtered at the north side of the altar might be God’s counter punch to Satan, for the sin that was the bait of Satan was completed dealt with and removed.

The description in verses 14-19 is about the case of the burnt offering of birds. It is regarded as the offering of the poor. Even poor people could have an opportunity to offer the burnt sacrifice to God with their willing voluntary spirit. It says, “If the offering to the LORD is a burnt offering of birds, he is to offer a dove or a young pigeon. The priest shall bring it to the altar; wring off the head and burn it to the altar; its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar. He is to remove the crop with its contents (or the crop and the feathers) and throw it to the east side of the altar, where the ashes are. He shall tear it open by the wings, not severing it completely, and then the priest shall burn it on the wood that is on the fire on the altar. It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.” Again, the offeror had to do the dirty job of throwing the crop with its contents to the place where ashes are.

In this passage of Leviticus chapter 1, we are so impressed by God’s detailed instructions regard the burnt offering. It could be simply spoken, “The animals are to slaughtered and burned and offered to God.” The detailed instructions show that the LORD is a delicate and real God. As he gave a detailed direction for the building the tabernacle with valuable materials of gold and colourful yarn and finely twisted linen and four layers of durable cover and exact measurement, which represented the beautiful Jesus, so did he for the burnt offering, pointing to the sacrifice of Jesus. The LORD is not a conceptual God, but the real God of history, being mindful of the people of the world, one by one. He is a holy God, different from the gods of Egypt and all the gods of the world. He had the whole grand plan for the salvation of mankind and carried out one by one in a wonderous way. According to Ephesians 5:2 Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. We thank and praise God for Christ Jesus our Lord who offered himself as a burnt offering of us sinners. Paul says in Romans 12:1, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.” In the grace of Christ’s offering, may we live a life of offering and sacrifice with deep gratitude and clear repentance. May we use our head and whole body to worship him and serve him and his people in thee redemptive work and history of God.