THE FIRE MUST BE KEPT BURNING

Leviticus 6:8-7:38

Key Verse: 6:9

“The burnt offering is to remain on the altar hearth throughout the night, till morning, and the fire must be kept burning on the altar.”

Thank God for the message that the Lord God rules over us and even over this evil world in his sovereign power. It will be to the end of the age. His sovereign power and rule were most evident in Jesus’ death and resurrection. The Son of God came to this world and died on the cross, crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The Son of God was forsaken by God, bearing all the hellish wrath of God upon himself so that we might not be forsaken and suffer eternally in the fiery lake of burning sulfur in complete separation from God, but be forgiven and welcomed into the love of God the Father and live in his presence in his kingdom forever. This saving love of God was confirmed through his resurrection. God had prepared this loving salvation plan even before the creation of the world. Then, at just the right time, he instituted the sacrifice/offering system as the foreshadow of Christ’s own sacrifice: the burnt offering, the grain offering, the fellowship/peace/reconciliation offering, the sin offering and the guilt offering. In the burnt offering, the slaughtered animal was cut into pieces and the whole thing was burned on the fire on the altar after the blood was sprinkled on the all sides of the altar. It was to make an atonement through the process of the laying of the offeror’s hand on the animal. This burnt offering is a pleasing aroma to God. As for the burnt offering, the “offeror” is in Hebrew *Adam* (Ge 3:9), a fallen sinner. But from the grain offering, the “offeror” is in Hebrew, *nephesh*, a living being (Ge 2:7). The grain offering shows the life of Christ, whose character was like fine flour grinded on mill stones to be fully obedient in complete submission and dedication to God. Our Christian life is to imitate this Christ. The fellowship offering is a reconciliation or peace offering. Since God reconciled us to himself through the very life of his Son, the Son’s life blood as the expression of his greatest love, we are to respond to it with our best, with all our intellect, emotion and will as all the fat, both kidneys and the liver of the sacrificed animal were offered to God. It is to have peace with God and peace with other fellowmen in Christ Jesus, generously sharing the meat of the animal all together in thanks and gladness. The sin offering deals with specific sins committed, while the burnt offering involves sinners in total corruption with the original sin. The blood of the animal was sprinkled seven times on the curtain of the sanctuary and then on the horns of the altars of the incense and the horns of the altar of the burnt offering. In that, there is perfect forgiveness and restoration of life. This sprinkling of the blood particularly indicates the shedding of the whole blood of the coming Christ. The guilt offering is a trespass offering and is also called the restitution or compensation offering. Christ redeemed us by paying the full price. In this grace, God wants us to be responsible for what belongs to God and to others, and furthermore to live a life of giving and serving and sacrifice, having only the debt of love.

So far, Leviticus 1:1-6:7 dealt with the five major offerings from the worshiper’s perspective. Today’s passage is about the five offerings from the priest’s perspective including the laws of sacrifice for the priesthood and their portion of the sacrifice.

In 6:8, this short clause, “the LORD said to Moses,” again reminds us that these are the words of the LORD, not the words of man. God said to Moses, “Give Aaron and his sons this command: ‘These are the regulations for the burnt offering: The burnt offering is to remain on the altar hearth throughout the night, till morning, and the fire must be kept burning on the altar.” At night, everyone is to be asleep. But the fire of the burnt offering is to be kept burning throughout the night. Certainly, the priest had to be there to watch over it. Here we are to know that when the sacrificial system became settled, the regular burnt offering had to be made along with the grain offering every day. In Numbers 28:1-5, the Lord said to Moses, “Give this command to the Israelites and say to them: ‘…This is the offering made by fire that you are to present to the LORD: two lambs a year old without defect, as a regular burnt offering each day. Prepare one lamb in the morning and the other at twilight together with a grain offering of a tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with a quarter of a hin of oil from pressed olives. This is the regular burnt offering instituted at Mount Sinai as a pleasing aroma, an offering made by to the LORD by fire.’” In this system of the sacrifice, an assigned priest was to take night shift duty. We don’t know how the priest carried out the sacred duty for so many years. Yet, one thing is clear – that God was awake as the fire was kept burning on the altar every night. Psalm 121:3-4 says, “…he who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.”

The passage in Leviticus continues in verses 10 and 11, “The priest shall then put on his linen clothes, with linen undergarments next to his body, and shall remove the ashes of the burnt offering that the fire has consumed on the altar and place them beside the altar. Then he is to take off these clothes and put on others, and carry the ashes outside the camp to a place that is ceremonially clean.” We see that the burnt offering was consumed until it became ashes, that are worthless and nothing. Removing and carrying the ashes outside the camp was an honourable job, a tedious, unrecognizable, and menial job to the eyes of the people. But the priest had to discharge such a work faithfully. He had to wear linen clothes and linen undergarments, which absorbed the sweat well. It seems that any human effort was to be seen in that sacrifice. We know that salvation is solely by God’s work and all human efforts contribute nothing to God’s salvation.

When the priest carried the ashes outside the camp to a place that is ceremonially clean, that could be the end of the instructions about the burnt offering for the priests. Yet, the LORD says more in verses 12 and 13, “The fire on the altar must be kept burning; it must not go out. Every morning the priest is to add firewood and arrange the burnt offering on the fire and burn the fat of the fellowship offerings on it. The fire must be kept burning on the altar continually; it must not go out.” Here, we see clearly what is stressed. In the description of the burnt offering for the priests, the expression “the fire must be kept burning on the altar” is written three times and “it must not go out” two times. What an emphasis!

The tabernacle was there and the fire continuously burned in the court of the Tent of the Meeting, all the time every day, even through the whole night. What a sight on the earth from heaven! It really draws our attention. First of all, fire represents God’s presence. Exodus 13:21 says, “By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light. So that they could travel by day or night.” And Exodus 19:18 says, “Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire.” God’s presence was there always as the fire was kept burning on the altar. Again, God was awake. What could the LORD God think throughout the night, every single day, watching over the burning fire? The LORD must have been thinking of the day to send his Son as the final and true burnt offering for the sin of mankind. He waited countless days and nights for 1500 years. Surely, the fire of God’s love was burning throughout those days, months, and years. The flame of God’s love did not go out until he finally sent his Son into the world and let him be sacrificed on the cross. As the fire was burning all the time, God’s love was displayed never dying out. Songs of Songs 8:6 says, “Love is as strong as death…” The final demonstration of his undying love is as written in Romans 5:8, “God demonstrates his on love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” The Son’s burnt offering of total sacrifice on the altar of the cross was the demonstration of God’s burning love of salvation upon sinners, but it was also God’s burning wrath of judgment upon the Son because of man’s sins. These two, salvation and judgment, are the characteristics of God’s love. The love of God saves us and warms us, always melting any coldness and sustains us and makes us strong above all human weaknesses. It is as a hymn song (The Love of God) says, “O love of God, how rich and pure! How measureless and strong! It shall forever more endure The saints’ and angels’ song!” God wants us to grow strong in his burning love. At the same time, this love of God is the burning wrath that consumes everything that rejects him. Deuteronomy 4:24 says, “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.” This God of jealous love cannot bear any alternative or any rival. The LORD says in Exodus 34:14, “Do not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God.”

When the Son was sacrificed as a burnt offering on the altar of the cross, the altar related to the Tent of Meeting was gone with no more burnt offerings. Now the heart of each believer is the altar. Because of God’s love demonstrated, each of his people’s love for God is to be kept burning on the altar of the heart. The Lord cannot bear the lukewarmness of his people. The Lord says in Revelation 3:16, “Because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about spit you out of my mouth.” In lukewarmness, the altar of the heart can gradually become the altar of idols, which God really hates. It is as Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Ether he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Mt 6:24). Money can represent all sorts of idols that occupy the altar of our hearts. It is also as Paul said in 2 Corinthians 6:16-17, “What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols… ‘come out from them and be separate’… ‘Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.’” And John said in 1 John 2:15-16, “Do not love the world or anything in the world…For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of eyes, and the pride of life/the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world.” It is notable that the final judgment is by fire. 2 Peter 3:10 says, “The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare/burned up.” And there is the lake of fire where the devil and all his angels and all unbelievers will be thrown (Mt 25:41; Rev 21:8). On April 8, 2024, the solar eclipse took place. According to CBC broadcast around1.5 million people gathered at Niagara Falls and watched the wonder of the total eclipse. As for me sitting at my desk, I watched a part of such wonder, less than 10 seconds of daytime suddenly becoming the night and then bright again, though not total darkness, and realized that it was a wonder of God’s creation. (The speed of the earth’s rotation is1600 km/hr; the speed of the earth’s orbit around the sun is 10700km/hr, 29.7km/sec.) However, even such at such a spectacle, most people do not recognize God, although they admire science. Yet, the Bible clearly says that the final judgment will be by fire.

As in his love, God sent his Son into this world for his salvation purpose, so the Son Christ Jesus will return to the earth as the Judge to end God’s purpose. Christ’s first coming and second coming are well depicted together in Isaiah 9:6-7, in two verses: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.” And then it says, “The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.”

Because of God’s love of sacrificing his own Son on the altar of the cross, may the altar of our hearts be kept burning in our love for God” each day. May we do so with our eschatological faith in the view of our Lord Jesus’ return and the final judgment of fire. And in that love for God, we may serve God’s flock of sheep, one by one, in the hope of Christ’s eternal kingdom.

The following part of today’s passage is about the priests’ portion from the offerings. The burnt offering was totally offered to God with nothing remaining to be eaten but only ashes. However, certain portions from the grain offering, the sin offering, the guilt offering and the fellowship offering were given to the priests. As for the grain offering, the Lord says in verse 15, “The priest is to take a handful of fine flour and oil, together with all the incense on the grain offering, and burn the memorial portion on the altar as an aroma pleasing to the LORD.” As we learned, the life of Christ, which was like fine flour being grinded, is to be remembered for us to imitate and so be remembered by God. And the Lord says in verse 16, “Aaron and his sons shall eat the rest of it, but it is to be eaten without yeast in a holy place; they are to eat it in the courtyard of the Tent of Meeting.” And in verse 23, “Every grain offering of a priest shall be burned completely; it must be eaten.” The grain offering at the time of the priest being anointed must not be eaten.

As for the sin offering, the Lord says in verse 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.” And he says in verse 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.” This is related to the sin offering due to the sin of the priests or the community. We are to know what God allows and what God does not allow. We should reject any money that is not earned in the right way. As for the guilt offering, the Lord says in 7:6, “Any male in a priest’s family may eat it, but it must be eaten in a holy place.”

As for the fellowship offering, all can enjoy the food. The offeror is to be generous, sharing the food fully with others, not being stingy, trying to save something. But it is clearly written about who cannot eat in verses 20 and 21, “If anyone who is unclean eats any meat of the fellowship offering belonging to the LORD, that person must be cut off from his people. If anyone touches something unclean—whether human uncleanness or an unclean animal or any unclean, detestable thing—and then eats any of the meat of the fellowship offering belonging to the LORD, that person must be cut off from his people.” As for us, anyone can join this community of God with one condition of repentance of their sins. Those who indulge in sin with no fear of God cannot participating in the fellowship of God’s people.

And in verse 25, “Anyone who eats the fat of an animal from which an offering by fire may be made to the LORD must be cut off from his people.” And in verse 27, “If anyone eats blood, that person must be cut off from his people.” Blood stands for life. We are to recognize that life belongs to God. Also fat can be related to our strength. It is God who gives strength. God says in Deuteronomy 8:17-18, “You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you ability to produce wealth…” We should not just think that my hard work enabled me to make money, but to know that God gave me good health and strength so I could work hard.

And in 7:34 the LORD says, “From the fellowship offerings of the Israelites, I have taken the breast that is waved and the thigh that is lifted and have given them to Aaron the priest and his sons as their regular/perpetual share from the Israelites.” The breast and the thigh are the best part of the meat. It can be the expression of the Israelites to show their due respect for the priests as their honour of God. We should believe that as we serve the Lord as the royal priests and a holy nation, the Lord will provide us with all the necessary things.

We see that the order of the description of the five offerings for the offerors/worshipers, the burnt offering, the grain offering, the fellowship offering, which are voluntary offerings and then the sin offering and the guilt offering, which are compulsory. However, in the order of the description for the priests, the fellowship offering is listed last. I think that it well shows God’s desire for his coming kingdom through Christ Jesus, which was like the fellowship offering, depicting the perfect fellowship with God and with fellow men in perfect peace with God and with others in Christ Jesus.

Let’s remember that the fire must be kept burning on the altar; it must not go out.