

# Introduction to the Book of Leviticus

The book of Leviticus is one of the more difficult books in the Bible to study. It is not that it is hard to understand (though, like any book, there will be some passages that are more difficult than others), but it is often seen as being tedious, boring, and largely irrelevant to Christians today.

However, Leviticus is part of the Old Testament and has been “*written for our instruction*” (Romans 15:4). As we study the book, we will learn about holiness, worship, sacrifice, authority, purity, and more. All of these apply to our lives as Christians.

Paul told the churches of Galatia, “*The Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ*” (Galatians 3:24). Leviticus points to Jesus and His role as both high priest and the sacrifice which would be offered.

## The Background to Leviticus

The book of Exodus closes with the tabernacle being set up “*on the first day of the first month*” (Exodus 40:2). The book of Numbers begins “*on the first day of the second month*” (Numbers 1:1). Therefore, Leviticus takes place during the month in between Exodus and Numbers. Authorship is generally attributed to Moses.

The majority of the book of Leviticus contains instructions about various offerings, observances, moral statutes, cleanliness laws, and so on. Aside from these instructions, there are two events that are recorded in the book – the consecration of Aaron and his sons (Leviticus 8-10) and the account of the man who was killed for blasphemy (Leviticus 24:10-23).

## The Theme of Leviticus

The overall theme of the book of Leviticus is *holiness*. To be holy is to be set apart for God's purpose. The instructions about sacrifices, the priesthood, sin, cleanliness, and so on, were all based upon the idea of God's people being holy as He is holy.

The key verse in the book is this: "*Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, 'You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy'*" (Leviticus 19:2). This was quoted by Peter (1 Peter 1:16) and applied to Christians.

## Outline

In our study, the book of Leviticus will be divided up into nine lessons:

1. Offerings (ch. 1-6)
2. Priests (ch. 6-10)
3. Cleanliness (ch. 11-15)
4. Atonement (ch. 16-17)
5. Sin (ch. 18-20)
6. Priests and sacrifices (ch. 19-22)
7. Festivals and observances (ch. 23-25)
8. Obedience and disobedience (ch. 26)
9. Vows and tithes (ch. 27)

## Summary

When studying Leviticus, there are two things we want to avoid: (1) getting so bogged down in the details that we lose sight of the overall theme and how it relates to Christians today and (2) quickly passing over or ignoring the book altogether as if it were of no value to us.

With these initial thoughts in mind, let us begin our study of the book of Leviticus.

## Lesson 1

# Offerings

Leviticus 1:1-6:7

The book of Leviticus begins by describing five different types of offerings that were to be made – burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and guilt (trespass) offerings. All of these offerings were for a different purpose. Furthermore, each one of them foreshadowed a different aspect of Jesus' sacrifice for us.

## Types of Offerings

### Burnt Offerings (1:1-17)

Burnt offerings were the most common offerings that were made. The animal brought for the sacrifice could be a bull from the herd (1:3), a male sheep or goat (1:10), or a turtledove or young pigeon (1:14). If the burnt offering was for the congregation, the offering was specified. If it was for purification after childbirth or after being cleansed of leprosy, it would be a lamb or bird, depending on one's means (12:6-8; 14:10, 21-22). Other burnt offerings were *freewill offerings* (22:18-20) which would have likely been preferred in the order given (bull, sheep/goat, bird).

Except in the case of the birds – which were handled by the priests – the following process would be used in sacrificing the burnt offering:

1. The offerer would lay his hand on the animal's head and kill it (1:4-5, 11).
2. The priest would sprinkle its blood around the altar (1:5, 11).
3. The offerer would cut it into pieces and wash it (1:6, 9, 12-13).
4. The priest would offer it in smoke on the altar (1:7-9, 12-13).

Certain burnt offerings were made on a regular basis on behalf of the congregation – daily (Exodus 29:38-42; Numbers 28:3-8), weekly (Numbers 28:9-10), monthly (Numbers 28:11-15), and yearly (Numbers 28:16-31). The animals to be offered were specified in each case. However, this chapter emphasizes the burnt offerings that would be made by “*any man of you*” (1:2). These would be made when being cleansed of some uncleanness (12:6; 14:19-20) or as a voluntary vow or freewill offerings (22:18-20).

### Grain Offerings (2:1-16)

The King James Version calls grain offerings *meat* offerings, though they did not involve meat. At the time that translation was made, this word was simply used to denote *food*. There were three types of grain offerings that could be made:

1. Fine flour (2:1-3)
2. Prepared bread/cakes (2:4-10) – either baked in an oven (likely a large pot), made on a griddle, or made in a pan (frying pan)
3. Early ripened grain (2:14-16) – this would be offered during the Feast of First Fruits (23:9-14)

The priests would offer a portion on the altar and would keep what remained (2:2-3, 9-10, 16). The exception to this came when the priest presented the grain offering, in which case it would be burned entirely (6:23). The offerings could not contain leaven or honey (2:11). They were also required to be seasoned with salt (2:13) since this was a sign of their covenant with God (Numbers 18:19).

Grain offerings were never made alone. They were always made with burnt offerings (23:37) or peace offerings (Numbers 6:17). They would also be accompanied with drink offerings (23:13).

## Peace Offerings (3:1-17)

A peace offering could be either a bull/cow from the herd (3:1), a lamb (3:7), or a goat (3:12) without defect. The process to be followed in offering the sacrifice was similar to that of the burnt offering:

1. The offerer would lay his hand on the animal's head and kill it (3:2, 8, 13).
2. The priest would sprinkle its blood around the altar (3:2, 8, 13).
3. The offerer would remove the fat and kidneys (3:3-4, 9-10, 15-16).
4. The priest would offer it in smoke on the altar (3:5, 11, 16).

Though the process was mostly the same, there were a few differences between the burnt offering and the peace offering. The burnt offering would be *completely* burned (8:21). For the peace offering, the fat and kidneys would be burned (3:3-5, 9-11, 14-16) while the meat would be shared by the offerer and the priests (7:15-17; 29-34).

The food from the peace offering – part of which would be the grain offering (Numbers 6:17) – was to include both leavened and unleavened bread (7:11-14). Included in the instructions about the peace offering was a prohibition against eating any fat or blood (3:17).

Peace offerings would be made annually during the Feast of Weeks, or Pentecost, after they entered the land of Canaan (23:19). They would also be offered by individuals at other times as an expression of thanksgiving (7:12) or to confirm a vow (7:16).

## Sin Offerings (4:1-5-13)

The sacrifice to be made for the sin offering would differ depending on who had sinned:

1. A bull for a priest (4:1-3)
2. A bull for the congregation (4:13-14)
3. A male goat for a leader of the people (4:22-23)
4. A female goat or lamb for anyone of the common people (4:27-28, 32)

For the sins of the priest and the congregation, the priest would sprinkle the blood in front of the veil in the tabernacle, put blood on the horns of the *altar of incense*, and pour out the rest at the base of the altar of burnt offerings (4:5-7, 16-18). He would then offer the fat on the altar (4:8-10, 19-20) and burn the rest outside the camp (4:11-12, 21).

For the sins of a leader or a common person, the priest would put blood on the horns of the *altar of burnt offerings* and pour out the rest at the base (4:25, 30, 34). He would then offer the fat on the altar (4:26, 31, 35) and eat the flesh with the other priests in the court of the tabernacle (6:24-30). [Note: The sin offering for the priest or the congregation could not be eaten because its blood was taken “into the tent of meeting” (6:30; 4:7, 18).] If a common person was too poor to offer a female lamb or goat, he could offer two turtledoves or young pigeons or a tenth of an ephah of fine flour (5:6-13).

The sin offerings were for *unintentional* sins (4:2, 13, 22, 27); and some examples were given (5:1-4). A confession was also to be made along with the sacrifice (5:5).

It should be noted that there is some question as to whether chapter 5 begins with a continuation of sin offerings or if it begins the discussion about guilt offerings. However, the sins here (5:1-4) belong with the sin offerings rather than the guilt offerings for two reasons. First, the sacrifice matches that of the sin offerings (5:6; 4:28). Second, guilt offerings emphasize making *restitution* and these sins were not ones in which restitution could be made.

A sin offering for the priest and the congregation would be made annually on the day of atonement (16:11, 15, 34). On this day, the sin offering for the congregation would be two goats instead of a bull (4:13-14; 16:5). Other sin offerings would be made as needed.

## Guilt/Trespass Offerings (5:14-6:7)

Guilt/trespass offerings were to be made when a sin had been committed against either God or man in which *restitution* could be made. The sacrifice was always the same – a ram without defect (5:15, 18; 6:6-7) – without a separate provision made for the poor.

Besides the sacrifice, the offender would also make restitution and add a fifth to it. If the sin was against the Lord, the fifth would go to the priest (5:16; cf. 22:14). [Note: Redeeming a tithe or vow also required a fifth to be added to be valuation (27:13, 15, 19, 27, 31).] If the sin was against another man, the fifth would go to the one who was sinned against (6:5; cf. Exodus 22:10-15).

Since guilt offerings were made when one sinned against God or his fellow man, they would be offered as needed. They would also be made when one was cleansed of leprosy (14:12-18).

## Foreshadowing of Christ's Sacrifice

Jesus' sacrifice was part of the "*predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God*" (Acts 2:23). As the law points to Christ (Galatians 3:24), the different offerings point to different aspects of His sacrifice.

**The burnt offering** – The burnt offerings were *completely* burned up (1:9, 13; 8:21; 9:24). Similarly, Jesus offered His life *completely* and was "*obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*" (Philippians 2:8).

**The grain offering** – The grain offering contained bread or the flour used to make bread (2:1, 4-8). Jesus came down as "*the bread of life*" (John 6:35). The grain offering was also always offered with a blood sacrifice (23:37; Numbers 6:17). Jesus needed to do more than just live, teach, and leave an example; He had to die and shed His blood. Furthermore, grain offerings would include the "*first fruits*" (23:10; 2:14) which foreshadows Jesus' death and resurrection as He is "*the first fruits of those who are asleep*" (1 Corinthians 15:20). Both call upon us to have faith that *more* is coming (harvest or resurrection).

**The peace offering** – The peace offerings symbolized *fellowship* as it was shared by the offerer and the priests (7:15-36). Jesus “*is our peace*” who reconciled us “*to God through the cross*” (Ephesians 2:13-16).

**The sin offering** – The sin offerings were offered to make *atonement* (5:6; 16:29-34). Jesus offered His blood on the cross to make atonement for us (Romans 5:6-11). Also, as these sacrifices were burned outside the camp (4:11-12, 21), Jesus “*suffered outside the gate*” (Hebrews 13:11-12).

**The guilt offering** – The guilt/trespass offerings included *making restitution* (5:16; 6:5). This meant that the one who had been sinned against received something that was of greater value than what was originally lost. We “*were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold...but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ*” (1 Peter 1:18-19). He redeemed us to be “*a people for God’s own possession*” who “*once were not a people, but now...are the people of God*” (1 Peter 2:9-10) in the church (Acts 20:28). In one sense, all people are God’s children because He is our Creator (Acts 17:28). However, we are now one people in Christ in the church, which is a far better brotherhood than the one we share with all mankind generally.

## Application for Us

As Christians, we must be “*crucified with Christ*” (Galatians 2:20) and present ourselves as “*a living and holy sacrifice*” to Him (Romans 12:1). As His sacrifice on the cross relates to the five offerings identified in Leviticus, our sacrifice can be seen in the same light.

**The burnt offering** – As the burnt offerings were *completely* burned up, we must give our lives completely to Him (Galatians 2:20).

**The grain offering** – As the grain offerings were *bloodless* sacrifices, we must offer ourselves as a “*living...sacrifice*” (Romans 12:1).

**The peace offering** – As the peace offerings involved *fellowship*, we enjoy fellowship with God and, as a natural extension of this, fellowship with His people as we obey Him (1 John 1:3, 7).

**The sin offering** – As the sin offerings were “*burned outside the camp*” and Jesus “*suffered outside the gate,*” we must “*go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach*” (Hebrews 13:11-13). He expects us to “*come out...and be separate*” (2 Corinthians 6:17) and “*take up [our] cross daily and follow [Him]*” (Luke 9:23).

**The guilt offering** – As the guilt offerings involved *making restitution*, when we follow the Lord, we must offer ourselves as something *better* than what we were before. This means that we must *repent* of our past sins and commit to a life of obedience (Romans 6:17-18). Jesus redeemed us “*from every lawless deed*” so that we would now be “*zealous for good deeds*” (Titus 2:14).

## Questions on Lesson 1: Offerings

1. What were the five types of offerings?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. What animals could be offered as a burnt offering?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. What was not to be added to the grain offerings?



## Lesson 2

# Priests

Leviticus 6:8-10:20

This section of Leviticus begins by describing the role of the priests in each of the five offerings. After that, we have the first of two events recorded in the book – the consecration of Aaron and his sons, followed by sacrifices and then the sin of Nadab and Abihu.

## Offerings, Consecration, and Sacrifices

After giving commands regarding the five different types of offerings, more details are given about the priests' work and portion in the offerings (6:8-7:38). They are given in the same order as the commands about the offerings from the preceding chapters, except the peace offering is discussed last. These instructions included what the priests were to do and what portion of the offerings belonged to them for food. The burnt offering was not to be eaten at all (8:21). The peace offering was to be shared by the priests and the ones presenting the offering (7:15-38).

### Burnt Offerings (6:8-13)

The burnt offering, depending on the occasion for it, could be a bull, a sheep, a goat, turtledoves, or young pigeons (1:2, 10, 14).

The fire on the altar was to be "*kept burning continually*" and was "*not to go out*" (6:13). The priest was responsible to see to it that this was done. At a minimum, burnt offerings were made every morning and evening (Exodus 29:38-42); though there would be other burnt offerings made at other times as well. The priests would put the burnt offering on the altar, remove the ashes, and carry the ashes away to a clean place outside of the camp. Later there is a provision for the skin of the burnt offering to belong to the priest who presents the offering (7:8).

## Grain Offerings (6:14-23)

The grain offering could include fine flour (2:1-3), prepared bread or cakes (2:4-10), or early ripened grain (2:14-16).

There were two occasions for the grain offering discussed in this passage. The first was the grain offering that would be made generally (6:14-18). In this case, a portion would be offered “*in smoke on the altar*” (6:15); and the rest would be eaten by Aaron and his sons (6:16, 18).

The second was the grain offering that would be made when the priest was anointed (6:19-23). In this case, the grain offering would be “*burned entirely*” (6:23). The priests were not permitted to eat a portion of the grain offering on this occasion.

## Sin Offerings (6:24-30)

The sin offering could be either a bull or a goat, depending on who the offering was for and, in the case of the congregation, what the occasion was (4:1-3, 13-14, 22-23, 27-28, 32; 16:5).

The sin offering was shared by the priests (6:26, 29) unless the offering was for the sin of a priest or the congregation. The reason for this was because the blood from the sin offering for a priest or the congregation was to be taken inside the tabernacle (4:6-7, 17-18); and the Lord specifically said, “*No sin offering of which any of the blood is brought into the tent of meeting to make atonement in the holy place shall be eaten*” (6:30). Since the blood of the sin offerings for the leaders or the common people was not brought into the tabernacle, but remained in the outer court (4:22-25, 27-30), it could be eaten by the priests. Instructions were given regarding the dishes in which it was boiled in preparation for a meal – an earthenware vessel would be broken, a bronze vessel would be cleaned (6:28).

## Guilt Offerings (7:1-7)

The guilt offering was always the same – a ram without defect (5:15, 18; 6:6-7). Every male among the priests were permitted to eat of the guilt

offering (7:6). The priest who presented the guilt offering would have the same provision as existed for the sin offering (7:7-8).

### Peace Offerings (7:11-36)

The peace offering could be a bull, lamb, or goat (3:1, 7, 12). While there were certain times when peace offerings were required (23:19), the ones addressed in this chapter were made on a *voluntary* basis – either as a thanksgiving offering (7:12) or to confirm a vow (7:16).

The peace offering would be shared by the offerer and the priest (7:13-17, 32-34). The portion for the priest presenting the offering and the portion for the rest of the sons of Aaron was specified – the right thigh for the priest (7:32-33) and the breast for Aaron and his sons (7:34). They were commanded not to eat the fat or the blood (7:22-27).

### Ordination Offering (7:37)

The ordination offering would be a ram sacrificed when Aaron and his sons were consecrated or ordained (8:22-29). As the priest would receive a portion for the peace offering, Moses received a portion of the ram of ordination (8:29).

## Consecration and Sacrifices

Following the instructions about the priests' portion of the offerings, we have the first event recorded in Leviticus with the consecration of the priests (8:1-36) and the sacrifices offered in relation to that (9:1-24). The process of consecrating Aaron and his sons was as follows:

1. The congregation assembled (8:1-5). All of the people needed to know what was happening since the priests were going to be serving on their behalf.
2. Aaron and his sons were washed and Aaron was clothed with the high priest's garments (8:6-9).
3. Both the tabernacle and Aaron were anointed (8:10-12).

4. The sons of Aaron were clothed with their priestly garments (8:13).
5. The sin offering was made (8:14-17).
6. The burnt offering was made (8:18-21).
7. The ram of ordination was sacrificed (8:22-29).
8. Aaron and his sons were anointed with the anointing oil and blood from the altar (8:30).
9. Aaron and his sons were given instructions to remain in the tabernacle for seven days (8:31-36).

It is important to note that Moses was the one offering the sacrifices at first (8:14-29). This was necessary because Aaron and his sons were *being* consecrated, but were not yet consecrated.

On the eighth day following the anointing of the priests, Moses gave Aaron instructions about the offerings he was to make on that occasion (9:1-7). He said to him, “*This is the thing which the Lord has commanded you to do, that the glory of the Lord may appear to you*” (9:6). Aaron then, with assistance from his sons, made the appropriate sacrifices:

1. Aaron first sacrificed the sin offering for himself (9:8-11).
2. Aaron slaughtered the burnt offering (9:12-14).
3. Aaron presented the people’s offering (9:15-17) which included a sin offering, burnt offering, and grain offering.
4. Aaron offered the peace offering (9:18-21) which included the wave offering (cf. 7:30-34).

After Aaron – first by himself, then with Moses – blessed the people (9:22-23), the glory of the Lord appeared: “*The glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Then fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the portions of fat on the altar; and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces*” (9:23-24).

## **The Sin of Nadab and Abihu**

It is important to understand that the end of chapter 9 describes an exciting and awe-inspiring time for the nation. The tabernacle had been

built, the priests had been anointed, sacrifices were being offered, and God showed His approval of all of this by sending fire from above and consuming the burnt offering on the altar. But the example of Nadab and Abihu reminds us that excitement and emotion do not eliminate the need to carefully follow God's instructions.

Nadab and Abihu's sin involved offering "*strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them*" (10:1). At first, "*fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed the burnt offering*" (9:24), showing God's approval of the proceedings. Then, "*fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them*" (10:2), clearly showing God's disapproval of their actions. Their sin was *lawlessness* – doing something for which they had no authority. Moses indicated that by acting in this way, they failed to treat God as holy (10:3).

After Nadab and Abihu were taken outside of the camp by Mishael and Elzaphan – mentioned among the heads of Israel (Exodus 6:22) – Aaron and his other sons were warned not to mourn or leave the tabernacle (10:4-7). Later in Leviticus, the high priest was specifically prohibited from uncovering his head or tearing his clothes (mourning), approaching a dead body, or leaving the sanctuary after being consecrated (21:10-12).

The Lord then gave a warning directly to Aaron about drinking wine or strong drink and how it would affect their work: "*Do not drink wine or strong drink, neither you nor your sons with you, when you come into the tent of meeting, so that you will not die—it is a perpetual statute throughout your generations—and so as to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean*" (10:9-10). The placement of this command directly from God immediately following Him striking down Nadab and Abihu suggests that the sons of Aaron may possibly have been drunk when *they offered strange fire*" (10:1). If not, they were at least acting as if they were drunk – not mindfully following God's instructions, careful to do exactly what He commanded. Later the wise man would warn about alcohol causing those who use it to forget the law and act contrary to it (Proverbs 31:4-5). Whether Nadab and Abihu were intoxicated or not, this is exactly what they did – they forgot and then violated God's law.

After this, Moses gave them instructions to eat of the sacrifices that had been offered (10:12-15). At the end of the chapter, Aaron and his sons failed to eat of the sin offering as they had been commanded to do (cf. 6:24-30). Why did they fail to do this? While we are not told in the text, it seems likely that it was due to a sense of unworthiness after Nadab and Abihu were killed for their sin. Whatever the reason, their failure was not treated as severely as Nadab and Abihu's sin. Moses confronted them, but no punishment came from God for their failure (10:16-20).

## Application for Us

Many will argue that as long as the Scriptures do not *specifically* condemn a particular practice, then we are permitted to do it. This argument has been used to justify instrumental music in worship, building "fellowship" halls, church support of human institutions, observing the Lord's Supper on Saturday evenings, and so on.

However, we learn from the example of Nadab and Abihu that God's silence should not immediately be interpreted as permission. When God has specified something to be done, everything else is prohibited. The "*strange fire*" was condemned because God "*had not commanded them*" to use it (10:1), not because there was a specific prohibition against the particular fire source they used. By not being careful to do what God said to do in the way He said to do it, Nadab and Abihu failed to treat God as holy (10:3). We can be guilty of the same thing today.

We cannot allow emotions, convenience, or preference to determine what we do in religion. We must be able to cite book, chapter, and verse for our authority (cf. Colossians 3:17; Matthew 7:21-23).

## Questions on Lesson 2: Priests

1. Which of the offerings were not to be eaten by the priests?
2. Which of the offerings were to be eaten by the priests *and* the offerer?
3. Who made the offerings to consecrate Aaron and his sons?
4. What did God do with the burnt offering made in connection with the consecration of the priests to show His approval of it?
5. With regard to Nadab and Abihu's sacrifice, explain the meaning of the phrase, "*which He had not commanded them*" (10:1).



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