

Our Peace Offering

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on December 19, 2021.

And this is the law of the sacrifice of peace offerings that one may offer to the LORD. If he offers it for a thanksgiving, then he shall offer with the thanksgiving sacrifice unleavened loaves mixed with oil, unleavened wafers smeared with oil, and loaves of fine flour well mixed with oil. With the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving he shall bring his offering with loaves of leavened bread. And from it he shall offer one loaf from each offering, as a gift to the LORD. It shall belong to the priest who throws the blood of the peace offerings. And the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving shall be eaten on the day of his offering. He shall not leave any of it until the morning. But if the sacrifice of his offering is a vow offering or a freewill offering, it shall be eaten on the day that he offers his sacrifice, and on the next day what remains of it shall be eaten. But what remains of the flesh of the sacrifice on the third day shall be burned up with fire. If any of the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offering is eaten on the third day, he who offers it shall not be accepted, neither shall it be credited to him. It is tainted, and he who eats of it shall bear his iniquity. “Flesh that touches any unclean thing shall not be eaten. It shall be burned up with fire. All who are clean may eat flesh, but the person who eats of the flesh of the sacrifice of the LORD’s peace offerings while an uncleanness is on him, that person shall be cut off from his people. And if anyone touches an unclean thing, whether human uncleanness or an unclean beast or any unclean detestable creature, and then eats some flesh from the sacrifice of the LORD’s peace offerings, that person shall be cut off from his people (Leviticus 7:11–21)¹.

According to the Ceremonial Law of ancient Israel, the people were to offer peace offerings at the temple, an animal sacrifice accompanied by grain-based offerings. The Hebrew word translated “peace offering” is remarkably difficult to translate. The word “peace” is typically used because of the root connection with the Hebrew word *shalom*. Broader in scope than our use of the word “peace,” *shalom* includes health, prosperity, and peace with God,² the blessing of both physical and spiritual peace. We may, then, think of the peace offering as a form of sacrificial worship for a wide range of reasons but resting on God’s gracious provision.

The offering was made for three different occasions: an offering of thanksgiving, typically offered in gratitude to God for something specific; an offering made prior to or upon fulfillment of a vow; or, a freewill offering, ranging in purpose, spontaneous in worship, typically in general gratefulness for God’s blessings.

Though an act of ceremonial worship, uniquely the sacrifice was followed by a fellowship meal for the worshiper and his family. While the choice parts of the sacrificed animal would go to the priest, that which was not burned upon the altar was retained by the worshiper, a real celebration in a culture where meat was eaten sparingly, typically upon special occasions. The peace offering

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), 77.

Our Peace Offering

was a special occasion, not only for ancient Israel's blessing but also for the greater blessing of what the offering foreshadowed.

Typically, we do not think of the Ceremonial Law in the same context of the advent of the incarnation of our Lord. Typically, we do not think of Israel's bloody sacrifices and propitiatory provision when we think of Jesus's birth. But when the angels heralded the good news of great joy, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11), they were calling worshipers to the Lord's temple, anticipating a grand sacrifice and subsequent fellowship meal to come. In Bethlehem, to a virgin in a manger was born God's greatest gift, our peace offering.

Pleasing Sacrifice

According to the third chapter of Leviticus, a bull, goat, sheep, or cow "without blemish" was to be chosen for a peace offering. The animal was to be taken to the entrance of the temple and the worshiper's hand placed upon the head of the animal, identifying himself with the animal and signifying a transference of guilt of sin. The animal was then killed, blood taken and splattered against the sides of the sacrificial altar. The animal's liver, kidneys, and surrounding fat were then burned upon the altar, a tangible and sensory act of sacrificial worship. Perhaps it was the purifying and protective significance of the internal organs and adipose tissue, but Scripture clearly states that the offering was "a pleasing aroma to the Lord" (Lev. 3:5).

Removed as we certainly are from animal sacrifices but even from the slaughter of the meat we eat, the Levitical instruction can sound anything but "pleasing" to modern ears. Yet as graphic as it is, it is also telling, leading us to wonder why it is a "pleasing aroma to the Lord"? As the expression is used, it is a poetic metaphor connected to the actual burnt sacrifice, an act of worship that produces an unmistakable aroma. But its significance is far more pungent, conveying the idea that the worshiper's offering is favorably received by the Lord. Through the sacrifice, according to God's appointment, the worshiper is redeemed from God's judgment and purified from his sin. Indeed, God is satisfied in the sacrifice of the worshiper's momentary salvation, a certainty worthy of celebration, as the occasion of the peace offering was.

Yet, sacrifices would continue to be necessary, as sin is a constant of the fallen condition. One sacrifice would not suffice, a peace offering offered only momentary peace. The writer of Hebrews describes this dilemma of the law, explaining that where sacrifices are "continually offered," there is a repetitive reminder of sin but also an insufficiency, for "the blood of bulls and goats" (Heb. 10:1-4) do not suffice. What is needed is a perfect and pleasing sacrifice to the Lord to which all prior sacrifices point. In the gift of God's only son, one perfect and final sacrifice was made upon the cross, "a single sacrifice for sins," perfecting "for all time those who are being sanctified" (Heb. 10:12, 14).

Provisional Fare

Accompanying the animal sacrifice were three kinds of bread: unleavened bread mixed with oil, unleavened wafers covered with oil, and leavened bread of fine flour mixed with oil. The loaves were not separate but part of the peace offering, with one loaf of each chosen as a gift to the Lord

Our Peace Offering

and received by the priest. The loaves not given were retained by the worshiper to enjoy with his subsequent meal, a unique aspect of this specific offering.

Little is known about the significance of the variety of bread, although the unleavened loaves were not allowed upon the altar (Lev. 2:11). Most obvious is the blessing of the bounty of the grain of the field to the priest and petitioner alike, with full acknowledgment of the Lord's provision. What naturally flows from the meat and bread of the peace offering is a provisional fare from the Lord.

From a modern perspective, we might separate ceremonial worship from a family feast, but the peace offering blended the two. Following the offering, the worshiper received the majority of the meat from the sacrifice and the remaining loaves of bread. A family feast followed, a festival of fellowship and food, with notably the rare luxury of meat and plenty of bread. The meal would likely include other side dishes, but it was the roasted meat that was the main dish.

If the peace offering were an offering of thanksgiving, then the meat would be consumed on the day of the sacrifice. Another day was given for a votive or freewill offering, but on the third day what remained would be burned. So strict was the law that disobedience nullified the peace offering and its atoning significance. Furthermore, everyone who joined the feast was required to be ceremonially clean according to the law. A feast it was; flippant it was not.

Such rigid rules seem foreign to us, seemingly robbing the enjoyment of the feast. But consider the significance of the main course. The meat upon the table meant that God had granted forgiveness, his judgment appeased, fellowship restored. Though it was not the last sacrifice the worshiper would bring, in that moment there was peace, a peace to be enjoyed and shared in gratitude for God's provision. As the psalmist sings in Psalm 66,

With wholeburnt offerings
your temple courts I'll tread;
I will fulfill my vows to you—
the promises I made.

I'll keep the vows I made
when trouble came my way;
rams, bulls and goats I'll sacrifice
and on your altar lay.

Come, all who fear our God;
I'll tell what he has done.
I cried out to him with my mouth;
his praise was on my tongue.

If I had cherished sin,
the Lord would not have heard;
but surely when I prayed to him
God listened to my word.

Our Peace Offering

For ever God be praised,
who hears me from above;
he has not turned away my prayer
or kept me from his love.³

One can imagine the family singing this psalm as they enjoyed a feast of food and God's favor.

It was, however, not a never-ending party. The main course had a deadline, not to be exceeded, to be eaten or burned. Sufficient for sacrificial worship, the sacrifice did not save. Sufficient for a momentary feast, the meat was merely for the moment. But to what God's provisional fare pointed to, there is more. The writer of Hebrews writes,

when Christ came into the world, he said, "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will...'"

The writer then concludes, "And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Heb. 10:5-10).

In Christ, we look to the finished work of his pleasing sacrifice and rejoice in it through the provisional fare of his death and resurrection. We do not wait for the occasion of a peace offering, for our peace offering has been made once for all. So, we feast as a family on the bounty of Christ's rich blessings, knowing that what we enjoy in sacrament here is but a taste of heaven to come. We enjoy the blessings that flow from the peace offering of Christ today in part but one day in full.

And it is this truth that we as Christians carry through this season and throughout the year, not a message of angst and animosity but of hope, love, joy, and peace. Let us be known as people of peace, for we are through the ultimate peace offering of our Lord. Let our words give hope, our hands show love; our hearts full of joy, let us give peace through the gospel of Christ's peace offering.

Propitiatory Gift

When the heavenly host sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased" (Luke 2:14), they were not proclaiming immediate peace from the ongoing evidence of the Fall, whether it be verbal strife, physical assault, or international warfare. Jesus came, lived, died, resurrected, ascended, and the fighting continues. On earth there is no peace, except in the hearts of those who believe on the Prince of peace.

What the angels declared was the arrival of our peace offering, the propitiatory gift of God. What we celebrate at Christmas is no less but more than Jesus' birth, but also his righteous life, sacrificial death, and victorious resurrection. For, his coming was for living, his living was for

³ *Sing Psalms: New Metrical Versions of the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: Free Church of Scotland, 2017), 165-66.

Our Peace Offering

dying, his dying was for giving that we too might live in him, the sinless, sacrificial Savior of “those with whom God is pleased.”

But it is not in our sinful state that God is pleased but in the sinless sacrifice of his Son, whom he has given as the greatest gift of all. As John wrote to the church, “In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10). In Christ, our peace offering, we have been given the gift of peace with God forever. There is no greater Christmas gift than that.

Born of the lowly virgin,
as the prophet did foretell;
God the Son incarnate
in law with man did dwell.

By law in peace he gave
what only he could give;
in life and love he died
that we through him should live.

Our offering of peace he made,
our family feast is sure;
by offering up himself,
our spotless lamb so pure.

So, let's rejoice on Christmas day,
all days that follow too;
for Christ in birth and death
atoned for me and you.