

LEVITICUS



DIRECTIONS AS YOU DECIDE

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INTRODUCTION

Go ahead. Admit it.

You aren't really sure you're up for this Bible study. In fact, you might even be standing in the bookstore right now giving this suspicious tome the first-line test: If the opening sentence grabs you, you'll consider it. If not, you'll let the cover flap down, slide it back on the shelf, and mosey on down the row in search of a more alluring title.

After all, this is *Leviticus*, for heaven's sake.

Rivaled only by its successor, the Book of Numbers, Leviticus might just win the award for the most—am I allowed to say this?—*boring* book in the Bible. It may have even been gonged a few times throughout the centuries as the Church gradually canonized the 66 books we still hold as inspired today.

Surely Leviticus still has purpose for today's Christians, right? After all, we surmise, God wouldn't have sealed it into His inspired Word if it held no universal, timeless value for His followers. In our occasionally egocentric, frequently myopic view of Scripture, we assume that all Scripture purposes to speak to *us*. About our lives, about our world, about our walks with God.

That might be why we get annoyed with Leviticus. Even the most creative applications of Scripture rarely suggest much metaphorical value for Leviticus. Many Bible readers skim it, skip it, or sleep through it. A bunch of laws and rituals that were obfuscated when Jesus of Nazareth entered the timeline of history, Leviticus sits in the Old Testament like a middle child. Exodus was a show-stopper, and Numbers at least brings blessed assurance of God's hand upon His people.

That leaves Leviticus sandwiched in between. Tolerated but not embraced.

This study is not written out of pity for an underappreciated book. I do not offer any artistic flair to make the book more palatable; I cannot and will not take liberties with God's Word. I am convinced that His Word—all 66 books of it—is a gift to Christians,

however, and that we are missing an aspect of *knowing* in our relationship with God if we ignore any part of it. Including Leviticus.

For the most part, the Leviticus mandates are obsolete—directions for holy living for a people not yet redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ. Laborious, painstaking, and even gruesome, maintaining a righteous life in the eyes of Yahweh, Jehovah God, was no joke. In fact, if I may venture to say, one had to flat-out *choose* to be holy or not because redemption was too much work to fake it. Righteousness was a daily choice; Deuteronomy shows us Moses explaining this black-and-white conundrum, urging the Israelites to decide to follow God’s laws so they could receive His promise:

“See I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice, and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them” (Deuteronomy 30:15-20, ESV).

Joshua, Moses' successor, also reiterated the *choice* aspect of living a God-honoring life (Joshua 24:15), and, centuries later, Peter's letter to the diasporic Jews connects holiness to obedience (1 Peter 1:13 – 16). God's chosen people—whether the nation of Israel or the Church of Jesus Christ—have never received His inheritance through sheer nepotism. They have taken His name and then willfully chosen to follow His commands.

I offer, then, *Directions as You Decide* as a theme for our study of Leviticus. God urges His people to be informed decision makers, literally loathing the Israelites for not knowing His ways (Psalm 95:10 – 11) and, consequently, doing their own thing instead of His thing. Even though our hectic, daily lives present us with countless decisions to make (the average person makes over 30,000 decisions a day!), let's keep our focus on one decision only: the decision to be holy.

So what do we do with 27 chapters of God's Code Annotated? We quit whining, and we quit expecting to be entertained. We accept that learning God can be perplexing and downright difficult, and we relinquish our comfortable sense of entitlement, so we can wade through the deep waters of detail. And when we emerge from the last verse of the last chapter of the last biblical book we ever expected to read (much less study), we enjoy the surprising gifts of knowledge and understanding that coalesce into much-needed insight about our mighty God.

And we decide.

➤ L E S S O N 1 ➤

Direction: Worship

(**Read Leviticus 1 – 3; 6:8 – 23; 7:11 – 38**)
in preparation for this lesson

Leviticus makes me a little squeamish. I can tolerate blood well enough, but I'm an animal lover. And Leviticus isn't exactly pamphlet material for PETA. The first several chapters describe an entire paradigm for redemption that rested chiefly on animal sacrifice, so I confess here on the front end that I've never really enjoyed this book of Scripture. Admittedly, I feel sorry for the animals being killed.

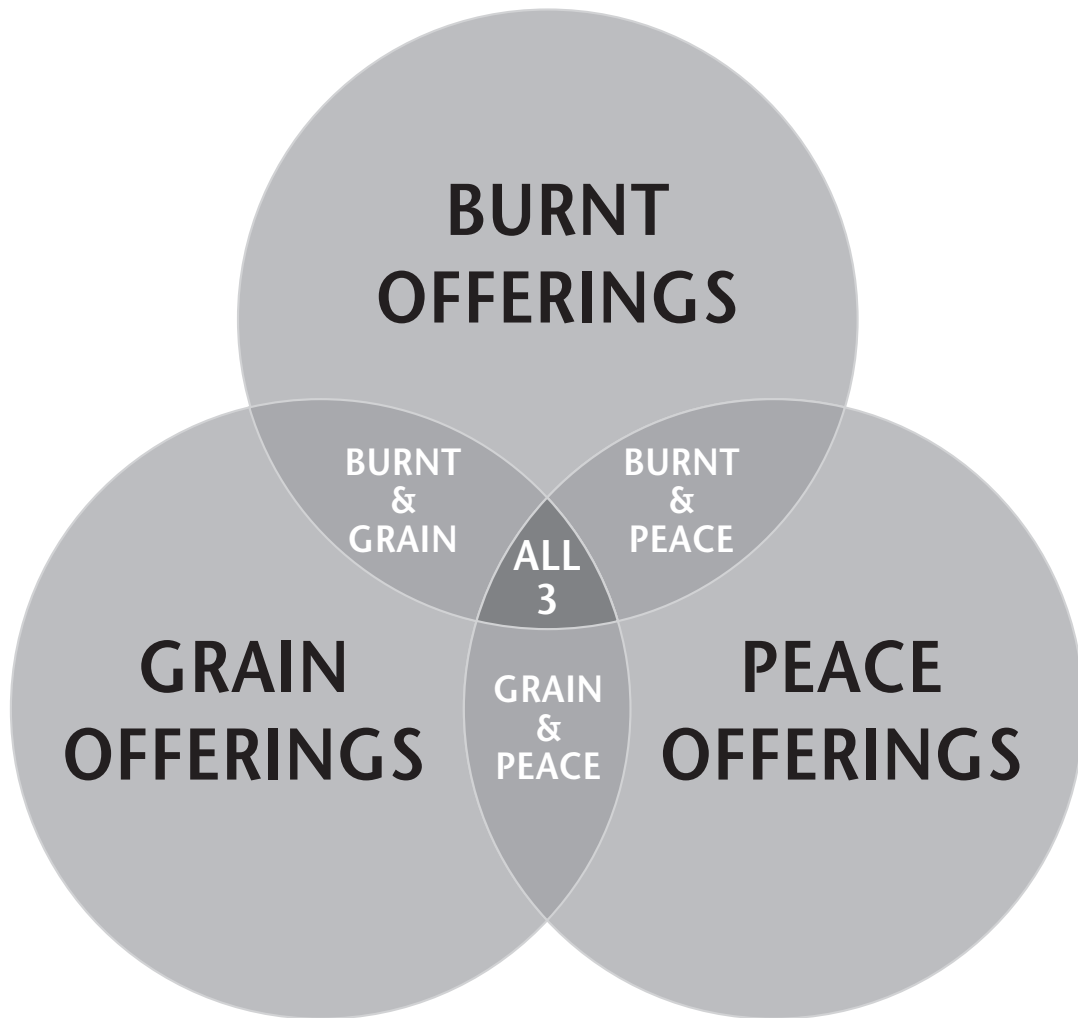
Not long ago, however, I tried again. Instead of reading as quickly as I could, reassuring the three cats on my lap that they were safe as I turned the pages of Leviticus, I slowed down. I swallowed my instinct to criticize animal cruelty, and I tried to learn a little bit more about the God I love.

By itself, a chapter of Leviticus can seem irrelevant. By itself, for that matter, the entire book seems like a helpful tool for Bible scholars curious about ancient Hebrew law—at best. At worst, however, Leviticus in isolation might be best microfiched, accessed easily enough by zealous seminary librarians, but not in the way of the everyday reader of Scripture who seeks to understand this grand, ancient love story.

But the thing is . . . we *can't* look at Leviticus by itself. If we try to skip over or extract Leviticus from God's larger narrative of love and redemption, we miss the miracle.

So now we're back to animal sacrifices. Foundational to all communion between God and man is the shedding of blood. Our understanding, then, must begin with a close look at this process. First, we will examine the voluntary offerings: the burnt, grain, and peace offerings. In common to all three of these is the pleasing aroma they brought to God! After this lesson, we will look at the mandatory offerings: the sin and the guilt offerings.

Be patient as we unpack the miracle, for a glorious one it is!



The Burnt Offering

(CHAPTER 1)

Atonement

If you're a mom or an aunt or a godmother, you probably look forward to times of special togetherness with your child or children. Birthday parties, graduations, ball games, dance recitals—all of these are occasions to grab the lawn chairs and invite the relatives. We all enjoy moments when even the calendar seems to say, *Stop and be together*.

As joyous as those events usually are, there is a feeling even more tender and memorable that comes when spontaneous, unscripted time with our children is initiated by *them*. Your teenage son plops down on your bed at 11:30pm when he can't sleep and talks to you about a funny YouTube movie he once saw. Your nine-year-old niece wants to go to work with you for a day on her spring break. Some of these moments are filled with deep conversation; other times, you can't remember what you talked about because you were savoring the clock as you and your child were the only two people in the world.

Recently, my son Drew and I were in the car on the way to his lacrosse practice. The drive between our house and the field is probably only six or seven minutes, yet somehow we ended up in a big conversation about Navy SEALs during the commute. He's always loved all things military, so on that particular drive, he explained the logistics of being a sniper. He told me about the spotter, who records the kill and all the particulars surrounding the shot fired, and he shared a couple of experiences described by the late Chris Kyle in his book *American Sniper*. I was mildly fascinated by the military protocol and precision, but that isn't why I remember that time in the car.

I remember it because *my son wanted to talk with me*. He wasn't asking what time I was picking him up. He wasn't asking me to save him some dinner. He wasn't on his phone checking Instagram. He wasn't telling me that, by the way, he needs an empty shoe box for a project that's due tomorrow. My soon-to-be 16-year-old son wanted to share something neat and interesting with his mom. He talked about snipers, and I asked questions when I didn't understand. He patiently explained all things military, and by the time I dropped him off at practice, my heart was full.

I wonder if that's how God felt each time a child of Israel brought Him a burnt offering. Though an enormous sacrifice on the part of the giver, burnt offerings were not mandatory. The Israelites brought them before God regularly as a way to stay in fellowship with Him. The sacrificial bloodshed enabled a sinful people to draw near to a holy God. The decision to give a burnt offering, even for those who were just going through the motions as they laid a bull or a sheep or another acceptable animal on the ginormous altar (reread Exodus 27:1 – 8 to get a description of this altar), was a decision to be right with God.

	Sacrifice	Location of Kill	Presentation on Altar	Special Instructions
BURNT	<i>From the herd</i> a male without blemish, usually a bull	At the entrance to the Tent of Meeting	Flay. Arrange pieces on the wood in the altar.	Wash entrails and legs first (with water). Priests throw blood against the sides of the altar. Leave burning all night until morning.
	<i>From the flock</i> a male without blemish, possibly a sheep or a goat	On the north side of the altar	Cut up. Place pieces on wood in the altar.	Wash entrails and legs first (with water). Priests throw blood against the sides of the altar. Leave burning all night until morning.
	<i>Of birds</i> pigeons or turtledoves	At the altar	Open it by the wings, but don't sever. Lay on wood in the altar.	Put crop and feathers in with altar ashes. Priests drain blood on the side of the altar. Leave burning all night until morning.

With its chief purpose being atonement, the burnt offering bridged the divide between Jehovah God and His people. Chosen or not, they were sinful to the core, and they needed God's forgiveness. The guilt offerings, as we will examine in our next lesson, were required by God for cleansing of their sins. So why weren't burnt offerings mandatory, too?

Atonement, as it turns out, is not exactly the same as cleansing. *Cleansing* wasn't optional if the Israelites wanted to camp anywhere even remotely near God. Supremely and exquisitely holy, God's presence was quarantined from a people contaminated with sin. God's gracious gift was a method by which they could be cleansed and, thus, allowed to be near their Creator. But that's for Lesson Two.

The linguist in me turns inner-nerd in meting out the subtle, hair's width differences between the cleansing that a guilt offering brought about and the atonement that resulted from the burnt offering. Atonement is more akin to reparation or restitution. The idea of making things right with someone you have wronged, atonement is what most parents try to instill in their children. *You damaged your brother's Nerf® dart gun when you stuffed it with Slim Jims® and tried to have an armed food fight. How nice that you have said you're sorry. Your brother is gracious for forgiving you and even saying not to worry about it. But don't you think you should now use your allowance to buy him a new Nerf gun?*

Using his own money to buy his brother a new Nerf gun is atonement. Forgiveness has already been granted, but there is still a golden opportunity to make things right with someone you love. Necessary? Not really. But atonement seems to go a long way in proving one's sincerity and even one's love for the person who was wronged.

So now we may understand why the burnt offerings were so precious and sweet to God. We can also understand why they were voluntary. From Day One, God gave man freedom to choose. Man has always been free to choose, though Scripture passionately urges us to choose blessing instead of curses, righteousness over wickedness, humility over pride. Being *required* to make restitution with God—to atone, one might say—wouldn't quite bring the healing that we need in our relationship with Him.

Let's return to the Nerf gun example. Consider the usual way this kind of scenario shakes out: Mom "suggests" that the Slim Jim perpetrator use his allowance to replace the gun, but he knows that her question is rhetorical. When his piggy bank is sufficiently full, they make the obligatory trip to the store where he buys a new gun, giving his gloating brother a secret shove for tattle-telling.

What if, on the other hand, Mom did not require this restitution? What if, when freeing up the Slim Jim traffic jam in the barrel didn't restore the gun to working order, the boy goes to his piggy bank, requests a ride to the nearest discount store, and picks out a new Nerf gun—all without being required to do so by Mom? Those are the mommy moments that make us proud—and for good reason. Voluntary atonement is a humble, selfless, sincere act of love fueled by a desire to make things right *for* and *with* another person.

But how could we possibly make things right with God? He certainly doesn't need a new Nerf gun, so to speak, though the boy mom in me imagines that heaven for kids like mine is going to have to a Nerf arsenal and replacement darts on auto shipment. So to answer that question, let's examine Leviticus.

Burnt offerings were distinct in at least three ways. First, the purpose of atonement was unique to this offering. Though often offered in tandem with another type of sacrifice—a guilt offering, for example—only burnt offerings made reparations with God. A second distinction is that sacrifices for burnt offerings were entirely consumed in the flames of the altar (thus the name of the offering). Down to the very hair and feathers on the animal,

every single bit was turned to ashes, with nothing left over from which the priests or anyone else could benefit. (Leviticus 7:8 seems to allow the priest to keep the skin in the event that the priest offers the burnt offering in a person's stead.)

The third distinction gives me pause. A long pause. In front of a big mirror of self-reflection that fully discloses my need to make things right with God.

Though not described until Leviticus, burnt offerings are distinct in that they'd been around for a while. They were an ancient tradition, with several examples in Scripture predating the Israelites' exodus out of Egypt. Noah (Genesis 8:20) and Abraham (Genesis 22:2 –13) both made burnt offerings to God, for example. It seems that from the very beginning, man has been desperate to make things right with the God he so completely denied in his foray with sin. And God, in His unfathomable graciousness, agreed. He agreed to accept a paper airplane from us when we broke His Nerf gun.

This will never make sense to me, and I am amazed every time I read Leviticus 1 that God would be pleased with such a paltry offering from His people. Don't let the directions God gives scare you away from discovering the miracle here. Of course God gave them directions for the burnt offering; He *had* to! These people didn't exactly have a track record of knowing instinctively what would indeed please God. Had God not given them instructions, they probably would have floundered around like college kids trying to assemble furniture from IKEA®. Not only was God saying yes to regular acts of reconciliation with an extremely sin-filled people, then, but He was also giving them an explicit, step-by-step, you-can't-mess-this-up-even-if-you-tried user's manual so they wouldn't fail in their attempts to please Him.

Direct and Decide

List the names of one or two people with whom you absolutely love spending time. What makes time with this person(s) so special?

To paraphrase Robert Brault, "Appreciate the friend who, for you, clears his calendar. Value the friend who, for you, changes his calendar. But cherish the friend who, for you, doesn't even consult his calendar." Reflect on this statement, including any personal examples you may have.

Think of a time when you wronged someone. How did you fix it—what did you do to make things right with this person?

Read 1:14 - 16. Did Ruth stay with Naomi because she had to or because she wanted to? What did this mean to Naomi?

Read John 4:4 and then the rest of the chapter if you aren't familiar with this story, looking at a simple New Testament map if possible. Apparently, why did Jesus "have" to go through Samaria?

Read Philemon verses 17 - 19. How did Paul atone for Onesimus?

Decision Point

Do you long to be with God, or is spending time in worship, prayer, and Bible study still a bit of a chore? It's OK to be honest here! Let's unpack here what it is that either *pushes you toward* time with God or *pulls you away* from it. Explain in detail, being confident that God meets you wherever you are in your journey with Him—just like He did the woman at the well.
