

The following is a rough transcript, not in its final form and may be updated.

The Purification Offering Leviticus 4:1-35

Intro: The first question to ask concerning the offering described in ch4 is what to call it. Traditionally, it has always been referred to as the sin offering because “sin” is the most literal translation of the Hebrew word that occurs 10 times in this passage. But, later sections of Leviticus will state that God commanded His people to offer this sacrifice in situations that had nothing to do with sin; like childbirth, the healing of a skin disease or contact with a corpse. So, the purpose of this offering was certainly to deal with sin but also to remove defilement in a more general sense, be it literal or ceremonial. In light of this, it’s probably best to refer to this sacrifice as the purification offering.

The Israelites had 5 standard offerings. The first 3 were described in ch1-3: burnt, grain, and fellowship offerings. The last 2 are no described in 4:1-6:7; the purification offering (sin offering – 4:1-5:13) and the reparation offering (*guilt* offering – 5:14-6:7). These last 2 naturally belong together as they both deal with making atonement for the worshipper. The purification offering addressed either ritual impurity or various sins. Ch4 describes these sins very generally, saying only that they are unintentional. Ch5 will describe specific sins - both unintentional (5:2-4) and intentional (5:1) – that this offering was to address.

In order to understand how the purification offering functioned, it’s important to remember that the Bible often uses the metaphor of impurity to describe sin. For example, the psalmist cries out to the Lord, “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin” (Ps 51:2). We can relate to this because sin often makes us feel dirty. But, to the Israelite, sin’s defiling effects made an impact not only on the sinner, but also on those associated with them. Just like when children do wrong, they dishonor on themselves as well as on their family, especially their parents. In a similar way, Israelites who committed certain wrongs brought a defiling dishonor on themselves, their nation (their covenant family) and especially on their covenant Lord. This dishonor clung to the Lord’s home (tabernacle) just as the dishonor of a child’s wrong can cling to the parent’s home. It was like an unholy dust that arose from their act and settled on the Lord’s sanctuary. How was it to be

removed? By the purification offering's cleansing blood.

Our text describes the procedure for the purification offering for 4 groups of people: the anointed priest (3-12), the whole congregation (13-21), a ruler (leader-22-26), any...of the common people (27-35). 2 of the 4 sets of instructions are devoted to atoning for the sins of those in position of leadership. God singled out leaders for special attention – religious leaders and civic leaders. Why? Because sin isn't stagnant; it's powerful and destructive. When we sin, it affects other people and if we're in a position of leadership, what we do affects more people. When someone has a contagious infection, they shouldn't be around other people because the more people they come into contact with, the more they will infect. A person in a leadership position touches a lot of people; if the leader is infected with sin, their sin will affect many. One message of the purification offering is that sin is serious; it is so for the congregation as a whole, for each individual and even more so for people in positions of leadership.

We live in a culture where the subject of **sin** has become very unpopular. In many circles, the word has become passé, sounding antiquated and out of place. We're constantly bombarded with exhortations to stop categorizing behavior as wrong or right but to celebrate every form of behavior simply as a neutral personal choice. Even many churches rarely or never use the word sin. They talk about love and grace, but talking about sin is a total bummer, a real downer; it upsets people and they think it lowers self-esteem. But, to ignore sin is to ignore the Bible. Modern entertainment is geared to make people laugh at sin but in the Bible, sin is no laughing matter. As one theologian put it, "Sin must never be taken lightly. The Bible presents a horrific picture of the devastation of sin" (Stan Norman). Sin is serious. It destroys lives and devastates relationships. Worst of all, sin separates us from God. Unfortunately, sin is also universal; it's in all of us.

2 - unintentionally – The idea isn't so much of an *accidental* sin but of a sin committed by a person whose life is lived in general obedience and surrender to God. The contrast we will see come into play later is the difference between sins of human frailty and outright rebellion. The root of the Hebrew word translated unintentionally has the idea of "to wander" or "to get lost." No one intends to get lost but, when it happens, you're still lost – and if you're really lost, you need to be rescued. Another contrast to unintentional sins is the presumptuous sin of **Num 15:30**. This sin literally

means “to sin with a high hand.” There was no atonement available under the Old Covenant for the one whose heart was so defiantly turned against the Lord in presumptuous sin. We should be grateful that under the New Covenant, there is atonement available for every sin (1 John 1:9).

This is also the first time the word sin appears in Leviticus. The Hebrew root of the word essentially means “*to miss*.” The same root is used in Judges 20:16 in describing men who could sling a stone and not miss. At the heart of its meaning is the idea of missing the mark or failure to attain something or to be out of harmony with someone or not be in a normal and right relationship with someone. In the case of sin, it’s God that has been harmed. We’ve missed His mark of perfection; we’ve failed to attain it. Thus, we’re out of harmony with Him; outside the normal or right relationship for which we were created.

Again, the focus of this offering is on unintentional sins. This serves to bring to our attention an aspect of sin which we are at least in danger of taking too lightly. We tend to think that sin is only attached to the will and there is certainly a sense in which this is true. Guilt rarely attaches to sin unless it is an act of will. If I do something wrong not knowing it was a sin, why would I feel guilty about it? You don’t know what you don’t know. But here’s the thing; our natural self (old self) is rife with imperfection and the pollution of the world and those things serve to exclude us from God, even if there’s not feeling of guilt or personal responsibility for them by us. We are naturally abhorrent to God. Does God care about unintentional sins? Our text says He does, from the highest to the lowest in the land.

The fact that there is a separate cleansing ritual for the unintentional sins of a priest shows that they had a greater accountability before the Lord and were, in a sense, judged according to a stricter method. If this sounds strange or unfair to you, it shouldn’t because it isn’t. The Apostle James applies the same principle to teachers of God’s people in the NT era (James 3:1). Some identify this anointed priest as the high priest but we should also remember that even the common priests were anointed so this may refer to any priest serving in the tabernacle or in the temple.

Notice the required offering – a young bull, the most costly of all the sacrificial animals. Also notice the hand laying ritual. It’s listed 5 times in the passage (v4, 15, 24, 29, 33). Notice also the extensive blood rituals for each

offering. For the priest, the blood was sprinkled 7 times “in front of the veil.” We’re not told that he sprinkled the veil itself but I can’t imagine the veil remaining clean for very long because blood makes a mess. If blood were to land on the veil, it wouldn’t take long before that veil of costly tapestry would look like a cloth dipped in blood. Blood was also applied to the altar of sweet incense, which represented the prayers of God’s people; and to the altar of the burnt offering, the place of atonement. The implication is that sin affects our prayers and makes our atonement necessary.

We should also notice that, just like the peace offering of ch3, the priest was to take all the fat from all the various parts of the bull and burn it on the altar to the Lord; but that’s where the similarities end. Instead of taking the meat and sharing it with the other priests and worshippers, the priest was to take the entire remainder of the bull - skin, meat and everything else left over after the fat evisceration - outside the camp and burn it all completely to ash. The fatty portions were offered to God because the best was dedicated to God after the blood covered the sin. But the valuable hide and meat and all the rest were burnt outside the camp. It couldn’t be offered to God but it was burned up as if it were a worthless thing. It had to be done outside the camp to show that the affects and memory of this sin had been effectively removed from the people.

But why burn up good meat? The purpose for this was to ensure that all selfish motives had been removed in the purification offering. This is true in each instance in ch4. If a priest brought the offering, the whole offering had to be destroyed. If a non-priest brought the offering, the priest could eat of it but not the one bringing the sacrifice. You couldn’t just bring a purification offering because you wanted meat or leather; you would only bring it if you truly desired to be right with God. This also served to emphasize that there is no benefit, temporal or eternal, to our sin. The Apostle Paul expressed this same attitude in [Phil 3:7-8](#). It pains me to hear someone give their testimony and inadvertently try to glorify the wretched state of their old life as if that was what brought them to the Lord. It wasn’t – it was a complete waste of time, energy, talent and opportunity. Yes, praise God they are saved but what might they have accomplished for the kingdom of God if they had come to Him earlier in life? There is no benefit to sin!

All the laws, epistles, poems, prophecies and stories of the Bible constitute one big story. That story encompasses all of history from the beginning of

creation to the new creation in eternity. The Bible is the grand narrative of the history and destiny of humanity. Sadly, that narrative is a story of sin. Do you realize that there are only 4 chapters in the entire Bible that have no sin in them? Those would be the first 2 chapters of Genesis before the first sin was committed and the last 2 chapters of Revelation after sin has finally been completely defeated and God's people are in God's presence where sin does not exist. Sin is the story of humanity.

There are certain characteristics of sin that, since many ministers refuse to speak of it, most Christians are unaware.

1) Sin is universal. [Rom 3:23](#) says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Leviticus records the words God spoke after He delivered His people from slavery in Egypt; made a covenant with them and gave them His law at Mt Sinai. God knew even then that His people would rebel against Him and violate His law- His people whom He had redeemed, with whom He had made a covenant and to whom He had given His word. Sin is universal.

2) Sin is also powerful. Never think that sin is passive; it's an active force in our lives. We don't sin and then just return to where we were spiritually. Sin is always a set-back; it affects us negatively in so many areas of our lives: spiritually, mentally, emotionally; even psychologically. It changes the way we think (esp. about God). Sin will always take us farther than we want to go, keep us longer than we want to stay and cost us more than we want to pay.

3) Sin is destructive. The first sin in the history of humanity led to the deaths of Adam and Eve and sin has led to death and destruction ever since. The Israelites God was speaking to in Leviticus wandered in the wilderness for 40 years and died there because of sin. The Devil wants to destroy us with sin. Jesus Himself said that the Devil comes to steal, and to kill and to destroy in [John 10:10](#). That's his goal and the glorification of sin is his means to that goal.

4) Sin is divisive. Sin caused God's people to complain against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness and to contend with each other. Sin divided God's people from their leaders and from each other. It's no different today. When someone harbors as secret sin, it divides them from other people even when they don't know about it. The person works hard to keep it a secret,

giving half-truths and false impressions. They're building a wall that separates them from others so they won't discover the truth. They're sin divides them from others. Committing or harboring sin is like throwing pebbles in a pond; it creates ripples that keep spreading into other parts of our lives and to other people.

All of God's Word teaches us that sin is serious. We may not like it, but sin is what's wrong with humanity today; it's what's wrong with us! So, what do we do with sin? Praise God, He not only tells us our problem; He also gives us the solution to it! The OT sacrificial system was God's sin solution for His people – His temporary solution that He used to prepare us for His eternal solution: Jesus Christ. What does God do with sin? He frees people from past sins. God gave His law to His people at Mt. Sinai after He had set them free from slavery in Egypt. When God gave Israel the 10 Commandments He began by saying, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" ([Ex 20:2](#)). First God set His people free; then He gave them His laws for living.

That order is important. God doesn't give His law to people and say, "Here are some rules I expect you to obey. Do the best you can to follow them and if you're good enough, you can go to heaven." No, through His law God shows us how we have sinned, how our sin separates us from Him and the life He has for us and how we need to forgive us and set us free from sin. Then once we see all this, we turn to God in faith and ask for His forgiveness and salvation from sin. He provides salvation from sin in Jesus, who died as the sacrifice for our sins on the cross. We put our faith in Jesus and just as God set His people free from slavery in Egypt, He sets us free from slavery to sin ([Rom 6:23](#)). Just as Israel escaped slavery by God's power, in Christ, we escape sin and corruption. Then, once God has set us free and changed us by His power, He gives us commands in His Word to follow by the power of His Spirit within us.

First comes His redemption; then comes His law. Praise God, He frees people from past sins!

God also forgives people for present sins; even unintentional ones. As mentioned before, an unintentional sin is a sin of error. It's not premeditated or planned, it's a sin we just wandered into through either ignorance or negligence. Ignorance is when we don't know about the law but if you've

ever tried to use that excuse after being pulled over for speeding, you probably heard the oft repeated principle that ignorance of the law is no excuse. Negligence implies that we knew about the law and didn't intend to break it but we weren't paying attention and made a mistake. But, a momentary mistake can cause a lot of trouble and be very expensive and so an unintentional sin. Just because we commit sins out of ignorance or negligence doesn't mean we won't experience consequences because of them. We are defiled by all sin so God provided a sacrifice of atonement for unintentional sins.

Our text mentions atonement 3 times (20, 26, 31) emphasizing the purpose of this sacrifice. To atone for sin means to do what is necessary to restore a right relationship with God. The word used to refer to forgiveness is a word that in the whole OT is used only to refer to God's forgiveness. We can forgive other people and they can forgive us, but God forgives in a way that no human can so a special word was reserved to refer to God's forgiveness. When I forgive someone's sin against me, I forgive as someone who has also sinned. My forgiveness doesn't require a sacrifice to atone for sin; it doesn't even necessarily require a confession or repentance. It only requires my decision to forgive; realizing that I too am a sinner in need of forgiveness. God's forgiveness is different. He's perfectly holy, perfectly just and the King of the universe who decrees that all sin leads to death. To secure His forgiveness requires either our death or the death of a sacrifice that He ordains and will accept as a viable substitute.

Praise God, He does forgive and our text carries the message that forgiveness is available to all: to priests, to rulers, to the congregation as a whole and to each individual person. But, God's forgiveness isn't automatic. Forgiveness is arranged by God; he gave specific laws regarding it and those laws must be followed to secure His forgiveness. Sin leads to death; God has decreed it and there's no way around it. Sin always leads to this end but God in His mercy allows for a sacrifice to die in the place of sinners so they can live. God's decree that sin leads to death is still in effect. My sin and your sin will lead to death. Someone will die for our sins. Either we will die eternally for our sins and remain separated from God or we can place our faith in Christ, and His sacrificial death on the cross will atone for our sin.

In each offering listed we see the required ritual of laying hands on the

sacrificial substitute. As we've mentioned before, this wasn't just simply the touch of contact – it carries the meaning of leaning heavily. Is this not the very essence and nature of Christian faith? It's a faith that not only brings us into direct contact with the great Substitute but teaches us to lean on Him with all the burden of our guilt and shame. If you believe that your sins are just too heavy, let me assure you Jesus Christ is able to bear them all.

Jesus is like the young bull; the most precious thing in heaven, strong for service and docile in obedience, He was both willing and able to labor for our sakes. So, if you need and desire forgiveness, lean hard on Jesus, throw the entire weight of your sin on His shoulders because He is able to bear them. In fact, that was His purpose for coming. V20 tells us that when the elders laid their hands on the bull and it was sacrificed in accordance with the Lord's commands, that forgiveness was obtained. What a wonderful assurance! There is forgiveness when we come as God commands and receive atonement as He directs. Jesus took our place and won our redemption. 😊