

Altars & Sacrifices

To understand spiritual warfare, we have to understand the battlefield on which the war is waged. So to do that, we are going to go through the Old Testament to understand the spiritual framework in which we see early humanity interacting with, and the way God commands Israel to interact with Him.

From shortly after the fall, we see hints of sacrifice and what it is for...

Genesis 3:21

And the LORD God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins and clothed them.

The word for skins means hide or leather, and is very clearly indicating an animal hide of some kind. While this isn't explicit, what is implied?

Genesis 4:2-4

Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the LORD an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions.

Both Cain and Abel make offerings to the LORD. What two things are given as offerings?

Genesis 8:20, 9:1a

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. [...] And God blessed Noah and his sons

What follows Noah's sacrifice on the altar to the LORD?

The Framework

Old Testament Sacrifices

Everyone's favorite book of the Bible, Leviticus, describes in painstaking detail laws about sacrifices. But we can boil these down to understand the language here more easily. However, one myth must be dispelled now: Old Testament sacrifices were **not** for the forgiveness of sins.

Hebrews 10:4

For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

In Leviticus we see different words like atonement, guilt, sin, cleansing, etc. But none of these sacrifices removed Israel's sin either individually or corporately. We who are sinful cannot exist in the presence of God. His presence in our state is *dangerous*, and so in order for God to dwell with Israel, He provided them a system of *covering*. To use a modern analogy, God made the land of Israel radioactive to sinners with His presence, and the sacrifices provided radiation suits.

Types of Offerings

Offering Type	Meaning/Purpose	Verse
Burnt Offering	Thanksgiving, covering	Leviticus 1
Grain Offering	Thanksgiving	Leviticus 2
Peace Offering	Thanksgiving, fellowship	Leviticus 3
Sin Offering	Cover sins/Restore sanctuary	Leviticus 4-5
Guilt Offerings	Reparation	Leviticus 5-6

Alongside many rules about offerings, there are many rules forbidding types of offerings for various reasons. Human offerings are wholly forbidden, as are unclean animals, offerings to other gods, etc. But of course, anything God creates, Satan counterfeits and corrupts, and that includes the systems of sacrifice. We see this all over the Old Testament:

Exodus 32:4, 6a

And he received the gold from their hand and fashioned it with a graving tool and made a golden calf. [...] And they rose up early the next day and offered burnt offerings and brought peace offerings.

Leviticus 10:1-2

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD.

Deuteronomy 32:17a

They sacrificed to demons that were no gods

Psalm 106:37-38

They sacrificed their sons
and their daughters to the demons;
they poured out innocent blood,
the blood of their sons and daughters,
whom they sacrificed to the idols of Canaan,
and the land was polluted with blood.

And while these sacrifices are corrupted, they are not without effect. But as you read the following verses consider how these effects contrast the effects of the sacrifices God ordains.

2 Kings 3:26-27

When the king of Moab saw that the battle was going against him, he took with him 700 swordsmen to break through, opposite the king of Edom, but they could not. Then he took his oldest son who was to reign in his place and offered him for a burnt offering on the wall. And there came great wrath against Israel. And they withdrew from him and returned to their own land.

Jeremiah 44:17-18

But we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out drink offerings to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no disaster. But since we left off making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine."

When people used the sacrificial system illicitly, they found success, but it was temporary or incurred wrath and disaster.

The Bible and other ancient texts indicate that illicit sacrifices to various gods were typically for self-benefit. This might have been personal wealth, prosperity, success, or protection. On a larger scale, sacrifices were to achieve military success, avert natural disasters, support good harvests, or curse enemies.

This Week's Takeaway

While the Bible shows that illicit sacrifices do produce effects, what does the story of Elijah and the prophets of Ba'al tell us about God's power vs. other spiritual beings?

While illicit sacrifices are sometimes used to curse others, what does the story of Balaam's oracle show about the nature of sacrifices to Yahweh?

What is the ultimate goal of God's sacrificial system when used in its ordained way?

Preparing for Next Week

To prepare for class next week, read the following passages and write down a few observations for each passage about the **blood**. This isn't about right answers or deep insight, just jot down what you notice and what stands out in each passage, or what questions you may have. What is the importance of the blood? What does it do?

Genesis 4:10-11; Genesis 9:4-6; Exodus 12:7-13; Exodus 24:3-8; Leviticus 17:10-12;
Deuteronomy 12:23; Psalm 106:37-38;