

Atonement: Purification Offering



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: 2 Chron. 33:12, 13; 2 Sam. 14:1–11; Lev. 4:27–31; Jer. 17:1; Lev. 10:16–18; Mic. 7:18–20.

Memory Text: “Knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18, 19, NASB).

The sacrificial system is probably the best-known part of the sanctuary service because it's the part that points directly to Christ's sacrifice. The blood of the animal that died for the sinner becomes a symbol for the blood of Christ, who died for us.

This week we will study several concepts linked to the “purification offering” (also called “sin offering”), which was God's appointed way of helping us to understand better how He is reconciling us to Himself through the only true Sacrifice, Jesus Christ. At times, this lesson uses the term “purification offering” instead of “sin offering” to avoid the impression that an act that required an offering, such as giving birth, be regarded as a moral fault (Lev. 12:5–8). Such a sacrifice is best understood as a purification offering for a woman's ritual impurity and not as a sacrifice because of sin.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, November 2.*

Sin and Mercy

As anyone who knows the Lord can testify, sin separates us from God. The good news is that the Lord has put in place a system to heal the breach caused by sin and to bring us back to Him. At the center of this system is, of course, the sacrifice.

There are basically three kinds of sin depicted in the Old Testament, each corresponding to the sinner's level of awareness while he or she committed the transgression: inadvertent or unintentional sin, deliberate or intentional sin, and rebellious sin. The "purification offering" prescribed in Leviticus 4:1–5:13 applied to cases of unintentional sin, as well as some cases of deliberate sin (*Lev. 5:1*). While an offering was available for these first two categories, none is mentioned for rebellious sin, the most heinous kind. Rebellious sin was done "in the face" of God, with a high hand, and the rebel deserved nothing less than to be cut off (*Num. 15:29–31*). However, it seems that even in these cases, such as with Manasseh, God offered forgiveness (*see 2 Chron. 33:12, 13*).

Read Deuteronomy 25:1, 2 and 2 Samuel 14:1–11. What does 2 Samuel 14:9 reveal about mercy, justice, and guilt?

Is God justified in forgiving the sinner? After all, is not the sinner unrighteous and therefore worthy of being condemned (*see Deut. 25:1*)?

The story of the woman of Tekoa can illustrate the answer. Pretending to be a widow as instructed by Joab, this woman went to King David, seeking his judgment. Joab contrived a story that he asked her to tell David: about her two sons, one having killed the other. Israelite law demanded the death of the murderer (*Num. 35:31*), even though he was the only male left in the family. The woman pleaded with David (who functioned as judge) to let the guilty son go free.

Then, interestingly enough, she declared: " 'Let the iniquity be on me and on my father's house, and the king and his throne be guiltless' " (*2 Sam. 14:9, NKJV*). Both the woman and David understood that if the king would decide to let the murderer go free, then the king himself would acquire the guilt of the murderer, and his throne of justice (that is, his reputation as judge) would be in jeopardy. The judge was morally responsible for what he decided. That is why the woman offered to take over this guilt herself.

Similarly, God takes over the guilt of sinners in order to declare them righteous. For us to be forgiven, *God Himself must bear our punishment*. This is the legal reason Christ had to die if we were to be saved.

Laying On of Hands

Read Leviticus 4:27–31. What ritual activities were performed along with the sacrifice?

The goal of the offering was to remove sin and guilt from the sinner, to transfer responsibility to the sanctuary, and to let the sinner leave forgiven and cleansed. (In extremely rare cases, one could bring a certain amount of fine flour as a purification offering. Although this purification offering was bloodless, it was understood that “without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” [*Heb. 9:22, NASB*]).

The ritual itself included the laying on of hands, the death of the animal, blood manipulation, the burning of fat, and the eating of the animal’s flesh. The sinner who brought the offering was granted forgiveness, but only after the blood ritual.

A crucial part of this process involved the laying on of hands (*Lev. 1:4, 4:4, 16:21*). This was done so that the offering “may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf” (*Lev. 1:4, NASB*). The offering applied only for the one who put his hands on the animal’s head. According to Leviticus 16:21, the laying on of hands would be accompanied by a confession of sin; this would acknowledge the transfer of sin from the sinner to the innocent animal.

The slaughter was, of course, basic to any animal offering. After the animal was killed, the spilled blood was used to make atonement on the altar (*Lev. 17:11*). Because the sins had been transferred to the animal by the laying on of hands, we should understand the death of the animal as a substitutionary death. The animal died in the place of the sinner. This may explain why the act of killing the animal had to be performed by the sinner, or the guilty one, and not by the priest.

Next time you are tempted to sin, envision Jesus dying on the cross and see yourself putting your hands on His head and confessing your sins over Him. How might this concept, played out in your mind, help you to understand just what it cost in order to be forgiven? How could this idea help you to resist succumbing to that temptation?

Transfer of Sin

“The sin of Judah is written with a pen of iron, and with the point of a diamond: it is graven upon the table of their heart, and upon the horns of your altars” (Jer. 17:1).

After the laying on of hands and the death of the animal, the next ritual activity in the offering was the handling of the blood. The priest applied the sacrificial blood to the horns of the altar. Because blood was involved, this ritual part had to do with atonement (*Lev. 17:11*). If the sinner was a commoner or a leader, the blood was applied on the altar of burnt offering (*Lev. 4:25, 30*); if the high priest or the entire congregation was the sinner, the blood was applied to the inner altar, the altar of incense (*Lev. 4:7, 18*).

What did it mean to smear blood on the horns of the altar? The horns were the highest points of the altar and, as such, could signify the vertical dimension of salvation. In this way, the blood was brought into the presence of God.

Jeremiah 17:1 is of particular importance for understanding what happens: the sin of Judah is engraved “upon the tablet of their heart, and on the horns of their altars” (*NASB*). Although the text is referring to altars involved in idolatrous worship, the principle remains the same: the altar reflected the moral condition of the people. Blood transferred the guilt of sin. The blood smeared on the horns of the altar transferred sin away from the sinner to the sanctuary, a crucially important truth in order for us to understand the plan of salvation as revealed in the earthly sanctuary service, which symbolizes the work of Christ in heaven for us.

Because the blood carried sin, it also defiled the sanctuary. We find an example of this defiling in cases where the blood of the purification offering splashed accidentally on a garment. The garment needed to be cleansed, not just anywhere, but only “in a holy place” (*Lev. 6:27, NKJV*).

Finally, the burning of the fat on the altar indicated that everything relating to the purification offering belonged to God (*Lev. 3:16*).

Thanks to the death of Jesus, symbolized by these sacrifices, our sin has been taken away from us, placed on Him, and transferred to the heavenly sanctuary. This is central to the plan of salvation.

How does the sanctuary service help us to understand our utter dependence on God for forgiveness of our sins? What comfort does this truth bring you? At the same time, what important responsibilities follow? See 1 Peter 1:22.

Bearing Sin

Read Leviticus 6:25, 26; 10:16–18. What crucial truth is revealed here?

By eating the offering at a holy place, the officiating priest would “bear away the guilt” of the offender. The meat of this offering was not just payment for the priests’ services (otherwise Moses would not have been so angry with Aaron’s sons for not eating of it) but a crucial part of the atonement.

How does the eating of the sacrifice contribute to the process of atonement? Eating was required only of those offerings in which blood did not enter the Holy Place; that is, the offerings of the leader and the commoner. The Bible explicitly said that by eating the sacrifice the priests would “bear away the guilt,” which would “make atonement” for the sinner. To carry the sinner’s guilt implies that the sinner now goes free.

In the Hebrew, Exodus 34:7 says that God “carries iniquity,” the same two Hebrew words used in Leviticus 10:17, where it’s clear that the act of the priest’s carrying the sin is what brings forgiveness to the sinner. Otherwise, without that transfer, the sinner would have to bear his own sin (*Lev. 5:1*), and that, of course, would lead to death (*Rom. 6:23*).

The priest’s work of bearing another’s sin is exactly what Christ did for us. He died in our place. We conclude, then, that the priestly work at the earthly sanctuary typifies Christ’s work for us, because He has taken upon Himself the guilt of our sins.

“The blessing comes because of pardon; pardon comes through faith that the sin, confessed and repented of, is borne by the great Sin-bearer. Thus from Christ cometh all our blessings. His death is an atoning sacrifice for our sins. He is the great medium through whom we receive the mercy and favor of God. He, then, is indeed the Originator, the Author, as well as the Finisher, of our faith.”—Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases*, vol. 9, p. 302.

Imagine standing before God in judgment. What would you lean on—your good works, your Sabbath keeping, all the nice things you have done and all the bad things you haven’t done? Do you really think this would be enough to justify you before a holy and perfect God? If not, what’s your only hope in that judgment?

Forgiveness

Read Micah 7:18–20. What picture of God do we find in this passage?

The last three verses of the book of Micah focus on the relationship of God with His remnant. The text beautifully describes why God is unrivaled. He is incomparable because of His forgiving love and grace. The outstanding characteristic of God, as revealed in Micah (and elsewhere), is His willingness to forgive. Micah emphasizes this point by using various expressions for God’s attributes (*vs. 18*) and achievements (*vss. 19, 20*). His attributes and achievements are explained in the language of the Israelite Credo in Exodus 34:6, 7, one of the most beloved biblical descriptions of the character of God.

Interestingly, several crucial words in Micah 7:18–20 are also used in the Servant Song in Isaiah 53, pointing to the fact that the means of forgiveness comes from the One who is suffering for the people.

Unfortunately, not everyone will enjoy God’s saving grace. God’s forgiveness is neither cheap nor automatic. It involves loyalty. Those who have experienced His grace respond in kind, such as we see in Micah 6:8, a central text in the book. Just as God “delights in unchanging love” (*NASB*), He calls His remnant to “love kindness” (*NASB*). His people will imitate God’s character. Their lives will reflect His love, compassion, and kindness.

In the Bible, Micah 7:18–20, with its emphasis on forgiveness, is immediately followed by Nahum 1:2, 3, with its emphasis on judgment. This unfolds the two dimensions of God’s dealings with us; He forgives the repentant and punishes the wicked. Both sides belong to God. He is Savior and Judge. These two aspects of God’s character are complementary, not contrary. A compassionate God can also be a just God. Knowing this, we can rest assured in His love, in His forgiveness, and in His ultimate justice.

Read Micah 6:8. What good is a profession of faith without these principles to reveal the reality of that profession? What’s easier, to claim faith in Jesus or to live out that faith, as expressed in Micah 6:8? How can you better do the latter?

Further Study: Ellen G. White, “The Tabernacle and Its Services,” pp. 343–358, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“As Christ at His ascension appeared in the presence of God to plead His blood in behalf of penitent believers, so the priest in the daily ministration sprinkled the blood of the sacrifice in the holy place in the sinner’s behalf.

“The blood of Christ, while it was to release the repentant sinner from the condemnation of the law, was not to cancel the sin; it would stand on record in the sanctuary until the final atonement; so in the type the blood of the sin offering removed the sin from the penitent, but it rested in the sanctuary until the Day of Atonement.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 357.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Some have argued that the whole concept of substitution is unfair. Why should the innocent die in the place of the guilty? However, because this is a truth that is not only clearly taught in the Bible but is central to the core theme of the Bible, how do we answer that charge? Might the “unfairness” of it all help us to understand the grace that was displayed in order to bring us forgiveness? That is, in what ways might this “unfairness” help to show just how great and merciful and loving our God really is?
- ❷ As a class, read Micah 6:8. What are we being told here? More important, how can we learn to fulfill this explicit command? How do we learn to do all these things, including to “walk humbly with thy God”? What does that mean? How can walking humbly with God translate into walking humbly with others?
- ❸ Think about what it means that the only way we could be saved was through the death of Jesus. What does this amazing truth teach us about just how bad sin is and why any effort to save ourselves by our own works is as fruitless as scrubbing a pig in hopes of making it kosher?
- ❹ In class, go over the final question at the end of Wednesday’s lesson. Discuss your answers and the implications of your answers in terms of the gospel and that which God has done for us in order to save us.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Leviticus 4*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Comprehend the typology of the sin offering (also called “purification offering”).

Feel: Appreciate the work of Jesus as prefigured in the sin offering.

Do: Experience the forgiveness of sin that the sin offering prefigured.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Typology of the Sin Offering (*Leviticus 4*)

A The repentant sinner (1) brought his sin offering to the sanctuary, (2) laid his hand upon the innocent animal, and (3) killed it. The animal sacrifice (4) was eaten by the priest (for the commoner or ruler), or (5) its blood was carried inside the Holy Place (for the priest or congregation). Thus (6), the sinner was cleansed from his sin, and (7) the sanctuary was defiled by the record of the sin. What does each of these steps prefigure in the antitype?

II. Feel: The Joy of Christ’s Forgiveness

A The Old Testament sin-offering ritual makes vivid the steps of forgiveness through the sacrifice and priestly ministry of Christ. What are your feelings about Christ’s work as you relive this typology?

III. Do: Experience God’s Forgiveness

A The typology of the Old Testament sin may be experienced in reality as we receive forgiveness through Christ our Substitute. Have you determined that you will personally experience this gracious forgiveness?

► **Summary:** The sin offering foreshadows the way in which repentant sinners receive forgiveness through the sacrifice and priestly ministry of Christ. It also prefigures the way in which the heavenly sanctuary is defiled by the record of forgiven sins.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Isaiah 53:6*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The Old Testament sanctuary ritual of the sin offering (also called “purification offering”) foreshadows the way in which repentant sinners receive forgiveness through the sacrifice and priestly ministry of Christ. It also points to the way that the heavenly sanctuary is defiled by the record of forgiven sin.

Just for Teachers: In his classic book on the sanctuary, Adventist pioneer Stephen N. Haskell wrote about the sin offering: “In none of the types was the individual worshiper brought into so close touch with the sanctuary service as in the sin-offering. There is no part of religious worship that brings the worshiper into such close touch with the Lord as when he kneels at the Saviour’s feet, confessing his sins, and knowing the strength of the promise [1 John 1:9 cited]. . . . It is then that the repentant sinner touches the hem of the Master’s garment, and receives His healing power in the soul.”—*The Cross and Its Shadow* (South Lancaster, Mass.: The Bible Training School, 1914), p. 123.

Opening Activity: Ask the class to visualize themselves bringing a sin offering in Old Testament times. Then ask them to describe the various steps in the process of receiving forgiveness.

Consider This: Why was there need of a sin offering in the type, and, antitypically, why did Jesus need to die as our Substitute? What does the sin offering teach about the nature of divine justice and mercy?

► **STEP 2**—Explore

Just for Teachers: In this section we will summarize the major steps in the sin-offering ritual and their antitypical meaning and clarify the kinds of sins that were dealt with by the sin offering.

I. An Overview of the Sin-Offering Ritual (*Review Leviticus 4 with your class.*)

Leviticus 4 describes two different procedures for the sin offering—one for the priest or congregation and the other for an individual ruler or a common citizen.

A. Steps in Common. The first four steps are the same for all involved:

1. Recognition of Guilt. The Hebrew word *'asham* (vss. 13, 22, 27) implies both legal status (“are guilty,” *NKJV*) and subjective experience (“realize their guilt,” *ESV*).

2. Animal substitute, repentance, and confession. The repentant sinner brings his animal sacrifice to the door of the tabernacle (vss. 4, 14, 23, 28). “By the act of bringing the offering to the sanctuary, the individual confessed himself a sinner, deserving the wrath of God, and signified his repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, whose blood would remove the guilt of the transgressor.”—Ellen G. White, in *Signs of the Times*, July 15, 1880.

3. Hand-laying, thus, in symbol, effecting the transference of sin to the sacrifice. The repentant sinner lays his hand on the head of the innocent animal (vss. 4, 15, 24, 29), symbolically transferring his or her sin to the innocent animal substitute, representing Christ our Substitute (see *Leviticus 1; 4; 16:21; 17:11*; Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, pp. 354, 355).

4. Death of the sin-bearing substitute. The repentant sinner then slays the animal before the Lord (*Lev. 4:4, 15, 24, 29*). This underscores that it is our sins that ultimately caused the death of the Lamb (see *Isa. 53:5, 6, 8*), who bore our sins as our Substitute on the cross (*2 Cor. 5:14, 15; 1 Pet. 2:24*).

B. Differences in the Two Procedures. In the last phases of the two procedures, there are distinct differences in what the priest does with the animal.

For a sin of *the priest and the whole congregation*, the priest brings some of the blood into the Holy Place (*Lev. 4:5, 16*), dips his finger in the blood and sprinkles some of it seven times before the Lord in front of the inner veil (vss. 6, 17), daubs some of the blood on the horns of the altar of incense (vss. 7, 18), pours the rest of the blood at the base of the outer altar (vss. 7, 18), removes the suet (vss. 8–10, 19), burns the suet on the altar (vss. 10, 19), carries the remainder of the animal to a clean place outside the camp (vss. 12, 21), and incinerates the remainder of the animal (vss. 12, 21).

For a sin of the *individual ruler and individual common person*, the priest collects the blood (vss. 25, 30), daubs with his finger some of the blood on the horns of the altar of burnt offering (vss. 25, 30), pours the rest of the blood at the base of the altar (vss. 25, 30), removes the suet (vss. 26, 31), burns the suet on the altar (vss. 26, 31), and eats the meat of the sin/purification offering (*Lev. 6:25–30*).

The ultimate result is the same for both procedures: the priest “shall make atonement for” (that is, purge or remove the sin from; see *NKJV* and *NIV*) the repentant sinner(s), who “will be forgiven” (*Lev. 4:20, 26, 31*). The verb translated “will be forgiven” is in the passive (Hebrew *nif'al*) and implies that it is God who does the forgiving, not the priest.

The basic difference in these two procedures may be summarized by

this principle: when the blood goes into the sanctuary's Holy Place, the meat of the sacrifice is not eaten; but when the blood does not go in, the meat of the sacrifice is eaten by the priest. Why this difference? The answer seems to be that in the cases of the priest or of the whole congregation (which would also include the priest), the priest cannot become the carrier of his own guilt, so the blood goes directly into the sanctuary as the agent of transfer carrying the sin away from the sinner into the Holy Place. But in the case of the ruler and the individual commoner, the priest is not involved in the sin; and thus, he can be the carrier of the sin from the sinner onto himself (*see Lev. 10:16, 17*). In this latter case, the sin is transferred to the sanctuary via the priests when the priests offer their own sin offering and the blood is taken into the sanctuary.

Ellen G. White supports this latter view: "The sins of the people were transferred in figure to the officiating priest, who was a mediator for the people. The priest could not himself become an offering for sin, and make an atonement with his life, for he was also a sinner. Therefore, instead of suffering death himself, he killed a lamb without blemish; the penalty of sin was transferred to the innocent beast, which thus became his immediate substitute, and typified the perfect offering of Jesus Christ."—*Selected Messages*, book 1, p. 230.

C. Common Results of the Sin Offering. By means of the sin offering, the sinner is cleansed from the sin, he is forgiven, and the sin is transferred to the sanctuary. In its typological fulfillment, Christ is both the Lamb of God and the Priest-Mediator (*John 1:29; Heb. 8:1, 2*). He had no sin in Himself; so, as the Priest, He could "bear the guilt of the congregation"—yes, of the whole world!—in His own body. He also could minister the benefits of His spilled blood in the New Covenant heavenly sanctuary.

Consider This: What is the function of the blood in the sin offering? What does it cleanse, and what does it defile? Can blood be an agent of cleansing and defilement at the same time? (*See Lev. 6:27.*)

II. The Kind of Sin Involved in the Sin Offering (*Review Leviticus 5:1; 6:2, 3 with your class.*)

Some interpreters maintain that only unintentional (inadvertent) sins could be forgiven through the sacrificial system, but there is explicit mention of deliberate (nonrebellious) sins also being forgiven through this system (*Lev. 5:1, 10; 6:2, 3, 7*). The word *shegahah*, used throughout Leviticus 4 (*vss. 2, 13, 22, 27*) and often translated as "unintentional" or "inadvertent," derives from a verb meaning "to wander, go astray," and can refer to both inadvertent and conscious (deliberate but nonrebellious) sins of "going astray" (*Num. 35:11, Eccles. 5:6, 10:5, Job 12:16, Ps. 119:67, Prov. 5:20*). (See R. Laird Harris,

“Exodus,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990], pp. 547, 548.)

Consider This: Numbers 15:22–31 contrasts sins of “going astray” (*shegagah*) with “high-handed” rebellious sins of presumption. Why was there no atonement in the sacrificial system for “high-handed” sins? Could people who committed “high-handed” sins be forgiven by God if they repented?

► **STEP 3—Apply**

Just for Teachers: Note that the Hebrew word *chatt’at*, “sin offering,” may also be translated as “purification offering” (especially when it refers to purification from nonmoral ritual defilement, as in Leviticus 12:5–8).

Thought Questions:

- 1 What is the symbolism of the burning of the fat (suet) of the sacrificial animal on the altar and the incineration of its carcass outside the camp? (See Lev. 3:16, 17; Gen. 45:18; Heb. 13:11–13.)
- 2 Are the concepts of substitutionary atonement and transfer of sin optional in understanding the gospel?

Application Questions:

- 1 What is your response to this Ellen G. White statement: “We are not to be anxious about what Christ and God think of us, but about what God thinks of Christ, our Substitute” (*Selected Messages*, book 2, pp. 32, 33)?
- 2 If we receive forgiveness for sin when we accept Christ as our Substitute, why does the record of that sin remain in the heavenly sanctuary? Discuss: Is there an aspect of atonement beyond forgiveness? Give reasons for your answer.

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: Return to the visualization of the sin offering, but now summarize the antitypical meaning of its various steps.

Activity: Have the class explain what each step of the sin-offering ritual signifies in the antitype. Determine to accept Jesus anew as your Substitute.