

“Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”. Eph 5:1

These words of Paul refer to the death of Jesus as a “fragrant offering”, a “pleasing sacrifice”. This is a technical expression used of certain offerings in the Old Testament sacrificial system, and Paul’s use of it clearly indicates that what he has in mind is either the burnt offering or the fellowship offering (or both). He is not referring to either a sin offering or a guilt offering, for neither of these two offerings was considered a “fragrant offering”. The sin and guilt offerings took on the sin of the offerer and thereby became tainted. Consequently they were burned outside the tabernacle, away from the presence of God and not on the tabernacle altar. Whilst God accepted them, indeed required them, he took no “pleasure” in them, and they were never “fragrant”. Although, elsewhere, the identification of Jesus with the sin offering was paramount in Paul’s thought (e.g. *God sent his own son ... to be a sin offering*”. Rom. 8:3), that was not in his mind here. He was far too well versed in Old Testament language and temple practice to use the word “fragrant” loosely. The “fragrant offerings” could only refer to the burnt offering and the fellowship or peace offering. We need, therefore, to consider what Paul was thinking when he saw Jesus’ sacrifice in terms of these “fragrant” offerings.

The Burnt Offering (Lev. 1:1-17 ; 6: 8-13)

There were initial similarities between the sin offerings and the “fragrant” offerings. In both types of offerings the offerer laid hands on the animal so that it might stand in his stead, and the blood of the animals was poured out around the altar. But in the fragrant offerings the laying on of hands was not associated with the transference of sin, and the disposal of the carcasses of the animals was markedly different. In the sin offering and the guilt offering the carcass was never allowed to be burned on the brazen altar since it had “become sin”, was therefore unclean and had to be burned outside the Tabernacle. The burnt offering, however, was burned on the brazen altar before the Lord. The fact that it could be burned on that altar in the tabernacle of God meant that the animal had not become a sin carrier for the offerer, but represented something else.

The sacrifice represented, in fact, an act of absolute and complete dedication of the life of the offerer to the Lord: it meant he was ready to yield his life for whatever purpose God might wish to use it. This total commitment is typified by the fact that the carcass of the burnt offering was totally consumed and completely given over as a sacrifice to God. Thus when the offerer initially laid hands on the burnt offering he was by that act offering his whole life in dedication to God. When Jesus went to the cross it was an act of total commitment to his Father, even though that commitment meant dying for sin. Thus he gave himself as a “burnt offering”, in total self surrender. This was supremely pleasing to God, truly a fragrant offering, a sacrifice that could be burned on the altar before his presence. In this he is a pattern for us.

With Jesus, of course, such an offering of himself did not require any previous cleansing from sin for he was without blemish. The offerer in the Old Testament tabernacle, however, could not begin to make any offering of his life to God until his sin had been dealt with. For this reason, therefore, the burnt offering always had to follow on from the sin offering or guilt offering. In the same way for us there can be no satisfactory dedication of our lives as a “burnt offering” until we have availed ourselves of the cleansing of the “sin offering” in the person of Jesus. Moreover, that dedication of our self has to be offered through Jesus who is “our burnt offering”. So the Israelite, despite having had his sin dealt with by the sin offering, nonetheless had to use another sacrificial animal for his dedication. Any presentation of our self in dedication, therefore, must be through the sacrifice of Jesus as a burnt offering. When we are in Christ we confess our sin and identify that confession with our sin offering who is Jesus; when we offer up our lives with the mixed motives that always abound, we offer them through our burnt offering

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who is Jesus

We can understand from the above why burnt offerings in large numbers were always offered among the Jews in moments that called for special affirmation of total commitment. A very clear example of this is to be seen in the dedication of the Temple by Solomon. On that occasion the numbers of burnt offerings were so vast that a whole new area of the temple had to be dedicated especially for them to be sacrificed. It was an unparalleled time of total commitment on the part of king, priests and people to the Lord, and this was expressed, as God required, in burnt offerings. Likewise, when David bought the threshing floor of Araunah where God had stayed the plague in Israel, he immediately offered burned offerings there as a sign of his re-commitment to God (2 Sam. 24).

A remarkable example of the use of a burnt offering is found in the life of Abraham. When God called Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, he told Abraham to sacrifice him “as a burnt offering” (a “burnt offering” which actually pre-dated the Tabernacle sacrificial system). When eventually he stopped the sacrifice of Isaac God’s words to Abraham were very significant: *“Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your only son”* (Gen. 22:12). These words clearly indicate that the burnt offering was for Abraham a test of his willingness to give all. The ram which God subsequently pointed to, and which was to be sacrificed instead of Isaac, was then offered as a “burnt offering”. If the sacrifice of Isaac points to the sacrifice of Jesus, then it points not to Jesus as a sin offering, but to Jesus as a burnt offering.

The Sacrifice at Calvary was in fact a burnt offering just as much as it was a sin offering or a guilt offering. The full measure of Jesus’ commitment as a burnt offering lay in the fact that he was ready to accept the call to be a sin offering. He embraced the agony of dying as a sin offering, because he wanted to embrace the will of his Father. Like Isaac, he allowed himself to be bound on the altar as a burnt offering, but unlike Isaac he himself had to remain there as a sin and guilt offering. The obedience of Jesus to the most appalling but absolutely necessary requirement of his Father’s will, is an example beyond parallel of a life offered as a burnt offering. It is this obedience that made this offering a “fragrant offering”.

The Fellowship or Peace Offering (Lev. 3: 1-17; 7:11-36)

“Sacrifice fellowship offerings there, eating them and rejoicing in the presence of the LORD your God”. Deut. 27:7

Though it was sacrificed like the other offerings with the laying on of hands and the pouring out of the blood, the fellowship offering differs from them in that the carcass of the animal was seen not as something to be burned up but as something that provides food. The fat of the animal’s entrails were offered on the altar as a due portion for God, its breast and right thigh were waved before the Lord and then given to the “sons of Aaron” and the officiating priest and the remainder was eaten by the offerer. The offering thus provided a meal for God, the priest and the offerer. It was in effect a fellowship meal in which God, priest and offerer were at peace with one another. It is an offering that speaks not primarily of the removal of our sin (sin offering) nor of the dedication of our lives to God (burnt offering) but of our fellowship and feeding together on a sacrifice provided. This “peace-giving fellowship” could be nothing other than a “fragrant” offering.

The above verse from Deuteronomy refers to sacrifices offered on Mount Ebal at the time of the entry of the Israelites into the Promised Land and brings out clearly the nature of this fellowship offering as a time of joyous fellowship in the presence of God. The moment of entry, after such a long wilderness wandering, was obviously a moment of great joy and a time for great thanksgiving. It is this spirit that marks the fellowship offering; a time to eat and rejoice together. Significantly the fellowship offerings on that occasion were preceded by burnt offerings of dedication. The burnt offering always preceded the fellowship offering, for there could be no real fellowship apart from total commitment to God and his purposes. Mostly the two types of offering went together. We have noted the vast numbers of burnt offerings that Solomon made at the dedication of his Temple, but there were also on that occasion vast numbers of fellowship offerings, for it was as much a time of thanksgiving, joy and feasting as it was of dedication

“To explore the fellowship offering is to explore how we ‘feed’ on Jesus”

Jesus is the fulfillment of the “fellowship (or peace) offering” in the sense that, in offering himself, he has become the one on whom we “feed” and the one who brings satisfaction to God. To explore the fellowship offering is to explore how we “feed” on Jesus. This is not to be seen, of course, in carnal terms; his is an offering which provides us with deep spiritual nourishment and strength. God’s “food” is the deep satisfaction of contemplating what Jesus has done. Moreover even Jesus himself finds satisfaction - *“he shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied”* (Isaiah 53:11). When we have confessed our sin and dedicated our lives through him we are able to receive all his sustenance with great joy and with a great sense of thanksgiving, and in communion with a deeply satisfied God.

All animal sacrifices are “atonement sacrifices”.

In all the animal sacrifices the blood was poured out on the altar. Leviticus 17:11 notes: *“the life of the creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make an atonement for yourselves on the altar”*; it is the blood that makes atonement for one’s life. Thus the pouring out of the blood on the altar makes all the animal sacrifices “atonement sacrifices”, even though it is only the sin and guilt offerings which deal directly and exclusively with sin. They all involve a substitute whether they are sin, burnt or fellowship offerings. There is no such thing as an acceptable offering made without the death of a substitute. God has given the life of the substitute (i.e. allowed it to die) so that through that substitute a proper offering may be made. We first have to place our sin on a substitute (sin offering), then we have to dedicate our lives through a substitute (burnt offering), and we can only receive the spiritual strength and nourishment from God by means of a substitute (fellowship offering). At each stage we are totally dependent on something offered on our behalf, for everything we offer on our own, even our dedication and our desire for grace, is tainted. We cannot deal with our sin through a substitute and then in our own way make a dedication, for a dedication has also to be done through a substitute. At each stage something or someone “undefiled” has to present whatever we desire to offer. “Full” atonement can only be made when the Israelite has faced up to his sins, completely dedicated his life, and sat down to have fellowship with God, taking his provision. All three are necessary. All these offerings can only be properly done through “blood”, that is through the death of another, whose death makes each offering acceptable. Unless they are presented through one who is sinless and who has shed his blood on their behalf they cannot be received.

All this explains why Jesus is not only our sin and guilt offering but also our burnt offering and our fellowship offering. We must bring our sin to him and lay it upon him if our sin is to be removed, we must offer the dedication of our lives through him for such dedication to be acceptable, and we must seek the sustenance of God and the effective fellowship with others only through him. Self effort has no place at any stage.

It is a salutary reminder that all the offerings were sacrificed every day, representing a daily cleansing from sin and a daily commitment to God and feeding from the sacrificed one. Nothing less is expected of a Christian in his walk with God.

The Grain (Meat) Offering and the Drink Offering (Num. 29:2, 25, 28, 31. Lev. 23:13)

“I am being poured out like a drink offering” Phil. 2:17

These two offerings were always additions to the burnt offering, and signified the same total dedication to the Lord. Whereas, however, the offerer offered up his life through the burnt offering, he offered up the fruits of his labour through the grain and drink offerings. A handful of the grain offering was burnt before the Lord, and the rest belonged to Aaron and his sons. This seems to indicate that there was a dedication of the work of his hands to the work of the tabernacle. The grain offering was made of flour (bruised), oil, salt and frankincense representing in turn a crushed and sifted life, the presence of the Spirit, freedom from corruption and fragrance in burning. All these were the features of the sacrifice of Jesus. The drink offering was of wine, a further dedication of the offerer’s labour. Paul, with humility, thought of the last stages of his life as a drink offering being poured out on greater sacrifices.

The Peace offering has additions of cakes and bread when it was either a thank offering or a vow offering, but without the salt and frankincense. It is called the “meat of the fellowship offering” (Lev 7:15). It is not burned however, but eaten by priest and offerer. It adds to the concept of the fellowship offering as a time of mutual feeding.