

Sacrifices, Offerings, Feasts and Festivals
Lesson 9 Lecture
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Next week, we in the U.S.A. will be celebrating a national remembrance, called Thanksgiving Day. The first celebration of the thanksgiving feast was held by the Pilgrims in October of 1661. They gave thanks to God for their first harvest in the New World, after near starvation the previous winter. It was first celebrated by our nation under a proclamation from congress, when George Washington was president in 1789. But it wasn't until Abraham Lincoln in 1863 proposed a celebration for "Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father, who dwelleth in heaven", that it was celebrated on the third Thursday of November nation-wide.

Finally, Ulysses S. Grant made Thanksgiving Day a yearly holiday for federal employees in Washington D. C., through his Holiday Act. And in 1885, congress declared that this holiday would be a paid holiday for all federal workers. So this day became a national day of feasting and giving thanks.

Our memories of this celebration may be varied between sad and happy events in our past. I remember the honor of getting to eat at the "adult's" table as a teenager. I remember how my Mom would cook and prepare for this holiday for days before the feast, and the wonderful aromas that resulted from her preparation. I also remember the tears both of my parents shed on the first year my oldest brother was not present for Thanksgiving, due to joining the Air Force during the Viet Nam War. But, more recently, I remember the solemn time of praise to God, as each person at our extended family meal, took turns to say what they were thankful for that year, before we began to eat.

Whatever your memories may be, this American, yearly feast may help you to understand the importance of the Sacrifices, Offerings, Feasts and Festivals that we studied this week in our lesson. Each had a purpose for the people of Israel. Each one held meaning in worship and in their history. So today in this lecture, we will explore together what those meanings were and how they helped Israel and ourselves, as we worship the God who is the same yesterday, today and forever.

Two months were particularly sacred for Israel. The Month of ABIB and the month of Tishri. In each of these months there were three holy celebrations. We will take a look at each of these celebrations with their sacrifices and how they taught Israel to worship the One True God. Then we will notice how each one pointed to Jesus, the Messiah and the hope we have as Christians today. Finally

we will touch on the sacredness of the Sabbath, The Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee.

Now, the Jewish calendar is different from ours. The twelve months follow a lunar measure. Every month began with the new moon, which could actually start the Jewish month in our previous month. Each month was announced in the cities and villages by the blowing of trumpets. The year began in our month of April, which was called ABIB or NISAN in Hebrew. (You might like to refer to the page 9-5 from our lesson packet to follow this progression, and to take notes for this lecture.) The celebrations in this month centered around the Feast of Passover.

We have studied the history behind the feast of Passover in lesson 4, so for our purposes here, we will just briefly review. When God commissioned Moses to lead the children of Israel out of slavery, God struck Egypt with ten plagues to persuade Pharaoh to let Israel go into the wilderness and worship Him. Remember, the tenth plague was to be the death of every firstborn son and animal in the Egyptian homes. Believers in Yahweh could be saved from this final plague of Egypt only if that household sacrificed a lamb and brushed its blood over the top of their door, and on the two posts. Every family member must remain inside the home, behind the blood on the door during the evening, so the Lord God would “pass over” the blood so they would not die.

Even as God warned Israel of the preparations they must do while in Egypt, He commanded Moses to record this holiday, so they would remember. In Exodus 12: 14 the Lord said, “This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the Lord – a lasting ordinance.” [Exodus 12:14]

After building the tabernacle and establishing the priesthood, God informed Moses, in the second year, to institute the Passover Feast on the 14th day of ABIB, as a national feast of commemoration. Each family was to kill and sacrifice a year old male lamb, which must be without blemish, at twilight. This was to be a burnt offering, or fellowship offering. With either of these sacrifices, the man brings the lamb to the door of the tabernacle, places his hands on the head of the animal, and it is slaughtered by the Levites.

The internal organs and fatty parts are burnt on the altar of sacrifice. Then the rest of the lamb can be taken home, to be roasted for dinner. Each household then served the roasted lamb with unleavened bread, and bitter herbs were added.

If any lamb was left the next day, that the family was not eat it, “They must not leave any of it till morning or break any of its bones.” [Numbers 9:12] Any left overs must be burned, (Exodus 12:13) not eaten, unlike with our Thanksgiving turkey left-overs!

The day after Passover, began a week of further commemoration called the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The mandate to only eat bread without leaven during Passover, continued through this week; therefore, it caused this Feast to be called also the Feast of Unleavened Bread or Passover Feast interchangeably in the future. However, the weeklong feast of Unleavened Bread was a commemoration of the children of Israel's hurried journey through the Red Sea, fleeing the pursuing army of Pharaoh. During this escape, they were unable to take the time to let bread rise with leaven while they fled.

Just like our Thanksgiving is a commemorative feast of a special time in our history, the Passover feast was a special commemoration of this Exodus occurrence in Israel's history. However, the Passover Feast also held a very special future place in the history of the World. The Gospels record the last Passover Feast Jesus celebrated with his disciples. “On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, when it was customary to sacrifice the Passover lamb, Jesus disciples asked him, 'Where do you want us to go and make preparations for you to eat the Passover?'" [Mark 14:12]

It was in the upper room He indicated, during this last meal, that Jesus blessed the bread, and the wine in the first celebration of the commemoration we call communion. He retold his disciples that one of them would betray him. and he would be arrested as they would all leave him. He prayed for them and on that evening, Jesus was arrested and stood trial.

The next day the year Jesus was crucified was the Sabbath. But it was not always so during the fall of days in this first month. However, no matter which day the 15th of ABIB fell upon, that day held a sacred assembly. The people were to do no regular work, while on a Sabbath, the people were to do no work at all. The difference was that on this first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, food could be prepared. But on a normal Sabbath, even food was not to be prepared. The people ate food that they had prepared before sunset the previous day, or after sunset on the seventh day of the week.

Remember that the Sabbath was instituted in commemoration of creation. When God gave the ten commandments, He proclaimed that the Sabbath day, the

seventh day of every week, was to be kept holy. “For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.” [Exodus 20:9]

Likewise, God commanded that the people of Israel keep the day after the Passover sacred, set apart for a sacred assembly. The final day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread was also to be a sacred assembly. These days remind us of the sorrowful day the disciples spent in fear and despair while Jesus was in the tomb. Each day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, sacrifices were offered: Two young bulls, one ram, and seven lambs for a burnt offering; meal offerings; and one goat for a sin offering.

Such offerings reminded the people of how serious sin was. It was a foreshadowing of the final sacrifice of the Lamb of God, that would be offered to take away our sins, once for all. This was a solemn feast. But the second day of this feast included the hope of the First fruits.

The Festival of First Fruits was held on the 16th of ABIB, or three days into the Feast of Unleavened bread. On this day, a sheaf of barley was picked, which was the first grain that ripened for harvest. This first representative of the harvest to come, was offered as a wave sacrifice at the temple, in thanks for God's provision. It included the sacrifice of a lamb without defect, a grain offering of the finest flour mixed with oil, and a drink offering. The citizens were not allowed to harvest or eat any of the barley until this First Fruits offering to God was complete.

Notice that this Festival of First Fruits was commanded to Israel while they were still camped at Mount Sinai. Living a nomadic life style, they were not planting any crops in the wilderness. But the laws God gave them, were more than just instructions to live by while wandering in the desert, these were lifelong statutes, meant to prepare their hearts to worship Yahweh long after they moved to possess the land of Promise.

But their symbolism also reached thousands of years into the future. Just as Passover reminds us of Jesus' death on the cross, the Feast of First Fruits reminds us that Jesus rose from the dead three days later. Paul recognized this connection. In 1 Corinthians 15:20, 23 he wrote: “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep....But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits, then, when he comes, those who belong to him.”

So, the Festival of First Fruits held deep future symbolism and fulfillment. This feast held no meaning at all, for the Israelites camped in the desert. But it represented the hope of the Promised Land, God's physical provision for their families, and God's spiritual provision of eternal life in the future. The Old Testament believers who honored God's system of sacrifices and observance of His holy days, were putting their faith in all that God would do in the future. They recognized that by faith they would be saved.

The Festival of Unleavened Bread concluded seven days after Passover with another holy Sabbath. But starting the day after offering the First Fruits, the Festival of Weeks began a countdown. "From the day after the Sabbath, the day you brought the sheaf of the wave offering, count off seven full weeks. Count off 50 days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the Lord." [Leviticus 23:15,16] Counting those seven weeks, brought them to the Festival of Weeks, or what Jesus would have called Pentecost.

The weeks they counted consisted of the harvest time. They would be harvesting the final crop for the season, the wheat harvest, when they reached the seventh week. So the Festival of Weeks was both a busy and a joyous time. When it arrived, it marked the conclusion of harvest, all of their crops were brought in and stored. That would usually fall in our month of June. To celebrate the harvest, they would bring two big loaves of bread baked with yeast, to offer as a wave offering. This was presented to the priests, along with seven lambs, one young bull, and two rams as a burnt offering. These were sacrificed with grain offerings and drink offerings to the Lord.

A goat was offered as a sin offering and two lambs were offered as a fellowship offering. The sin offering was always completely burned with only a portion for the priests to be eaten; even its hide and hooves were to be burned outside the camp. But the fellowship offering was a voluntary offering and could be a male or female, without defect. Its fat and internal organs were burned, and its meat could be eaten. The only restriction was stated in Leviticus 3:17: "This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live: You must not eat any fat or any blood."

Daily, the sin offering was to be made. God somberly reminded the people of Israel that their sins must be atoned for. Last week Jeff taught us how strongly God emphasized that He is pure and holy, and men are not; not even the priesthood. Daily they had to offer a male animal sacrifice for known sins, given as a sin offering. But whenever people recognized that they might be guilty of a sin

they hadn't realized was sinful at the time, that would require the sacrifice of a ram and restitution was required. This voluntary offering was a guilt offering.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must realize that we sin every day too. We break God's laws, fully aware that we are doing so. We are not loving the Lord with all of our heart, soul, mind and strength. We also realize that we have unintentionally sinned. We may realize that we have judged, or coveted or given false testimony about someone, but later find out we were wrong, so we're guilty.

1 John 1:8 declares to believers: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us." But the Lord Jesus Christ has provided a way for us to remedy these sins. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." [1 John 1:9] Unlike the people of Israel, our Savior who died on the cross, covered all of our sins with His blood and daily intercedes on our behalf to ensure that we are forgiven. We too should be rejoicing in the hope He gives us.

After the summer months, the people of Israel would then be ready for the second holy month; the month of Tishri. This coincided with our month of October. The Festival of Trumpets, the Day of Atonement and the Festival of Tabernacles occurred during the month of Tishri. These represented the high, holy days, where as a nation, the people prepared, and then gathered at the tabernacle to make atonement for their sins.

On the first day of this seventh month the people awoke to the blast of trumpets. Unlike the beginning of every month, the priests in every town would blow trumpets throughout the entire day. This declared a day of a sacred assembly. The people were to do no regular work. It marked the beginning of the civil year. And it was also a signal that the Day of Atonement was coming soon and people needed to get their hearts and minds ready for the confession of sins, and restitution of anything they owed to one another.

The tenth of the month was the Day of Atonement. The Lord required the people of Israel to fast, or deny themselves and not do any work, as they gathered for a sacred assembly. This was so important that the Lord declared, "Those who do not deny themselves on that day must be cut off from their people. I will destroy from among their people anyone who does work on that day." [Leviticus 23:29,30]

This was the day that the sin offering was made for the nation. The instructions were given to Moses for the Day of atonement after the incident where Nadab and Abihu tried to offer unauthorized fire before the Lord. They had been consecrated along with Aaron and their brothers. They had heard the instructions as well, but they were not offering incense as directed. Rather they were offering this incense because they wanted to be important enough to enter the tabernacle too.

But God spoke to Moses to reveal His purpose for their deaths. “Moses then said to Aaron, 'This is what the Lord spoke of when he said: “Among those who approach me I will be proved holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored.”' Aaron remained silent.” [Leviticus 10:3] God was teaching his people, including his priests, that He is holy. Sinful man cannot approach the Holy Lord God in his own efforts.

Now, in our day, with the history of Christ's sacrifice and His gracious mercy that has been poured on us because of His finished work, we also may have lost our awe of His holiness. We are used to the open access Christ gave us to approach God the Father with our requests and prayers. But have we become complacent and sloppy in our worship? Our prayers must not be only about our wants and cares, without proper adoration of the Holy God. Let's examine the careful celebration of the Day of Atonement with that in mind.

Aaron was commanded to wash himself and put on the sacred linen tunic, linen undergarments, and tie them with the linen sash. Then, he should put on the linen turban, to prepare himself to offer the appropriate sacrifices on this specific day. He was reminded that he could not approach the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle on just any day. It had to be on the tenth of Tishri, but only after offering a sin offering for himself.

Aaron then took two male goats up before the entrance of the tent of meeting. Then, he was to cast lots, using the Urim and Thummin, to choose which goat would be the sin sacrifice and which would be the scape goat. The goat chosen for the sacrifice would be kept aside and the one that had been chosen as scape goat had a scarlet ribbon tied to its horns.

Next, Aaron would sacrifice the young, male bull for his own sins and those of his household, retaining its blood in a bowl. While the bull is burning, Aaron should then take a burning coal from the altar, along with two handfuls of incense, and take them behind the curtain to offer the incense on the altar of incense inside

the holy place. This represented the prayers of the people. But more than that, the Lord said, “He is to put the incense on the fire before the Lord and the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the tablets of the covenant law, so that he will not die.” [Leviticus 16:13]

Even when following the Lord's commands, the high priest was in danger of offending God Almighty. So, the Lord made this provision. While offering a sin offering for his own sin, the high priest could present the incense to obscure with its smoke the Ark of the Covenant where God's presence hovered above the Mercy Seat, which was also called the Atonement Cover. In this way, “he will not die.”

Only at this time could Aaron take the blood of the bull into the Most Holy Place, to sprinkle it on the front of the Atonement Cover, and then before the Atonement Cover seven times. Next, the goat for the sin sacrifice of the people, was to be offered. Aaron was to take the blood of the goat also inside the Most Holy Place. He was again to sprinkle its blood on the Atonement Cover and in front of it. “In this way he will make atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites....” [Leviticus 16:16]

Aaron would also make atonement for the altar of sacrifice. He took the blood of the bull and the goat and sprinkled it on all four horns of the altar. Then he was to sprinkle the blood on the altar itself seven times, “to cleanse it and to consecrate it from the uncleanness of the Israelites.” [Leviticus 16:19]

But there was another important event on this day. Finally, he took the goat that had been chosen as the scape goat before the people. Leviticus 16:21,22 recorded, “He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites – all their sins – and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task. The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness.”

However, God's abhorrence of sin required even more. Aaron was to take off his linen garments that he had worn into the Most Holy Place inside the tent of meeting and leave them there. He washed himself with water, and then put on his regular priestly garments. Only then was he ready to help attend to the burnt offerings of all the people for their sins as well as his own. Even the man who escorted the scape goat out into the wilderness needed to remove his garments outside of the camp, and wash them before he came back into the camp.

With all of the ceremony of this Day of Atonement, God showed His holiness, his abhorrence of sin and the terrible condition of mankind in the presence of the holy Lord of Lords. God also demonstrated that “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” of sin. [Hebrews 9:22] But remember, this very holy day had to happen again and again, year after year. The atonement from the blood of all these sacrifices, only temporarily covered their sin.

Five days after the Day of Atonement, the people celebrated a week of remembrance of their days in the wilderness, the Feast of Tabernacles. By spending a week living in outdoor booths, the people would remember their days living in tents as they learned about God's law in the shadow of Mt. Sinai. So, even after the amazing ceremonies of the Day of Atonement, the people began the next year studying God's Law, which revealed their sinfulness all the more.

But the blood that Jesus sacrificed when he was crucified, paid the price of all of the sins of the world. From those of the people of Israel, to our sins and those of the people of the end of days, the blood shed by the perfect Son of God, as the Lamb of God finished the atonement begun so long ago. Because He was sinless, he could offer himself to bear out sins, once for all. He purified us so we may come boldly into God's presence, without the fear of the separation our sin would demand.

Finally, let's examine briefly, the Sabbath year and the Year of Jubilee. Both of these yearlong celebrations were to commence when Israel entered the Promised Land. The Lord commanded that once the people began to farm their own territory, they should count off toward the Sabbath year. “For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the Lord.” [Leviticus 25:3,4] The people were to only live off of the crops left from the year before.

The Year of Jubilee was after seven of these sabbath years, or after 49 years. The Year of Jubilee was consecrated to the Lord. In this year, property that had been sold, was to return to the original clan. Debts were to be forgiven among the Jews. And any Israelite who had given themselves into servitude was to be released, debt free.

Why these special years? The Lord said, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.” [Leviticus 26:38] The Land belonged to God. So, if He said the land needed a rest

every seven years, it should be so. The people were His. So, they could not sell themselves or their land into permanent debt. They had no right to enslave themselves again, when God had already redeemed them out of slavery.

We will see in our future lessons that the people needed constant reminders of God's laws and plan for them as His people. We will see how they blew it and repented and then blew it again. But aren't we also a people who forget or rationalize our disobedience to God?

Let us remember during our Thanksgiving Feast, that all we have belong to the God who has provided for us every day. Let our feast day be one centered around thanks to and reverence before Him. Perhaps this year of isolation has been our “Sabbath Year” – forced upon us because we have never dedicated a year to Him before. Perhaps we should take Thanksgiving Day as a day to celebrate all God has provided for us even when we could not work.

Let's pray: Dear Lord, You are the Creator of the earth we live on. You have provided everything we have out of your wonderful bounty and mercy. We belong to you, and want to worship you. By your sacrifice on the cross, you have drawn us to yourself, with our sins forgiven and allow us to stand boldly before you, in the purity of your grace. Help us, oh Lord, to truly be thankful to you for your love and compassion and atonement. Thank you for our hope of eternity with you! In Jesus' name, Amen.