

Leviticus 5: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 08 April 2022

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Leviticus chapter 5. If anyone sins in that he hears a public adjuration to testify, and though he is a witness, whether he has seen or come to know the matter, yet does not speak, he shall bear his iniquity. Or if anyone touches an unclean thing, whether a carcass of an unclean wild animal, or a carcass of unclean livestock, or a carcass of unclean swarming things, and it is hidden from him, and he has become unclean, and he realizes his guilt. Or if he touches human uncleanness, of whatever sort the uncleanness may be with which one becomes unclean, and is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and realizes his guilt. Or if anyone utters with his lips a rash oath to do evil or to do good, any sort of rash oath that people swear, and is hidden from him, when he comes to know it, and he realizes his guilt in any of these, when he realizes his guilt in any of these, and confesses the sin he has committed, he shall bring to the Lord as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, a female from the flock, a lamb or a goat for a sin offering, and the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin. But if he cannot afford a lamb, then he shall bring to the Lord as his compensation for the sin that he has committed, two turtle doves or two pigeons, one for a sin offering, and the other for a burnt offering.

He shall bring them to the priest, who shall offer first the one for the sin offering. He shall wring its head from its neck, but shall not sever it completely, and he shall sprinkle some of the blood of the sin offering on the side of the altar, while the rest of the blood shall be drained out at the base of the altar. It is a sin offering. Then he shall offer the second for a burnt offering according to the rule, and the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin that he has committed, and he shall be forgiven. But if he cannot afford two turtle doves or two pigeons, then he shall bring as his offering for the sin that he has committed, a tenth of an ephah of fine flour for a sin offering.

He shall put no oil on it, and shall put no frankincense on it, for it is a sin offering. And he shall bring it to the priest, and the priest shall take a handful of it as its memorial portion, and burn this on the altar, on the Lord's food offerings. It is a sin offering. Thus the priest shall make atonement for him for the sin which he has committed in any one of these things, and he shall be forgiven. And the remainder shall be for the priest, as in the grain offering. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, If anyone commits a breach of faith, and sins unintentionally in any of the holy things of the Lord, he shall bring to the Lord as his compensation a ram without blemish out of the flock, valued in silver shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary for a guilt offering.

He shall also make restitution for what he has done amiss in the holy things, and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to the priest. And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering, and he shall be forgiven. If anyone sins doing any of the things that by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done, though he did not know it, then realises his guilt, he shall bear his iniquity. He shall bring to the priest a ram without blemish out of the flock, or its equivalent, for a guilt offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him for the mistake that he made unintentionally, and he shall be forgiven. It is a guilt offering. He has indeed incurred guilt before the Lord. In Leviticus chapter 5, the treatment of the purification offering is concluded, and we reach the fifth form of sacrifice. Leviticus chapters 1 to 3, the opening speech of the book, contained the ascension offering, tribute offering, and peace offering, in that order. Chapters 4 and 5 contain the second and third speeches of the book, which deal with the purification offering, and then, in chapter 5, also with the reparation offering. However, the parts of the second speech contained in this chapter seem to have something of a hybrid character, as we shall see. Verses 1 to 4 present a series of four different scenarios within which a person might need to offer a purification offering. The first is a sin of omission, where a person failed to testify in a case where he was a witness and bore guilt for his sin. The responsibility that the witness bore before

God to testify, and their liability to judgment if they did not, as John Kleinig observes, would have been an important means of ensuring the administration of justice in a very close-knit society without police, within which people would often be tempted to refrain from bearing testimony in cases where they might exonerate their enemies or condemn their friends or relatives. The second case is one where a person touched an unclean thing, such as the carcass of an unclean wild animal, and failed to do anything about it. The third case is where someone came into contact with human uncleanness, and failed to do anything about it. The fourth case is a sin of commission, an oath, perhaps a rash one, that someone inadvertently failed to fulfil. In contrast to many of the cases covered by the purification offering, these cases involved some guilt on the part of the offerer, and required confession. It's important to note that some of the situations here are what might be described as inadvertent, in contrast to the sort of determined and intentional sins, which could be described as high-handed. The cases described here in which someone contracted uncleanness, for instance, were not initially dealt with as they should have been, so some guilt is involved in addition to the uncleanness. Consequently, as verse 5 makes clear, some sort of confession had to occur. No offering is provided for high-handed or deliberate sins, although it seems likely that such sins could be downgraded in severity through repentance, as Jacob Milgram and others have argued. Confession, we should consider, was an integral part of rituals such as those of the Day of Atonement. Numbers chapter 15 verses 27 to 31 discusses the difference between inadvertent and high-handed sins. If one person sins unintentionally, he shall offer a female goat a year old for a sin offering, and the priest shall make atonement before the Lord for the person who makes a mistake when he sins unintentionally, to make atonement for him, and he shall be forgiven.

[6 : 04] You shall have one law for him who does anything unintentionally, for him who is native among the people of Israel, and for the stranger who sojourns among them. But the person who does anything with a high hand, whether he is native or a sojourner, reviles the Lord, and that person shall be cut off from among his people. Because he has despised the word of the Lord, and has broken his commandment, that person shall be utterly cut off. His iniquity shall be on him. In thinking about the difference between a high-handed and an inadvertent sin, we might think about the way that Eve was deceived concerning the forbidden fruit, whereas Adam was not deceived. He sinned with a high hand.

He knew what he was doing. As Eve had not heard the commandment directly from the Lord, and had been taught by Adam, who did not contradict the word of the serpent, she could be deceived. As he had received the word of the Lord first-hand, he could not be so deceived.

The sacrifices that we read of here, with the confession that was integral to their performance, would put the offerer back in good standing with the Lord. We should appreciate that the purification and reparation offerings go beyond cleansing alone. Moving further into the book of Leviticus, we will see various cases of cleansing from uncleanness without sacrifice. The purification and reparation offerings address more serious forms of uncleanness and guilt than those which could be addressed by rituals such as washing alone. Although this section is commonly classed as concerning the purification offering, verse 6 contains the term that is used for the reparation offering, a sham, the sacrifice that will be treated in the second half of this chapter. Most commentators maintain that the term is being used in a more general sense here, rather than in reference to the reparation sacrifice. Naphtali Meshul, however, makes the argument that the term is being used in the more technical sense, as a reference to the reparation offering. How could this be the case, especially as the same verse describes the animal as being brought for a sin or purification offering?

Meshul, having observed the way that the term a sham within verses 6 and 7 stands in parallel position in those sentences as offering in verse 11, argues that this makes far more sense if we consider that a sham is the technical term for the offering in this context. He argues that the term is not being used carelessly for the purification offering rather than the reparation offering here, nor is it being used non-technically as a reference to compensation more generally. However, this obviously leaves us with the question of why the animal is also being referred to as the purification offering. Meshul argues that this terminology makes sense when we consider the fact that the reparation offering is a sort of hybrid of the ascension offering and the purification offering.

We read more about the reparation offering in Leviticus chapter 7 verses 1 to 7. This is the law of the guilt offering. It is most holy. In the place where they kill the burnt offering, they shall kill the guilt offering, and its blood shall be thrown against the sides of the altar.

[9 : 01] And all its fat shall be offered, the fat tail, the fat that covers the entrails, the two kidneys with the fat that is on them at the loins, and the long lobe of the liver that he shall remove with the kidneys. The priest shall burn them on the altar as a food offering to the Lord.

It is a guilt offering. Every male among the priests may eat of it. It shall be eaten in a holy place. It is most holy. The guilt offering is just like the sin offering. There is one law for them.

The priest who makes atonement with it shall have it. Like the ascension offering, but unlike the purification offering, the blood of the reparation offering is thrown against the sides of the altar, presumably the internal sides. However, like the purification offering, the fat of the reparation offering is that which is burned upon the altar, and the priest can eat the flesh of the sacrifice in a holy place. The close relationship between the purification and the reparation offering is underlined by the statement of chapter 7 verse 7. The guilt offering is just like the sin offering.

There is one law for them. Meshul suggests that the form of reparation offering provided for the person who cannot afford a lamb, involving two turtle doves or two pigeons, the first for a purification offering, and the second for a burnt offering, further demonstrates its hybrid character. Indeed, it is worth reflecting upon why two birds are required, rather than merely one. The two turtle doves or two pigeons are the first of two potential alternative sacrifices that could be offered by people who could not afford a female from the flock. The second alternative for someone who could not even afford the two birds was an ephor of fine flour. Here a grain offering is functioning as a sin offering.

While functioning as a sin offering, this sacrifice is handled very similarly to the tribute offering of grain in chapter 2, albeit without oil and frankincense. We might compare this to the description of the tribute offering of the woman suspected of adultery in the test of jealousy in Numbers chapter 5 verse 15.

[10 : 59] Then the man shall bring his wife to the priest and bring the offering required of her, a tenth of an ephor of barley flour. He shall put no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of jealousy, a grain offering of remembrance, bringing iniquity to remembrance. The indigent man's sin offering is largely handled as a tribute offering, save for the emission of oil and frankincense.

The oil and frankincense added to the tribute offering rendered it a pleasing aroma to the Lord, but the memorial of the purification offering of grain brings up before the Lord the man's fault, and so it should not be offered as a pleasing aroma. As we're seeing, many of the sacrifices have overlapping features, and in some of their forms will be strongly related to two or perhaps more of the different types of sacrifice. Perhaps we should treat the categories of sacrifice with a degree of flexibility, also appreciating the ways that specific offerings can seem to straddle categories of sacrifice, and that these forms of sacrifice can also illuminate the relationships between the categories. In verse 14 of the chapter, a new speech begins with, the Lord spoke to Moses. While Meshel was a very distinct minority in holding that the earlier part of the chapter dealt with a form of the reparation offering, that the conclusion of the chapter deals with this offering is not really in dispute. Two cases are outlined here. The first, a breach of faith, someone who sins unintentionally in any of the holy things of the Lord, and the second, someone who sins again inadvertently in one of the things that the Lord's commandments say ought not to be done. When such a person realizes their guilt, they have to offer a reparation offering. We might think of cases such as someone who forgot to tithe upon a particular part of their produce and enjoyed the benefit of that for a year, and then realizes, at the end of that year, that they had never offered a tithe for their grain, for instance.

Or perhaps someone has inadvertently mixed crops within their field. Perhaps the local Levite had not taught them well in this matter that this was not something that ought to be done. And then someone brings this fault to their attention, and they discover to their horror that they are in breach of the Lord's commandment. How do they set things right? In such cases, you would offer a tribute offering.

When someone has desecrated the things of God, or failed to deliver to God those things that belong to him, some form of reparation or compensation needs to be paid. An example of such a trespass can be seen in somewhere like Leviticus chapter 22 verse 14.

And if anyone eats of a holy thing unintentionally, he shall add the fifth of its value to it, and give the holy thing to the priest. The reparation offering is unusual in what is offered. While the sin offerings of the flock were female, the reparation offering has to be an adult male of the flock. In contrast to the other offerings, the reparation offering also allows for the offering of the monetary equivalent to the cost of the sacrifice, measured in the shekel of the sanctuary.

[13 : 53] 2 Kings chapter 12 verse 16 suggests that this money went to the priests. The priests were the guardians of the holy things of God, and when someone trespassed upon those holy things of God, money was given to the guardians of those holy things. Holy things are for holy persons, and trespassing upon the holy things of God, when you are not a holy person or a clean person, puts you in a very dangerous position. In touching a holy thing, you can contract a sort of holy status.

In desecrating or taking one of the things of the Lord, the Lord now has a sort of claim upon you. In such cases, the offering would serve, as it were, to desanctify you, to remove you from the threatening realm of holiness. We see a good example of this in the law concerning the Nazarite, in Numbers chapter 6 verses 9 to 12, in a situation where the Nazarite, for reasons beyond his control, could not keep his vow. He had to offer a reparation offering, because he had marked out his head for the Lord, and now he could not offer what he had promised.

And if any man dies very suddenly beside him, and he defiles his consecrated head, then he shall shave his head on the day of his cleansing. On the seventh day he shall shave it.

On the eighth day he shall bring two turtle doves, or two pigeons, to the priest, to the entrance of the tent of meeting. And the priest shall offer one for a sin offering, and the other for a burnt offering, and make atonement for him, because he sinned by reason of the dead body. And he shall consecrate his head that same day, and separate himself to the Lord for the days of his separation, and bring a male lamb a year old for a guilt offering. But the previous period shall be void, because his separation was defiled.

The case of the Nazarite is an illuminating one. It is an example of how someone could inadvertently break their vow, and defile the holy things of God. The Nazarite in such a situation is presumably not seen as morally guilty. The man died suddenly beside him. He wasn't expected to die, so the Nazarite wasn't being reckless about his vow. But nonetheless, reparation does need to be made.

[15 : 51] He promised something to the Lord, and now he's failing to deliver it. Whether or not he's guilty, this is clearly a serious matter. The stipulated sacrifices for the Nazarite who did not fulfil his vow under such circumstances, seem to be lesser sacrifices within the categories to which they belong. Which perhaps suggests that the sacrifices that someone had to offer, were not merely determined by economic factors, but could also involve some sort of consideration of the severity of their wrong.

From the earlier part of this chapter, we might have expected that the Nazarite, for his broken vow, would have to offer a female of the flock as reparation. But instead, he has to offer the lesser reparation sacrifice of two turtle doves or two pigeons. In addition to that sacrifice for the broken vow, he has to offer another reparation sacrifice for failing to deliver his consecrated head to the Lord, and that takes the form of a male lamb of the first year. Interestingly, though a reparation offering, this is not the ram of reparation, but a lamb of reparation. Again, it seems that there is some allowance being made for the extreme inadvertency of the Nazarite's fault. Another instance of the reparation offering is found in the case of the laws for the cleansing of lepers in chapter 14 of Leviticus. Along with the ram of reparation, or its monetary equivalent, the offerer also needed to make restitution for what he had taken or failed to deliver. So a person who had failed to pay their tithe, for instance, would have to pay back that tithe with 20% added to it. This would all be given to the priest. Perhaps the fifth that's added to it is seen as a sort of double tithe. Someone who failed to deliver to the Lord what belonged to him earlier now has to deliver double the Lord's portion upon that.

A question to consider. What significance might we see in the distinction between the offering of a ram and the offering of a lamb?