

Lesson 3. ISRAEL'S PRIESTS AND SACRIFICES

READING: Exodus 28; Numbers 18 and 28.

AIM: To show the meaning and importance of the duties performed by the Priests and Levites.

1. BACKGROUND

When the Tabernacle was completed as a place of meeting between God and Israel, Moses was directed by God to appoint priests. He received detailed instructions concerning their consecration and duties at the Tabernacle. They were set apart for this special work of God, who gave precise details even as to what they were to wear (Exod. 28:1-4, 39:1-31).

A large part of the worship of Israel had to do with offering sacrifices and this involved the priests. These sacrifices were to be perfect, without any defects. (This general principle is stated in Lev. 1:2-3 concerning Burnt Offerings). Strict observance of these laws not only underlined the devoted and selfless attitude of mind, which was essential for worshipping the Lord acceptably, but also pointed forward to Jesus who offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for the sins of mankind.

2. PRIESTS AND LEVITES: Num. 18:1-32

The priesthood was confined to the family of Aaron. He was appointed High Priest and his sons were appointed as Priests. When the High Priest relinquished his position, it was normally assumed by his eldest son. The Priests ministered in the Holy Place. The High Priest alone was permitted in the Most Holy Place and only on the Day of Atonement (Heb. 9:7).

To assist the house of Aaron in their priestly duties the whole tribe of Levi was set apart. However, they were restricted in the work they were allowed to do. The Levites were allowed in the court of the Tabernacle, but only the direct descendants of Aaron were permitted in the Tabernacle itself. (Num. 18:2-3)

The Priests and Levites were given no inheritance in the Land (Num. 18:20-23). They were taught to rely entirely upon God for their living. The people of the land had to sustain them by giving a tithe (a tenth) of what they had to the Levites (Num. 18:24) which they did every three years (Deut. 14:28-29). And in turn, the Levites gave to the Priests a tenth part of the tithes they received from the people. Thus, the people gave to the Levites, and the Levites gave to the Priests. The tithe was not regarded as belonging to the people at all, but if they did not give it, it was equivalent to robbing God of what was His due (Mal. 3:8-9).

As well as the tithe they received from the people, the Priests were given certain portions of some of the sacrifices, which they ate as their due. The Priests and Levites were expected, in turn, to give their whole lives to God. They taught the people God's law (Lev. 10:11; Deut. 24:8), they acted as the people's judges (Deut. 17: 9-10), and when Israel was established in the land, they were allocated to cities spread throughout the whole nation (48 cities - Num. 35:2-8). They would always be on hand therefore to teach and instruct the people (Mal. 2:7).

In summary, the duties of the Priests and Levites included these:

- (1) At the Tabernacle they watched over the fire on the altar of burnt offerings to keep it always burning. (Lev. 6: 12-13).
- (2) They offered a lamb as a sacrifice for the nation each evening and morning. (Exod. 29:38-46; Num. 28:1-8).
- (3) They received and offered the sacrifices brought by each Israelite. (Lev. 6:7, 14, 20, 25).
- (4) They kept the seven-branched lampstand supplied with pure olive oil brought to them by the people. (Exod. 27:20-21;
- (5) Lev. 24:1-4).
- (6) They changed the shewbread every week. (Lev. 24:5-9).
- (7) They instructed Israel in God's laws. (Lev. 10:11).

3. SACRIFICES. Lev. Chapters 1 to 7; Num. 28

Sacrifices were divided into two main categories: those offered by individuals and those offered on behalf of the nation.

Individual Sacrifices. There were burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings and sin and trespass offerings. (Lev.7:37-38).

- **Burnt Offerings** (Lev.1:1-3)
In these an animal or bird was completely burned upon the altar. This was how the offerers showed that they gave themselves over completely to serving God.
- **Grain Offerings** (Lev. 2:1-3)
These were of fine flour mixed with oil and baked without leaven. Once again they showed a desire on the part of the individual to live in obedience to the Lord's commands.
- **Peace Offerings:** Lev. 3:1-5
These were freewill offerings brought when the people desired to give something to God, for example when they had experienced particular blessings from God and wanted to thank Him.
- **Sin and Trespass Offerings** Lev. Chapters 4-7.
When a person sinned, even in ignorance, he was required to offer a sin offering. An animal (a kid) was slain and its blood poured out at the altar as an offering to God. The blood was accepted by God as a covering for sin, for "the life is in the blood" (Lev.17:11). God forgave the sins of the offerers if they were truly repentant.

National Sacrifices. Although individual sacrifices for sin were made frequently, these were not sufficient. National sacrifices were offered daily at morning and evening for the nation, and also on the Sabbath, at the beginnings of months and on other occasions such as the annual festivals.

Special provision was made for a Day of Atonement for the sins of the whole nation of Israel. These sins were confessed by the High Priest and pardoned by God. Both the people and the priests had to meticulously prepare themselves for this occasion, which is dealt with in detail in the next lesson.

4. WHAT THE SACRIFICES TEACH US ABOUT JESUS

The sacrifices and offerings pointed forward to Jesus, the Son of God, who was the lamb without spot or blemish, perfect in every way. Christ as "the lamb of God" offered himself willingly, as teacher and healer, to His disciples and the common people, right up to his death on the cross. God accepted Jesus' sacrifice as a covering or atonement for the sins of many (Jno.1:29; Rom. 6:3-4; Eph.1:7).

Unlike the Israelites' sacrifices, which had to be offered continually, no further sacrifices were necessary after Christ died at Calvary. His life was the perfect offering, given once and for all for Jew and Gentile (Heb.10:14).

"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away are made nigh by the blood of Christ." (Eph. 2:13-14).

5. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Under the new covenant in Christ we are not expected to bring sin or burnt offerings with the blood of animals as He required of Israel. God, our Father in heaven, asks us to come with obedient minds and hearts to serve Him in our daily life. (Rom. 12:1) These sacrifices were the way given for the people to recognize and acknowledge God's goodness to them. We too, in our prayers, can give thanks to our Heavenly Father for the blessings in our lives, and we may also ask for help and comfort in times of distress.

REFERENCE LIBRARY

"The Law of Moses," chapters 17, 24 and 25. "Law and Grace," chapters 8 and 9.
"The Letter to the Hebrews," section 4.

QUESTIONS

1. Describe the important functions carried out by the priests in Israel.
2. What were the two main types of sacrifices under the Law of Moses?
3. What do the sacrifices under the Law of Moses teach us about the life and work of Jesus?