

SACRIFICE: GOD'S MEANS OF GRACE

1. Covenant renewal

Sacrifices are the way that God draws his people into his special presence in order to renew his communion with them and maintain his covenant relationship with them after the fall (e.g., Ps 50:5).

2. Drawing near

Sacrifices are the way that God draws Israel near to himself. Offerings were *qorban* (e.g. Lev 1:2), which means “that which is brought near.” The same verb usually translated “to offer” comes from the same root: “to cause to come near.” Sacrifices are not merely for atonement and forgiveness of sins by a substitutionary death but also for drawing near to God to experience communion with God in his special presence. The embodiment of God’s presence in the sanctuary makes these truly sacramental rituals.

3. Animals as substitutes and representatives of people

All animal offerings begin with the same sequence of actions that establish the animals as representatives/substitutes for the worshipper:

1. The worshipper selects and brings an animal that belongs to him.
2. The worshipper lays his hand on the animal
3. The worshipper kills the animal.

Each one of these opening actions identifies the animal with the one bringing the offering:

- The worshipper must select his own animal that belongs to him. The description of the animal as a “son of the herd” (Exod 29:1; Lev 1:5; Num 7:27; Ezek 43:19, 23, 25; 45:18; 46:6) only emphasizes the close relation of worshipper and offering. Leviticus explicitly says that the worshipper brings the animal so that “he may be accepted before the LORD” (Lev 1:3).
- Laying a hand on the animal is the same procedure employed to ordain leaders who represent the people (Num 8:10; 27:18–20). Pressing a hand on the animal is done so that “it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him” (Lev 1:4). “The very action of pressing down on the animal’s head suggests an attempt to establish an identity between worshipper and victim....[I]n some metaphysical sense, the victim is a vicarious substitution for the donor himself.”
- The worshipper kills the animal himself. This obviously emphasizes his personal stake and involvement in the ritual.
- Vicarious death: Taken together, these initial ritual actions imply that the animal dies as a substitute. Sinful people cannot approach a holy God on their own because of the guilt and defilement of sin. However, they could draw near through a substitute or representative who receives the penalty and consequences of human sin instead of the worshipper. In Israel’s worship, the animals play this mediatorial role. The blood of the animal represents its life, and God gave the use of the blood on the altar as a covering/atonement for human lives (Lev 17:11). Thus, God accepts the death of the animal substitute as a covering for human sin.

4. Liturgy of sacrifices

- Different kinds: Each different sacrifice embodies a distinct aspect of the way that God overcomes human sin and draws human beings near in restored communion with him. The different kinds of sacrifice thus reveal the gospel (and prefigure many aspects of Jesus’ death and resurrection) and provide a tangible means of experiencing gospel in these sacramental acts of worship.
- Consistent order: Whenever Old Testament narratives describe the sequence of liturgical events that involved more than one kind of sacrifice, the sacrifices are always offered in the same sequence.

