

Leviticus 6:1-13

Keeping the Fire Burning

The fire shall ever be burning upon the altar; it shall never go out – v. 13

The altar of sacrifice plays a prominent role throughout Old Testament history – and in particular in the book of Leviticus. It is in this book that the Lord establishes the way in which He would be worshipped by the Israelites. And the truth that stands out very clearly in this book is that the Lord would not be worshipped apart from the sacrifice offered on the altar.

There were no exceptions to this rule – and hence we find instructions governing the common Israelites with regard to their offerings. Each individual needed atonement for his sins. And we also find instructions governing the priests. In spite of their sacred office they stood in need of an atoning sacrifice also. They offered for the people and for themselves. The same applied to the rulers of the nation. They needed atonement for their sins. And so from the greatest to the least – from the common to the sacred – all were in need of atonement – because all were tainted by sin.

And this approach to God through an altar of sacrifice did not begin with the Israelites or in the book of Leviticus. As far back as Abel we find the altar implied when we read in Gen. 4:4 that *Abel brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof*. The first actual mention of the altar occurs in Gen. 8:20 where we're told that Noah built an altar.

In the book of Leviticus, however, we find the regulations of the altar enlarged upon in much greater detail. We find, in fact, two altars mentioned in connection with the tabernacle. There was the brasen altar which was located in the court of the tabernacle. This was the altar where the animal sacrifices were made. And there was the altar of incense which was within the holy place by the vail that was before the ark of the testimony. This was the altar upon which the priests burned incense.

In our text we see that one of the rules governing the altar was that the fire of the altar was to be ever burning. This is stated with emphasis by a positive and a negative statement. The positive statement is that *the fire shall ever be burning upon the altar*. The negative statement is what follows – *it shall never go out*.

The fire of the altar was to be a perpetual fire. It's interesting to note from Lev. 9:24 that the fire of the altar was initially ignited by God Himself. And we read that *there came a fire out from before the LORD, and consumed upon the altar the burnt offering and the fat: which when all the people saw, they shouted, and fell on their faces*. And so this perpetual fire was traceable to God Himself.

Now there are manifold spiritual applications that we can draw from the altar of sacrifice. But the one spiritual application I want to draw from today in order to give focus to our study comes by recognizing the connection between that fire burning on the altar and the fire that must be kept burning in the believer's heart.

It was the revelation of Christ to your heart that initially ignited that fire of love and devotion to Him. *Did not our heart burn within us* the Emmaus road disciples ask – *while He talked with us by the way, and while He opened to us the scriptures?* (Lk. 24:32). Much of the exposition that Christ would have been engaged in at that time would have been the exposition of the meaning of all those Old Testament animal sacrifices. Now the followers of Christ would understand that those sacrifices pointed to Him. He was the one that made atonement for our sins. And He made that atonement by being the sacrifice for our sins.

And so it is with this spiritual application in mind – the fire of devotion which comes from your heart that I want you to listen again to the words of the text – *the fire shall ever be burning upon the altar; it shall never go out*. When you see the fire of the altar as a picture of your devotion – your love – your zeal – your service to Christ then we can say that this fire must be kept burning, it should never go out.

I'm sure that you can trace times in your spiritual experience when that fire burned brightly. You were filled to overflowing with a sense of love and gratitude to the One who died for you and you couldn't do too much for Him. You sought Him with all your heart. And I'm just as sure that you can trace other times in your spiritual experience when that flame amounted to smoking flax. You could barely tell the fire was there at all.

In Old Testament times the sacrifices kept the fire going. There were continual sacrifices throughout the day. There was the morning sacrifice and the evening sacrifice. There were sacrifices made on special days and there were the freewill offerings of the Israelites. Between the wood of the altar and the animals burnt on the altar the fire of the altar was kept burning.

In our day it is the remembrance of Christ, the antitype of the sacrifices, that should keep the fire burning in our hearts. This explains why our observance of this ordinance must be perpetual. It keeps the fire burning. *For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do show the Lord's death till He come*.

And so I want to focus on this theme this morning – the theme of:

Keeping the Fire Burning

Consider with me, then, first of all that we keep the fire burning –

I. **By Remembering What the Offerings Signified** -

If you're the least bit familiar with the book of Leviticus then you know that there were many designations given to the sacrifices of the altar. There was the sin offering – the trespass offering – the peace offering – the meat (meal) offering.

Some of these offerings were named for the thing that made them necessary – the sin offering, the trespass offering – so named because sins and trespasses made the offerings necessary. The peace offering was named for the effect that was gained by that offering. Once atonement had been made then the one making the offering could be at peace with God.

But the most common offering was named for what took place on the altar. I'm referring now to the burnt offering. In a sense every offering was a burnt offering because in these offerings there was always an animal burned in part on the altar. But only in the burnt offering do you find the entire animal burned on the altar.

It was the burnt offering that was offered every morning and every evening by the Levitical priests. This offering stands out from the others by its name. It was called the burnt offering. It wasn't named for the occasion which led to it or for the effect produced by it – it was named for what took place with the sacrifice. It was burned – entirely burned (v. 9).

And while all the offerings in one way or another would point the offerer to Christ – it seems that the burnt offering pointed exclusively to Christ. It placed the strongest emphasis on Christ's atoning work. As we look back on it in retrospect we can say that this offering teaches us the power of Christ's atoning death.

Our text, you see, tells us that the fire shall ever be burning and will never go out. We might read that last statement – *it shall never be quenched*. In the immediate context of our text we can recognize that the reason the fire could never be quenched was because animal sacrifices could never efficaciously remove sin. This point is emphasized in the book of Hebrews – *For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins* (Heb. 10:4).

These sacrifices were the shadows of things to come. And it was when Christ Himself came and offered Himself a sacrifice for our sins that redemption truly was obtained – and propitiation truly was accomplished – and reconciliation truly was effected. I'm sure I've pointed out on various occasions that in the case of the burnt offerings the flames consumed the sacrifice. The flames stood for the wrath of God against sin. But when Christ came and gave Himself for our sins you find the case reversed – now instead of the flames consuming the sacrifice – the sacrifice consumed the flames. Christ would make the glorious proclamation – *it is finished!* – signifying that the flames of hell against His people had been extinguished.

And so it is not the fire of God's wrath that we see now as a fire that must continually burn. But rather it is the fire of devotion that we see in Christ's heart that continually burns instead. This is the fire that will never go out. It's the fire of love that moved Christ to leave heaven's glory to come into this world. It's the fire of love that moved Christ to render perfect obedience to His Father. It's the fire of love that would move Christ to be obedient unto death – even the death of the cross.

These elements, then, that we partake of today are designed to remind us of the constancy of Christ's love for us. Could Christ ever stop loving His people? We're tempted to ask that especially when we're aware of how unworthy we are of His love. The bread and the cup tell us, however, that He'll never stop loving us.

How could He stop loving us when He became one of us in order to purchase us to Himself? How could He stop loving us when He shed His blood for our sins and satisfied

the claims of the broken law? How could He stop loving us when He paid such a high price for us? The bread and the cup tell us that the fire of Christ's devotion for His people will never go out.

And for that reason He will continue to make intercession for us. *Wherefore He is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them* (Heb. 7:25). Do you remember what I said earlier about the altar of incense? It was fire taken from the brasen altar that was used to provide fire for the altar of incense. The brasen altar was the place of sacrifice. The altar of incense was the altar of prayer.

And what a picture we have of Christ's devotion to His people when we consider that He first made atonement for our sins and He then took up His post as our Great High Priest where He continues to present on our behalf the merits of His death as He intercedes on our behalf. He's proceeded from the brasen altar to the altar of incense as it were. The fire of devotion for His people has not gone out and will not ever go out. Thank God that it's the fire of God's wrath that has been forever extinguished because of Christ's atoning death, but the fire of His devotion burns on.

So as we ponder this great love which is pictured for us in the elements of the communion feast we look beyond the elements by faith to the One that loved us and bought us with His blood. We look to Him with wonder and awe that He would love us so fully, so freely, and so constantly. And in so looking to Him we keep the fire of devotion burning in our own hearts toward Him.

The fire of devotion in His heart toward us never diminishes. But the fire of devotion in our hearts toward Him does diminish and it becomes our duty to keep that fire going. We'll keep that fire burning brightly if we'll remember Him the way He tells us too – remembering His body broken for us – and remembering His blood shed for us.

We keep the fire burning, then, by remembering what the offerings signify – in particular what the burnt offering signifies. Our remembrance of Christ and His shed blood fuels the fire in our hearts with wonder and awe.

But would you think with me next that we keep the fire of our hearts burning –

II. By Remembering The Occasions for the Offerings –

Lev. 5:1 *If a soul sin, and hear the voice of swearing, and [is] a witness, whether he hath seen or known [of it]; if he do not utter [it], then he shall bear his iniquity.*

Lev. 5:17 *And if a soul sin, and commit any of these things which are forbidden to be done by the commandments of the LORD; though he wist [it] not, yet is he guilty, and shall bear his iniquity.*

Lev. 6:2 *If a soul sin, and commit a trespass against the LORD, and lie unto his neighbour in that which was delivered him to keep, or in fellowship, or in a thing taken away by violence, or hath deceived his neighbour;*

- *If the priest that is anointed do sin* – 4:3

- *If the whole congregation of Israel sin* – 6:13
- *When a ruler hath sinned* – 5:22
- *And if any one of the common people sin* – 5:27

You begin to get the picture, I trust, that sin was the occasion for many of the offerings. You don't find man in his unfallen condition needing to worship through an altar. He didn't need a substitute then. But since the fall of man sin is what gives occasion for the altar. Two of the sacrifices made on the altar were named for what occasioned them.

There was the sin offering. This offering was made for sins committed in ignorance. This offering was made regularly for the corporate people as a whole on such occasions as the New Moon, Passover, Pentecost, The feast of trumpets, the feast of tabernacles and the Day of Atonement. When the priests were consecrated a sin offering was required. When any sin committed by any individual would come to the consciousness of that individual a sin offering would be required.

This offering alone would call for an untold number of animal sacrifices. But this wasn't the only offering that occasioned the use of the altar. There was also the trespass offering. This offering made reference more to particular sins which were trespasses of the law of God. The sin offering made reference primarily to the sinner himself.

It's no wonder the fire was never allowed to go out. When would a time ever come in which there would be no need for the altar? I'm inclined to believe that when the children of Israel were honest before God it would prove to be a very busy time for the priests.

When you think of the countless sacrifices that needed to be offered on account of sin then it makes that proclamation all the more amazing that was uttered by John the Baptist when he first pointed to Christ – *Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world* (Jn. 1:29).

Can it be that this one man could accomplish such a feat? Indeed, it was the very purpose for which He came. The offerings all pointed to Christ. In Old Testament days forgiveness was gained through the sin offerings and the trespass offerings. But forgiveness was gained – not through any merit of those animal sacrifices – no rather forgiveness was gained because those sacrifices served to remind God that His Son would come and His Son would live and die and bear the transgressions of the world.

The fire of devotion in our hearts, therefore, should be fueled by humility with thanksgiving. We're thankful to be saved. Were you not saved the flames of hell would be the flames that would burn forever to satisfy God's wrath. And since your punishment could never make atonement for your sins your punishment would need to be extended throughout the ages.

There's a phrase that occurs no fewer than 5 times in Isaiah 9 & 10. It's a phrase that describes the judgment that was to come upon Israel. We can take Isa 10:4 as a sample - *Without me they shall bow down under the prisoners, and they shall fall under the slain. For all this his anger is not turned away, but his hand [is] stretched out still.*

And if you could picture the sinner burning in hell – He’s been there for hundreds and thousands and even millions of years. He seeks to cover his face in his shame as he burns and as he weeps and as he gnashes his teeth against God. He turns in his agony and torment to look up and to hope that sometime down the road of eternity his punishment will stop. But instead he sees blazoned on the walls of hell in flaming letters – *For all this His anger is not turned away, but His hand is stretched out still.*

This is what sin calls for. This is what sin deserves. And no ritual can suffice to take away sin. Countless animal sacrifices bear no merit in and of themselves and can never satisfy the broken law of an infinitely holy God. But then we look to Christ who is the propitiation for our sins and not for ours only but for the sins of the whole world (1Jn. 2:2).

And when we look to Christ we’re able to read in Isa. 12:1 – *In that day thou shalt say, O LORD, I will praise thee: though thou wast angry with me, thine anger is turned away, and thou comfortedst me.* So the fire of devotion is kept burning in our hearts when we think of what Christ accomplished. We stand in wonder and awe of such an accomplishment but we also stand in humility knowing that our sins called for Christ’s death. It was our sins that called for His body to be broken. It was our sins that pressed a crown of thorns into His brow. It was our sins that drove the nails into His hands and feet. It was our sins that called for the shedding of His blood.

Thank God He came. He came to become One of us. He came to die for us. He came to propitiate God’s wrath. He came to fulfill what all those animal sacrifices only illustrated. They illustrated substitution – Christ is our substitute. They illustrated imputation as the offerer placed his hands on the animal signifying the transfer of his sins to the animal that was to be offered. Christ fulfilled the illustration and so *he that knew no sin became sin for us* (by having our sins imputed to Him) *that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him* (by having His righteousness imputed to us – 2Cor. 5:21).

When we know something of the extent of our sinfulness then we can also know something of the extent of the forgiveness that He’s procured for us. This is how we keep the fire of devotion burning in our hearts.

And then consider finally that we keep the fire burning:

III. By Considering What was Gained by the Offering –

Forgiveness was gained at the altar.

Lev. 6:7 *And the priest shall make an atonement for him before the LORD: and it shall be forgiven him for any thing of all that he hath done in trespassing therein.*

One of the offerings was called the peace offering. And this signifies what was gained at the altar. In the burnt offering the entire sacrifice was burned on the altar. In the sin offering and the trespass offering part of the sacrifice was burned – part was given to the priest.

Only in the peace offering did the offerer actually share in the feast. Part of the sacrifice was burned – part was given to the priest – and part was given to the offerer. Now that his

sins had been atoned for he was enabled to enter back into fellowship with God being at peace with God and this fellowship was symbolized in his participation of the feast.

This offering formed a picture of God being satisfied with what was burned on the altar. And the priest was satisfied with the sacrifice he had made and the offerer was therefore satisfied as well.

The spiritual feast of which we're about to partake fulfills all these offerings by looking back to the One who actually fulfilled them all. Thank God this morning that the literal fire of the altar no longer burns. Christ – our Passover consumed the flames. We marvel at such a sacrifice and we marvel at the love that moved Christ to such a sacrifice.

But we also bow humbly before Christ our propitiation. We remember that our sins made the altar and the sacrifice necessary. We rejoice – but we rejoice with humility. And then we rest in the assurance of knowing that we've been reconciled to God through Christ. He is our peace and because we're justified by His blood we enjoy peace with God.

As we remember Him today in the way He's ordained – I trust that the fire of devotion in your heart – a fire of praise and thanksgiving to Him will continue to burn and will burn even more brightly. May it be said of your devotion that *the fire shall ever be burning upon the altar; it shall never go out.*