

“Meeting God at the Altar” series (A study from Leviticus)

Week 4: Thanksgiving

November 23, 2025

Psalm 100:1 Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. 2 Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. 3 Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. 4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. 5 For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.

Introduction

- There are certain themes that weave their way throughout the entire bible. Certain terms or ideas that pop up again and again and again.
- God’s holiness. Repentance. Salvation. Hope. Love. Faith & trust.
- One of those themes that flows throughout the bible is one that most people agree is important regardless of religion and across cultural boundaries. It’s one that good parents try to teach to their children. It’s thankfulness. Gratitude.
- Psychologists know from studies that being a thankful person and practicing gratitude leads to better well-being. There is evidence that our health is better and we are less anxious. We will sleep better and experience less depression.
- It helps build better relationships. You all know this. Think about people you know who are thankful, grateful people. They are fun to be around. They never lack for company. Compare that to critical, mean-spirited, hateful, negative people – you can only go so long before you need to escape from them.
- We KNOW in our heads that thankfulness and gratitude is a good thing.
- Many people will go through the exercise this week to share around the table before eating what we are grateful for.
- On top of all that, if you are a follower of Jesus, you know we are told to practice thankfulness.

Psalm 100:4 Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name.

Philippians 4:6 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

1 Thessalonians 5:16 Rejoice always, 17 pray continually, 18 give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.

- And then you run into a day, a week, a month, a year, where gratitude is NOT what you feel and is the furthest thing from your mind. What are we to do?
- We are exploring the bible book of Leviticus. It is the third book in our bibles, and it is almost entirely about the early Israelite religious system and laws.
- The reason we are studying this book is because it demonstrates the lengths that a holy, powerful, creating God will go to be in relationship with people he loves.
- Leviticus demonstrates how sinful people can have a deep and abiding relationship with a holy God and the book of Leviticus is a picture of what Jesus did 1500 years later, making a way for us, as sinful people, to have a deep relationship with our holy creator.
- The altar played a central role in this system of laws for the Israelite nation in how they were to know God and follow him.
- We have subtitled this series, meeting God at the altar. It was at the altar that the Israelites were invited to meet God and let him change their lives. And while we don’t physically offer sacrifices the way that Israel was supposed to, God still invites us to meet God at the altar.

- Regardless of your experience with the altar, for this series, when we talk about the altar, it is simply **where we have an opportunity to surrender to God so that we might know him and be changed.** It is the act of coming to God to acknowledge who he is, who we are, and the implications for how we live today.
- We have spent the first few weeks looking at surrender, obedience, confession and repentance. They can feel kind of heavy. But those are not the only reasons to meet God at the altar. **Thankfulness changes how we interact with God and others.**

Main Sermon Text

- There were a number of offerings that Israelite nation was to make in the law. A bunch of those were related to atoning for sin. There were multiple offerings centered around bringing an animal who was killed and sacrificed. They were the reminder of sin, the holiness of God and how to connect with him.
- In the midst of all of these offerings, God provided for another one that was different from all the rest.

Leviticus 7:11 "These are the regulations for the fellowship offering anyone may present to the LORD: 12 If they offer it as an expression of thankfulness, then along with this thank offering they are to offer thick loaves made without yeast and with olive oil mixed in, thin loaves made without yeast and brushed with oil, and thick loaves of the finest flour well-kneaded and with oil mixed in. 13 Along with their fellowship offering of thanksgiving they are to present an offering with thick loaves of bread made with yeast. 14 They are to bring one of each kind as an offering, a contribution to the LORD; it belongs to the priest who splashes the blood of the fellowship offering against the altar. 15 The meat of their fellowship offering of thanksgiving must be eaten on the day it is offered; they must leave none of it till morning."

- A little explanation. This offering was referred to by several different names in the law. It was called a "peace" offering, a "fellowship" offering or a "thanks" offering.
- It was unique:
 - 1) It was optional. It was voluntary, unlike the sin offerings which were a mandatory part of the law. It was not part of any specific holiday, ceremony or event. Whether it was because you had made a vow/promise or because you wanted to thank and honor God, you brought this sacrifice when you felt like you wanted to.
 - 2) The worshiper themselves participated in consuming the sacrifice. The one who brought it was one of those who consumed the offering. These offerings had a portion for the Lord, a portion for the priests AND a portion for the one bringing the offering.
 - 3) It had to be eaten on the day it was offered. This was not true of other offerings, which could carry over to the next day or days. In this case, it had to be consumed by the end of the day. It could be an animal or (basically) baked goods.
- Why would God create this unique altar encounter for the people of Israel? **Thankfulness changes how we interact with God and others.** So how we do this matters.

I. Gratitude is an intentional and practiced act.

- Gratitude is something we have to practice because we never "default" to grateful, regardless of our age.
- Our natural response to life around us is not gratitude. Why?
- We are sinful people. This means that our root problem is selfishness. From Adam and Eve in the garden until now, sin is the desire and act to put myself first. We never have to teach selfishness. Kids come out of the womb selfish, focused on their own desires and needs.
- Whether the needs are legitimate or not, the focus is on me. Every one of you have expectations, desires, hopes on your life and circumstances should look like.

- The problem comes when we compare these expectations to what we have.
- Everyone has some level of blessing.
- There is usually a gap in how we see it between what we have and what we desire or expect.
- They should be happy after all that I have sacrificed for those kids.
- My spouse should do a little more since I am pulling more than my weight here.
- Our elected officials should take our desires into account.
- The person at the DMV really should treat me with a smile – after all, my fees pay their salary.
- And these expectations extend to God. I have been to church every week this year – I kind of deserve better health. I have been faithful with my money, a little extra blessing would be good. We may not say it, but those expectations and desires float there, often in the background.
- Normally, we should focus on what I do have but this can cause us to focus on what I “don’t have” more than what I do. I see the gap more clearly than the rest.
- This is our default position. God knew that.
- Consider, he had brought Israel out of Egypt. They had seen God’s miracles. They had watched him part the Red Sea. They had seen God on the mountain. Stuff that we can’t imagine. Their response. Grumble about the lack of water. Complain getting food. Then when God provided manna, they complained that it was always the same. On and on it went.
- God knew that gratitude is a habit. It happens on purpose, when we CHOOSE to be thankful. It is why so much was written commanding God’s people to be thankful. It is all throughout the Psalms. Paul wrote about it over and over (example from one letter)

Colossians 4:2 Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

Colossians 3:15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

- When you encounter a lovely, grateful person, you can be absolutely sure they have practiced it over and over and over.
- Why did (and does) God care about this?

II. Gratitude shapes how we see and interact with God.

- The Lord's part of the offering, which was the fat portions, was to be set apart to him alone and completely burned upon the altar. Why the fat portion? In that culture, a well fed person was a sign of prosperity. The fat portion was the best part.
- Devoting the fat portions to the Lord symbolically recognized that all our blessings come from God. As we saw in an earlier week, he does not bless us for only our own benefit, but to bless others.
- It was also the first part of the offering. It recognized that God provided it all. It put the focus on him first. His requirements. His kingdom.
- Bringing an offering of thanksgiving was all about two things.
- It brings a proper perspective. It makes us recognize that every good and perfect gift is from above. It reminds us that God has given us out of the overflow of his character and bounty. It reminded them and us that God is gracious, compassionate, full of mercy and abounding in love.
- Gratitude puts the focus off of myself and puts it on God. It forces a different way of thinking – it puts God in the right place and us as well.

- Gratitude is an act of worship. Their thanksgiving offering was an act of not only recognizing that God gave them everything, but they wanted to give back. To offer themselves and their resources to him.
- It reminded them that their only reason they even had something to bring was because God gave it to them.
- Because they focused on God with their first and best, it changed how they viewed all the rest of their lives.
- Gratitude shapes how we interact with God, but not in a blind way.
- You might feel that gratitude is ignoring the gaps and focusing only on the blessings we have. But that is an incomplete picture.
- When we practice gratitude, it takes the whole of our life and brings a right focus, a right priority, a right ordering of things. It recognizes all the blessings in my life, that God is giving them to me, and that while there might still be gaps, I see them through the lens of God, giving him thanks and trusting him for what remains.
- Gratitude is something we need to practice. It will shape how we interact with God. But there is one more thing.

III. Gratitude benefits us and those around us.

- As we mentioned before, unlike other offerings given to the priest, the worshiper ate offering. Given that it would be hard for one person to eat all this food, it provided a meal bringing people together around the table, joined in thanksgiving to God.
- There was a communal aspect to the thanksgiving offering.
- Part of the offering went to the priest, which benefited him. He had something to eat. It was how they lived. They did not tend livestock or cultivate flocks, so they relied on this.
- Gratitude should spur us to be more others focused.
- When we are not thankful, we will naturally focus on our own needs first.
- When we begin to see God as the source of all blessings, and that he has given us all we need and more, it will lead us to look for ways to love others with our resources.
- Thankful people are generous people. Thankless people are stingy, self-absorbed people. They only take care of others when they have done all they wanted for themselves.
- The rest of the offering was then used to have a meal, a feast, with others.
- Gratitude should promote generosity and hospitality in us. The worshiper was to invite family and friends to rejoice with him.
- Thanksgiving is to flow out on others. We are to be thankful together. Our gratitude is to be celebrated together. When we practice gratitude, not only does my own attitude change, but it changes the people around us.
- Like everything else we have seen in this series,

The thanksgiving offering was shown in Jesus.

- The symbolic meaning of the feasting they did together was that as the food would nourish their bodies, the Lord would strengthen them to live a holy life, pleasing to God.
- It symbolized feasting on Jesus, the Bread of Life.

John 6:35 Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

- It foreshadowed eating and drinking in the kingdom of God.
- And it showed that Jesus would tell them this body and blood was represented when they ate the bread and drank the wine together, and showed life and blessing. Do you know what's interesting? What we call the Lord's Supper has historically been called, and still is in many faith traditions, the Eucharist. A word which means, "thanksgiving."

Conclusion

- **Thankfulness changes how we interact with God and others**
- Thanklessness leads us to be self-focused. Thankfulness leads us to see God for who he is and what he has done for us.
- Gratitude benefits us by freeing us from worry and frustration.
- Gratitude benefits those around us by inspiring us to generosity and an others focused life.
- God wants our gratitude. Not like a tax that we have to pay, but as a gift of appreciation that recognizes him for his character, his love, his faithfulness, and his blessings.
- God wants our gratitude because he knows that this is how a self-focused world around us will see something different.
- God wants our gratitude as this is a clear picture of who we follow.
- Let's practice becoming people of gratitude.
- Take a step this week by changing your focus. Consider what there is to be thankful for. Be specific. Start with the little things.