

# Judges 21:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And it came to pass on the morrow, that the people rose early, and built there an altar, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.

## Analysis

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**And it came to pass on the morrow, that the people rose early, and built there an altar, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.** Israel built an altar at Bethel despite the ark and tabernacle being present with their existing altar. The Hebrew *mizbeach* (מִזְבֵּחַ, "altar") suggests this was an additional altar, possibly indicating their desperation to seek atonement for the near-extinction of Benjamin. The combination of *olot* (עֹלֹת, "burnt offerings," wholly consumed, symbolizing complete dedication) and *shelamim* (שְׁלָמִים, "peace offerings," partially eaten, symbolizing fellowship restored) shows they sought both purification and reconciliation.

The timing "on the morrow" and "rose early" indicates urgency—they immediately sought to restore relationship with God and address Benjamin's crisis. Yet the tragic irony persists: they offered sacrifices for a problem they themselves created. From a Reformed perspective, this illustrates the danger of religious ritual divorced from repentance and wisdom. They performed correct sacrificial procedure but then "solved" the problem through more violence (destroying Jabesh-gilead, verses 8-12) rather than through genuine reconciliation. This parallels Saul's later reasoning that sacrifice can substitute for obedience (1 Samuel 15:22). Israel demonstrated religious form while lacking the wisdom to prevent disasters or the humility to solve them justly. Their offerings addressed symptoms (guilt) but not root problems (rash oaths, excessive vengeance, failure to seek God's wisdom before acting).

## Historical Context

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Building altars for special purposes had biblical precedent: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob built altars at sites of divine encounter (Genesis 12:7-8, 26:25, 35:1-7). However, after the tabernacle's construction, sacrifices were to occur at the central sanctuary (Leviticus 17:8-9, Deuteronomy 12:13-14). During the chaotic Judges period, this law was often ignored—Gideon built an altar (Judges 6:24-26), as did Manoah (Judges 13:19-20).

The burnt offering (*olah*) was completely consumed on the altar, symbolizing total dedication to God and atonement for sin (Leviticus 1). The peace offering (*shelamim*, also called fellowship offering) was partially burned and partially eaten by worshipers, symbolizing restored communion with God and community (Leviticus 3, 7:11-21). Together, these sacrifices sought to address the catastrophic breakdown in Israel's community—they had nearly destroyed Benjamin, violated tribal unity, and made rash oaths they regretted. Yet their subsequent actions reveal the emptiness of ritual without wisdom: they destroyed Jabesh-gilead (400 virgins taken, everyone else killed) and condoned kidnapping at Shiloh, showing that sacrifice cannot substitute for righteous, wise action.

## Related Passages

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**1 Corinthians 13:4** — Characteristics of love

**John 15:13** — Greatest form of love

## Study Questions

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1. How do we sometimes use religious activity to address problems we ourselves created rather than truly repenting and seeking wisdom?
2. What does the combination of burnt and peace offerings reveal about Israel's desire for both purification and restored fellowship?
3. In what ways might we perform correct religious forms while still lacking the wisdom to prevent or righteously resolve ethical dilemmas?

## Interlinear Text

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וַיְהִי	מִמָּחָר ת	וַשָּׁכַח יָמוֹ	הָעָם	וַיִּבְנוּ
H1961	And it came to pass on the morrow	rose early	that the people	and built
	H4283	H7925	H5971	H1129
שָׁם	מִזְבֵּחַ	וַעֲלָה ו	עַל אוֹת	וּשְׁלָמִים:
H8033	there an altar	and offered	burnt offerings	and peace offerings
	H4196	H5927	H5930	H8002

## Additional Cross-References

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**2 Samuel 24:25** (Sacrifice): And David built there an altar unto the LORD, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the LORD was intreated for the land, and the plague was stayed from Israel.