1-21-20

Leviticus 1:1-17

The descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had spent over 400 years in the land of Egypt. During that time they had grown into a very large company of people; however, they had also picked up lots of bad habits from the Egyptians in the form of worshiping false gods and immoral behaviour. God delivered a series of plagues on Egypt to show His superiority over the gods of Egypt; and then He delivered His people from their bondage in Egypt with a mighty display of power. He let Israel know that He was God and they were His people.

In the book of Exodus, God gave very explicit instructions on how to build an area to offer sacrifices; an area for worship. The instructions were meticulous and the people were to be meticulous in building the worship area and tent of meeting. It was important because as we read in Hebrews 8:5, the tabernacle was a copy of what is in heaven. Once the tabernacle was complete, we come to the book of Leviticus.

Leviticus contains a huge number of laws and instructions regarding how to worship and how to live as the holy people God requires them to be. And we can’t just brush off what we read in Leviticus, because God still requires us to live as holy people.

One of the main ideas behind “holy” is being “set apart”. The people of Israel were called to be different from the rest of the world. We are called to the same thing. Just as the people of Israel came out of bondage in Egypt, we who are Christians are brought out of the bondage of the world. Make no mistake: any who are not in Christ are slaves to the world; are slaves to sin. So, in Leviticus, we find lots of things that the LORD considers an abomination. These are things we are to avoid.

But Leviticus also gives very explicit instructions on how to worship. And much of that worship is through sacrifice. One of the sacrifices we don’t often pay attention to is the prohibition of eating certain foods. There were a number of animals that the Israelites were not to eat. The other nations would eat them, but they couldn’t. This was part of the Israelites being a separate people. This was a physical way of showing that they were different from the rest of the world and that they belonged to the true God.

Now we are not under that prohibition. For one thing, we are not under the Mosaic covenant. We are under the new covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31 where God writes His law upon our hearts; the covenant that comes through Jesus Christ. For another thing we read in Mark 7:19, “Thus [Jesus] declared all foods clean.” Did God change His mind? No. Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Law and our cleansing comes through Him, not our behaviour.

Leviticus gives detailed instructions about what to sacrifice and how to do it. Again, this is in the Mosaic covenant. We as Christians are not under that covenant. In fact, that covenant is no longer in force. The new covenant in Jesus’ blood has replaced it. God has graphically shown this by allowing the temple in Jerusalem to be destroyed and making it impossible for the Jews to rebuild it. So, yes, at least for now, it is according to God’s purpose to have the Islamic mosque on the temple mount.

There are several different sacrifices described in Leviticus and they have different purposes. Each has its own specific set of steps involved and also what is to be done with the sacrifice itself. Some are to be burned entirely, some are to be eaten by the priests and Levites, and some are to be eaten by the one offering the sacrifice. Each is important to study because they all have different ways of pointing to Jesus.

The whole idea of sacrifice is important in the Bible; especially blood sacrifice. A blood sacrifice, the giving of a life, is required for atonement of sins. We see this right after the fall in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3:21. Adam and Eve had made a pathetic attempt to cover their own shame and sin by sewing fig leaves together. God had to make an appropriate covering using animal skins. In other words, an innocent animal had to die in order to properly cover the shame of the people. So this was the first blood sacrifice to atone for the sin of Adam and Eve.

Animal sacrifices were very common among the different peoples who lived at the time of the Israelites. God’s instructions to Moses had to be very specific so His people would know that their sacrifices were being offered for a very different reason than those of other nations. Other nations sacrificed to try to appease an angry God. Israel’s sacrifices were to demonstrate their heart: asking forgiveness or offering worship. Other nations offered sacrifices thinking that their gods were dependent on them for food. God made it clear that He didn’t need their food. In Psalm 50, He lets the Israelites know that He already owns everything. It is good for us to remember in humility that God doesn’t need us; He created us and it is only by His grace that He has made a way for our salvation.

Here in Leviticus chapter 1, instructions are given for what is called a “burnt offering”. In a burnt offering, perhaps with the exception of something like feathers or hide, the entire animal is burned on the alter. It is an irretractable offering of the entire sacrifice to God. Nothing is kept back for the use of the owner of the animal or the priest. It is entirely offered to God.

Notice that different animals can be offered for this same sacrifice. God is making allowance for what people can afford. That’s important; God is not forcing a poor man to somehow obtain an expensive bull so he can make his offering to God. Why can God allow animals of different value for the same sacrifice? Because God is looking at the heart behind the offering. And that’s where the all-important faith comes in with these Old Testament sacrifices. God is looking for faith and dedication to Himself.

We see this demonstrated in the first sacrifice offered by people in the Bible: Cain and Abel. God accepted Able’s sacrifice but not Cain’s. The problem was not in the sacrifices themselves but in the heart of the ones offering. God knew Cain’s heart wasn’t right, and even though He didn’t accept Cain’s offering, God still warned him and encouraged him to turn to what was right.

Later in the Bible we read of many times where the Lord spoke through His prophets saying that He would not accept the sacrifices of the people or priests. They had gotten to the point where they were just offering because they had to, and more importantly, their hearts were elsewhere. They had turned to idolatry.

The offering was to be a male without defect. Without defect was important. It shows that God is perfect and that He requires perfection. It also shows the value of the sacrifice. It was a valuable animal; it was to truly cost the offeror something. Furthermore, before the sacrifice of the burnt offering the owner lays his hand on the head of the animal. Behind this is the idea of transference. The sin of the offeror is symbolically transferred to the innocent animal and the burnt offering is for atonement.

We can see how this points to Jesus. Jesus is a male and He is absolutely without defect. On the cross, a transference took place: He took on the sins of the world so that those who believe on Him could be acceptable to the Father. He not only suffered the consequence of sin, which is death, but He took the punishment that we would receive after judgement. While Jesus’ body was not burned, He was in effect a burnt offering: He was entirely offered up to God in sacrifice. The alter for Jesus was the cross and as the blood of the victim was sprinkled on the sides of the alter, so the blood of Jesus ran down the cross.

The animal sacrifices were not sufficient to remove sin. As Hebrews 10:4 tells us: *For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.* Although they were without blemish, they were not perfect. Additionally, the animal had no idea what was going on. It was not voluntarily being a substitute for someone.

The Bible gives us a beautiful progression. In the Garden of Eden God used the skins of the animal to cover the nakedness, the shame, of Adam and Eve. It was a physical covering of what was still there. In the Mosaic covenant, in the same way, the blood of the animals covered the sin. The sin and guilt were still there, just covered by the blood of the sacrifice. With the sin covered, the person’s worship was then acceptable to God. The blood of Jesus does not cover our sins; it entirely removes the sin and guilt from us. But because we are still sinners, another transference takes place: we are covered in Jesus’ righteousness and therefore able to come before God.

Notice that the person offering the sacrifice was the one to slaughter the animal. It was his responsibility. Then the priests stepped in to offer it on the alter. The one doing the offering needed a mediator. Likewise, it is the responsibility of each one of us to accept Jesus as our Lord and Saviour. Once we do that, Jesus becomes our mediator. He is the narrow gate; He is the door to the sheepfold; He is the only way to the Father.

There is a wonderful invitation and promise that Jesus made in Matthew 11: “*Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*” There are certainly many levels to these words, but this must be one: Jesus was speaking to the Jews who were still under the Mosaic covenant; they were still subject to all the sacrificial ordinances of the Old Testament. Most people will never even manage to read the book of Leviticus; imagine trying to live under all it prescribes and commands. Jesus was offering to lift that heavy yoke of the Law, and replace it with pure grace by faith.

Here is good news: Blood sacrifice was absolutely necessary for atonement from sin. Even the best attempts from human-beings were insufficient for our perfect and holy God. So he made a way for us. Jesus was the last blood sacrifice needed because He was perfect, He perfectly obeyed God and the Law, and He knew exactly what He was doing and did so voluntarily. The necessity for a blood sacrifice is a thing of the past.

We read Leviticus and see how God had things worked out from the very beginning. The death of the animals should have reminded the Israelites how evil sin really is. The death of Jesus should remind us of the same thing. But here is the thing; since we are no longer under the covenant through Moses and are no longer required to offer the sacrifices as described in Leviticus; are we now free from sacrificing? Not hardly.

In Romans 12:1 Paul tells us: *Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.* Once we become a follower of Jesus Christ, we become a burnt offering. Jesus paid a high price for us and we belong to Him. We are totally His. We are given to God in entirety.

That means everything we say and do. That means everything we own, because we recognize that God really owns our possessions and our money; He’s just letting us use it. That means our life and our heart. All we are becomes His. So, how are we doing with that?

In John 13:34 Jesus tells us: *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.* What a sacrifice we are called to. The Bible makes it clear throughout that we are to love each other, but Jesus tacked on something so radical: *as I have loved you*. I leave it to you to consider all the ways Jesus demonstrated His love for each and every one of us. But to love our brothers and sisters in Christ as He loves us absolutely requires sacrifice.

Notice that does not mean being a doormat or a slave to some unreasonable person. But it does mean to genuinely give up our time, money, or possessions to someone who needs them. It calls us to hurt for the benefit of others. We no longer give up a bull or a goat, we give up ourselves.

And here is an important part of this. Just as the blood sacrifice was part of the worship of God, when we sacrifice for others, it is worshiping God. As Paul said, it is a spiritual service of worship. And because of Jesus, our sacrifice is acceptable to the Father.

Prayer

Thank You Lord, for Your precious word. The more we read, the more we are convinced that it can only come from You and that You are all-powerful and wise God. It is truly amazing how You have set so many things up to point to our salvation through Your only begotten Son, Jesus. We praise and worship You, our Triune God, who had all things worked out from eternity past.

We are grateful Lord, that Jesus was the last blood sacrifice necessary for our salvation. There is no need for any other and any other is really an affront to Christ because His work was sufficient. We can see from history, that it was necessary for You to intervene, as mankind is too sinful to ever atone for our own sins. You are gracious Lord.

Now we also realize that we are still called to sacrifice, although in a different manner. Please help us to be willing to give of ourselves to others, especially those who are our brothers and sisters in Christ. In doing so we know that we are offering worship that is acceptable to You; and You, and You alone, are worthy of worship.

It is in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ we pray these things

Amen