

52 STORIES OF THE BIBLE

by

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10. The Holiness of God (Leviticus)

I. Introduction to Leviticus

This morning I want to look at one of the most intensely theological books in the entire Old Testament. A book permeated, permeated with the doctrine of the holiness of God, that he is separate from sin and he expects his people, likewise, to be holy. He expects his people to be different from the rest of the world. A book that tells us what sin is so we can avoid it and do the will of God. And a book that says if we fail, then God is a forgiving and merciful God, and that the chief benefit of that forgiveness is the very presence of God. As we have just finished singing that he is the air that I breathe, your very presence. This morning I want to look at the book of Leviticus. Leviticus is the third book in the Old Testament, instructions given to Moses while he's up on Mt. Sinai, and at first glance the book of Leviticus seems to be a pretty strange book, doesn't it? A strange book with strange regulations about strange things. All these rules on how you sacrifice animals, what do you do if an ox gores your neighbor a second time, all kinds of relevant stuff like that. Of course, if you were gored a second time by your neighbor's ox you probably would want to know what to do. Rules about special festivals and blood and fat and hindquarters. Strange stuff at first glance. And yet Leviticus is consumed with the very presence and the holiness of God, that he is separate from sin, that's what holiness means that he is separate from sin and he expects his people to be more like him than to be like the rest of the world.

II. Sacrifices

There are many places we could look at, but for example, Leviticus 18, starting at verse 2, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, 'I am the Lord your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt where you lived and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes; you shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God.'" Chapter 19, verse 18, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord." In truth, the principles in Leviticus are timely and relevant as much today as it was in the day when they slaughtered bulls and goats and lambs. There are a lot of places that we could look this morning in Leviticus but I want to center in on the whole sacrificial system. And there are lots of different sacrifices, there are different rules given for how you sacrifice animals. But they are all basically the same. So turn, please, to the first chapter of Leviticus and let's look at the first set of instructions. Leviticus Chapter 1, starting with verse 3. And I'm going to supply antecedents to a few of the pronouns to clear it up. "If his offering", in other words, the person bringing the offering, "If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, here's how you do it. He shall offer a male without blemish." In other words, "Don't bring me your runts of the litter. Don't bring me the crippled animals. Don't bring me the defective ones. Bring me the best ones you have; I am worthy of that. Bring me a male without blemish." "And the person bringing the offering shall bring it to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting that he may be accepted before the Lord. And then he (the person bringing the offering) shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. And then he (again the person bringing the sacrifice), he shall kill the bull before the

Lord and Aaron's sons, the priests, shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. And then he (again, the person bringing the sacrifice) shall slay the burnt offering, (skin it, in other words), and cut it into pieces and the sons of Aaron, the priests, shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. And Aaron's sons, the priests, shall arrange the pieces, the head and the fat on the wood that is on the fire on the altar. But its, the animal's entrails and its legs, he (the person bringing the sacrifice) shall wash with water and the priests shall burn all of it on the altar as a burnt offering. A food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord." And by pleasing aroma, that's Leviticus' way of saying that God will accept the sacrifice and will forgive the sin. That point is made explicitly in Chapter 4, verse 20.

Interesting passage, isn't it? And if anything comes through clearly in this passage, it's that the person who is bringing the sacrifice is a participant, isn't he? The person bringing the sacrifice is not an observer in this process at all. It's the person who has sinned who gets the animal, he brings it to the Tent of Meeting, he puts his hand on the head of the animal, and he cuts it most likely slitting its throat. And then he skins the animal and he hacks it into pieces and then he washes the guts and then all these things are given to the priest and the priest burns them on the fire. He takes some of the blood and throws it on the altar. Sometimes the blood is poured out before the altar, and in a few cases, the blood is actually thrown back on the sacrificer as well. There's no question who is responsible for his sin, is there? I mean, when you look at the process you can see that there's no one else to blame. The person has sinned, they have brought a sacrifice, they are a participant in the process, and as a result at the end, they are forgiven.

A. God is a Holy God

You can read this general procedure for sacrificing over and over again and many of the themes that are present in the sacrifice are present in the other discussions of Leviticus in terms of how you be clean and how you not follow after the ways of the world. And as you look at these and as you mull them over, there are many, many things that we can learn. Among other things, we learn certain things about God in the sacrificial system. And first and foremost, we learn that God is a holy God. That he does not sin and that he is totally separate from sin. As you have been reading through the Old Testament you have seen this idea of the holiness of God start to crop up. It's present implicitly in the Garden of Eden; it starts to come more explicitly to the forefront in the story of the burning bush in Exodus 3 where God says to Moses, "Take your sandals off for you are on holy ground." And the ground was holy because the holy God was present in the midst of the burning bush. We see God's holiness portrayed in places like Exodus 19 where they're getting ready for Moses to go up to Mt. Sinai and we see the Ten Commandments. And you have almost a whole chapter of instructions about not letting any animal or any person on Mt. Sinai. Why? Because the holy God is present at the top and if any sinful creature touches the mountain when the holy God is on it, that sinful creature, whether it be a person or an animal, will be killed instantly. You start seeing God teaching his people what it means to be a holy God. And when you get to the book of Leviticus you see God driving this point home because it is God' holiness that drives the entire sacrificial system. It is critical for you all to see that. God doesn't hate animals. God's not cruel or capricious. That's not what is driving the sacrificial

system. What is driving the system is the fact that God is holy. Leviticus asks the question: why should you sacrifice? Well, obviously because you sin. Well, what's the big deal about sin? Well, sin cuts you off from the presence of a holy God and therefore something has to be done about it. See, it is God's holiness that's driving everything. If I could state that in reverse, as we grow in our awareness of God's holiness, what happens? We also grow in an awareness of our own sin, don't we? And as we grow in our awareness of God's holiness, and of our own sin, we come to understand that there must be a punishment for our sin. It's just part and parcel of the same thing. The passage that Steve read from Isaiah 6 makes the statement so clearly. When Isaiah in his vision sees God high and lifted up and they're declaring, "Holy, holy, holy," what does he do? He doesn't jump in and worship him. It's his sin that is overwhelming to him and he says, "I can't look, I'm an unclean man and I live amongst an unclean people. I have to be forgiven." See, that's what happens when you see the holiness of God, and that's why it's so important to see that it's not some "cruelty to animals idea" that's pushing Leviticus. What is pushing Leviticus is that God is a holy God and we are a sinful people, and those two can't go together. I remember hearing about a comment that a pastor made once and publicly proclaimed that never again will sin be preached from his pulpit. Guess what? Never again was holiness ever preached from his pulpit. Ever. We learn a lot about God, but most importantly that God is a holy, holy God.

B. About Sin

What else do we learn from the sacrificial system? Well, we learn a lot about sin. We learn a lot about sin and its hard focusing on.... I mean, there are a lot of things that we could talk about. Let me just share two things about sin that come out of the sacrificial system. Number one: The sacrificial system in Leviticus teaches us that sin is the breaking of God's rules. What brings us to the point of needing to have a sacrifice so that we can enjoy the presence of a holy God, that sin is the breaking of God's rules. God alone decides the rules in Leviticus. He doesn't ask Moses' opinion. He doesn't ask Aaron his opinion. He doesn't ask Miriam her opinion. He doesn't ask Mike Murray his opinion, or anyone else's opinion. God alone makes the rules. And sin is breaking his rules. Now that's important to understand because it leads us to another truth and that is that sin ultimately is always against God. You see, if it is God's rules... (space at end of tape). Let me back up here. One of the things that we learn from the Levitical system is that sin is the breaking of God's rules, that God and God alone determines what is sin and what is not sin. And this is ultimately why all sin is against God. Joseph certainly understood this, didn't he? When Potiphar's wife was trying to seduce him, he knew that if he had succumbed to that, he would have sinned against Potiphar and yet he says to Potiphar's wife, "How could I do this evil thing and sin against God?" He knows that the rules for adultery come from God and therefore, by committing adultery, he would be breaking not Potiphar's rules, but God's rules. And therefore, the sin is against God. In psalm 51, one of the most powerful Psalms in the Bible, this is the Psalm of David after he has been confronted by Nathan about his sin with Bathsheba. And listen to how he confesses his sin, Psalm 51, starting at verse 1, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love, according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin for I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me." And then he says, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight." Yes, David sinned against Bathsheba, David sinned against Uriah, Bathsheba's husband. But at the

deepest most fundamental level, David understood that it was God's rules and when he broke God's rules, he sinned against God. And certainly, the Levitical system is helping us see this.

Now the ramifications of this are pretty relevant, aren't they? It means that if you and I are cruel to our sister or our brother, we are sinning against God. If we devalue people by excluding them from our little clique at school, we are sinning against God. If you and I disrespect our spouse, we are sinning against God. And if in our private thoughts and our private actions if they're full of lust and hatred, then we're sinning against God. That's what the Levitical system is trying to help us understand. See, you don't sacrifice to anyone else in Leviticus, do you? You don't kill a little animal to placate your wife's anger and then the bull to placate God's anger. I mean, you'd better deal with your spouse. But sin ultimately is against God. It's a different way of looking at sin I think. It's the Biblical way. That's one thing we learn about sin from the Levitical system that it's a breaking of God's laws, God's rules, and therefore sin is against God ultimately, finally. Yes, other people are involved, but ultimately it's God.

Well, certainly second of all, the Levitical system teaches us the tremendously high cost of sin, doesn't it? That's why I read Leviticus 1, that's why I made it clear that you would know who puts his hand on the animal, who slits its throat, who skins it, who hacks it into pieces, who washes its guts, who hands it to the priest? See, it's the sinner that does it. It's the person bringing the sacrifice and what God is trying to help us understand is how bad sin really is. We certainly live in a world, don't we, that belittles sin? We live in a world that ridicules holiness, that mocks righteousness. We live in a world that says purity is only for the weak and the Philippians 4 test; "Whatever is good and honorable and lovely, dwell on these things" is just for losers. Isn't that what the world says? When was the last time you heard of sexual purity upheld on television or in the movies? Leviticus says that sin is so serious that the only acceptable punishment for it is death.

Now, I'm going to drive this point home a little further. What I'm about to say is a little morbid, perceived as being morbid, but it's Biblical. And I don't know how to say it but to tell you to go home and do it, but I'm not sure that I want you to do it. But go home and get Fluffy. Go home and get your Fido and put him on your lap, put your hand on his head, get a butter knife, hold it to Fluffy's throat, and then you tell God that white lies aren't that bad., that the private sins are no one else's business. That little sins aren't an issue. I mean, Leviticus has people slaughtering bulls for unintentional sin. You see the power of the picture of sacrifice? You can't imagine doing that and at the same time saying, "Yes, Fluffy, you are going to die for my sin" and then at the same time say, "Sin is not that bad." I mean, you can't do it, right? You can't do it. That's the power of the sacrificial system that sin is horrible. The fact of the matter is that if someone feels that sin isn't that bad, they haven't read Leviticus. And if someone thinks that sin isn't that bad, they simply have not come to grips with the holiness of God. That's just the way it is. Leviticus teaches us many things about sin but those two are paramount, that it's the breaking of God's laws and it's very, very serious.

C. About Forgiveness

But Leviticus also teaches us a lot about forgiveness and this is often missed when you read Leviticus because in the book of Leviticus is one of the strongest pictures there is in the entire Bible short of the cross, one of the strongest pictures that God is a forgiving God. And that God forgives us not because we deserve it, but that God forgives us because he is a God of mercy and he is a God of grace and he is glad to extend forgiveness to those who are repentant so that they can enjoy his presence. Does God have to forgive you and me? Does God have to forgive Moses and any of the people who lived in Israel at that time? No. There is nothing in God's character that requires him to forgive and God can be perfectly just and perfectly holy and perfectly loving and allow every person who has sinned to die in their sin and to spend eternity in hell. He's perfectly loving and just if that's what he chose to do. But because of his mercy and because of his grace, God decides to extend forgiveness to those of us who don't deserve it. And it is only because of God's mercy and grace that he said the killing of an animal will affect atonement and he will forgive you. Do you remember back in Exodus 34 when Moses says, 'I want to see your glory, God. I want to know you so I can follow you.'? And when God's presence comes in a mighty way in Exodus 34 and God's glory goes before Moses as he's in the cleft of the rock, remember how God proclaims himself? Exodus 34, starting at verse 6, "The Lord passed before him (Moses), and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin." See, that, too, is the message of Leviticus that God is a merciful and a gracious God who extends forgiveness to me who does not deserve it and He extends forgiveness to you who do not deserve it. God is a forgiving God.

Now I need to add, really quickly on this, that forgiveness isn't automatic. It's not automatic in Leviticus and it's not automatic now. Let me explain that. The first impression that you can get when you read Leviticus is "Hey, if I do something wrong, I slaughter an animal and God has to forgive me and nothing else matters." And you can mistakenly read that into Leviticus, but as you read through the Old Testament and especially when you get to the prophets that God's intention in sacrifice was not to somehow automatically forgive you and let you live any way that you want. But that you had to be exercising faith, you had to believe that God would forgive, and you had to repent, you had to change your evil ways, otherwise the sacrifices didn't do anything. There are many, many passages that we could look at, but look at Isaiah 1, please. In Isaiah Chapter 1, both God and Isaiah are fed up with this idea that if I just go through certain motions, then somehow God is going to have to forgive me. It's kind of like God is a Coke machine, you put in your quarter and you can make God do whatever you want. But both Isaiah and God are tired of people offering sacrifices but refusing to repent, refusing to respond as God wants them to. So, starting at verse 11, God says to Isaiah, "'What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices', says the Lord. 'I've had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts. I do not delight in the blood of bulls or of lambs or of goats.'" Now he's talking about Leviticus here, isn't he? "When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts. Bring no more vain offerings." In other word, they're not affecting forgiveness. They're not doing what they were designed to do. "Incense is an abomination to me, new moon and Sabbath and the calling of congregations." Now,

why God? I mean, they're just doing what Leviticus says to do. Why are you so mad at the children of Israel? Let me tell you why I'm mad. "I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. I cannot stand it when you come to the temple and you go through your religious motions and you do the religious things and you keep the external letter of the Law but you are harboring sin in your hearts, you are full of iniquity you are refusing to repent and change your ways." God says, in a sense, "This makes me sick! It makes me sick to watch you go through the religious motions and live in sin. That's why your sacrifices are vain." If you're going to live in iniquity it's like God says, "Don't even offer the sacrifices." I remember when I took my SAT's, they had just instituted a new rule that if you leave a question unanswered it's minus one. If you answer it incorrectly, you have minus two. And I was thinking, you know, that's what's going on in verse 13. "It would have been better for you never even to offer the sacrifice if you're going to harbor sin in your heart and refuse to repent. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates. They have become a burden to me. I'm weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands I will hide my eyes from you even though you make many prayers, I will not listen. Why? Because your hands are full of blood. Rather, what should you do? Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean. Remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes. Cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, correct oppression, bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause." There's nothing automatic about forgiveness in the book of Leviticus. And there's nothing automatic today about going through religious actions, and going to church, and putting your five dollars in the plate if you're harboring iniquity in your heart, is there? The same is true today as it was then. God is a forgiving God. He forgives because of his mercy and because of his grace, but he requires true repentance, true repentance, not religiosity. He requires true repentance.

III. Leviticus Prepares Us for the Cross

Well, there's a lot that we are learning about God, about sin and about forgiveness. But I cannot leave Leviticus without making the most important point. That the book of Leviticus, and then as it is helped by the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, most importantly prepares us for understanding what the cross of Jesus Christ is all about. In fact, you simply cannot really understand the cross unless you understand Leviticus. It's not really possible because Leviticus teaches us that our sins have separated us from a holy God, we've broken his rules. Leviticus teaches us that the penalty of this sin is death. As Paul says to the Romans, "The wages of sin is death." Leviticus teaches us that forgiveness is only through the mercy and grace of God. We can't earn it. And Leviticus teaches us that forgiveness is received only when we stand before the altar in true repentance and offer the sacrifices that he desires. And you take that and then you put it in light of the New Testament teaching, and especially Hebrews, and you realize that ultimately, finally, on the cross the ultimate sacrifice was paid. Forgiveness was finally made available in all its fullness and all its completeness. And the cross becomes the altar and on the altar hangs, as John says, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Jesus is the ultimate sacrifice and in fact, the Bible teaches, fulfills the sacrificial system. Do you want to know why we don't kill bulls and goats anymore? Because Jesus, the Lamb of God, fulfilled the sacrificial system. He was the ultimate sacrifice and he finally has made forgiveness available. And the book of Hebrews, let me just mention them briefly; Hebrews 9:22 says without the shedding of blood there's no remission of sins. There's no forgiveness without life being spilled in blood and yet

in Hebrews 10:4 in a very interesting twist, if you will, the author says that it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin. And you look at it and you scratch your head saying, "Well, what's going on in Leviticus?" What's going on in Leviticus is that God knows that his Son is going to die. God knows that his Son is going to provide the only true sacrifice for sin. And he is beginning to teach his people about himself and about sin and about forgiveness. And he honors the sacrifice because he knows at one time in the future THE sacrifice was going to be given, the death of the Lamb of God. And on the cross our holy God provides the perfect sacrifice to secure forgiveness forever. And we don't have to sacrifice any more animals. The Lamb of God has already done it.

You know, I use the ABC's all the time with you to share the gospel, right? That we have to Admit that we're sinners. Any clearer picture than killing a bull? We have to Believe that salvation, forgiveness of sins, is in God alone. God alone accepts the sacrifice. And after the New Testament, it's Jesus alone in whom lies forgiveness. And then we move into the presence of God, just as they did in Leviticus. They sacrificed the animal and they moved into God's forgiveness once the sin had been forgiven. So also, you and I, as we become disciples of Jesus Christ, move into his presence and live with him. ABC.

I want you to leave this morning with the image of the sacrifice forever planted in your head. I want you to know I resisted bringing my dog this morning to make this point. But I want you to leave here forever with the image of sacrifice embedded in your head. The image that you would put your hand on the animal and God would accept it as the punishment for your sins. You would slit its throat, you would skin it, you would hack it to pieces, and you would wash its guts. And then the priest would take it and burn it and sprinkle its blood on the altar and sometimes sprinkle it back on you. And if I could take that image and extend it, it just seems to me that if we could simply understand that it was our hands that killed Jesus. If we could only understand that it was our hands that pounded the nails. Do you remember Thomas Blackshear's picture "Forgiven"? This is the point that he's trying to make. If we could only understand what it means when we say that Jesus was our sacrifice, then we would fall at the feet of the cross, the place of the sacrifice, and we would worship him. We would be overwhelmed with thankfulness for his forgiveness that comes, not because I deserve it, but because of his mercy and grace. And then out of that would come a desire to please him, to enjoy the presence of a holy God. Remember Romans 12:1? It is by the mercies of God because of everything that God has done for us, because of his mercy that we are to present our bodies as "living sacrifices". That is the message of Leviticus. But perhaps more than a vision of the sacrifice, I want you to leave with a vision of God's holiness. That sin is so bad because God is so holy.

Let's pray: Father, in the words of Moses in Exodus 34, we invite you into our midst. We invite you into our midst as a family, and Father I pray if there's anyone here who is not one of your children, that they would invite you into their heart, into their midst. We are a stiff-necked people Father. We do sin. We have broken your commandments and as David says, "Against you, and in you alone" we have sinned. Please pardon our iniquity, pardon our sin. We thank you Father, that you do. Take us for your inheritance. Father, thank you for the cross, that place of the final sacrifice, the sacrifice that was sufficient to cover all sins. And because of the cross, in Christ alone is

forgiveness and in Christ alone because of his sacrifice for our sins, is access to you in all your holiness. Father we thank you for your forgiveness and your holiness through what Christ has done on the cross. Amen.

Understand that there is a holy God. And aren't you glad, not so much that we're sinners, but that we understand that there's only one way to get from the depths of our sin to the holiness of God and his presence forevermore. It's not through religion; it's not through meaningless, unrepentant sacrifice. It is through Christ alone after what he did on the cross. If any of you are stiff-necked people and you have not acknowledged your sin, have not confessed your faith of what Jesus did on the cross will save you from that sin, and have committed your life to him to live in his presence now and forevermore, I would invite you to come and talk to us afterwards. But may you go, a stiff-necked people, forgiven because of what Christ alone has done on the cross. You are dismissed.