

Leviticus: Sin, Blood, and Atonement

In our narrative we have come to the close of Exodus. The descendents of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who had developed into a stiff-necked and rebellious people, are, nevertheless, freed from by the grace of God from oppressive servitude to Pharaoh, the most powerful figure in that ancient world. God imposed His will upon the Egyptian leader in very dramatic fashion and, in equally dramatic fashion, made His presence known to Israel at Mt. Sinai. There, He set forth the constitution by which Israel would be governed, the Ten Commandments, and declared that if Israel would abide by its terms He would bless them. He promised to build them into a holy nation, to be their God, and to dwell among them. To maintain a visible presence He had a home built for Himself, the Tabernacle, where Israel could worship Him and find a temporary remedy for their sins. He set before them a Mediator, the man Moses, to establish His covenant with His chosen people. He provided the descendents of Levi to serve Him in the Tabernacle and the descendants of Moses' brother Aaron, also from the family of Levi, to serve as a body of priests to make atonement for their sins. The nation was established by the hand of God and the prospects for it were grand. All things were readied for Israel to conquer the land that God had promised to Abraham. With God, who had demonstrated His power by many marvelous wonders, leading them, nothing stood between Israel and the realization of that promise. Nothing but their own faithlessness.

At this point in the Bible we have an interlude to the historical narrative. The next book in the Old Testament is Leviticus and contains little in the way of the chronological development in the history of Israel. That account will resume in the book of Numbers. Leviticus is the Latin equivalent of the Greek, *Leuitikon*, which means "That Which Pertains to the Levites." The Hebrew title is *Wayyiqra*, meaning "And He Called." Other Hebrew literature refers to the book variously as "The Law of the Priests" and "Law of Offerings." While much is disclosed about priestly functions in their service in the Tabernacle, the message is about much more than priests and rituals. As we take a broad overview of God's work with His creation, we find the central message of Leviticus to Israel and, ultimately, to mankind is that sin is serious, the remedy for it is costly, man must put his trust in his Maker, and God's purpose in man begins and ends in Himself.

The first fifteen chapters of Leviticus deal primarily with various offerings, mostly for sin, and things that make a man unclean. In Chapters 1 through 7 we have descriptions of offerings at the altar and the laws governing the administration of those offerings. The reader's attention is drawn to the killing of animals and the sprinkling of the animal's blood (Lev. 1:5, 11; 3:2, 8, et al). We also observe in chapters 8 and 9 that for a second time the consecration of Aaron and his sons for priestly service is recorded (see Exodus 29). Again, we note the central role of blood as Moses took some of the blood of the sacrificed animal and applied it to Aaron and his sons as part of the purification process that prepared the priests for service in God's house (Lev. 8:23-24; see also Lev. 9:9, 18).

The gory business of animal sacrifice would continue through one offering or another, in one application or another, day after day for fifteen hundred years. To the modern observer temple worship would look more like a busy day at the butcher shop than an assembly at a house of worship. All the bloodletting was not designed to be a disgusting and pointless ritual, but was intended to emphasize the seriousness of sin. From early in the creation account (Genesis 4:10; 9:4-6), blood symbolized life. God taught that life was in the blood, that blood (life) was not to be taken without serious consequences, and that blood was sacred. Leviticus 17 expands upon this theme and makes a distinct connection between sin and blood: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul (Lev. 17:11)." God may not yet have revealed that "it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins (Hebrews 10:4)," and men could become insensitive to the mass of blood that flowed from these poor animals, but there could be no mistake even in the eyes of a casual observer that God declares sin is serious and its atonement is costly. A millennium and a half of such practice should have prepared Israel for the sacrifice of the Lamb of God whose blood God gave to man on the altar to take away our sins.