

A God of Joy and His people...

Leviticus 16v1-10; 18v1-5; 19v9-18

Introduction

Four weeks ago we looked together at Psalm 66 and discovered that true joy involved praise, testimony and sacrifice. That only by being serving instruments of God's orchestra of joy, can true joy be experienced! Then last week we looked at a momentous and joyous event followed by a great tragedy as Nadab and Abihu stumbled and incurred God's wrath on their sin.

Book of Leviticus

Tonight, we look again in the book of Leviticus. Some of the words and phrases we commonly use come straight from the book of Leviticus. Words such as jubilee and scapegoat are commonly used today. And what husband hasn't offered a form of guilt offering to his wife!

Leviticus does have important things to tell us about sin, obedience and holiness. Perhaps most importantly it tells of God dwelling with His people. So tonight we delve into Leviticus chapter 16, which is the centre and pinnacle of the book. So please do turn in your bibles to Leviticus 16.

1. Sacrifices & Atonement

Read Leviticus 16v1-10

Day of Atonement

Chapter 16 describes the Day of Atonement! We know that God had chosen Israel to be His people and that they were to be a shining beacon of light and hope to the world! As part of the covenant made with their leader, Moses, God said that He would be their God and they would be His people! What a contrast to the nations around them that worshipped multiple 'gods', made of stone and often thirsty for human sacrifice.

The Tabernacle / Tent of Meetings

Most of the activity takes place in the Tabernacle! What did the Tabernacle look like? The Tabernacle or as it is also known as, the Tent of Meeting, was a marquee divided down the middle by a curtain. There was the 'public' side and the other side, beyond the curtain, we know as the Holy of Holies, where the Chief Priest could only enter once a year! Inside the Holy of Holies were these items, which all screamed how special this place was!

- Ark of the Covenant: the object representing God's presence with His people
- Mercy seat: the removal top of the Ark where the blood was sprinkled by the High Priest
- Golden censer: High priest used this to make the cloud of incense as he entered the Holy of holies!
- Golden pot of manna: symbolised how God had supplied the needs of His people.
- Aaron's rod
- Stone tablets of the Law: as given to Moses on Mount Sinai

So what was the Day of Atonement all about? It was to be an annual event. The verses read give a summary but you can read the details in the rest of the chapter. To atone means to clean, make amends, and to substitute. Chapter 16 starts by referring back to the incident we looked at last week, with Abihu and Nadab. Through their death, the Lord states the fundamental principles for priests – only they could mediate for the nation before Him and they had to be spiritually and ceremonially clean.

Lets look very quickly at 5 aspects: Offerings, Blood, Aaron, Scapegoat and the people!

The Offerings!

There were 5 offerings performed on the day of Atonement in order to cleanse and re-consecrate the Tabernacle. All included the death of an animal and therefore involved blood : 2 blood atonement sin offerings; 1 scapegoat sin offering and 2 burnt offerings

Blood!

But why was blood used to 'cleanse'? Why not water? Did God need blood, to quench his thirst for blood? By all means, no! God didn't need blood but blood was used to show that sin had a cost – the cost was blood because life is in blood (**read Leviticus 17v11**)! The death substitute of an animal, reflected a temporary covering or veneer, which is why it needed to be done over and over again.

Aaron!

So that's blood! What about Aaron? During his normal daily duties, he represented God before the people, and was dressed as king! A king with great honour and clothes would draw attention to his office of honour! Here, on this one day of the year, the Day of Atonement, he represented the people before God, he was dressed as a servant. Before the Lord Almighty, Aaron is stripped of honour and approaches God as a servant. So, to a certain extent, Aaron was a servant King! Before he could go into the most holy place, he had to create an obscuring cloud of incense in the Holy of Holies, to veil the glory of God so he could enter and live. No doubt the memory of his sons provided an extra incentive to follow God's rules meticulously!

Scapegoat

And all this talk of a scapegoat! There were 2 goats to be offered! One goat was sacrificed as a substitutionary sin offering for the people and its blood taken into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled on the mercy seat. Aaron, laid his hands on the second goat's head, the one kept alive, and symbolically cast the burden of sins of the nation onto the goat. It was then driven out into the wilderness, far away from the camp and was never to return!

The people!

Lastly, what about the people? What were they to do? Just sit there and be bored while this all took place? No! They were not to be passive! But rather, they were to remember this day as an addition to their annual calendar by "humbling their souls" as one translation puts v31. This involved not doing routine things such as working and feasting. They were to ponder upon the awesomeness of their God who lived amongst them, and to reflect the cost of their sin. They were also trusting that the Chief Priest was being fully obedient to the regulations!

Atonement done!

On this day of Atonement, the one day of the year, Atonement took place between God and His people. God's holy dwelling place and things associated with it were cleansed. The sins and disobedience of the nation of Israel, over the previous year, had left impurities as stipulated in verse 16. (**Read v 16**) The cleansing blood was to symbolise the great cost of sin.

If the Day of Atonement did not proceed as regulated or was forgotten one year, God could no longer be present with His people, due to the stains of sin and uncleanness of His Tabernacle or dwelling place.

Holiness is what separates God from all His creation. For God alone is holy, perfect and full of glory. Exodus 15v2 "Who is like you, O God, glorious in holiness!" Or Isaiah 60v25 "To whom will you liken me, or shall I be equal?" says the Holy One.

But if God was holy, how was His nation to act holy? That's what we will be discussing in the next part after a break!

2. Life worship –

Leviticus 18v1-5; 19v9-18

In our first part, we looked at the ceremonial cleansing of God's dwelling place. Now Leviticus moves to the matter of personal & communal holiness and moral impurity. Repeatedly in this book, God has frequently said "**Be holy, for I am holy**". The ancient nation of Israel was to be an obedient example to the whole world, a unique concept or paradigm if you like! God was present with them and they were to be His light in a dark world. The people of Israel were to live a life that reflected the holiness of God! God desired obedience over sacrifice!

Be Holy!

Holiness was to be a moral attribute of ancient Israel, much the same as it was for the holy God who dwelt amongst them. In chapter 18, we see at least 3 characteristics of this relationship!

Firstly there is the call to be loyal to God! God's laws were not to be obeyed slavishly but to be obeyed joyfully and with effervescent vigour! God is speaking to those He is in an intimate relationship with and He wants them to be observably loyal by being like Him – holy!

Secondly there is the call to be different! Different from the surrounding countries and cultures! Ancient Israel was to have a national distinctiveness that truly was to have separated them from the surrounding cultures such as Egypt. Ancient Israel was to live a life so radically different that people around them would notice! They were to be separate from the worlds around them in lifestyle and worship! . Their God was a personal God who dwelt with them. God's presence with them was to affect every aspect of life, on both a national and individual level.

Thirdly, their whole life was to be worship! Worship wasn't to be just for the Sabbath, feasts and ceremonies – it was to be their lifestyle. God's regulations affected such ordinary things as relationships, diet, clothing, social justice, social welfare, environment and work. Their whole lifestyle was to be an act of worship, and not just on the Sabbath. Who knows best what humans

need – humans or the God who created them? By being obedient, they would have life to the full – a life of blessing and peace!

Lets look at an example. Chapter nineteen which was read to us, starts off with taking care of the poor and the daily necessity to eat! That was how God was going to provide for the poor – through the farmer not harvesting everything! To leave some food unharvested was to be a symbolic act of worship, a thanksgiving and a visible sign of trusting in God to supply! It was holiness in action – a generous holiness if you will!

Good Neighbours!

This section is summed up in Leviticus 19:18, “love your neighbour as yourself”. So, for an ancient Israelite, to love his neighbour would mean not stealing, lying, deceiving, blaspheming, cursing, being unjust, slanderous, filled with hatred or endangering! A good neighbour would be a person of integrity, not seeking to exploit others in any way. A good neighbour would administer justice and be observably filled with love. Does that remind you of something that was said in the New Testament?

How to read Leviticus today?

So what is the best way for us in the 21st century to read these ancient laws of Leviticus? Is it just to simply ignore them or are we to slavishly follow them? Perhaps the best way is to simply let Scripture interpret Scripture and see what the New Testament says about the Leviticus laws. Take for instance the food laws. We know in the New Testament that all food is now permissible, whereas under the Old Testament, certain foods were not permitted to be eaten. In the New Testament, the Apostle Peter had a dream in which all food was declared clean!

It is also wise, not to see them as merely a list of “not do” statements, but also as “do statements”. Rather, we should see them as a love letter from a God who wants to save His people from distress and anxiety in order to give them a life of peace, unity, health and a joyful life in all its fullness.

All these laws were to lead ancient Israel to be a holy nation. Holiness was about being set apart for a purpose and making wise, conscious decisions about what was right or wrong. It involved being obedient to God and keeping His decrees and regulations. Being holy, involved having a lifestyle, which was contrary to the cultures surrounding them. To be holy was a lifestyle choice of worship, to reflect their holy God.

They were called to be loyal! Called to be distinct! Called to worship! What has all this got to do with us? Where does the Day of Atonement and these laws fit into the life of a Christian in the 21st century? We will take a look in the third part in a little while!

3. Today

Read Hebrews 2v14-18

Holy Barrier

I wonder what the biggest fence, wall or barrier is that you have either seen! Perhaps one of the biggest walls in the world is the Great Wall of China. It is over 4000 miles long, about 25 feet high and up to 30 feet thick! It is huge!! I have seen it both up close and from the air! It was originally built to keep out invaders – for that is what walls and barriers do: Keep out enemies!

However big the Great Wall of China is, there is one barrier that is even bigger! Just as it was for ancient Israel, it is for us today. The biggest barrier to exist is the one that separates God from all His creation. This barrier is holiness, for God is a holy God and people are inherently not! The prophet Ezekiel gives a vivid picture of the holiness of God and describes it as a fire, a bright light, radiance, full of glory and majesty.

If that is holiness, what is sin? Sin is both a heavy burden. Sin is like also toxic virus of the soul and affects every person. It is more deadly than Ebola, HIV and Spanish flu - combined. Sin inevitably leads to death and sin is anti-God! Sin is disobedience of God. Sin is also not doing what is right! With God there is no big or small sin – sin size is a human construct! However, some sins do cause God to grieve more than others.

Holy People!

If only people declared holy can enter God's presence, how are we made holy? How can we, as mortal unholy people, enter into the presence of God and live? What does atonement, if anything, mean for us in the 21st century?

Chapters 9 & 10 of the book of Hebrews are the best commentary you can find on Leviticus 16. In there we see that Jesus Christ is our scapegoat and takes the immense burden of our sins on himself! Aaron was a type of servant king but Jesus was the ultimate servant king! Aaron, as Chief Priest, offered sacrifices for the cleansing of sin, but Jesus Christ himself was both the

sacrifice and the Chief Priest. Jesus Christ became sin! We see the annually repeated Day of Atonement becoming the unique Day of Calvary, as Jesus' death is an atoning and substitutionary sacrifice, which makes amends to God for the sins of the world. Jesus alone gives life and offers life to the full – a life borne from grace and not from Law.

At the time of Jesus' death, the curtain to the Holy of Holies in the Temple, the Tabernacles successor in Jerusalem, was torn in two from top to bottom to symbolise that access to God was now open! The blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin, as God never wanted sacrifices in the first place! God desired obedience over sacrifice – all the time! The sacrifices of Leviticus were only in situ because the ancient Israelites sinned, they were disobedient towards God and His desires! God wanted obedience, and obedience as we know, goes on to give praise to Almighty God and gives testimony to His goodness!

Declared Holy!

Lets now, quickly compare the Levitical Sacrifices and Jesus' Sacrifices!

Levitical Sacrifices: Performed repeatedly by earthly priests who stood. Their work was unending as they laboured on earth and their sacrifices could never take away sin.

Jesus' Sacrifice: He offered one sacrifice. Jesus now sits at God's right hand in power and glory with His earthly work now complete. His sacrifice achieved its goal of fulfilment and made his followers holy!

At the cross of Jesus Christ on Calvary, the Old Covenant was fulfilled and the New Covenant ushered in! This New Covenant assures those who follow Jesus Christ have

- Forgiveness!
- Peace!
- Reconciled to God
- Declared right and just before God!
- Cleansed from sin!
- Free from the slavery to sin!
- Intercedes for us!
- Given the Spirit to dwell inside!
- Granted direct access to God the Father, through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit

With His own blood, rather than that of an animal, Jesus became the only atoning sacrifice that is perfectly acceptable to God, and it's only by His blood that was shed on that hill of Calvary that makes people holy. While the Levitical sacrifices were needed to be done over and over again,

Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was a once and for all sacrifice – never to be repeated! Because of Jesus Christ's sacrificial death and His subsequent resurrection, we have access to God and we have been declared holy and innocent! But only if we have made a conscious decision to follow Him

Perfect holiness, has been revealed in Jesus Christ, and Him alone. If you are a Christian, you have been declared holy because you now wear Jesus Christ's robe of righteousness! It was given to you as a gift of grace! That is because of what Jesus did on the cross and in His resurrection. Jesus Christ has broken down the barrier between God and humanity once and for all, by His sacrificial death.

That's why we celebrate Jesus' death around the communion table and that's why the bread and the wine are only symbolic of His flesh and blood. If the bread and wine did turn into the actual flesh and blood of Jesus Christ as some churches proclaim, then we would be sacrificing Jesus Christ all over again. If you are a Christian, you are declared holy, and therefore you are to live a holy life – a life worthy of Jesus Christ!

Live Holy!

As a Christian, the Holy Spirit is living inside you, changing and transforming you into the very image of the holy one, Jesus Christ. Your transformation into that image of Jesus Christ, is the greatest evidence, not only of the work of the Holy Spirit but also of you being a Christian living an obedient life to God. As a Christian, you are no longer an enemy of God but a friend of God and belong to God! As Christians, we are to live a life of obedience to God – casting off all that hinders and seeks to stop us. And if we fall into disobedience, we can confess our sin to the Father, through the name of the Son and in the power of the Spirit and get right back up again, knowing we are forgiven – totally amazing!

As Christians, we are called to be joyfully obedient to the Lord, serving Him in every aspect of life! In doing so, our whole lives will be acceptable worship to God and not just at a Sunday meeting. Our worship is to be a lifestyle of conscious decisions, reflecting our devotion to a God with whom we are to be in a dynamic and intimate relationship with. This lifestyle will affect the way we work, rest and play!

As instruments in God's orchestra of joy, we are to be loyal to Him – the joy giver! We are to obey with joyful, effervescent vigour and reflect a living God to a society out there, which is in darkness. They will know we are Christians by the way we act – actions of obedience to God, signified by the love we have for each other and them. Love in action by supplying people's needs, both on an individual and church basis.

We are called to follow God and not to succumb to the temptations, which seek to mar our relationship with the God who lives inside us. Go into this week, to obey and serve the Lord with faithful obedience!

But if you are not a Christian here tonight, then please do make yourself known to us afterwards and we would love to talk to you about becoming a Christian. While you have breath, it's not too late to start this life of joyful obedience to a loving God and enter into a living and dynamic relationship of true Joy with Him. Don't leave it so late that you incur God's judgement for your sins and have everlasting separation from Him and others! God does indeed love you and He is calling you to come into a dynamic relationship of true joy with Him today. Take the opportunity today – come and follow Jesus Christ. He is calling you to respond!