

1. Too hot to handle (studies in Leviticus) - Living Sacrifices

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[0 : 00] So, to the book of Leviticus. If I tell you that the book of Leviticus reminds me of the ending of a James Bond film, you're probably not going to believe me.

But it does. At the end of most James Bond films, there is a scene where the hero and his current girlfriend are trapped down in an underground cavern.

There are explosions all around them. They're perhaps in a railway carriage and the track on which they are traveling is red hot. The walls seem to be caving in and the ceiling falling in and the ground exploding around them.

That is the book of Leviticus. Everywhere we go, there is danger. Everywhere we go, like a power station, there are signs that say, keep out, do not touch, this is dangerous, do not go beyond this point.

And that's the thing I want to impress on you as we begin our study of this book. That's why I've called this series Too Hot to Handle. The blazing holiness of God is not something to be trifled with, not something to be rushed into, not something to be despised.

[1 : 16] It is too hot to handle. I suspect that many of you have found this book too boring to read rather than too hot to handle.

And indeed, it has often been the graveyard of pious hopes to read the Bible from cover to cover. Those who have struggled through the building of the temple at the end of Exodus, the tent, sorry, at the end of Exodus, frequently find when they come to Leviticus that it's a step too far.

My hope and prayer is that after these six services, that we'll have a juster and more balanced view of this great book.

So let me make a couple of comments by way of introduction. First of all, the value of this book. Why are we reading and studying this book? Now the first thing to notice is the very heart of the books of Moses, the Pentateuch, Genesis to Deuteronomy, the five books of Moses.

Now there is no authority in the Old Testament that bypasses that of Moses or is superior to that of Moses. Indeed, in the last months, we've been spending a great deal of time in the books of Moses, really in his series on Genesis and his more recent series on Exodus.

[2 : 34] And don't imagine that when we come to the New Testament that we can then safely ignore him. Jesus says on more than one occasion, if to the scribes and Pharisees, if you had understood Moses, you would have understood me because he writes of me.

Jesus giving his authority to the words of Moses as being words that point to him. And even more astonishingly, in the book of Revelation, the redeemed in heaven, as they gather round the throne of God, sing a song of victory.

And that song is described as the song of Moses, the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb. The words of Moses, this authority, the authority to which the prophets look, and the authority which our Lord Jesus Christ himself underlines.

These words are spoken as the nation gather at Sinai to hear the word of God. It's interesting, these two chapters in Exodus, which Willie has been expounding the last few Sunday evenings, some 400 years pass during that time.

You might not pick that up, but that's the time that passes. Whereas from Exodus 3, right on through the rest of Exodus, right through Leviticus, and on to Numbers chapter 10, we have the events of one year only.

[3 : 55] The whole narrative slows down. As if the Spirit is saying, look, you must take particular attention to this. This has to be taken slowly. This has to be understood clearly.

The book of Leviticus is good news. It's good news that there is a way back to God. Remember at the end of Genesis 3, the way of the tree of life is barred.

The cherubim are there. The flaming sword is there. There is no way back. Well, God is saying there is a way back. There is a way back, and it's a way of sacrifice.

We can now approach the holiness of God by the grace of God. Only by grace can we enter. Only by grace can we stand, not by our human endeavor, but by the blood of the Lamb.

In the letters of the Hebrews, chapter 8, verses 8 to 9, don't bother looking them up, but look it up later. Hebrews 8 gives us a list of all the rituals, the furniture, all the sacrifices that were set down by Moses.

[5 : 03] And then he says this, this is an illustration for the present time. In other words, who is the book of Leviticus written for? It was written for us. Not just for the people who first heard the words of Moses.

It was written for us. So that's the first thing I want to say. The book is valuable. The book is essential. Then a quick word about the setting. Let's say the setting is the tent of meeting.

The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting. The tent, like the temple after it, was divided into three parts. There was a so-called outer court.

Then there was the holy place. And then there was the most holy place, or the holy of holies, where only the high priest was allowed one day a year on the day of atonement.

And we'll come to that in due course. So this book is written to answer the question, how do we worship God? How can we worship God acceptably?

[6 : 05] What offering can we bring, as we sang a moment or two ago? But much more than that, it's a whole lifestyle. So we'll see next week and in the following weeks. This isn't just about sacrifices, about temples, about tents.

This is about a whole lifestyle. And while the book is quite complicated, the structure is basically simple. What we're going to do, really, is to take...

There are six main divisions in the book. And each of the sermons, we're going to take one of those divisions and try to open some windows into it.

Chapters 1 to 7 are all about sacrifices, the different kinds of sacrifices. The peace offering, the sin offering, and so on. But the most basic offering of all is the burnt offering, which we read about.

And if we understand something of this, then we'll have a key to understand chapters 2 to 7. That's, I think, the only way to look at the book in a study of six parts.

[7 : 10] I read the words from Romans 12, where Paul says, I appeal to you by the mercies of God. What does he mean by the mercies of God? He means the work of Christ, which he's described in the letter so far.

Then he says, present your bodies a living sacrifice. Christ has given himself for you. You need to give yourself back to him. And that, essentially, is how we're going to look at this chapter.

I want to make two very simple observations about this chapter. The first thing I want to say is that God calls us. That's verses 1 to 2. And then verses 3 to 17.

We need to respond. And that seems to me the key to unlock the sacrifices. God calls us, first of all. I mean, in many ways, these first two verses are the most important verses in the book.

The Lord called Moses. Remember, the titles of our books are not inspired. They come to us from the Greek Old Testament via the Latin Vulgate. The Hebrew title of the book is simply, And He Called, And the Lord Called.

[8 : 21] And that's establishing an enormously important point. Leviticus is about approaching God, about worshipping God. Now, what does that mean?

Worship doesn't happen when we feel like it. Worship happens when God calls us, and when his spirit in our heart moves us to respond.

That's why God's word must be at the center of our worship. It's not a case of us sitting down and forming a worship committee and working out what would be the most appropriate way to worship God.

Worship is about, first of all, listening to God. After all, the voice from heaven must be more important than the voices on earth.

What God says to us must be more important than what we say to him. Indeed, we'd have nothing at all to say to God unless he first spoke to us. So that's the first important principle.

[9 : 19] God has placed in our hearts, the book of Ecclesiastes says, a sense of eternity, a sense of otherness, a sense of someone greater than us, and he speaks to us.

Now, that makes it so different from the pagan gods. Pagan gods are rather like phoning a call center. I had to phone a call center on Friday about a passport.

And first of all, I was directed to a particular number, which then told me about one, two, three, four options. I tried all these, and the fourth option says, well, if you have any difficulties, go back to the call center.

In other words, put back to the number which I had first phoned. Many of you will have had that kind of experience. Now, the worship of pagan gods is like that. You talk and talk and talk, and you never receive a true response.

The God of Israel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, called us. Think about that for a moment. You are here today because God wants you to be here. You are here today because God has purposes of grace and steadfast love for you.

[10 : 30] Now, notice, first of all, he calls to Moses. The Lord called Moses and spoke to him. This shows the authority of the words of Moses. When the prophets are raised up, they are raised up to call people back to the words of Moses.

Do you read the prophets bearing that in mind? That's why the prophets are so often called man of God, because that's the word used regularly about Moses, showing us, of course, that Moses was no superhuman figure.

He was a human being called by God to be the instrument of his word. But what God says to him is of permanent value.

In a sense, the book of Leviticus and other books like it are a series of acted parables, of visual aids, of windows into the gospel. Now, his visual aids have gone, but the principles remain.

After all, when you talk to young children, very often you will use visual aids, you will use different devices, not to mislead them, but to show them something of the reality of what you're trying to convey.

- [11 : 37] As the children grow up, the visual aids possibly are no longer needed, or no longer needed in the same way. But the principles remain. And the principles are that God is holy.

God hates sin. But God loves sinners. And he wants to provide a way back to his presence. But it's not just the call to Moses. It's good news for us.

Speak to the people of Israel. And that extends, of course, to us, as the New Testament makes clear. The people of God in New Testament times, and the people of God in Old Testament times, are one people to whom comes the message of the grace of God.

Now, if you read back in Exodus, in Exodus 32, these people had already sinned very badly. They had sinned by making a golden calf idol and worshipping it as the God who had brought them out of Egypt.

They needed forgiveness. Psalm 24 speaks about who will ascend the hill of the Lord, who will stand in his holy place. He who has clean hands and a pure heart.

- [12 : 42] So that's the basic pattern then. God speaks. A sacrifice is offered. And God is pleased. You'll see several times a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

The burnt offering was wholly consumed. Some of the other offerings, parts of them were eaten. And in a sense, were part of the remuneration of the priests.

They were able to eat parts of the offerings. And in the case of the grain offering, nearly all of it. But the burnt offering, the most basic sacrifice, was wholly consumed.

So that's the first thing then. God calls us. And that's the principle that runs through all of chapters 1 to 7. Sacrifices aren't offered when we feel like it. Or the kind of sacrifice we feel like.

You'll remember, that's exactly what Cain did. Cain thought he knew better back in Genesis 4. And Cain offered the kind of sacrifice he thought God ought to be pleased with, rather than the sacrifice as God commanded.

- [13 : 45] But secondly, the rest of the chapter, verses 3 to 17, we need to respond. And you notice the repetition here. Three offerings. The bull, the sheep, and the turtle dove or pigeon.

Now this is where we often get it wrong. This is still grace. This is not good works. This is grace.

You see, it would not be good news if what were being said, well, God's done his bit. We need to do our bit now.

That's not good news, is it? That's terrifying news. If we have to do our bit and please God by our own efforts, then one of two things will happen. We'll either become hopelessly discouraged and feel we can't make it, or else we'll become conceited as we look at other people and think we're doing rather well.

In relation to them. This is grace. I've long believed that we trust in God for our salvation. We believe in his grace. But we do not trust in him for our sanctification, for him making us holy.

- [14 : 58] We feel that's our bit that we have to do. Look at it. The good news is, God has taken the initiative. He has provided the desire in our hearts.

And he also gives the animal for sacrifice. That's what I mean when I say it's good news. None of these things are human creations. They're all placed...

Now, when I say that we... It's all of grace. I, of course, do not mean that we don't need to respond. That is the whole point. But the point is, it is love responding to love.

It's not grim, determined obedience, hoping that if we do it a little better, we'll make it. And verse 3 says, That he may be accepted before the Lord.

That's the point of the sacrifice. And three times the details of the rituals are set out. Now, I'm not going to go through it ritual by ritual, because the principles are the same.

[15 : 59] What I want to do is to talk about one or two things that become clear in verses 3 to 17. First of all, what are the sacrifices for?

Why this succession, if you like, of visual aids, of active parables throughout the long centuries? And verse 4 tells us it is to make atonement.

Now, to make atonement, the Hebrew word can mean two things. It can mean to wipe clean. Or it can mean to cover. It's related to the paying of debts.

Now, we still use these words. We talk about covering a debt. We talk about wiping the slate clean. So you see what it is. See what's happening. We have a debt which we owe to God.

And we cannot pay that debt. So what are we going to do? And what happens here? God is saying, you need a substitute. You need someone or something to stand between you and God.

[16 : 59] And that's why the worshipper lays his hand, verse 4, on the head of the bull. Because he's transferring symbolically his sins to that substitute.

This is an acted parable. Now, Isaiah is going to tell us in his great 53rd chapter that ultimately he needs to be another human being, a suffering servant.

But the animal is a picture, is a parable of that. God provides the sacrifice. Way back in Genesis 22, the angel, the Abraham had said to Isaac, God himself will provide the lamb.

And that's exactly what happened. So the ritual of laying hands on the animal means the sins are transferred from me to my substitute. And then the water represents cleansing.

There is to be water. And the verse 8, verse 9, sorry, it's entrails in his legs he shall wash with water. And so on, and the other sacrifices as well.

[18 : 08] That represents not just the forgiveness, but the daily cleansing. Why is it that every day we need to confess our sins, even though our sins have been forgiven?

We need to confess our sins because we are still sinful. Christ has died. Christ has forgiven our sins. And as long as we are in this world, we'll have to keep on saying sorry to God.

That's one word we will never not need to use as long as we're in this world. And these, the other sacrifices in chapters 2 to 7, just a quick word about these.

The cereal offering or the grain offering in chapter 2 is a symbol of giving to God what he's already given. Rather like the offering we take in services.

That's what the grain offering symbolizes. The peace offering in chapter 3 is a shared meal which symbolizes fellowship. And the purification offering, or the sin offering in chapters 4 and 5, symbolizes the daily cleansing that's needed for God's service.

[19 : 19] And finally, in chapters 5 to 7, we have the guilt offering, or the reparation offering, paying back something whom we've defrauded. Now, I'm not going to go into these in detail, but the general principles remain.

God calls us and we respond. We respond most totally in the burnt offering, when in response to God's love, we present our bodies as a living sacrifice.

Ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven, the other version of Psalm 103 says. So that's the first thing. They are to make atonement, so that we may be acceptable.

The second thing to notice about our response, three times, verse 9, verse 10, and verse 17, these sacrifices are described as a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

The Lord, it's a picture of the Lord smelling the sacrifice as it burns and being pleased. Now, smell, of course, is something that arouses memory and very deep emotions.

[20 : 27] We're all familiar with this, how you can smell something and suddenly you're transported miles away and years back to somewhere else. Smell is very powerful. And Paul uses that picture in 2 Corinthians chapter 2.

He says this, when Christ is preached, people smell the aroma of Christ. Some people smell the stench of death and they hate it and they reject it and they reject Christ.

Other people smell the fragrance of life and they come to Christ. Now, that's taken from the idea of the sacrifice. You see, once again, we lay the sacrifice on the altar.

We present Christ. And as Christ is presented, as his word is unfolded, the smell, the aroma of Christ comes into people's, not just into their nostrils, but into their hearts.

To some, it is the stench of death. To others, it is the smell, the fragrance of life. That's why it's never possible simply to present the gospel as a clear and logical explanation and expect people will believe it.

[21 : 36] Of course, it's got to be presented clearly. I'm not denying that for a moment. But simply to present it clearly is not enough. There has to be the fragrance of Christ.

So, the sacrifices make atonement or rather they point forward to the perfect sacrifice which makes atonement. The sacrifices are pleasing to God, this vivid metaphor of smell.

And the third thing is, these sacrifices must be the best. Verse 3, without blemish. Verse 10, without blemish.

Now, at the end of the Old Testament period, Malachi condemns the people for bringing diseased sacrifices. They bring some, they bring some animal that's already dying on its hind legs and say, oh, this will do.

This is good enough. And Malachi says, it's not good enough. But notice, there's two very important things. First of all, in ancient Israel, meat was an expensive luxury.

[22 : 45] You think, for example, of a family who maybe had a pet lamb. Children probably played with it or to become part of the household. Can you imagine the sorrow when that lamb was taken away to be sacrificed?

And you begin to see that this word sacrifice means something. So meat was an expensive luxury. And for the rich people, it would be a genuine sacrifice.

Not like the rich people that Jesus condemned for throwing purses into the temple treasure when they already had plenty of money. But the other thing is, God, in his grace, realizes that there will be those who cannot give a lamb or a bullock.

That's the point of verses 14 and following. If his offering to the Lord is a burnt offering of birds, then he shall bring his offering of turtle doves and pigeons.

Surely that's so important. God wants what we have and what we are. Not what we don't have and what we are not. God is not... You see, so often, we talk about giving ourselves to God in terms which make it into a kind of grim legalistic business.

[23 : 58] You must give up this. You must give up that. You must... And so on. That's not what the Bible says. What God wants is you. He doesn't want your money.

He doesn't want your possession because he knows that if he has you, then you will give him what you can. It's not a case of one-upmanship.

It's a case that God wants you. God wants me. Not so much our possessions. Because if he has us, then these other things will follow. And it's not a case...

It's not a case that we sit down and compare ourselves to other people and say, well, they give this, I give that, and so on. The case of God wants us. And that is grace, isn't it?

God wants us to be in a relationship with him. And if we are in a loving relationship with him like any other loving relationship, then of course we will give. That's part of a loving relationship, isn't it?

[24 : 53] So he says, Paul says, come in, and all this in mind, I'm sure, because Paul has the Old Testament background in mind, present your bodies.

It's another way of saying present yourselves. Your whole self for God. That's what he wants. As we finish, just two points.

First of all, this point, indeed chapters 1 to 7, points to the perfect sacrifice. The letter to the Hebrews speaks about one sacrifice once for all, which can never be repeated, and to which nothing can be added.

And Peter tells us in 1 Peter, we are redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb, without blemish, and without spot. But secondly, this is good news of God's grace.

How do you think the people in Old Testament times were saved? They were not saved by work. Read Hebrews 11. By faith, Abel offered a better sacrifice.

[25 : 59] By faith, Noah. By faith, Enoch. By faith, Abraham. By faith, Moses. These sacrifices they offer were active parables, pointing to the Lamb of God.

And if we believe, as we do, that we can be saved by an event that took place thousands of years before we were born, then surely that same event could have saved those who were born before it happened.

We used to sing a chorus when I was a boy that said this, what can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me clean again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

That's not very good poetry. That is very good theology. And that's what Leviticus is about. Let's pray. Here is love, vast as the ocean, loving kindness like the flood.

Lord our Father, how we praise you for that one perfect sacrifice, that wondrous cross on which the King of Glory died. Lord, if we know you, may that become real and living in our experience.

[27 : 07] And if we don't know you, may we indeed come to that cross for forgiveness, for healing, and for cleansing. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.