

Better Blood

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[0 : 00] Dropping in this morning to the book of Leviticus, a place deep in our Old Testament. Now, if you have your Bible, which you should have a Bible, a paper Bible, okay, maybe you have it, maybe it's at home, and you were to take it and close it, it's not often the minister tells you to close your Bible, but if you close your Bible and you look at the pages, those pages will tell you a lot about you, because they will show you where you have most turned in your Bible, where the spine has been broken, where the pages have been thumbed, and I'm guessing for most of us, those pages are going to be towards the end of our Bible, the New Testament, and maybe the middle of our Bible, maybe the Psalms for some of us, but there are sways, there's huge amounts of our Old Testament that are closed to us, and maybe we've read through it in our Bible in a year plan, that's great, but there are places we're not quick to come back to, because they are closed to us, we don't know what to do with them, they are lost on us.

Maybe as we read just now from Leviticus, we were thinking, what on earth is going on? Why are we reading this on church on a Sunday? And last week, Easter Sunday, we heard Jesus say amazing things, didn't we? In his resurrection, one of the first things he says is that everything written in the Scriptures had to be fulfilled about him, and he opened the minds of his followers to understand the Scriptures. Now, one amazing thing, a voyage of discovery for them who knew these books of the Old Testament really well, but had been lost on them, and then Jesus rises from the dead and gives them a new heart and a new eyes to see what is really going on in the pages of the Scriptures. And it is a voyage of discovery for us too. God has spoken, hasn't he, life-giving words, and books and books and pages and pages of our Bible, that if we don't feed on them, we are starving ourselves, aren't we, of God's life-giving truth. And particularly because, he says, Christ and his gospel are held out and on offer on every page of our Bible.

And so I wanted to drop back into the Old Testament and Leviticus 16 this morning, just to give us a taste, perhaps, of what we can feed on in our Old Testament. So let me set the scene for us.

God has created the universe, the world and everything in it, and human beings in his image to fill the earth with his glory by reproducing and ruling over his world and reflecting his goodness and his character to his creation. But the first human beings rebelled against God. They wanted the world their way, and they fell from that glorious calling that God had given them. And to punish them for their rebellion, God sent the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, out of his presence, out of the garden and into a wilderness world, a world he had cursed for their sin. And as humanity grew and spread in the world, instead of filling the earth with his glory, they filled the earth with their sin.

Until God looked at the world he had created and saw that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. So he sent a great flood to wash his world clean from sin, saving only one family to begin again. But they too were rebels. And as humanity grew back, so sin grew back with a vengeance. But out of the massive humanity, sinful humanity, God chose a man and a woman, Abraham and Sarah, and promised to be their God and the God of their children, a new beginning.

[4 : 43] And this family grew and sin grew too. But God kept them and protected them, provided for them. And they trusted him in a deeply flawed, but in a genuine way. Okay, that's the book of Genesis. Into Exodus, the family grows in the land of Egypt. They are made slaves. God rescues them out of slavery, brings his people, his family to himself at Mount Sinai, and begins afresh. He promises again to be their God and they will be his people. A new beginning for a new humanity, a redeemed people. And as part of that new beginning, God gave instructions for a special tent to be made called the tabernacle.

It was to be pitched in the center of the camp. And God himself would come and live there. And the purpose of this tent was so that God could bring this new humanity, in some sense, back to the

beginning. In the tent, he was making the way for people to come back into the garden, so to speak, from the wilderness and live with him again. Leviticus begins back in chapter 1, verse 2, with God saying, if any Adam should draw near, this is how he should come.

He reminds me of the way C.S. Lewis so powerfully kind of describes what humanity is. We could say, if any son of Adam or daughter of Eve should draw near, there is a way to come back.

Leviticus is all about God making a way back into his presence from sin and its curse. But we find in Leviticus that that is no easy way. It involves very particular and very messy and very bloody sacrifices to be with God again, because something has happened since the garden to make it difficult, if not impossible for us to be with God.

And that is that sin, a spirit of rebellion, at a heart, a posture of disobedience has entered into human life. And that sin carried with it a death sentence, and that sentence had to be dealt for any son of Adam or daughter of Eve to come back into God's presence.

And where we started in chapter 16 impresses that on us, because it reminds us that two men had decided to come to God, but not in the way that God said that they must.

[7 : 41] The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron, who died when they approached the Lord. Back in chapter 10, Nadab and Abihu were priests.

Their dad was the high priest. But one day we read that they offered unauthorized fire, or strange fire before the Lord, contrary to his command.

They tried to come back to God, but without bringing the right sacrifice. So we read, fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.

Now that is shocking, it's graphic. We might wonder if it was completely necessary for these two guys to die. But remember, says God, death is the penalty for you to come near.

Fire must come and consume whatever carries sin into his presence. Because what happened to these brothers should have happened to the sacrifices that they should have brought.

[8 : 56] It was the animals that they didn't bring that would have been burnt, consumed on the altar. But they didn't bring those sacrifices.

And so that penalty was laid on them. And they were burned and consumed to death themselves. It is incredibly graphic, isn't it?

It's not for the faint-hearted. But it illustrates so clearly what these sacrifices were there to do. The sacrifices were there to stand in for those who brought them.

The animals were there to deflect God's punishment and that penalty so that human beings could stand in God's presence and not be destroyed.

We've become more familiar than we wanted in the last few years, haven't we, with war and anti-missile defense systems, haven't we?

[10 : 03] And the idea of those systems is when missiles are detected, kind of flying in, and they are going to land, well, this defense system will release little rockets, fire them up to intercept these missiles and be destroyed before they can land and destroy human life.

So the rockets are blown to pieces so that human beings are not. Well, the sacrifices here are like those little rockets.

As God's wrath falls on sinful people, we should be destroyed. But the sacrifices were there to intercept God's wrath as it fell, shielding those offering the sacrifice so that the sacrifices were destroyed instead of those who came.

And what that illustration breaks down, of course, is that God, despite justly striking out against sin, is the very one who in his grace provided the defense system so that people could come and be in his presence without being killed.

And so this chapter opens with a stark reminder that the death that these animals died is the death that we deserve for our rebellion against God.

[11 : 29] Because Aaron's sons were consumed and died in that same way when they did not bring the sacrifice. And it comes as a warning to Aaron himself, verse 2.

The Lord said to Moses, tell your brother Aaron he is not to come whenever he chooses into the most holy place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die. For I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover. This chapter begins with a reminder, friends, that whoever we are, the most religious, the most important, the most innocent person in the world, we cannot come to God in the way that seems best to us.

We have to come back to God in the way that God has given us to come. We need the sacrifice that he says we need.

Because God is not in the business of just making up random rules or making it difficult or taking himself too seriously. His purity, his holiness cannot tolerate the impurity, the rebellion in our hearts. [12:44] And so it is purely out of his grace that God has made a way for our sin to be dealt with so that we can come back and live before him.

And that way is not optional. And it's not over the top. It's what we need to be with God. And God has graciously given us that way to come back.

So then what kind of sacrifice do we need to come to God? That's what the rest of the chapter spells out. And there's a lot going on.

We're not going to get into all of it. Blood and bulls, goats, rams, sacred clothes, incense. But to cut to the heart, there's only actually one thing going on.

One word, repeated, repeated, repeated. Did you pick up what it was? What is the result of all of this? Atonement.

[13:47] Atonement. Now that sounds like a complicated theological word. It's really not. Actually, the word itself tells us what it's saying.

Just break it down. Atonement. Atonement. It is making things at one. Now that might sound too simple. I was pretty skeptical at first, actually.

But unlike so many theological words, it actually has its origin in English. So that is exactly how it works. Atonement is reconciling things that have been separated.

It is making two things that are far apart at one. But to do that comes at such a cost. The further that things are from each other, the more it costs to bring them back together.

And nothing is further than us from God as a result of our sin. Something needed to happen to atone. And so, Leviticus 16, only one time a year, only one man could go in before God's throne.

[15:01] The passage talks about an atonement cover. That's essentially just the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. And God was said to be enthroned there between two carved angels.

And on that day, this one man had to put on special clothes. Now those are just to say, he's not acting as an individual, but he's acting as a representative of all God's people, the community of his people.

And this guy needed first a bull. And he had to slaughter the bull, verse 11, to pay for sins that he himself and his family had committed.

So he had to go behind the curtain into the most holy place. Notice he even has to take incense to create a kind of smoke screen in front of God's throne so that he doesn't see God and die.

And as he does that, he takes the blood of this bull and sprinkles it seven times before God's throne. Again, that is just to cover his own sins and his family's sins.

[16:16] So if you can put it this way, it's just a bit like the scaffolding that has to go up before the actual work of the building begins. If the high priest doesn't have access into the throne room, well, how can atonement be made for God's people?

So once the sins of the high priest and his family have been atoned for, then the whole thing again with one of these goats. And this time, verse 16, to cover the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been.

Now that's easy to say, easy-ish to read, isn't it? But think about what that involves. How much blood does a bull and a goat pour out?

It is so much blood, so much death, simply for human beings to be there at all. Or more accurately, simply for God and his tent to be in close proximity to sinful people.

Did you spot in verse 16 the way that it's put that the high priest is making atonement for the most holy place because of their sin?

[17:39] Also for the whole tent, which is among them in the midst of their uncleanness. And the altar, verse 18, as if to say, this is just what it costs to have the tent.

This is just what it costs in order that God would have a place in the midst of sinful people. We could imagine these things were a bit like magnets, the tent, the altar, the holy place.

And it's as if as the high priest puts the blood of the sacrifices on these things, their kind of magnetic charge or their polarity changes. So that instead of repelling sinful people, pushing them away, now they attract and they draw near these people because they have been atoned for at one with the people by the blood of the sacrifices spilled in their place.

So this is what had to happen every year for God even to be in the camp with the people and they live. Sin cannot sit openly in front of God and his wrath not fall on it.

But that punishment fell every year on these sacrifices offered before his throne. It was the blood of bulls and goats instead of the people's blood spilled before him.

[19 : 15] But as if to stress how far sin has separated us from God, there is another goat so that after the high priest is finished in the most holy place, he is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites, all their sins, and put them on the goat's head.

He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task, the goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place and the man shall release it in the wilderness. So this goat is not slaughtered but something incredible happens with it. All the sins of God's people are ceremonially transferred onto this creature as if the guilt and the history and the sin of all God's people was taken off their shoulders and loaded onto this goat's back.

He is transferring the high priest all the guilt and wickedness and rebellion of the people onto this goat so that the goat is now carrying all their sin and where does the goat carry all their sin?

The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place and the man shall release it into the wilderness.

[20 : 59] Now if you've been following the story up to now you will see why that is incredibly significant. What happened to Adam and Eve when they sinned?

They were pushed out of God's presence and into a wilderness world and now God says come back my people from the wilderness into my presence but friends we must in some sense still be sent away.

Our sins must still somehow be removed out of God's presence even if we come. So God provides not only a goat to die instead of his people but a goat to be sent away instead of his people.

Then the high priest gets washed and changed and sacrifices another two rams and the result of all this verse 30 is that on this day atonement will be made for you to cleanse you.

then before the Lord you will be clean from all your sins. Your sin will be completely dealt with.

[22 : 19] You will be free to live with God and not die and not be sent away from him and not because you haven't sinned or that you don't sin or even that you won't sin but because God himself has provided the way for you to be with him without you having to bear the consequences of your own sins like the sons of Aaron did when they died before the Lord because a goat will have been destroyed from God's presence instead of ye and a goat will have been dumped outside God's presence instead of ye and for your sins now can you feel something of the drama and smell the blood and the intensity of that day what it costs to be with God because of course verse 29 tells us the same thing would have to happen the same day next year and the year after that and the year after that this was a yearly thing and verse 32 tells us that when Aaron the high priest died his son would take his place and do it all again until he died and then his son took over and his son after him so that verse 34 atonement is to be made once a year for the sins of the

Israelites look what it cost God made a way back but it wasn't a permanent way it wasn't a once for all way it was an again and again way and a never enough way but the drama and the blood and the intensity of that day every year was a little picture to the people of a better day and of a better high priest with better blood to pour out before God to atone for the sins of the people we read just incredible words from Hebrews earlier in our time speaking about this day only the high priest entered the inner room as we know and that only once a year and never without blood which he offered for himself and the sins the people had committed in ignorance but when

Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here he went through the greater and more perfect tent that is not made with human hands he did not enter by the means of blood the blood of goats and calves but he entered the most holy place once for all by his own blood thus obtaining eternal redemption Christ came as the better high priest says Hebrews with better blood to do once for all what the priests had to do year on year on year to do permanently what they could only do temporarily because he went into the real most holy place before the heavenly throne of God not to present the blood of countless animals but his own priceless blood in place of his people now there are so many ways that

Leviticus helps us to see glory in Christ and his finished work but just as we close point the camera where Hebrews points the camera did you see that the bull and the goat and the blood and incense how much help did Aaron have in the tent he was with him as he went in to do those things verse

17 no one is to be in the tent of meeting from the time Aaron goes in to make atonement in the most holy place until he comes out the high priest enters God's presence completely on his own but all on his own enough blood is spilt to atone perfectly and completely for his people's sins that's why both times it's seven sprinkles before God's throne the perfect number for complete atonement and so brothers and sisters who helped

Christ to atone for our sins who was with him as he went to offer the sacrifice Christ went completely alone to offer his sacrifice and not for his own sins because he had no sins of his own but to pour out enough of his own blood to pay perfectly and fully for every single one of his people's sins permanently for an eternal redemption he went completely on his own outside of the city all of our wickedness guilt and sin loaded upon him as he carried our sin into the wilderness to the cross he went completely on his own into the tomb dead and buried

[28 : 17] God's wrath having fallen directly on him and him having been destroyed from this world for our sins brothers and sisters he had no help in doing that and he needed no one to help him to present the perfect sacrifice to God to atone for our sins now how do we know that well how would the Israelites have known that God accepted the sacrifice that the high priest had made in the most holy place when the high priest came out of the most holy place and he had not died and he was alive it was when they saw the high priest emerge from the tent then the relief the joy the comfort the assurance of knowing that their sins had been atoned for because

God had accepted the offering of the high priest and he had not died so when the women went into the tomb and they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus but they turned and saw him alive again that is when they knew the joy the comfort the assurance of knowing that his work was finished and his blood had been accepted on behalf of sinners on the cross because he was not dead in the tomb but raised to eternal life and on his own Christ ascended into heaven before God's throne to present himself to the father as the lamb who takes away the sin of the world and the lamb who stands as one slain whose blood has ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation and so if

Christ died and rose again as the one and only better high priest with better blood spilled for us how do we know what he has done for us what has he done for you for me he has made atonement for our sins we know that he has made the way for us to be at one with God isn't that what it's all been about to make it possible for us to be back in God's presence not because we haven't sin or because we don't sin or we won't sin but because a sacrifice has been offered that takes away our sin and takes the punishment for our sin so here is the death that does that for us friends not a calf a bull a goat a ram but Christ himself the high priest and sacrifice he is the one that we must cling to you as we come into the presence of

God and he is not one among many because his death is the only shield and protection that stands between us and God's justice God God's wrath God's wrath against our sins was deflected upon him on the cross and it is his blood instead of our blood that is sprinkled before the throne of God his life for our lives and if we think we can come to God without what Christ did on the cross well here is what Leviticus reminds us we will suffer what he suffered because he suffered what we deserve like the sacrifices suffered what those guys deserved but he has secured a place for me and you to stand back in the presence of God from our sin and the wilderness and curse of it for us to be at one with God and have life with him he has done it and his sacrifice is enough so if you have not already would you take hold of him today and come back to

God and do not come as you think you need to come and don't leave Christ to the side and come because you think that it will be okay but believe God when he says do not come without Christ take hold of him by faith and draw into his presence and if you have if you have will you rest today in the joy the comfort the assurance of what he has done painted so vividly for us in the book of Leviticus but made real and fulfilled in the death of Christ on the cross and his glorious resurrection from the dead let's pray that that would be true of us today gracious father we thank you and praise you that we have such a high priest he who is spotless and blameless and above reproach he who had no sin but who became sin for us that we in him might become the righteousness of

[34 : 04] God and that he is no longer dead but he is risen and that he lives father we pray that each of us today would know by your spirit that what he has done is effective and that he is the way to ye lord grant us faith we ask to take hold of him with both hands and to draw near to ye knowing that he has done what was needed for us to live with you and father we pray that you would give us confidence in him lord that we wouldn't be timid in our faith but lord that we would be bold and have

freedom before you as you designed and created us to have we thank you that that is the life Christ gives and we pray that each one of us would share in it as your spirit applies his finished work to us do this we pray in Jesus name amen