

A Fellowship Meal at God's Table

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[0 : 0 0] I wonder what one of the kind of hardest or most difficult parts of the COVID lockdown was for you. What one of the hardest or most difficult parts of the lockdowns during the pandemic was for you. I think for many of us, I think for most of us, many of us, some of the hardest parts back in 2020 or 2021 that came as a result of the pandemic and all that was going on was the isolation that the lockdowns brought. The isolation, the time that we were by ourselves alone or just in our houses with a few people, that we couldn't gather, we couldn't be together with others, whether in church for a time or just even in a whole host of other ways. There was real isolation. Even some of the introverts I know, maybe there's some people and introverts here, but some of the introverts I know, and I spoke to them afterwards at the time, and as all this started, and I guess we didn't know where it was going, they kind of thought, do you know what, a few weeks, maybe even a few months with my thoughts and myself and my books or whatever, do you know, that might be okay, just the kind of thing I want. But even after three or four days, they just wanted out to be with people. They needed to see them. The isolation was too much. The Bible is a story that is here to tell us, to say that there is a great isolation. There is a great isolation, even greater than the isolation that came through pandemic lockdowns, but an isolation that can be overcome. What is the isolation that the Bible tells us of? It is of an isolation between people and God, between us and God. You see, since Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden at the end, at the end of Genesis 3, at the first book of the Bible, the end of Genesis 3, God has been doing what?

He's been working to bring his people back to him, to dwell with him. And the Bible story from then on, from Genesis 3, the end of chapter 3, is, well, how do we get back? How do we get back to a place where we can dwell with God, be near to God again? I remember when the pandemic, I think it's more near the start rather than as time went on. But I remember as time went on, seeing kind of pictures in people's windows, whether in hospital windows or whether in people's homes. And they had a bit of paper that they sometimes would put up and it would say something like COVID-19 here. And what was the implication?

COVID-19 here, so stay away. So don't come in. Don't come near here. This is here. You need to stay there. Well, we have a disease. We have an infection, something much worse than COVID. Our sin.

And because of our sin, we can't come into God's presence and live. Just in of ourselves, we cannot come near God's presence and live. But what we see from the end of Genesis 3 on, what we see right through the Bible is that God wants to bring people back to him. God wants to dwell with us again. He is holy. We are not. And he wants us to bring us back to be with him. And in fact, that's what he's just in the middle of doing as we arrive in Leviticus. We arrive in Leviticus 3 and we think, what is going on? What's all this? Well, where are God's people? They're just at the foot of Sinai. They've not long been rescued from Egypt. They've been 400 years slaves to Pharaoh. God has rescued them. He's taken them out. They've crossed the Red Sea. He's defeated Pharaoh. They've got given the law. And here they are at the base of Mount Sinai. They've been given the tabernacle, the tent of meeting. And God is giving them instruction of how they can dwell again together. God and his people.

God wants peace. He wants to dwell with his people. And that's actually the message of Leviticus 3. It describes a peace offering. Or we could describe it or call it a fellowship offering. A fellowship offering where by the end of it, what we're going to see, as it were, God and his people sit together at a table and have restored fellowship. They eat together. No more isolation, but peace and feasting.

[4 : 55] No more estrangement, but warm table fellowship. This is a sacrifice in Leviticus 3 that leads to a fellowship meal at the table of God. I wonder if you can think back to happier memories, not COVID isolation or lockdown restrictions, but can you picture or think in your mind's eye that the first time you were able to get together with people after all that came to an end? No masks, no bubbles, no little groups. What was it like the first birthday parties after that? The first weddings after that? The first anniversaries after that? Food, laughter, fellowship, fun. We're together.

We were out in the States when that happened. So much of our memories tied to that as well are at airports. The borders are open. People are here. Come, see us. Come to our home, eat and feast. We can be together. Life as it's meant to be. Dear friends, God wants to come near to us and live. Wants us to come into his presence and to know him, to know life as it's meant to be. And so this offering, we see that. We see an end to the estrangement. Here's how we can dwell together and have fellowship meal at God's table. So I just have three questions to work through this morning. A fellowship meal at God's table. Three questions. How do we come is our first one, and we'll start there. So our fellowship meal at God's table. How do we come? How is it the worshipers here come to approach God? Remember, God is holy, and they are not. They can't just come any way they want. If we were to have more time through

Leviticus or if you were here last night, we thought about that. They can't just come their own way. God is so righteous, so holy. We're so unholy. We have to come God's way. So how do we come?

Well, we come through a perfect saving substitute. A perfect saving substitute. Just look down at verse one, chapter three, verse one. If his offering is a sacrifice of peace offering, if he offers an animal from the herd, male or female, he shall offer it without blemish before the Lord. And he shall lay his hand on the head of his offering and kill it at the entrance of the tent of meeting. And Aaron's sons, the priest, shall throw the blood against the sides of the altar. And we get that repeated in verse six. It's the same or similar instructions, but with an animal from the flock. And then if you look down to verse 12, the same with instructions for bringing a goat. But bring an animal to sacrifice, and the animal must be what? Perfect without blemish. And as we bring it, we lay hands on it as we're going to die. We're saying our sin, our guilt is laid on the animal in my place. We thought a bit more about that last night. You can come and speak to me afterwards or maybe pick up the recording. We thought more about it, but that's what it's saying. Substitution. Substitution in my place. So how do we approach and eat God's table? Only through a perfect saving substitute. Lots of cultures have different social rules about gathering for meals. Maybe at some point in your life, you moved to Scotland or moved to the Northeast and you find particular certain kind of social rules here. Especially, I think, when we eat in someone's home. I was staying with someone this week that enjoyed such warm hospitality, but I didn't know them that well. And the questions in my mind, do I need to bring something?

Or if we're going to someone we don't know that well, do I wait for the invitation? Do I just turn up? Can I arrive early? How late? Can I stay? Do I need to take my shoes off? That's a big one for me, because often my socks are not matching or have holes or just, can I take my shoes off? Do I need to keep them? Do I need to keep them on? When I go to someone's house, it's not really that stressful.

[9 : 14] We love it. It's just in my mind. You see now how I work, right? Maybe it's just because I'm British. But if you go to another country or travel somewhere else, you'll see that there's all these kind of social norms, social expectations as we gather together for food and fellowship.

Coming into God's country, if I can put it that way, coming to God's country, to God's home, to his table, coming to his presence. It has to be done his way through a perfect saving sacrifice.

It must be done that way. Now, perhaps some of us then are asking the question, well, does this animal really have to die? Really, these animals are brought, and you understand from as we read through it, the animals are killed. Part of the body is burnt up. The blood is sprinkled on the side of the altar. Must the animal really die? When I go to someone's house, normally I just pick up a box of miniature heroes and maybe some schlur to drink. It seems quite a lot. Why a sacrifice?

Why a sacrifice? Why all these sacrifices? As I said, Leviticus 1 to 7 opens with instructions for five different types of sacrifice. Why a sacrifice? Well, because our sin is so great that before God we deserve to die, we can no longer come into God's presence and live because of Adam's sin, because of what he did in the garden and all that we've inherited from him, we are criminals before God. We are lawbreakers.

We're unholy. And the price to satisfy God's justice is death. Our sin is so great. The wages of sin is death. But God, out of his great mercy, is saying, I will accept someone in your place. I will accept the blood of another to pay your debt, to satisfy my justice. I will accept the blood of a perfect substitute and sacrifice in your place so that you can live and have peace with God.

[11 : 29] And that, of course, comes through Jesus. Jesus. You see, if you're relatively new to Christianity or haven't been a Christian that long, perhaps you're here this morning and you're not yet a Christian, you might be thinking some of the things that Christians say or sing, they can seem quite odd.

Jesus is a man, fully man, fully God, truly man, truly God, but we call him a lamb. We also call Jesus a lion. We also call Jesus a shepherd, a light, a vine. We have all of these things. We sing about blood quite a lot. Where does all that come from? What's going on there?

Well, that's where the Old Testament is such a help to us, and Leviticus especially. It helps us. It helps us to understand what Jesus came to do. Think about what we read earlier from Romans.

Since you have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through Jesus Christ. And how did God show his love for us to do that? That while we were sinners, Christ died for us, and we have been justified, justified what? By his blood, by his blood. You see, these animals, all they do is foreshadow.

They're checks that aren't cash. They cannot pay the price for our sin. No, it is Christ alone who comes, the perfect lamb of God, to die in our place. So through him, we can be reconciled with God, only through Jesus, only by his blood, that we can be reconciled with God. The only way to have peace in this world, peace with God, is through Jesus. We often look for a hundred different ways, don't we?

[13 : 22] A hundred different ways, 21 steps for this, or something from another religion, or self-help, whatever it is. No, only through Jesus, only through God's Son, can we have peace with God. So that's how we come to his table. That's how we dine with God, if I can put it that way. Jesus, who once and for all is the sacrifice for our sin. Because you could think about it, right? Joe and Donald, our pastors, they're not here this morning, standing at the front, waiting for you to bring in your goats, or bring in your sheep, or bring in your cows. They're not standing here, waiting for that to happen.

Why are we not doing this today? Because Jesus came, and perfectly, once and for all, offered his life on Calvary's tree, on Calvary's hill, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. That's why we're not doing this today, because Christ has done it. Christ has done it for us. He came to bring an end to the isolation, the estrangement, his body and blood given for us. There's no other way. There's no other way. It's him, his blood, or we pay for our sin with our own. It's his death, or we will die. So dear friends, this morning, if you don't know the Lord Jesus, if you don't know the Lord Jesus, then one day you will see God face to face. But if you do not know the Lord Jesus, you will pay for your sin eternally with your own eternal death before God. In hell, paying the price and the wages for your sin. So come to him today. Plunge yourself into the fountain of Christ's blood, and you will be forgiven, and you can come into God's presence and live through what Christ has done. Lay hold of him. Think of these people pushing down on the animal. My sin is yours.

Lay hold of Christ, and you will be forgiven. Your sin will be dealt with. I love the Charles Wesley hymn. And in one of, well, lots of hymns, the Charles Wesley hymn. He's written lots. But in one of them, you think he sings, bold I approach the eternal throne.

How can we approach boldly? Because Christ has dealt with our sin. Christ has dealt with it and done it. So we have come near to God, and we now live because Christ died in our place. So how do we come?

Through a perfect saving substitute. Question number two. Question number two. We'll keep moving. Well, why do we come to God's table? Why do we come to God's table? Out of a joyful response.

[16 : 03] In joyful response and thanksgiving for all that God has done for us. Now, how do we know that? Well, we actually need a bit of help. So just turn the page over to Leviticus 7.

Leviticus 7. We get a few more instructions. We get more instructions about this sacrifice. And if you just look to verse 11, Leviticus 7, verse 11, we're getting some more instructions about the peace offering, about the fellowship offering. This is what it says.

And this is the law of the sacrifice of the peace offerings that one may offer to the Lord if he offers it for a thanksgiving. So that's one of the reasons you can offer this for a thanksgiving.

Then he shall offer with thanksgiving sacrifice unleavened loaves mixed with oil, unleavened wafered smeared with oil, and loaves of fine flour well mixed with oil. Then if we go down to verse 16, we're going to get a little bit more. Go down to verse 16. But if the sacrifice of his offering is a vow offering, so we have a thanksgiving, we have a vow offering, or a free will offering. It shall be eaten on the day that he offers his sacrifice. And on the next day, what remains of it shall be eaten.

So those are the three occasions. We can offer it as thanksgiving, as vow, or free will. Those words are celebration words. They're response words. It's thanksgiving. It's free will of my own free will, Lord.

[17 : 34] I want to bring this to you to rejoice in all that you've done, and in all that you are, and all that you've done for me. A few chapters later, and a few hundred years later in the Old Testament, we come to the book of 1 Samuel. And 1 Samuel opens, kind of focusing in on Hannah. And as you meet Hannah there in 1 Samuel, you find that she brings this offering. She brings it as a vow offering. Remember Hannah?

She couldn't have any children. But then the Lord gives her a son. She has Samuel. And she responds in rejoice. Thank you, Lord, for all that you've done by offering the peace offering as a vow offering, as thanksgiving, that the Lord had heard her prayers. We also see this peace offering offered by Solomon at the dedication of the temple, at the dedication of the temple, on a kind of scale that is hard to imagine. 1 Kings 8, 63, Solomon offered a sacrifice of fellowship offerings. So that's this peace offerings to the Lord. 22,000 cattle and 120,000 sheep and goats. So the king and all the Israelites dedicated the temple to the Lord. 22,000 cattle, 120,000 sheep and goats. It's staggering.

Can you imagine the sight, the smell, the cleaning up? The blood from the animals would have overflowed the deer in the dawn, wouldn't it? So much. So why? Why does Hannah respond how she does? Why does Solomon offer that? In both of those circumstances, in response and in overflow to all that God has done, to all that God has done, to give thanks to him.

And do you notice, as we read through, particularly in chapter 3, what does God get? Well, he always gets the best part of the animal, doesn't he? He always gets the best part. He gets the blood, which is a sign of its life, and he gets the fat. Just look to the very end of chapter 3. We could read through other parts. We'll just look at the last little bit. Chapter 3, 17, it shall be a statute forever that through your generations and all your dwelling places, you eat neither the fat nor the blood.

The blood is the life of the animal, and the fat is the best bit. Some of us, when we get bacon or steaks, with apologies to the vegans and vegetarians, but when we get bacon or steaks, some of us these days, we take the fat off. We don't quite like it. Can we just leave that little bit to the side?

[20 : 13] But no, in this time, the fat was the best bit. The more fat, the bigger the animal. The more that was being given back to God, it was the best bit. So in this way, they're giving God the best.

They're giving God their best. They're coming to God out of response and saying, take my best. They were once enemies. Now they're reconciled. And so we want to give God a bit of the best.

He wants their all. He wants their best. So what does God want from us? What does God want from us? As we think upon the Lord Jesus and all that he's done for us, what does he want from us?

One hymn writer puts it this way, doesn't he? We're the whole realm of nature mine, that we're an offering too far too small, love so amazing, love so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. It is just worth as we read this and we think of them bringing these sacrifices, animals that they've raised, that cost them something and they give the best bit to God. It's worth us thinking, do we give God our all? Do we give God our best?

Or is it just one hour on a Sunday, a couple of hours through the week that we sort of turn our minds to God? Or are we praying, Lord, in response to the abundance of your love, help me to give my all. Help me to give my all, whether in workplaces or homes and how I use my leisure time and all those things. Help me to give it all to you, all to you in response to your love for me. Now remember, never to earn God's love, never to earn God's love, but always in response.

[22 : 08] Remember here, chapter three follows chapters one and two. And if you were here last night, or if you flick to chapter one later, you'll see there's a word missing here that's used in chapter one. You see, in chapter one, we get a similar description, but in chapter one, when the sacrifices are offered, they're atoning sacrifices. They're atoning sacrifices, and this sacrifice comes after.

So when this one's offered, it's kind of in remembrance of what's been done. In other words, the atonement's been done. The work of bringing the estranged parties back together, it's been done. And this is just offered in response to all that God has done for me. So never to earn his favor, but as he's lavishly loved us. So we long to lavishly love him and give our lives in devotion to him. So how do we come? Through a perfect saving substitute. Why do we come to the table of the Lord? Out of joyful response. Lord, you've done all this for me. I want to respond joyfully to you.

And who do we come with? Final question. Who do we come with? Well, we come with God and his people. God and his people. This isn't so explicit in chapter three. We'll come to it in chapter seven.

It's hinted at at the end of chapter three. Chapter 3, 17, we've just read it. It's a statute forever through generations. In all dwelling places, you eat neither the fat nor the blood. It's there. It's hinting that not all the animal here has been burned up. That the whole burnt offering, chapter one, everything is burnt up. But not all everything is burnt up here. Just look at Leviticus 7, 13, over the page again. Leviticus 7, 13.

With the sacrifice of his peace offering. For with thanksgiving, he shall bring his offering with loaves of bread. And from it, he shall offer one loaf for each as a gift to the Lord. It shall belong to the priest who throws the blood of the peace offerings. And the flesh of the sacrifice of the peace offerings for thanksgiving shall be eaten on the day of his offering. So the writer goes on, from there. But essentially, who's all eating here? Well, God gets the best. He gets the fat.

[24 : 30] If you look through chapter three, he also gets the kidneys. He gets the best. But then the priest gets some. He gets the loaf that is brought with it. But there is some left over. And that's what's to be eaten here. And as we read on, we'll see more instructions for how it's to be eaten.

How it's to be eaten. So God, the priest, and the people. God is the host, if you like. He's the host. He's the one sitting at the top of the table. But together we come and eat. Together we come and eat.

Who comes? God gets some, the priest, and the people. This is the only one of the five sacrifices. The only one where the people get some. Why? To show the peace. To show the togetherness. To show the table fellowship. I wonder if you've ever played the game or had that conversation. If you could invite six people or five people to kind of an imaginary dinner party, who would you invite?

Have you ever played that game before? Who would you like to come? I bet when I tell you mine, you are going to be blown away with how exciting this would be. Okay. For me, it would likely probably be, generally it's people from the past, right? It would likely be probably six dead ministers, I think is what we would go for. Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, Samuel Rutherford. You're all sitting there. That would be a blast. That's all you can think. The humor and the conversation, it would be amazing, right? But when you've ever played that game, the conversation tends to go to, yeah, but would they get on? What would the conversation be like? Would they actually just end up all kind of butting heads and all the rest, and that would be that? Would they get on?

Well, this dinner party, this table fellowship is all about communion with God, peace with God.

[26 : 29] God accepts it. It's a pleasing aroma to him. And so God and the priest and the people gather together in response to what God has done. They eat of it to show that they are together. Think about it in life, when things go well and we have celebrations, we often sort of instinctively want to celebrate this way.

Birthday parties. Think about those mini sausage rolls you get and party rings or whatever your favorite party food is, kind of timeless classics, bits of cheese on a stick with grapes or whatever it is.

We have birthdays. We want to eat and celebrate. Weddings. We what? This comes together. People make a vow together. This coming together. We want to celebrate with food. With food. Weddings are not times for fasting. No, it's feasting and fellowship. And this sacrifice is about fellowship, peace that leads to communion with God.

Table, fellowship, together. And so friends, this sacrifice really does find its kind of New Testament fulfillment at the table that is in front of me. The table that's in front of you, the Lord's Supper.

Leviticus 1, we thought a little bit last night, is really talking about the cross and the atoning work of Christ. But Leviticus 3 here, the supper, remembrance, and a celebration of all that Christ did on the cross.

[28 : 04] His life given to pay my debt. His body broken for my and my place. His blood shed. A substitute, perfect, spotless, blameless, so that I might live. So think about this fellowship here, this peace offering, right at the end. It really does have a kind of vertical and horizontal aspect to it, doesn't it?

Vertical. It's a meal for those who trust in God as their salvation. It's a meal, as this one is, for those who trust in the work of Jesus for their salvation. What does Jesus say in John 6?

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks of my blood has eternal life. And I will raise him up on the last day. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks of my blood abides in me and I in him. So there's a vertical dimension, a meal for sinners, but sinners who know they need a Savior. But there's a horizontal dimension too, isn't there? A meal for us to sit at, a table to eat together horizontally with people perhaps that we don't have a whole lot in common with, apart from the Lord Jesus, that we are united to him and belong to him too. It's a meal where we see with our eye, taste with our mouth and feel with our hands that isolation before God is over. And in the Lord's Supper, we see and know that we really do have communion with God. In the Lord's Supper, God invites all who know him to, if I can put it this way, slide their knees under his table to the feast of the Lamb. And it is a meal that we will partake of on this side of eternity here at this table. But at this table is a picture of what's to come for all eternity. For all those who know and trust and love the Lord Jesus, the wedding feast of the Lamb awaits. Peace with God, fellowship with God, one day with Jesus right before our eyes forever.

And so, dear friends, may you draw near to the Lord Jesus in repentance and faith and know peace with him forever. Let me pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are the perfect sacrifice for our sin, the peace offering who came to make atonement, to bring us back to the Father when we had strayed. We rejoice in all that you've done. Oh, Lord, when we see the elements even before us, we think upon our sin, how we're sinners. We need you, Lord Jesus. And we pray that we would live in repentance of faith, dependent on you, enjoying peace with God both now and forever. Amen.