

Dying to Meet God (Leviticus 1: Sacrifices and Atonement)

The book of Leviticus begins by emphasising the need for animal sacrifices. There is a website called “Atheist Bible Study” and this is how an atheist views the first of the offerings mentioned in Leviticus, the burnt offering:

The burnt offering was voluntary. It was performed as an act of worship to God and also to receive atonement for any sins the person had committed that they were unaware of. The priests would also present a burnt offering every morning and every night on behalf of all of Israel. Let’s just say that it was a steady stream of brutally killing animals and burning them up for no purpose other than that God liked it (it was an “aroma pleasing to the Lord”).¹

I think the last sentence, “It is a burnt offering, an offering made by fire, an aroma pleasing to the Lord,” (which is repeated throughout the chapter) is just further evidence for God being a blood-thirsty monster.²

Many Australians were outraged by video footage showing the cruel treatment of exported cattle in Indonesian abattoirs. Today many are concerned about animal rights; when many would think there was something essentially immoral about the whole practice of sacrificing animals to please a god.

Against this it is crucial that we understand that God is not “a blood-thirsty monster” who arbitrarily imposes this condition for fellowship with him.

But let’s not sweep this perceived problem under the carpet. An immense numbers of animals were sacrificed to make it possible for God’s people to draw near to him. In obedience to God’s laws, tens of thousands of animals were sacrificed by the Levitical priests every Passover. Enormous numbers of cattle, goats, sheep, turtledoves, and pigeons were sacrificed every day. According to Josephus in just one year the Jews sacrificed over ¼ million lambs at the time of Passover.

But do recognise that every year in Australia around 32 million sheep and 9 million cattle³ are slaughtered in abattoirs for human consumption, either in Australia or abroad. 488 million chicken are raised and slaughtered each year.⁴ In the US alone over 9 billion animals, from chickens to cattle, are slaughtered each year for domestic or overseas human consumption. Over 140 billion such animals, including marine animals, are slaughtered worldwide.⁵ Every day around 383 million such animals are slaughtered, including 246 million land animals.

Significantly, the vast majority of these animals are slaughtered and consumed without people giving any attention to God whatsoever.

In Israel animals were not sacrificed because their lives had no value. It is precisely because God cares about the lives of animals that the death of an animal means so much.

This week one of our 10-year old cats, McCavity, went missing from Monday to Saturday. Barbara was very concerned about him. Fearing the worst she got permission to crawl under a neighbour’s house suspecting she might find a body. Instead she found him barely alive. He is at the Animal Hospital now being rehydrated prior to x-rays being taken to find out more. After reviewing what God says about animals I recognise that in the past I have treated animal death as a trivial thing. But

God values the lives of the birds of the air and feeds them. Yes, God values us more highly but this presupposes that he does value all creatures he has made and cares when even a sparrow falls to the ground. In Genesis 9:4-5 God instructs Noah: *“But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man.”* Note carefully God says “from every beast I will require it.”

Christians should be at the forefront of protesting against cruel living conditions and ruthless treatment of domestic animals in chicken coops, dairy farms and slaughterhouses. This violates Scripture. Proverbs 12:10 states: *“Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.”*

If God, then, values the lives of animals why was it necessary for them to be sacrificed? The animal sacrifices teach God’s people over and over again that because God is perfectly holy it is a simple fact that no impure person can have an intimate relationship with God without death taking place. This is expressed in Leviticus 17:11, which states: *“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life.”*

In verse 4, concerning the first voluntary, the burnt offering, we read: *“[The worshipper] is to lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him.”* The Hebrew word for “atonement” is *kipper*, just like our English word for a smoked herring which some Poms like to have on toast for breakfast. In 4:20 it is described how a priest, through a so-called sin offering, *“will make atonement for [the members of an Israelite community], and they will be forgiven.”* Atonement, then, is not the same as forgiveness. Forgiveness follows atonement. Atonement is what needs to happen first so that forgiveness can then be experienced. In the book of Leviticus the word *kipper* especially means to “purge” or to “purify.” In Leviticus 4 it is the altar and the sanctuary which is ‘atoned’ or ‘purged’ or ‘purified’ for the sake of Israelites. Note Leviticus 17:11 carefully. It says, *“For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by its life.”* Now look at Leviticus 1:5: *“He is to slaughter the young bull before the LORD, and then Aaron’s sons the priests shall bring the blood and sprinkle it against the altar on all sides to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.”* Atonement describes what is done on the altar. The blood, that is, the death of the animal, serves to purge or purify the altar “on all sides to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.” Let me now remove any lingering doubt that this is what is meant by atonement here. Look at 8:15:

*Moses slaughtered the bull and took some of the blood, and with his finger he put it on all the horns of the altar to purify the altar. He poured out the rest of the blood at the base of the altar. So he consecrated it **to make atonement for it** [that is, the altar].*

When we use the term *atonement* in Christian theology we are quite right to centre our thoughts on how Jesus died for our sins on the cross. However, in the book of Leviticus the word ‘atonement’ is used in ways we might consider odd. Look at 14:52-53:

[The priest] shall purify the house with the bird’s blood, the fresh water, the live bird, the cedar wood, the hyssop and the scarlet yarn. Then he is to release the live bird in the open fields outside the town. In this way he will make atonement for the house, and it will be clean.

Here God speaks of making atonement for a house. Houses do not sin. Jesus did not die on the cross for sins committed by houses. No! Here “atonement”, as these verses make clear, has to do with purging, purifying, cleansing the house from the ritual defilement caused by mildew.

In order to really grasp what is going on, recall that Leviticus 1 starts with the Tent of Meeting, the tabernacle, at the centre. If you travel to Southern Egypt today you can visit Abu Simbel, the site of two massive rock temples carved out of a mountain, literally mountain sanctuaries. Carved on one wall is the picture of an Egyptian war camp. It shows the large tent of Pharaoh Ramses II (who ruled in the 13th century BC) in the middle of the camp, symbolising that he was the one with ultimate authority. In precisely the same way the Tent of Meeting was located in the very middle of the Israelite camp, symbolising that God had ultimate authority. Indeed, as the end of the book of Exodus makes clear the people’s decision as to whether to stay or move was totally dependent on whether the cloud of glory stayed hovering over the tabernacle or moved from it. In other words, God was the ultimate authority who completely determined the movements of his people.

The Pharaoh’s large tent had a square inner room and an outer room twice its size. This corresponds exactly to what we find in the tabernacle: a square inner room, the Holy of Holies, and the outer area, the Holy Place. In the Pharaoh’s inner room was located what is called the royal cartouche, that is, an oval-shaped seal which represented the identity of the Pharaoh himself. In the tabernacle’s Holy of Holies we have corresponding to this the Lord himself enthroned above and between the cherubim on the ark of the covenant. Ramses II was just a human being, you can see his shrivelled mummy in the museum at Cairo. God is a different story.

But the point is that God is at the very centre of the camp of the Israelites. So to be in the camp at all is to be in the presence of God, even if in a more marginal way. To be outside the camp is to be outside the presence of God altogether. But when one actually approaches the Tent of Meeting itself one is drawing near to God. You can be sure the Egyptian Pharaoh did not issue a general invitation to any Egyptian to come and meet with him. But God does.

It is because of the presence of God in the Israelite camp that we have so many laws in Leviticus concerned with ritual purity and impurity. Without going into detail at this point, all of this serves to emphasise that only that which is pure can be in the presence of God.

Do you get the idea? It was because of Adam’s sin that he was expelled from the Garden of Eden, the mountain sanctuary. He and his wife could not be allowed back into the presence of God because their presence as sinners would defile and pollute the sanctuary, the Garden. The only way to protect the sanctuary from such defilement would be to destroy the incoming threat. If we as sinful people draw near to God without anything being done to remove the threat posed by our defiling presence then we would necessarily and inevitably die and be destroyed.

At present we all live in a world where the vast majority of people live their lives outside the presence of God. Usually people don’t think for a moment about the most important question of all: “Can I live in the presence of God or not?” Everything around you belongs to a world God created. Yes, we are very clever. We make iPads and iPhones, use GPS, drive in modern cars, etc. But the brains, the muscles, the abilities, the raw materials we use – everything is created by God! What is ultimate reality? Is it this world? What is it that enables you to survive or to feel your life is somehow worthwhile? You fill your life with diversions, favourite TV shows, going to the movies, coffee shops

and restaurants, a job, family life, and so it goes on. But everything you depend upon to sustain your life ultimately comes from God, whether you acknowledge this or not. The day is coming when all of this will be stripped from you. This will happen when God brings the world as we know it to an end. It will also happen when you die. After you die you will not have the freedom to fill your life with the things you thought were so important before you died. After you die and everything is stripped away your all that remains is you and God. Your eternal future boils down to just one key question: "Can I live in the presence of God or not?" And yet we need to turn this question on its head, because now you realise that you are not the centre of the universe. God is the centre. So the question now needs to be asked from God's perspective: "Can I admit this person into my presence?"

Now remember God is perfectly pure and holy. He is 100% goodness. In Habakkuk 1:12 we read: *"Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong."* The situation is perfectly clear. Under no circumstances can God admit you into his presence if by doing so you would defile his heavenly sanctuary. If God did that he would be lowering his standards. If God were to lower his standards, which is an absolute impossibility, he would no longer be a perfectly pure, holy and good God. Just think what would happen then. The whole universe would be thrown into utter chaos. If there is ever to be a perfect world in which there is no evil it is only possible if the God who creates it is himself perfectly good and remains so.

The book of Leviticus is preparing us to face this ultimate question which will one day confront every one of us, when God asks, "Can I admit this person into my presence?" The book of Leviticus is a staging post, a major stepping stone along the path that leads to the ultimate answer to this ultimate question. The book of Leviticus falls short of giving an adequate answer to this question. Each member of God's people is invited to draw near to God, but the animal sacrifices do not enable any of them, except the High Priest and him only once a year, to enter the Holy of Holies, that is, into the very heart of God's presence. Also, do notice that the blood that makes atonement in Leviticus 1 is sprinkled not on the worshipper but on the altar. It is the sanctuary that is being purified to enable the worshipper to draw near God and meet him in this provisional and yet highly inadequate manner. But then we turn to Hebrews 10:19ff:

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

What a privileged people we are. You and I can enter the Most Holy Place, something that was utterly impossible for any Israelite in Moses' day. Why? Because the blood of Jesus is sprinkled not on the altar but on our hearts. Notice what the blood of Jesus does. It purges, purifies, cleanses our hearts. That's the difference between New Testament atonement and the atonement we encounter in the book of Leviticus. In Leviticus 1 blood purifies the sanctuary to enable an Israelite to meet with God. But if the ultimate question that will one day face us all is to be answered then that is not enough. We ourselves need to be purged, purified, cleansed. It is the blood of Jesus, the death of Jesus on the cross, that is the key to the transformation of our hearts and lives. When I die or when Jesus returns, whichever comes first, God will ask, "Can I admit Mike Wilson into my presence?" The answer is, "Yes", because the blood of Jesus has been sprinkled on my heart and has therefore purified me. When God asks whether he can admit you into his presence what will the answer be?

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- ¹ <http://atheistbiblestudy.tumblr.com/post/6884289407/the-burnt-offering> Viewed 17/7/11.
 - ² <http://atheistbiblestudy.tumblr.com/post/6884289407/the-burnt-offering> Viewed 17/7/11.
 - ³ <http://www.unleashed.org.au/animals/cows.php> Viewed 17/7/11.
 - ⁴ http://www.animalsaustralia.org/factsheets/broiler_chickens.php Viewed 17/7/11.
 - ⁵ http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_many_animals_are_slaughtered_each_day Viewed 17/7/11.