

Our Sacrificial Substitute (Leviticus)

Big Idea: Because of a sacrificial substitute, a holy God is able to live among his sinful people.

Good news: God created the world, and it was good. Very good. As part of that creation, he created humanity, male and female. Right on page one of the Bible, he endowed both genders with dignity and honor. We matter to him.

Bad news: We committed high treason against our good Creator. As dirt creatures, we defied God and rebelled against him. We broke our relationship with him and brought sin, misery, and death into the world and were banished from God's presence, and the world has been getting worse and worse.

Good news: God launched a rescue plan. He chose a man to become a nation and promised that he would one day rescue the world through that family. Despite that family being a mess, he grew them into a large nation, rescued them from slavery, and gave them his law.

Bad news: And this is really, really bad. Despite rescuing this nation, Exodus ends with really sad words. They'd built the tabernacle, just as God had instructed. This was going to be God reestablishing his presence with his people. We'd been banished from God's presence after Adam and Eve sinned, and now God is once again making his home with his people again.

And it works. A year to the day after being rescued from Egypt, they set up the tabernacle. They'd followed God's instructions down to the smallest detail. As they

completed the work, they would have wondered: was God really going to live among his people again?

The Problem

So imagine what it would have been like to see God show up in all of his glory. We read in Exodus 40:34: “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle.”

The cloud of God’s glory was a theophany—a visible manifestation of the invisible God ... The glory that filled the tabernacle was a spectacular display of the radiance of God’s being. The God of the exodus—the God of power, who made the heavens and the earth; the God of justice, who plagued the Egyptians; the God of love, who kept his covenant with Israel; the God of providence, who led his people through the wilderness; the God of truth, who gave them his law; the God of mercy, who atoned for their sins; the God of holiness, who set them apart for service—this great God was present in glory. When the people looked at the tabernacle, they could see that God was in the house. ([Phil Ryken](#))

What a high point! This is the climax of the book, one of the greatest moments in history. Exodus begins with Israel in slavery and ends with this. Amazing. If I could pick any moment of Scripture I would like to have witnessed, this would be on the shortlist.

But this moment is marred. Moses was especially close to God. Earlier in Exodus we read, “the LORD used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (Exodus 33:11) And yet you get to the end of Exodus and read these tragic

words in 40:35: "And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle."

Huge problem. Access denied. God had moved in among his people. This was the place where people could approach God. But when the moment came, not even Moses could get in. "The Lord was present indeed in his tent, but his tent was not open to callers" ([NIV Bible Speaks Today](#)).

This sets up the greatest problem that humanity faces. I'm not exaggerating: this is the biggest problem, bigger than cancer, poverty, climate change, wars, and global health issues, as big as those problems are. The problem is this: How can a holy God live among sinful people? As Ryken says, "Moses knew God better than any man alive; yet when the glory came down, he was not able to enter. Neither can we penetrate God's infinite glory; we can only stand back and worship with reverence and awe."

God is the one we need. God is the one we want. You can have everything in life, but if you don't have God, it doesn't matter. We were made for a world in which we have ongoing access to and relationship with God. We were made to long for that, to know, recognize, and live in the glorious presence of God, to worship and to know him.

And they get so close in this passage. But even with God living among them, the reality of their separation from God becomes even more real. There's a barrier between God and us because of our sin. The problem is so severe that even the best among us can't enter God's presence because of our sin. It would kill us. The thing that we need the most is something we can't have. We were made for God's glory, but can't stand in the presence of God because of our sin.

Think for a minute about the holiness of God. God is "of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong" (Habakkuk 1:13). [J.I. Packer](#) writes:

The aspect of his character on which God laid most stress in the Old Testament was his holiness ... The whole spirit of Old Testament religion was determined by the thought of God's holiness. The constant emphasis was that human beings, because of their weakness as creatures and their defilement as sinful creatures, must learn to humble themselves and be reverent before God ... Again and again it was stressed that we must keep our place, and our distance, in the presence of a holy God. This emphasis overshadowed everything else.

God is absolutely pure. He cannot tolerate even the smallest impurity, and the problem is that we aren't just a little bit impure, we're sinful through and through.

The problem is so bad that when the prophet Isaiah saw a vision of God, he said, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isaiah 6:6). Isaiah captured the problem well: how can we, in all of our sin, stand in the presence of a holy God? We're ruined, Isaiah says. We're doomed.

Bobby Moore was the England soccer captain who received the World Cup from Queen Elizabeth when England won the trophy in 1966. An interviewer later asked him to describe how he felt. He talked about how terrified he was as he approached Her Majesty, because he noticed she was wearing white gloves, while his hand, which would soon shake the Queen's, was covered in mud from the pitch. As the triumphant captain walks along the balcony, he kept wiping his hand on his shorts, and then on the velvet cloth in front of the Royal box in a desperate to get himself clean.

Vaughan Roberts comments, "If Bobby Moore was worried about approaching the Queen with his muddy hands, how much more horrified should we be at the prospect of approaching God? Because of our sin, we are not just dirty on the outside; our

hearts are unclean. And God doesn't just wear white gloves; he is absolutely pure, through and through."

That's the problem we have. It's the biggest problem we have. Exodus opens with Pharaoh threatening God's people, and ends with Israel's sin and idolatry isolating them from God. How can sinful people stand in the presence of a holy God? How will a holy God live among them?

That's the question that Leviticus will answer.

The Solution

Leviticus begins:

The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock.

"If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. (Leviticus 1:1-3)

And then it describes what to do with this sacrifice – not just this sacrifice, but all kinds of sacrifices: burnt offerings, grain offerings, fellowship offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings.

A lot of people get stuck in Leviticus because it's hard to read. But I don't think it was boring for the people who lived out these instructions. Leviticus is fascinating as it describes the ways that Israel was to keep themselves holy as God's people, and the way they were to deal with their sin through the sacrificial system that God provided.

The two big themes of Leviticus are:

- We need to be holy because God is holy.
- We need to be forgiven and cleansed because we have sinned and we're impure.

Picture being at the tabernacle, where God lived. You'd seen God's glory move into the tabernacle. You'd seen Moses turn away because not even he could enter. But then Moses comes and tells you that God has told him what Israel is to do:

- Every morning and evening, offer a burnt offering, the basic, all-purpose offering that dealt with sin in general.
- You'd also have grain offerings, the only bloodless offering, to give thanks to God and acknowledge that he is the source of prosperity.
- But then you'd have peace or fellowship offerings to render praise to God. This was offered a lot during the three annual feasts.
- But you also had the sin offering, to deal with impurity.
- And you also had the guilt offering, to deal with when you violated something holy.

No wonder we struggle with this. It's bloody.

Why so much blood and sacrifice? Leviticus 17:11 tells us: "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."

Here's what that means. All of these offerings reminded the Israelites that sin brings death. We deserve death for our actions. But by God's grace, God allowed an animal to die in the place of sinful humans. They died in the place of sinful human beings so that the people could live in the holy presence of God and not die.

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God finds a way to deal with Israel's sin and rebellion. He provides a substitute. The animal's life is symbolically offered in their place so they can live. It showed how committed God was to stay in a relationship with them, despite their sin. It showed how serious a problem their sin really was. It shows God's grace because he was willing to allow a substitute to pay the price that they should have paid for their sins.

And this went on and on and never stopped. So much sin. So much blood. Picture living in Moses' day with the endless sacrifices being offered so that God could continue to live among his people. Picture that going on for year after year, decade after decade, century after century.

When would it end?

It ended with Jesus. The book of Hebrews tells us:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. (Hebrews 10:11-14)

We deserve death for our actions. But God has graciously allowed a sacrificial substitute to take our place. Because of a sacrificial substitute, a holy God was able to live among his sinful people.

How can a holy God live among sinful people? Because they had a sacrificial substitute. And that's just what we have through Jesus. God calls us to turn from our sins, and place our trust in the sacrifice for sins that God has offered for us in Jesus. He is

our sacrifice who died in our place, taking the death that we deserved, so that God could live among his people.

Because of a sacrificial substitute, a holy God is able to live among his sinful people.

Have you sinned? Yes. Can you stand before a holy God? No. What can be done? Either you must die for your sins, or someone must die in your place. Which will it be? Trust in Christ who offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, and who by a single offering has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified, and you will live.

Father, thank you for showing us the seriousness of sin. Thank you for providing a substitute. Thank you for solving our sin problem so that we can live in your presence now and forever.

My prayer is that everyone here today would turn from their sins and trust in that substitute. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.