

Leviticus – OVERVIEW: Leviticus 9 [2000 words]

A person dies. Those that knew that person, and sometimes those that didn't, stop what they are doing and attend a funeral. Specific clothes are worn, certain words are said; each culture does it their own way. That person is recollected, who that person was is dwelt upon, the reality of what their absence means. The lack of a funeral in the case of a missing person or missing body is considered awful, mentally and emotionally taxing for the family and friends. The failure to attend a funeral can be lamented or considered as a snub to the community of that person

A man and a woman are married. Those that knew one, or both, of them participate in a great event or party. Specific promises are made before others, special clothes rarely to be used again are bought and worn, gifts are brought; each culture does it their own way. The pasts and families of two individuals are acknowledged and their future as a one unity is celebrated; the photographs and records of it are uniquely prized for the remainder of the marriage and beyond. The failure to be invited to such a celebration can be regarded as a snub, the failure to celebrate it properly as a source of dishonour.

Christians take food and drink, bread and wine, they speak some words from the bible, they share that same food and drink. To be denied participation in this meal is considered the highest form of punishment within the church – excommunication; being cut off from the people of God.

This is the power of rituals; this is the making of an invisible truth visible.

A funeral makes the loss of a person real, acknowledges it, recognising the role that individual played in their community. Without such a ritual we speak of lacking closure, as if that person is just absent, not dead, but unable to be related to.

A wedding makes the great unfathomable mystery of marriage visible, that unifying of one flesh, acknowledges the formation of a new family out of two. To not attend deliberately can be seen as refusal to acknowledge that family, to refuse to accept the new member into community. I might disagree with the ethics of same-sex marriage and the modern redefinition of marriage, but I know the reasons why people want the right to marry; it is to participate with that ritual.

And the Lord's supper reminds us of Jesus Christ, his death for our sins and our unity in his body, the church. To be excommunicated is exclusion from the community of the church, separation from the blessings and forgiveness found in Him.

Ritual makes the invisible visible, the intangible tangible. They try to express in word and deed what is, by nature, inexpressible. We know the significance of ritual in our daily lives. We move our whole schedules just to make room for a wedding or funeral. Some are ready to lay down more money than we would pay for a car for such an event. Yet when we get to the third book in the Bible, Leviticus, then our devotional reading grinds to a halt and we proclaim, "It's too boring! It's not applicable for us!"

We know the intangible behind a funeral. We know the invisible truth behind a wedding. We have rehearsed the reason for the Lord's supper. But we refuse to do the same for the rituals of Leviticus.

And that is deeply sad. For what is Leviticus but the word of God? The first verse reminds us of it and it is repeated more than 37 times in 27 chapters, "The Lord spoke." Whenever there is action by the people it is described as being done, "as the Lord commanded;" and this seven times in chapter 8 alone. But beyond obedience to the revealed word of God the motives for these rituals and laws are spelled out repetitively throughout the book. According to God the Israelites were to do these things because of the character or actions of the Lord God. They are to do them simply because "I am the Lord" (over 40 times), in other words because simply God is who he is. Or they are to do these things because God is holy and has made the Israelites holy. He is unique and set apart as such and so is his people and so should his people live, different from everyone, guided by God's word.

But uniqueness was not the only reason. No, God gave ritual because it had meaning; the great teacher was teaching. As students might not always understand a teacher's lesson at first, so we, do not understand the rituals of Leviticus. It is only by reading them, by examining them, by thinking on them, that we can fully learn the message of our great teacher.

So, if rituals make the invisible visible, then what is the invisible truth behind Leviticus? If Leviticus is trying to make something tangible, what is it?

It is nothing less than reinforcing the story of Genesis and Exodus through the ritual of Leviticus. The passage read out today emphasises this; it was obedience of Israel to the ceremony in Exodus 29, the uniting of all the ingredients of the sanctuary made and described in Exodus 25-40.

The story then is the continuation of the narrative of Genesis and Exodus, the second book of Exodus if you would think of it that way. This story was one of God's choice. God's choice to take one man, Abraham, out of his country to a country chosen by God. God's choice to make a covenant, a promise, to him. God's choice to start to bind himself closer to the humanity he created. His salvation of those people he had chosen. His triumph over Egypt by the Exodus from Egypt. God chose them to be holy, chose them to be set apart, to be different than all those around them. He bought them with blood shed, Blood wiped on the wooden door posts of their houses; a commemoration still celebrated in the Passover by Jews and the Lord's supper and Easter by Christians. These rituals are reminders of the truth of God's salvation and a life in the presence of God; it is how we approach God and live in his presence.

We are so accustomed to think of Christianity in the warm light of the largely persecution-free west that we have forgotten the basics of what Christianity is. The truth is that, for broken humans, God is not easy to get into a relationship with; it is this relationship building that Leviticus is talking about within its strange rituals and the building block of much of the ritual is the idea of sacrifice. The first 9 chapters are devoted to sacrifice, and the remainder of the chapters involve sacrifice in some degree. Sacrifice was to be the way of approach God. Sins were atoned for, guilt was removed, thanks to God was offered, fellowship with him was experienced, and all this was done through the shedding of the blood of animals

This seems highly involved for such a communion with God. We who stand this side of the cross of Christ take such approach for granted. After all, as Hebrews 10:19-20 writes, "we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place, [the very presence of God] by the blood of Jesus." But Leviticus helps remind us how precious such confidence is, how high the cost of forgiveness is. It says

in a literal blood bath what Hebrews 9:22 says in a sentence, “the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

But why bother with the ritual when a sentence will do?

Consider approaching a leader. Can I simply approach Queen Elizabeth II? No, the proper channels must be used; I must be allowed to have a relationship with her. A security check must be done, appropriate clothes must be worn, etiquette must be followed. If I were to try and bypass the checks demanded and walk up to the gates of Buckingham palace in shorts and singlet straight up to Queen Elizabeth, slap her on the shoulder and call her Lizzy, do you think that I would be accepted? No, I would be tackled by secret service agents before I got even to the front door! These are the sacrifices made in pursuing a relationship with a human monarch; it’s never allowed on our terms, only on theirs.

It is likewise with God. The blood of cattle, the finest of wheat and incense, all offered by the hands of a priest; these are the security checks, clothes and etiquette he demands for a meal or conversation with him. And just as the sacrifices are greater to approach God, so are the penalties for attempting to bypass them, as we find with the death of Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu in Leviticus 10.

Next week’s sermon will focus on sacrifice, but the key point is this: relationship to God is not easy, and sacrifice is the cost of that relationship; it is on his terms, not on ours.

But besides sacrifice required for a relationship there is also a need to be the right people within that relationship. God is holy and so his people must be holy, different from all those around them.

Our laws in Australia shows what we value. We value freedom, and so slavery and kidnapping is illegal. We value true representation in government, so we have highly regulated election laws and compulsory voting. We value the health and wellbeing of everyone, so we have public health care and a regulated health care system. So it is with God; His laws show what he values and shows what he is like. And, like the Australian government, his laws give guidance in how this is pursued.

For the Israelites God’s laws were all consuming. Everything was to be affected: what was eaten, what could be touched, pregnancy, birth, marriage, sex, health care, clothes, property management, work and religion; every facet of life from cradle to grave was impacted by the holiness of God and the need to be holy in his presence.

This is extremely counter cultural. Shortly before the postal vote regarding same sex marriage I was working as a carer in a nursing home. My manager at that time was a man I greatly respected and got along with well. He was also homosexual himself and was working with the company to write a LGBTI policy for my workplace. When the policy was brought in, he announced it at a staff meeting. In doing so he acknowledged that some people disagreed with homosexuality, but added, “whatever you believe about this, leave it at the front door.” What he was saying is the common mantra of this age: compartmentalise your life; leave your moral and religious beliefs at home and live the rest of your life as if you believed nothing.

My manager's suggestion is not the approach God requires. To approach and have a relationship with God is not as the world today expects. A relationship with him cannot be compartmentalised. A relationship with God is like a marriage; it remains whether your spouse is in the room or not, whether your ring is on your finger or not. You don't cease to be married when you leave your home and you don't cease to be accountable to God when you leave your home either; there is no part of life that God does not demand holiness in. Your relationship with God is all encompassing, not simply one reserved for Sunday.

This is just a taste of Leviticus, a bird's eye view of the book. I will not do such a book justice in a further paltry six sermons, so I encourage you to prayerfully read it yourself as well. But this is the big takeaway: the cost and comprehensiveness of a relationship with God. Our relationship with God is a one that demands sacrifice to enter and maintain and one that affects everything in our lives.