

The life is in the blood

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[0 : 00] We turn together this evening in God's Word to read from Leviticus chapter 17, and we're reading the whole of the chapter.

Leviticus chapter 17. The Lord said to Moses, speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites and say to them, this is what the Lord has commanded.

Any Israelite who sacrifices an ox, a lamb, or a goat in the camp or outside it, instead of bringing it to the entrance to the tent of meeting to present it as an offering to the Lord in front of the tabernacle of the Lord, that person shall be considered guilty of bloodshed.

They have shed blood and must be cut off from their people. This is so that the Israelites will bring to the Lord the sacrifices they are now making in the open fields.

They must bring them to the priest, that is, to the Lord, at the entrance to the tent of meeting and sacrifice them as fellowship offerings.

[1 : 19] The priest is to splash the blood against the altar of the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting and burn the fat as an aroma, pleasing to the Lord.

They must no longer offer any of their sacrifices to the goat idols to whom they prostitute themselves. This is to be a lasting ordinance for them and for the generations to come.

Say to them, any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who offers a burnt offering or sacrifice and does not bring it to the entrance to the tent of meeting to sacrifice it to the Lord must be cut off from the people of Israel.

I will set my face against any Israelite or any foreigner residing among them who eats blood and I will cut them off from the people for the life of a creature is in the blood and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar.

It is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. Therefore, I say to the Israelites, none of you may eat blood, nor may any foreigner residing among you eat blood.

[2 : 48] Any Israelite or any foreigner residing among you who hunts any animal or bird that may be eaten must drain out the blood and cover it with earth because the life of every creature is its blood.

That is why I have said to the Israelites, you must not eat the blood of any creature because the life of every creature is its blood.

Anyone who eats it must be cut off. Anyone, whether native born or foreigner, who eats anything found dead or torn by wild animals must wash their clothes and bathe with water.

And they will be ceremonially unclean till evening. Then they will be clean. But if they do not wash their clothes and bathe themselves, they will be held responsible.

Amen. So, the question for us this evening is, why is it that as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood?

[4 : 07] And without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness? Well, this chapter of Leviticus is giving us some of the background to that statement.

Why it is true that blood is so central to the cleansing of things under the law and to the procurement of forgiveness by the shedding of blood.

The whole chapter is tied together by blood. First, there's the question of the blood of the sacrifices and then prohibition of the eating of blood. Folks, if for us our forgiveness is won by the shedding of Jesus' blood, then it's worth us spending some time unpacking why that is and how it works.

So, before we dive in to the rules here about sacrifice, let's just remind ourselves where we are. Let's get our bearings. Chapter 17, this is following on from the high point of the Day of Atonement.

So, last week we thought in Chapter 16 about the Day of Atonement, making provision for the cleansing of the tabernacle for the forgiveness of the people's sins year by year, the high point of the calendar, the high point of the book of Leviticus.

[5 : 20] And now as we follow on from that, we're starting a section that's often referred to as the Holiness Code. And so it sets out a number of rules for how God's people are expected to live, some of them explicitly rooted in God's holy nature, some of them more generally rooted into the simple fact that, I am the Lord your God, therefore do this.

So this section sets out rules for how God's people are going to live. And one way you can think about it is that the first half of the book of Leviticus is kind of a manual for the priests.

It tells them what they're going to do week by week, day by day, how they conduct themselves in sacrifice, how priests are ordained and so on, how they discharge that duty to distinguish between clean and unclean, holy and unholy.

And we thought about that with respect to animals and skin diseases and bodily discharges. And that's kind of Section 1, the manual for the priests. And then Section 2, Chapter 17 onwards, this is now more about moral and ethical instruction.

And that'll be more obvious in the following chapters, I admit. The eating of blood isn't obviously immediately moral, but it is. So that does begin now, and that will continue through the rest.

[6 : 37] And this is therefore more directed to the people as a whole rather than to the priests as distinct. So what we're saying then is that this is kind of flowing out from the Day of Atonement.

The knowledge that atonement is possible frees up God's people to live now according to his precepts. Specifically, this chapter, God demands exclusive devotion in sacrifice, no sacrifices to anyone else, and demands also a proper respect for blood, because the life of the creature is in the blood.

So then first, sacrifice. This is verses 3 through 9. All sacrifices must be made according to the laws that were set out in the first half of the book. You can't go and sacrifice animals out in the fields, verse 3, nor, verse 7, may you sacrifice to goat idols.

Let's take that latter first. It's quite straightforward. No sacrificing to idols. God has consistently demanded exclusive allegiance, hasn't he?

From the very dawning of creation, God has expected that humanity, and especially here, his chosen people, that they will be his and his alone. No sacrifice to anyone else.

[7 : 52] No worship of any other God. No commitment to any other power or dominion. And it's easy for us to forget just how radical a position this is.

This isn't the way people at the time thought. Nobody's understanding of their gods required exclusive devotion. How could they? It doesn't make any sense to say you can only worship one God when you believe in a whole pantheon of gods.

You can't then have only worshipping one of them. But Yahweh, the God of Israel, says, verse 7, that to offer to other gods, to make sacrifices to idols, is to prostitute oneself.

Giving something for the sake of what you can get. These idols. These demons are the translations. These idols are no gods at all.

Now, the thing is, the Bible doesn't deny the existence of other supernatural entities. Angels are real. And demons are real, too. There are other beings that make claims to deity.

- [9 : 05] There are other entities that claim to be gods. But God is consistent. There is no grounds to worship any of them. Sacrificing to these goat idols in hope of receiving whatever benefits it is they thought they might thereby accrue, it is completely unacceptable to God. He demands exclusivity. And maybe there's a level on which this feels arrogant, restrictive, unreasonable.

And the rest of the Old Testament shows us God's people often viewed it that way. They did go and sacrifice to other gods. We sung just now in Psalm 106 about them sacrificing their sons and daughters to Canaanitish gods.

They did feel this to be restrictive. But the thing is, this isn't supposed to be arrogant and restrictive and unreasonable.

Because if these idols aren't actually able to deliver on what they promise, if they don't have the power to bestow blessing, then to sacrifice to them is folly.

- [10 : 13] It's a waste of time, energy, and resources. And to be forbidden from sacrificing to them actually means God's people can preserve their resources.

They don't have to waste their meat or their grain or their children in futile gestures. And perhaps more importantly, they can preserve their mental resources, for want of a better phrase, their devotion, their commitment.

They can keep their devotion and their worship to be poured out in the one place where it actually does some good. To the one God that is actually worthy of it.

To the one God who always keeps his promises. Who does exactly what he intends to do. Who is able to bestow blessing upon them day by day and week by week and year by year.

So R.K. Harrison, he points out that it's really difficult for us, for the modern Western mind to conceive of the overpowering influence that evil spirits and demons exerted over all areas of life in the ancient world.

- [11 : 25] And if the Israelites could remain free from bondage to these crippling superstitions, then they would be unique as a people in antiquity. And the intent of this legislation here in Leviticus 17 is to direct their activities to that end.

This legislation provides freedom. So God expects exclusivity of worship, both because he's a jealous God who will not share his glory with another, and because it is to his people's good that they be exclusively committed to him.

And the same is every bit as true today, isn't it? That God is still an exclusive God. That God still makes that demand to be number one, and one and only, not one amongst many, not first amongst equals, no, the only one worthy of our worship.

And perhaps in 21st century Scotland, well, we're probably not inclined to take our fattened calves and lead them out into the desert and sacrifice them to appease the gods.

It's a long way to go to find a desert apart from anything else. But we still have to find ourselves asking the question, well, how exclusive is our devotion and our worship?

- [12 : 51] These ancient Israelites, they weren't being tempted to sacrifice to these goat demons out of love. They were tempted to sacrifice to them because of what they thought they might get in return, because of what these idols claimed to offer to them.

They're tempted by something good. And the question, therefore, is, what are we sacrificing to the things that we think will deliver happiness to us, that will give us wellness and long life?

The question is, where are we bestowing our money, or even more precious, our time, our mental resources? Where are we expending what God has given to us in order to seek to buy elsewhere what truly comes only from God?

Some people go and pour all of their money into the slot machines, thinking that they will buy riches and therefore happiness, or the slightly less obvious ways of doing the same in the stock market or whatever it might be.

And they don't deliver. Some people pour all of their time into the dating game, imagining that finding the right life partner, or at least the right partner for tonight, will meet their heart's desires.

[14 : 19] Some people throw every ounce of mental energy into their work with nothing left for family, for friends, for church, dare we say, nothing left for God. Some throw themselves into work because they want the financial security, or because they find meaning in what they can produce, or because they think that the affirmation of their peers will give them the fulfillment that they desire, the confirmation that they have done well.

We bestow our resources to that which we think will give us the return that we desire. And like the Israelites sacrificing to the goat demons, these things don't deliver.

And we therefore have to ask, what are we devoting ourselves to? In manners that should be marks of our devotion to the Lord our God. Because folks, he demands your exclusive allegiance.

Don't sacrifice to goat idols, verse 7. Before that, it is what looks like a wider statement. Back up in verse 3. Any Israelite who sacrifices an ox, a lamb, or a goat in the camp or outside it, instead of bringing it to the entrance to the tent of meeting to present it as an offering to the Lord in front of the tabernacle of the Lord, that person shall be considered guilty of bloodshed.

They have shed blood and must be cut off from their people. No sacrifice anywhere except at the tabernacle, the tent of meeting, or the temple, its later successor.

[15 : 54] Now there's debate as to what exactly is being forbidden here. And it centers around this word sacrifice, verse 3. And the question is, does this verse only refer to sacrifice, that is to say, animals killed in honor of God or of gods?

Or does the word here just mean killing all animals, any killing of animals? So is this regulating worship or the slaughterhouse, the butcher shop?

And the linguistic argument seems to shade slightly in favor of the latter, that no animals that could conceivably be sacrificed can be killed at all, anywhere but at the tabernacle or the temple.

Now that doesn't mean the Israelites can't eat meat, because remember, the fellowship offering, you bring the fellowship offering, a portion's burnt as an offering to the Lord, a portion's given to the priest, and then 80% of it, whatever it might be, is given back to the person who brought the offering.

You get to eat your meat. So this isn't a forbidding of eating meat, but a regulating of it. Indeed, this could be. This could be a really good thing.

[17 : 09] Taking the line of this understanding, Andrew Boner writes, How solemn and how sweet to a true Israelite. He brings his food to the Lord, sees God's majesty, acknowledges himself worthy to die, and yet redeemed by atoning blood, and thus goes to his table and eats his meat with gladness and singleness of heart.

All their meat became a peace offering. I like that. That vividly pictures what we should surely count as a good and positive thing, to eat with thanksgiving to the Lord.

By saying, You only get to eat the meat if you come and do it in this way, that exemplifies thanksgiving. Well, the reminder is constantly there, that this is a blessing from God, a gift from his hand.

The tricky part of this understanding, though, seeing this as regulating all killing of animals, or all slaughter, the tricky part is, this doesn't really withstand time moving on.

Because at a certain point, it becomes impractical to travel from one end of the country to another, anytime you want to eat meat. Okay, they're eating meat a lot less often than you or I, but it still becomes unworkable with time, doesn't it?

[18 : 31] When all Israel here in Leviticus is gathered in a single camp, you can see this being feasible. But when they're a whole nation, with days of journeying to get to the temple, and therefore Deuteronomy 12.15 makes it clear, you can kill animals at home, just not as a sacrifice.

Chapter 12 of Deuteronomy makes it clear that the decrees being set out in that chapter, these are decrees as they enter into the land. So maybe there in Deuteronomy, that is then a new set of rules for a new situation.

But then we're left wondering, well, why did God make this law back in Leviticus if it was only ever going to last for one generation? Verse 7 is definitely referring to a lasting ordinance.

You could debate how much of the chapter that's commenting on, but it's starting to sound a little bit thin to understand it that way. And therefore, on balance, I'm inclined to say we get the best sense of what's going on here when we take the understanding that the NOV has followed by translating sacrifice in verse 3.

That probably comes closest to what's actually being regulated here. You can make that case even linguistically, and certainly it fits more easily together with Deuteronomy.

[19 : 52] Now on that understanding, this then is an argument that if you want to sacrifice an animal, if your desire is worship, then you have to do that at the right place in the right way.

You can only worship God on his terms. Whatever we're understanding here, let's be clear, this is really serious business.

Verse 4, if someone fails to follow the proper process, they are to be considered guilty of bloodshed. They have shed blood and must be cut off from their people. Guilty of bloodshed, this is tantamount to murder.

It's the same term for the unlawful taking of human life being used here of animal life. This is serious, and the punishment reflects that. Whether being cut off from the people requires the civil authorities to put them to death or to impose a sentence of exile, or whether this is an assertion from God that he will produce an untimely death, whatever cut off means specifically, it is very clear that it is a serious penalty, isn't it?

This is big stuff. God cares how he's worshipped. The death of Nadab and Abihu, a few chapters earlier, it provides an illustration of this principle.

[21 : 16] They clearly were not worshipping in the correct way. And then here, that same requirement of proper worship is applied to the whole people in the form of this law. God is to be worshipped in his way, and anything else is idolatry, is offensive to God, is not worship at all, but rather the reverse.

Now, naturally, for us today, we recognize that the forms of worship have changed. In fact, we're explicitly not to bring sacrifices. But God's character hasn't changed, has it?

God's expectation that he has the right to set the pattern of worship. His expectation of wholehearted worship has not been abandoned.

The God who said, I desire mercy, not sacrifice, still says so. Jesus said to the Samaritan woman, A time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in the Spirit and in truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.

God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in the Spirit and in truth. That day has arrived, hasn't it? We today are called to worship in Spirit and in truth.

[22 : 42] Folks, God expects wholehearted commitment. That means that we're not directing our efforts, our worship, our energies anywhere else.

Wholehearted worship devoted to God alone. And it means also that we're fully engaged, that we're totally committed, that when we're engaged in worship, that's what we're doing.

That's what we're focused on. And so we have to ask how many of us, or how often, how often we come to church more out of habit than out of a true desire to worship in Spirit and in truth.

Or how much of us, how often we come and we spend our time a little bit distracted, thinking about the tasks of the week ahead, or off with the fairies, or focus more on the music for its own sake, rather than the music as an expression of love and devotion.

Folks, I wrote these words actually only yesterday. And as we were singing earlier on, part of my mind was thinking about what am I going to lead people in prayer in a few minutes' time?

[24 : 06] How are we going to go through this sermon together? And even what's coming up in the week ahead? I wrote this less than 24 hours ago and have failed on it already.

I wonder how many of you were similarly distracted this very evening. Folks, God expects to be the only object of our worship and that our worship of him will be wholehearted.

The sacrifice, the blood. What of these laws in the latter half about the eating of blood? Verse 10, neither the Israelites nor others in their lands may eat blood.

And again, this same severe penalty for any breach of this law. Eating blood, again, is a serious business. Again, maybe it's hard for us to see why this is quite so important.

But it's clear that it is, isn't it? We see that from the penalty and we see that from the fact that between verses 10 and 14, we're told six times over in five verses, no one is to eat blood.

[25 : 22] And it's not a new rule here. Right back when Noah's first given permission to eat meat, Genesis chapter 9, he too was instructed, not the blood. Eat meat, but not with the blood still in it.

And now we're given a reason. The life of the creature is in the blood. So much so straightforward, right? Obviously a creature drained of blood, obviously it has no life.

There are other things necessary too for life, but fine. You know, the life is in the blood, okay. But isn't the second half of verse 11 even more significant? I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar.

It is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. We've seen this, haven't we? Going through the book of Leviticus, we've seen the important role of the blood in the different processes of sacrifice.

And that's not just in that, you know, most sacrifices are animals and therefore the blood is necessarily involved, but also think about all the different things that are done with this blood.

[26 : 28] It gets smeared on the altars. It gets smeared on people. It gets sprinkled on tents and on the ground and on the mercy seat. It gets collected in bowls. It gets drained into water.

It gets sprinkled over whole crowds of people. What happens to the blood in any given sacrifice matters a great deal because it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life.

And that's because if the life is in the blood, then the blood is a suitable payment for a life. It's a fit representation. A life that deserves to be poured out to God because of sinful rebellion against Him.

A life that deserves to be taken by God can instead be redeemed by the pouring out of blood. So why do you not eat the blood? Because the blood's sacred.

Because the blood's intended for something better. Because the blood can do more than be sustenance for the body. The blood is the means of atonement.

[27 : 36] And therefore, to just eat it or drink it is to treat it as less than it truly is. A commentator whose name I've written but don't want to try and pronounce says it's an act of disdain for the means that God provides for atonement.

Eating blood flies in the face of the symbol that blood serves as the ransom for life which provides atonement on the altar of God. Therefore, anyone eating blood, both native and alien, shall be cut off.

So we get, I hope, therefore, what's going on here in Leviticus 17, what the rules are for God's people then.

And as with a number of laws, we're then forced to ask, well, okay, but what about today? Are we bound by this same restriction? Shall we be avoiding eating meat with the blood still in it?

Is black pudding abhorrent to God? And this one's trickier than most other food questions. Because, you know, when we talked about clean and unclean, you know, we can go from there to the present day through the very clear comments to Peter that all food is declared clean and we kind of go forwards.

[28 : 52] But this is complicated by what's called the Jerusalem decree. And this comes in Acts chapter 15. In Acts 15, the early church are considering on what basis Gentiles are welcome in the church.

And James concludes as follows. It's my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead, we should write to them telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals, and from blood.

For the law of Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath. So Gentiles are not required to be circumcised and so on, but these things are still to be expected.

And this, in Acts 15, this comes after it was revealed to Peter that all animals are now clean. So we can't say that this is superseded by that judgment. The Jerusalem council already know all animals are clean.

What's helpful is Paul's later writings. And Gordon Wenham summarizes it this way. Paul does allow Christians to eat food offered to idols as long as the meal doesn't take place in a pagan temple and isn't being misinterpreted by pagan friends.

[30 : 13] That's clear in 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. And it seems very likely, therefore, that Paul did not view eating blood as something intrinsically wrong, but held that it should be avoided whenever it might offend Jewish Christians.

Romans 14. And if we read the last couple of those verses, Romans 14, 14. I am convinced, being fully persuaded in the Lord Jesus, that nothing is unclean in itself.

But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for that person it is unclean. If your brother or sister is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not, by your eating, destroy someone for whom Christ died.

Conclusion, therefore, if it troubles your conscience to eat blood, then don't do it. Don't go against your conscience. If it feels unclean, then to you it is unclean.

And furthermore, if it troubles somebody you're with for you to eat blood, then don't do it. Absent those restrictions, eat all the black pudding you like.

[31 : 29] So much for eating blood. But if we've resolved that query, I hope we have. We can talk about it more later if you like. If we've resolved that, then let's turn to a matter of frankly much greater significance and I hope more positive impact.

Folks, put yourselves for a moment into the shoes of Jesus' first disciples. Picture yourself one of the first Christians of a Jewish background back in the days of the early church and hearing these words from Jesus in John chapter 6.

Very truly I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. You've grown up your whole life hearing, we do not eat the meat with the blood in.

The life is in the blood. The blood is sacred. The blood is the means of atonement. We go nowhere near that. And Jesus says, you must, you must drink the blood else there is no life in you.

And folks, that's what we do again and again. We come and we drink the blood of Jesus because that is where the life is.

[32 : 47] His life comes into us. In the drinking of the blood, we remember that the price has been paid. The blood is there for atonement.

We now live by blood. We now drink the poured out blood of this Son of Man. So praise God that the life is in the blood and it has been poured out for you and for me.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, make us wholehearted in your service, we pray.

Make us single-minded in our devotion to you, in our worship of you. We are sorry when we are distracted, when we think about other things, when we should be focused on you and on what you have done for us.

Lord, may we sing with our whole hearts the glorious praises of what you have done for us. Sing not least, indeed sing perhaps most, of that blood that was poured out for us.

[34 : 07] The blood of the atonement in which we receive life. Amen. Amen.