

Draw Near to God

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[0 : 00] So, with those verses open in front of us, here's the question that we're going to ask over these coming five Sundays.! How can people like us draw near to a pure and holy God?

We just read from Exodus chapter 40, Leviticus chapter 1, really really old words from really old times, about three and a half thousand years ago. And if you've, as you heard it read, I don't know what you made of it. There's a strange desert tabernacle tent, an ark, an altar, a lampstand, there's oil and priests and curtains and washing in Exodus 40.

In Leviticus 1, slaughtering animals, twisting off a pigeon's head, splashing blood, chopping, washing, burning, and all of this apparently pleasing to the Lord.

Like, what would we say today about all that? You can say what you want, but it looks, on first glance, so alien, so weird, so bloody, so old, so backward even.

And, many would suspect, with absolutely nothing helpful or useful to say to us and our 21st century lives and the stresses of your coming week. Why look at it on a Sunday? Here's why.

[1 : 18] Because everything here in these old words, the layout and the furniture of the tent, the rules for slaughtering and skinning and burning, every single bit of this was given by the Holy God.

And it was given by God three and a half thousand years ago to teach people back then and us today how people like you and me can draw near to God.

That is the question. How can you, in all your human mess and sin, how can you come into the presence of a pure and holy God and enjoy him as your God forever?

That is what Leviticus is about and points towards, and that is why we're reading it. Before we dive in with a bit more introduction, just stand back a second. I think we live in a culture broadly which has narrowed the gap between us and God to almost nothing.

I wonder if this is how you perceive it from your standpoint. If God is there, and actually for many people today, who even cares about that, if he's there, then maybe we picture him as just a slightly bigger but invisible version of ourselves.

[2 : 34] If things get desperate, if you want a little bit of help or spiritual uplift, ask him to get involved, and probably he should be pleased that you're paying him a little bit of attention.

But God is not like that. He's not like us and just a little bit bigger. The testimony of the Bible is that God is holy. That's why we read from Psalm 99 at the beginning.

The Lord reigns. Let the nations tremble. And the eternal, uncreated God, who in the beginning of Genesis 1, verse 1, created the heavens and the earth, he is a sovereign, majestic, mighty king. He is far above us. He's immense. He's infinite. He's beyond our understanding. He's great and exalted. There is no one like him. He is majestically other and holy, and he deserves our highest praise.

And this high and holy God, moreover, is morally other. Like the sun in the sky, he blazes with moral purity.

[3 : 44] The God who made us is righteous. He always does what is just and right. The Bible says he dwells in unapproachable light. His eyes are too pure to look upon evil.

He is morally other from us, blazingly perfect and holy. And if those who are unclean and morally impure try to come close to him, they will be consumed.

Majestically other, morally other. This God is holy, holy, holy. And that is why at the beginning of the Bible, in Genesis chapter 3, when the first man and woman turn away from God in dirty disobedience, he drives them out of the garden and away from his presence.

In your sins, you can no longer come close to me and be with me, the Holy One. So the gap then between us, unclean human beings, and him, the Holy God, it's not narrow, it's vast.

Some of us may have forgotten that. Some of us may have never known that. We treat God casually, we think it's okay. Others of us might be much, much more aware of the gap between us and him.

[5 : 02] I mention this from time to time, it was so striking. I remember a guy who played five-a-side football a few years ago, and he said to me, I could never come to your church because I think I'd probably burn up. And he was serious.

What he was saying was, how could someone like me come near? And maybe some of us will feel like that ourselves some of the time. Here's the question again.

How can people like you and me draw near to this holy God? And Leviticus will show us that God, in his kindness, has made a way.

He has made a way for sinful people like us to draw near to him. Every God-given ritual that took place back then will show us what it takes. But more than that, I hope we'll see this.

In God's kindness and wisdom, every God-given ritual here that took place will point us forward.

Designed by God himself, the details, the action of Leviticus are like a God-given picture book.

[6 : 08] Because what took place here thousands of years ago will, on purpose, help us to understand and point us forward to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Because Jesus is the one, ultimately, through whom people like us are invited to draw near to God today. Leviticus, this book, strangely and wonderfully, will show us Jesus.

And that said, by way of introduction, let's get our bearings with this book from Leviticus chapter 1, verse 1. So with the text in front of us, look at this. Leviticus chapter 1 and verse 1.

The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting. Three things here. Notice firstly, right at the beginning, the Lord called. From Genesis onwards, in his initiative and love, the holy God takes steps towards humanity.

And from Genesis 12 onwards, he called and chose Abraham and his descendants. He said, I will be your God and through you I will bless the world. And my name is the Lord. That's the God who's speaking.

[7 : 22] Second here, the Lord called to Moses. Many of us, not all of us necessarily, will know the story. And the Jewish people have been in slavery and Egypt and God chose Moses to be their leader.

God rescued his people. He brought them through the sea. He brought them to a place called Mount Sinai. I have brought you to myself, said God. And the mountain blazed with terrifying fire because God was present in his holiness.

And third now, in words spoken at the foot of this mountain, Mount Sinai, the Lord spoke to Moses from the tent of meeting.

And what is the tent of meeting? As the people of Israel were to journey from Mount Sinai to a promised land, the Lord God promised to go with them. And as a mark of his holy presence with them back then, he commanded them to build a tent of meeting, a tabernacle.

And let them make a sanctuary for me and I will dwell among them, he said to Moses. Make this tabernacle exactly like the pattern that I will show you.

[8 : 33] And this tabernacle space, this dwelling place for God was built and set up. And it's what we read in Exodus 40. We'll explore it more over the coming weeks, but here's a picture of it on the screen.

And there's a courtyard around the outside. There's an altar with fire. And then there was a tent in which was the holy place and the most holy place.

And when Moses had finished the work of building this tabernacle on the page before Leviticus 1, if you've got Leviticus 1 open, just go back a page to Exodus 40 and verse 34.

And then there's a picture of the Lord, having built this place, then the cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Such a massive climax moment.

Could you believe it? That the Holy One might come and dwell among his people like this. And yet, at the same time, in verse 35, Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

[9 : 47] So do you see what has happened by the end of the book of Exodus? This holy God, strangely, in his mercy, has come so very close, said, I will dwell amongst you in this tent.

And yet, not even Moses, the leader of God's people, could enter. Question, how can a holy God dwell amongst us?

A question for today, how could Moses back then, how can anyone today enter God's holy presence? Or a question exactly like the beginning, how can people like you and me in all our mess and sin draw near to a holy God today?

Well, Leviticus will tell us how. That's the end of introduction part two or three. So listen to what God says then in Leviticus 1. Let me read from 1 verse 1.

The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, because Moses is outside, and he said, speak to the Israelites and say to them, when anyone among you brings an offering to the Lord, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock.

[11:03] So how do you draw near to a holy God? You draw near to a holy God, God says here, through sacrifice. Through bringing an offering to the Lord.

Leviticus chapters 1 to 7 will outline in careful detail the different sacrifices and offerings that God commands people to make.

You see that just in the headings in bold on these two pages. The burnt offering, the grain offering, the fellowship offering, the sin offering, over the page, the guilt offering. You are invited to come to God.

He invites you and commands you to come, and you are to bring an offering when you do. You are to sacrifice to him. That's what chapter 1 is about.

Chapter 1 describes the burnt offering. It's a voluntary offering. You bring it to the Lord. Would you this morning just notice three things about this offering, and then see how they point us to the Lord Jesus Christ.

[12:05] Notice first here, this offering that an Israelite is to bring is costly. It is so costly. An animal, verse 2, from either the herd or the flock, is a domestic animal.

Not a wild animal you trap and give for free. When you make this sacrifice, it will be costly. Chapter 1 lays out what to do if your offering is from the herd, verses 3 to 9.

From the flock, verses 10 to 13. Or if you can afford neither a dove or a pigeon, verses 14 to 18. Whichever it is, whichever offering it is, it will cost you.

So say you come to God with an offering from the herd. Then, verse 3, you're to offer a male without defect. It has to be the most valuable of your cattle.

I've never been to a cattle auction. Internet research. At the Darlington Farmer's Auction Mart, prime young bulls without defect go for £2,500 or £3,000 or more.

[13:16] It's not cheap at all, this offering. Later in the Bible, through the prophet Malachi, God criticises his people for offering second-rate animals.

Quote, When you bring injured, lame or diseased animals and offer them, should I accept them from your hands? For I am a great king, says the Lord Almighty, and my name is to be feared among the nations.

When you come, bring a young bull without defect, because only the best is good enough for this great king and holy God.

Did you know that? That only the very best that you have is good enough for him. And then in these verses, you take this costly bull and you slaughter it and you skin it and chop it up.

And then the whole lot just goes up in smoke. You've paid that much, you've offered it, it's just gone. Wow. A sacrifice to God then, hugely costly.

[14:20] Second here, this offering is pleasing to God. Look at verse 3. You're to offer a male without defect.

You must present it at the entrance to the tent of meeting so that it will be acceptable to the Lord. You are to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you.

I wonder if you can look back and imagine this. Can you imagine dragging your costly young bull through the curtain and into the courtyard and coming close?

And you present it to the Lord that he might be pleased. You lay your hand on the bull's head. You say, this is me, this is mine. And it will be accepted for you on your behalf.

And the Lord will be pleased with it. With you. You think, really? In the ritual here, you don't walk away at this point.

[15:30] You take the knife. You slash the bull's throat. The priest captures the blood, splashes it on the altar. You can't do that. You skin the bull. You chop it up.

This is your sacrifice. The priests arrange the fire. The pieces go on. You wash off the feces and the food from the bull's back bits. And then the priest burns it all.

It all goes up, destroyed and in smoke. And as you stand there, bloodied and tired with your knife by your side, you should know, end of verse 9, that it's a burnt offering you've just sacrificed.

It's a food offering. And it is an aroma pleasing to the Lord. You need to know this. God does not have nostrils.

He does not actually smell things. And nor does the Lord God get out of control, irritated with you, and need calming down with some nice smells.

[16:30] It's not like that. But this costly sacrifice that you have made, it is a sweet-smelling fragrance to him. It pleases him.

It soothes him. This holy God who cannot stand sin and impurity, he will not break out in anger against you now, because he's pacified.

He is pleased. He accepts this costly slaughtered animal from you on your behalf. And I guess back then you might say to yourself, why?

Why would this burnt animal offering make me acceptable? And here's the third thing. It is because this sacrifice is atoning.

Did you notice this in verse 4? Verse 4 again. You're to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you.

[17:34] Atonement is a Bible word. You don't hear it in normal chat. We do need to understand what it means, because it's so important and significant. To make atonement, it can have a sense of wiping clean, wiping away the sins that pollute you.

It can also mean, at the very same time, to pay a ransom price, freeing you from the judgment of death. And here in Leviticus 1, it is that sense of atonement that seems to fit best and is at the fore. Do you know this? All the way through the Bible, from the Garden of Eden onwards, God says that the wages of sin is death. That is, our uncleanness, our sinful impurity, provoke the just anger of a holy God.

He is not pleased with us, and so we cannot come into his presence and live. He judges rightly that we should die. And yet in his mercy, the holy God says, here is a way.

Come to me, he says. Bring an offering. I invite you. It will be a high price to pay, but laying your hands on the head of this costly burnt offering, this is yours, this is you, it will be accepted on your behalf as a payment for your sins which deserve your death.

[19:04] I wonder how you feel back then as you slaughter and skin and cut and blood gets splashed and the young bull instead of you is destroyed in death.

I imagine with the tent in front of you, you're shaking. This is so serious. This is for me. As in your place, this animal dies the death that your sins deserve and the Lord in heaven sees it and smells it and is pleased.

I imagine you're shaking. It's so serious. I imagine you are shaking with relief to think that here and now I'm accepted by a holy God.

Leviticus 1, the burnt offering, the bull, the same for the lamb and the pigeon. We asked at the beginning, how can people like us draw near to a pure and holy God and the holy God says, this is how.

This is chapter one of how. You draw near to him through sacrifice. You draw near through a burnt offering willingly given that is costly and atoning and pleasing to God and so, we must ask this morning after 20 minutes or so, so what for us?

[20:29] So what for us? Because we have no tabernacle or priests or altar and we don't slaughter livestock and burn them all and nor should we.

And yet this God in heaven remains an eternal, majestic king who is blazingly perfect and pure and how on earth can we with our unclean lives and dirty thoughts draw near to him?

Will a cash donation be enough? It won't. Will trying very hard to offer a life of better obedience be payment enough for this holy God?

It won't. The glory of the gospel is that the Lord God himself has provided for us the burnt offering sacrifice that we need.

For the ultimate burnt offering sacrifice to which Leviticus 1 points, it is God's son, the man Jesus Christ, who offered himself to die on a cross to make atonement for people like us.

[21 : 37] Draw near to a holy God through sacrifice. We draw near to a holy God today through the sacrifice of Jesus.

I want us to see this. The New Testament speaks so clearly of Jesus and his death in this way, in this Leviticus 1 way. The burnt offering in Leviticus 1 had to be costly.

It was a male without defect. You were redeemed, look at this on the screen, says 1 Peter 1, with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

What value Jesus Christ? He is more valuable than a bull or a lamb. He's a human being. He's the son of God. His life so infinitely precious and he, Jesus, without defect.

That is the only morally perfect and pure man who ever lived. He is the ultimate costly offering. Is he a high enough price to offer for our sins?

[22 : 49] He really is. And yet we do not offer him at great cost to us. Instead, he chose to freely offer himself for us.

In Mark chapter 10, Jesus sums up his mission. He says of himself that the son of man came to give his life as a ransom for many. As he dies on the cross, slaughtered, his blood flowing, he is making atonement for people like us.

He is dying the death we deserve and paying the ransom price we cannot pay. His offering of himself, the very heart of the Christian faith, costly and atoning and finally, so wonderfully, pleasing to God.

And if you know this verse, Christ, I love this beautiful description from Ephesians 5 verse 2, Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, what?

As a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. That is, on the cross, his bloody death pays for our sins and the sweet smell of his sacrifice rises to please and soothe his Father in heaven.

[24 : 14] That is, Jesus is the burnt offering. He is the one you need. He is a burnt offering even for you. I've said lots and lots this morning by way of introduction and here in Leviticus 1.

I don't know, actually, I don't know how you grab hold of this all at once. It is just wonderful. Right now, today, the eternal holy God, so blazingly, unapproachably holy, that is what he is like.

You, today, in and of yourself, so unclean and deserving of death. Jesus, loving you and giving up his precious life in death to pay for you as he dies on the cross.

And God, the Father in heaven, smelling the fragrant offering of his one and only son and accepting his son's sacrifice for you on your behalf and all of that so that now, today, through no merit of your own, you, along with every person who accepts Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and sacrificial offering, you can be accepted by the living God once and for all.

that is you, even you, can draw near. You can draw near without fear to a pure and holy God, be accepted by him and pleasing to him and know him as your God and Father for all eternity and the day will come when you will see him face to face in his presence without fear and all of that is only because of Jesus because he is your burnt offering and he is the one whom you need.

[26 : 13] I'm going to pray. I'm going to pray in response to this and then we're going to sing together. Almighty and high and holy God, we praise and thank you for this ancient book.

We praise and thank you that you, the high and holy one, have made a way for people like us to enter your presence. We thank you this morning for the Lord Jesus Christ, he whose life was so precious, who gave himself for us to atone for our sins that we might be acceptable to you.

Right now, here today, give us a sense of the cost of his death and the relief and joy of being able to know you.

Over these coming weeks, take us into this book and teach us in so many different ways of the glory of Jesus Christ. We ask that in Jesus' name.

Amen.