

There's Power in the Blood **Leviticus 17:1-16**

Blood, I'm told, is an amazing substance. It travels up and down the arteries and veins and capillaries of our bodies carrying all sorts of things to the different parts of the body. It carries oxygen and nutrients and hormones to the body's cells. It carries carbon dioxide and various other wastes away from the cells.

- It has platelets to help with blood clotting to help stop bleeding.
- It has red cells to help with the transfer of oxygen and carbon dioxide around the body.
- It has various white cells to help fight off infection and various poisons.

And that's only the brief summary.

Most of the time, we take all those things for granted. We don't stop to think what our blood's doing. We don't make any conscious decisions to tell it to drop off a bit more glucose to the brain or a few more nutrients to certain muscles. It just does it according to the way God's made our bodies. It's only when something goes wrong with the system that we think much about our blood – when we have a significant cut or when it's having trouble fighting off some infection or when it's transporting too many hormones around the place or when the balance between the white cells and the red cells gets out of kilter.

Within our culture, we've got a fairly scientific approach to blood. We understand what blood does within our bodies. We understand the important role it plays – or, at least, some of it. We understand we need to have

reserves of blood available for transfusions when those circumstances arise. Some of us are still a bit squeamish at the sight of blood and have reactions to match – but for most of us, blood's something we learnt about in biology and we've got it properly classified amongst a heap of other scientific data. Not all cultures have had a similar approach to how they think about blood.

The Old Testament Approach to Blood

Central to Leviticus 17

If you were to summarise what Leviticus 17 is about in one word, I think you'd go for the word *blood*. The NIV divides this chapter into five paragraphs – each of which has something to do with blood.

- The first paragraph commands them to bring their fellowship sacrifices to the central sanctuary so they won't be guilty of shedding blood and so the blood of the sacrifices can be disposed of properly and effectively.
- The second paragraph commands them to bring all their sacrifices to the central sanctuary. This one doesn't specifically mention blood, but we know from the first seven chapters of Leviticus that blood is definitely involved in most of the sacrifices.
- The third paragraph commands them not to eat blood and gives an explanation as to why not.
- The fourth paragraph tells them what to do with the blood of an animal they've killed through hunting.
- The fifth paragraph refers to eating from animals that are already dead when they find them. This paragraph also doesn't specifically mention blood – yet the overall context of this chapter strongly suggests that dealing with the blood of this dead

animal is involved somehow.
So, why all this fuss about blood?

The Context of Earlier Chapters

Come back with me to Genesis 4 – to the story of Cain and Abel. Cain murders his brother. Look at what God says to him in verse 10:

The LORD said, "What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth."

Come forward a few pages to chapter 9. This is after Noah and his family come out of the ark – after the flood.

Then God blessed Noah and his sons, saying to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

"But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man.

*"Whoever sheds the blood of man,
by man shall his blood be shed;
for in the image of God*

has God made man.

Come forward a few more pages to Exodus 12. God sent Moses to rescue His people from slavery in Egypt. God dealt with the Egyptians via a number of plagues. In this chapter, we come to the last plague – the one where the firstborn sons of the Egyptians are killed – what came to be called the Passover. Verse 12:

On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn – both men and animals – and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.

Then, if you turn forward a few more pages to the opening chapters of Leviticus, you find lots more references to blood.

- The blood of animal sacrifices regularly sprinkled against the altar or poured out at its base.
- Some of the blood of the ordination sacrifices was put on the right ear and the right thumb and the right big toe of the priests.
- The blood of the sin offerings on the Day of Atonement is used to cleanse the sanctuary and its furnishings from uncleanness.

In other words, we don't come to Leviticus 17 in a total vacuum. It must be thought of in terms of the bigger picture – in terms of the overall system God's given them.

Its Use in God's System

It's within that overall system that God says to them here

in verse 11:

The life of the creature is in the blood.

This isn't intended as some mysterious or mystical thing – nor as some scientific explanation as to the secret of life. It's simply a statement of observable fact.

- If a creature stops breathing – whether that creature be human or animal – it's dead.
- If a creature has its blood taken from its body, it too will die. The life of the creature is tied up with having its blood circulating around its body.

You can take an ear from an animal and the animal could still be alive. You could take a hoof from an animal and the animal could still be alive. But if you've taken the blood, then the animal's dead.

Therefore, blood symbolises death. Hang on a minute, you say, doesn't God say that it symbolises life? No. The life's in the blood – and so if you have the blood, the creature must be dead. Blood becomes a symbol that death has occurred.

Now, in the context of the law, death can either cleanse or pollute. Blood can either cleanse or pollute. God provides the sacrificial system for Israel so they may be cleansed from their sin and uncleanness. We've seen that over the last few weeks. The animal's brought to the sanctuary and killed. Its blood's drained and applied to the altar. Thus, the sacrifice is used to make atonement – to make things right between the one bringing the sacrifice and God. How's it done? Is it through some magical properties in the blood itself? No. It's because the blood represents the life of the animal. The penalty for sin is death – but God, in His grace, accepts the death of the animal instead of the death of the one doing the sin. The

fact that the blood can be poured out at the altar means the animal's dead.

In this way, blood can be used to cleanse that which is unclean and make it clean. Similarly, blood can be used to sanctify that which is clean and make it holy. This was God's gift to them. The use of blood in the right way was important for their ongoing relationship with God.

Yet, as we've also seen over the past few weeks, blood and death can also pollute.

- When a woman has an issue of blood – whether that be her regular issue of blood or an irregular issue – she becomes unclean and the things she touches become unclean.
- If a person comes in contact with a carcass, he/she becomes unclean.

Later, in Numbers 35:33, we read:

Do not pollute the land where you are. Bloodshed pollutes the land, and atonement cannot be made for the land on which blood has been shed, except by the blood of the one who shed it.

Deuteronomy 21 provides instructions for what to do in relation to an unsolved murder.

In this chapter, we're told of other ways the wrong use of blood can pollute those involved.

- Making a sacrifice away from the official altar will mean that the blood of that sacrifice won't be used in the appropriate way and the person doing that is to be cut off.
- Eating sacrificial meat from which the blood isn't properly drained is forbidden and anyone doing so is also to be cut off.

- Eating meat from an animal that's been hunted is also forbidden unless the blood's properly drained from it.

They were to be very careful what they did with blood.

Ordinary Israelites

Have you noticed that there's been a shift in focus in this chapter? Until now, the main focus of Leviticus is on the priests. It's not an exclusive focus – for the early chapters also include instructions relevant for ordinary Israelites (such as the laws on clean and unclean food) – but the main focus is on what the priests have to do. In chapter 17 and following, the focus is more on what the ordinary Israelite has to do. What's it mean for your average Jewish Joe Blow to serve the living God?

- Does serving God mean I just need to be careful when I come to the sanctuary – that I need to make sure I get all the rituals right and follow all the priest's instructions when I make my sacrifices?
- Or does serving God have other implications for how I live from day to day?

Chapters 17 and following say there are other implications. It's not just about what goes on at the sanctuary.

However, the implications spelt out in chapter 17 are very much tied up with what does go on in the sanctuary.

- If God's set up the proper way to bring sacrifices in the sanctuary, that has implications for whether or not it's appropriate to have any other sort of sacrifices or whether or not it's appropriate to make sacrifices outside the sanctuary.
- If God's given them the use of blood to make atonement, that has implications for how they should use blood in everyday life – or not use it.

The concern's to instruct the ordinary Israelites on the mistakes they could make in the way they relate to God.

Making Sacrifices

In the ancient world, there were plenty of religious ideas floating around the place. These Israelites were recently in Egypt. Egypt was full of different gods and religious ideas. Some of them were central to how Egypt herself operated; some of them floated in from the desert with the various traders that passed through. We don't know much about these goat idols or goat demons mentioned in verse 7 – but it seems the Israelites did. They offered sacrifices to them. Why?

- It may be they still had a limited view of God – that they thought God had power in certain areas and these goat idols had power in other areas and so they were covering all their bases.
- It may be they were having an each-way bet – that they weren't sure which was the better god and so they thought they'd keep both happy.
- It may be they attempted to offer the one sacrifice to both gods – that animals were fairly valuable and eating meat was relatively rare and so why not kill two birds with one stone – or please two gods with one goat.

Whatever their rationale, God would not have it. He demanded their full allegiance. They had to make their choice. If they chose to serve God, they must abandon these other idols completely. Not to do so is to prostitute themselves. It's infidelity. It's disloyal.

The way to ensure that happens is to bring the sacrifices to the official sanctuary where things are done properly according to God's instructions. It's to bring the sacri-

fices to the place where God's symbolic presence dwells. Then there could be no question as to whom the people were honouring.

It's one of Satan's constant temptations for God's people – to mix their service of God with service for other gods. To us, the practice of these Israelites is so obviously wrong. We're somewhat incredulous they could even think they could somehow serve God *and* these goat idols. We have the advantage of having that error pointed out to us by these verses. Before we get too busy removing the speck from their eye, we should pause to remember that Jesus said:

You cannot serve both God and Money – or Mammon as some of the translations have it.

How many of us disbelieve Jesus? How many of us try to have an each-way bet with these two gods? How many western Christians make their major sacrifices to the god of Mammon every day and expect the real God to be satisfied with the minor sacrifices they make to Him from what's leftover?

For these Israelites, serving God meant respecting what He said about sacrifices – about how they made sacrifices to Him and how they didn't make any other sacrifices at all. To ignore God's instructions about this – to disobey God – meant being cut off from God's people.

Using Blood

A second area in which ordinary Israelites needed to be careful was in their use of blood. Verse 11:

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.

This was God's gift to them. Blood had been given a holy purpose. Thus, it wasn't to be used for common purposes. And that has implications for how they treat blood in everyday life.

There have been some cultures who've had what we'd regard as a superstitious approach to blood. In such cultures, drinking blood is usual. They believe if they drink the blood of an animal then they'll be empowered with the strength of that animal. They believe if they drink the blood of a human, they'll be empowered with the strength of that other person. They think the life-force of another creature is contained in its blood and by drinking that blood they transfer that life-force to themselves. Blood becomes a precious commodity that's not to be wasted.

That's not to be Israel's approach. The blood of certain animals is given to make atonement for people through the death of those animals. The blood's poured out at God's altar, symbolising the death of the animal in the place of the person making the sacrifice. It belongs to God in terms of the way the sacrificial system's set up. Thus, no blood's to be put to common use. Its purpose is sacred. Life itself is sacred. To ignore God's requirements in this is also to be cut off from God's people.

Where do we Stand?

What's all this got to do with us? The New Testament picks up on the use of blood in a couple of ways. First, and most importantly, it speaks of the blood of Jesus bringing us forgiveness. For example, Hebrews 9:11

When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, He went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made,

that is to say, not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but He entered the Most Holy Place once for all by His own blood, having obtained eternal redemption. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!

The comparison's made:

- On the one hand, the blood of goats and bulls was able to make people ceremonially clean. It could remove the uncleanness that prevented them from approaching God at the sanctuary.
- On the other hand, the blood of Jesus can cleanse us from sin – it can cleanse us from the acts that we've done that lead to death.

This is the same point we've seen in previous weeks. The system God gave Israel pointed forward. This system was not the reality – rather, it pointed towards the reality that would come in the future. We find that reality in Jesus. The blood of these Old Testament sacrifices was not important in and of itself. The blood of sheep and cattle could not remove human sin. The blood of these Old Testament sacrifices pointed forward to the blood of Jesus being shed when He sacrificed Himself for us.

The blood's significant in the same way. When the blood of these animals was brought to the altar, it showed the animal's life was given in the place of the one who brought the sacrifice. When we speak of *the blood of*

Jesus, it's referring to the fact that Jesus gave His life for us. We deserved to die, but Jesus died in our place. It's a way of referring to His death.

God's provided Jesus' blood to deal with our sins – to make atonement for us. Because of Jesus' death for us, we can have a right relationship with God. Because of His death, we can be forgiven and cleansed of our sin. We're considered right in God's sight because we've been clothed with Jesus' goodness.

- It's not that we're not sinful people. We are. We've done the wrong thing by God over and over again. We know that. God knows that. We deserve judgment – to be cut off from God forever.
- But instead of judging us, God judged Jesus in our place. He paid the penalty for me. He made atonement for me. He shed His blood for me. He died for me.

And so, secondly, I need to treat His blood in the proper way. I'm not to treat as common that which is sacred. I'm not to treat as trivial that which is precious. How do I do that – or how may I be tempted to do that?

- One way would be to ignore what Jesus did for me – to say to God: Thanks for sending Jesus to die in my place, but I'll do it on my own. I'll make my own way to heaven without Jesus. I'll fix up my relationship with You without bothering to pay any attention to the way you've told me to fix it up. It just doesn't work that way. God calls the shots – not us. And if God calls the shots, it's not very smart to reject what He's provided. It's not very smart to treat Jesus' death as unnecessary for you. A person who rejects the sacrifice of Jesus will find

no other answer to the problem of sin.

- Another way to treat Jesus' blood in a trivial way would be to deliberately continue in sin. Have a look at Romans 6:1-2

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

And then down to verse 11:

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires.

Paul tells us Jesus died to save us from sin and its consequences. He died to save us from a life of rebellion against God. He died that we may live the life God intended us to live. Having learnt that, it doesn't make sense to continue to live the old life of rebellion. That's like saying: I'm going to give up the rebellion but I'm going to keep on rebelling. I'm going to live God's way, but I'm going to do it on my terms and the way I want. Where's the logic of that? That's to treat Jesus' death in a selfish and self-centred way.

Today, our focus must remain on the cross – on the death of Jesus for our sins. That's at the heart of Christianity – a crucified Saviour. The pressure to compromise keeps coming up. Change the message to make it more acceptable to those outside the church.

- Tell them that if they live a fairly good life, God'll be happy with them.
- Tell them that if they do a few religious things, they can buy their way into heaven.
- Tell them that God doesn't care about their sin and

He'll let everyone in.

All sorts of ways to try to get around what God says. That sort of thinking's common enough in the world – but it's not the true message. We must put our trust in the death of Jesus for us – and in that alone.