

God Dwells Among His People **Leviticus 1:1-2**

Today we're beginning a new series in what is a very old book, the Old Testament book of Leviticus. Now, if the Bible is new to you, that title Leviticus may mean nothing to you. But if you do know the book, then the thought of a teaching series on it may not exactly fill you with joy.

You see, at the start of a New Year, a great New Year's resolution is to read the Bible from cover to cover. And I'd really encourage you to do that. And maybe you could use one of the many, excellent Bible reading plans to help you. And if you do, typically, throughout January things go well. By February you're a bit behind, but you're still hanging in there. But then sometime around March you hit Leviticus and it's as if you are thrown into an alien world. A world of burnt offerings and grain offerings and peace offerings and sin offerings and guilt offerings, and blood from animal sacrifices is being splattered everywhere, and there are rules for mould and mildew in your houses and obscure regulations about what makes you clean or unclean, and there are descriptions of skin rashes that make you itch. And rapidly, Leviticus can become the graveyard, the Bermuda triangle of Bible reading, the dark forest from which no-one escapes alive. As one of my daughter's once asked me when she read Leviticus, 'Dad, what is this doing in the Bible?' And because we can find this book, written around 1400BC, so alien to our 21st Century lives, we quit reading, and maybe not just Leviticus. Which is why I want us to tackle it together.

You see, compare our attitude to that of the Psalmists. When they speak and sing of the law of the Lord, at least in part they're talking about Leviticus. Listen to Psalm 1: 'Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates days and night' (Ps 1:1-2). And the longest psalm, the longest song in the whole Bible, Psalm 119, is a celebration of God's law, which includes Leviticus. And the psalmist thanks God for it, he longs for it, he rejoices in it, he delights in it, he clings to it, he loves it, he sings about it, he wants to meditate on it. And ask yourself, what did they know, what did they see in this book, that we don't?

But it wasn't just the Psalmists or the Old Testament writers who took such a high view of this book. The apostle Paul wrote, '*All* Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness' (2 Tim 3:16). And do you know what that word *All* means? I looked it up in the Greek. It means, all. Including Leviticus. So Leviticus is breathed out by God, it's profitable for teaching, reproof, correction, and for training in righteousness. So, guess what, when the apostle Peter sat down and wrote to encourage Christians in his day, and ours, to live holy lives, guess which book he quotes from? Leviticus.

And so it's because that's how the rest of the Bible views this book, and yet we struggle with it, that I want us to look at it. But we're going to do it differently from normal. Rather than work our way through it chapter by chapter, we're going to take 7 weeks and by looking at specific chapters we're going to look at some of the great and foundational themes this book teaches.

You see this book told the ancient Israelites, and us, that God is dangerously, unapproachably holy. And so it answered the questions they would have been asking of how they could live in relationship with such a God, and how they could reflect his holy character to a watching world. So the first seven chapters tell them the sacrifices that will deal with sin and enable them to worship God rightly. Then it provides them with a priesthood who will intercede for them and lead them in worship. It gives them laws to deal with impurity, and then in chapter 16, the centre of the book, it introduces the Day of Atonement, a one-day a year ceremony to remove every trace of sin from the community. And then the book finishes by providing laws to direct God's people in living as a holy people. And when you begin to understand what this book is doing, you begin to understand why it might be relevant to us.

But to understand it, you have to be clear about the context, the time when it was written. You see imagine one of Winston Churchill's speeches during the Second World War. President Kennedy said that Churchill 'mobilised the English language and sent it off to war', and if you know his speeches, you'll know what he meant. But to understand the force of them you have to understand what was going on when he gave them. So take this line from one speech: 'I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat.' Or the opening line from another speech: 'This is your victory! It is the victory of the cause of freedom in every land.' Now, how you interpret those lines depends hugely on when Churchill said them, doesn't it? The first was from his first speech as Prime Minister, when things looked very dark and defeat appeared imminent. The second was given on Victory in Europe day when everyone was in the streets rejoicing. But get them round the wrong way, and think that in the face of imminent defeat he is claiming victory, or in the face of victory he is offering nothing better than blood, toil, tears and sweat, you have a problem.

And to understand Leviticus and its implications for us, you have to understand when it was written, and that was *after* the people of Israel had been rescued from slavery in Egypt. If you like, this was God speaking to them after Victory in Egypt Day, not before, and they are stood at the foot of Mount Sinai as free men and women, freed from the oppression and darkness of Egypt.

Now why does that matter? Because they had not been saved by God as a reward for obeying the law in Leviticus.

You see, if you're not yet a Christian, sometimes you can think that if you can only be good enough, or be moral enough, or give to charity generously enough, that you obey God's law, you can earn God's favour and save yourself. Or if you are a Christian, you can think that if you sacrifice enough, or live a holy enough life you can somehow put God in your debt and earn his blessing. But these ancient Israelites had not earned God's favour, or been saved from Egypt because they had got their act together, by living holy enough lives, or by making the right sacrifices as stipulated in Leviticus. Leviticus hadn't even been written. They were saved by God's grace. God had redeemed them when they could offer God nothing. You see salvation never comes in response to us thinking we can change or clean up our lives by obeying God's law. A changed and transformed

life comes as a result of salvation – and this is always by God’s grace through faith.

And that is why this book remains so helpful to us. You see, in his letter to the Galatians, Paul describes God’s law as being like a primary school teacher who leads us to Christ. And the famous Victorian preacher Charles Spurgeon said: ‘From every town, village, and little hamlet in England, wherever it may be, there is a road to London... and so from every text in Scripture there is a road to the metropolis of the Scriptures, that is Christ.’ In other words, for us, who live this side of Christ, Leviticus can be a teacher to show us more of Jesus, and how we are saved by his grace, and how that grace can result in our lives being transformed. And to let it do that, we’re going to take those roads leading to the Metropolis, that’s Jesus.

And to get us started this morning we are going to read just the first two verses of Chapter 1:

Lev 1:1-2

The God Who Speaks

So the people of Israel are at the foot of Sinai. We know from the book of Exodus that the tabernacle, the portable tent that would serve as God’s temple, was completed, and public worship was soon to begin. And v1 says, ‘The Lord called Moses and spoke to him.’

It is God who initiates. It is God who calls Moses that Moses may hear how Israel are to live. And that simple phrase ‘The Lord spoke’ keeps on getting repeated throughout this book, 35 times in fact. Now for anyone, to know God and to be in relationship with him, is the greatest good for which we were created. But for us to know him, we need him to reveal himself to us. Sure, there are certain things we may deduce about God if he were never to communicate directly. But for us to really know him, they needed him and we need him to speak to us. And Leviticus tells us, time and again, that God is a speaking God. And in giving his law he reveals his character, because laws always reflect the character of the lawgiver.

So this first verse tells us something profound about God’s desire that his people come into relationship with him. He does not leave them, or us, to stumble around in the dark, trying to find him. He speaks. He reveals himself. As one commentator said, it is God who breaks the silence.

But the fact that it is God who takes the initiative also tells us who controls that relationship. You see Leviticus shows us that this is not a relationship of equals. It tells us that worship and relationship with God is on his terms and his terms only. And of course that is an affront to our modern minds, isn’t it? In fact, as we will see, it was an affront to some in Moses’s day as well – nothing changes does it? We want to create God in our image, we want to be the ones who decide what is right and wrong, or say what we can or can’t do with our bodies or our lives.

We want to worship God how we want. But Leviticus, in the first verse, tells us that we are not God. We are not the one speaking from the tent.

And yet God does speak. And Israel's wellbeing depends on the initiative of a gracious, speaking God. And the same is true for us. In Deuteronomy 8:3 Moses said, 'man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.' We shrivel, we die spiritually, unless we hear the word of God speaking to us.

We feel guilty, often because we are guilty, and so we self-medicate and try and numb that guilt or rid ourselves of it by compensating with good works – when what we need to hear is the voice of God saying we are forgiven and our guilt is atoned for.

We feel insignificant and crave meaning in our lives, and so we work and study and earn to get that significance, but what we need to hear is the voice of God saying that your life matters.

We need to know that we are loved, and so we pursue relationships that are wrong, or get trapped in the fake intimacy of porn, when what we need to hear is the voice of God saying, 'you are my beloved child.'

Moses heard that voice calling him to the tent of meeting. The question is, where can you and I hear it?

Well, just as God broke the silence for Israel, so in Christ he breaks the silence for us. If the first verse of Leviticus is 'the Lord called and spoke', the opening verse of John's Gospel is, 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God' (John 1:1). And then John goes on to say, 'From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:16-17). So Jesus is God speaking to us embodied. And just as Moses heard the voice calling him to come to the tent, so in the Lord Jesus we hear him calling us to come, 'Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest, take my yoke upon you and learn of me' (Matt 11:28).

So when our souls and our lives are shriveling under guilt or fear or doubt. When we need courage to live as we should, or we need to know that we are loved in all our brokenness, it is Christ, the Word of God, we need – the Lord who calls us and speaks to us.

But did you notice where it was that God called Moses from? Because it wasn't from heaven, was it. Verse 1 again, 'The Lord called Moses and spoke to him *from the tent of meeting.*'

The God Who Dwells

Now as we've said, Leviticus is the sequel to Exodus. The people of Israel have been delivered from Egypt, and in Exodus 20-24 the people enter into a covenant

relationship with the Lord. He is their covenant king, and they are his people, bound to him in covenant.

And the Tent of Meeting is like the King's palace. It was the most beautifully decorated of all the tents of Israel, and it was to be pitched in the centre of the tribes. And The Most Holy Place, the inner room within the tent, was his throne-room and the Ark of the Covenant containing the 10 Commandments, and the Cherubim over the Ark were his footstool and his throne. And when the Lord calls Moses here in Leviticus it is to give him the laws of the covenant that are to guide the people in kingdom living, and they are to show exclusive loyalty to their king by being faithful to his laws.

But the extraordinary thing is that before that can happen, God descends to take up residence in the tent. Exodus 40:34-5, 'Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. 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.'

So this book comes from a time when God came to live and dwell among his people. Just get that. The God who gives your life meaning, the God who tells you what your life is for, the Creator of heaven and earth, who directs all the affairs of men, came to live in the midst of people.

And it is to meet God in his tent, to speak with him face to face, that God calls Moses here in Leviticus chapter 1. But where can you and I meet with God like this? If our lives will always be incomplete, if our hearts will always be restless unless and until we know God and are known by him, where can we meet with him as Moses did? What can fill the void of our lives that we are tempted to fill with so many other God-substitutes?

Well, as we'll see, it's hard to relate to blinding light, and clouds of glory and all-consuming holiness. And so at just the right time God humbled himself and came as a man. You and I can never bridge the gap of relationship by becoming more like him, and so he came as one like us.

Listen to how John once again describes Christ's coming: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). And when he says he 'dwelt among us' that could just as well be translated, 'he pitched his tent' among us. And God dwelling in a cloud of glory is one kind of glory, but God humbling himself and coming as a man, and living among us, and dying in our place is another kind of glory and that's the glory of Jesus that John speaks of. And so what God did for the people of Israel, he has done for us all in far greater measure. And in Christ you and I can meet with God and know God in even deeper and greater ways than Moses did.

You see, by living the perfect life that you and I fail to live, by perfectly obeying God's law, and by dying the death you and I deserve to die for failing to obey that law, Christ has made something extraordinary possible. As you put your faith in

him, and trust in his perfection and not your own, God comes and dwells in you by his Holy Spirit. And your heart, your life, your body, becomes a tent, the tabernacle, the temple of the Holy Spirit, where God dwells. What Moses only knew a fraction of, God dwelling among his people, Christ has made possible for us all.

But in closing I want you to see one last thing from these first two verses of Leviticus.

The God Who Redeems

Verse 2: 'Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the Lord...'. Not *if* any one brings an offering, but *when*. Do you see the expectation on the Lord's part? That in response to the Lord saving them by his grace, in response to his dwelling among them, they will come with sacrifices. That what God has done for them, and is doing among them, the reality that he is a holy God, is going to impact the way they live. And as a result their lives will be different from the nations around, what they worship and how they worship will be different.

And so Leviticus tells us that God has redeemed his people. But he has not redeemed them to stay where they are. And as we'll see, the implications of that go way beyond sacrifices. In response to God's redeeming them, they are to image him to the world; they are to embody his mercy, his love, his justice and his kindness that they have experienced, to the world. The very thing we have been created to do.

And when we get to the New Testament, we discover that the same is true for us. Out of his grace and his love, Christ redeems us from the slavery of sin. But he does not redeem us to stay as we are. We come as we are, in all our brokenness and in all our failure, there is no other way to come. But through the indwelling of his Spirit he changes us, and we don't stay as we are. And in response to his overwhelming sacrifice for us, Paul tells us we too will bring a sacrifice, not a burnt offering or a grain offering, but the sacrifice of your life, your whole life: Romans 12:1. 'Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.'

Because in response to the God who calls you to himself, in response to the God who comes and lives among us, in response to Jesus dying for us, in response to the God who redeems us, what other offering could you bring than yourself? What other sacrifice would be fitting, but your whole life, for the God who sacrificed everything for you?