

Freedom in Christ Leviticus 1-7

We are starting a new sermon series today and since I spent the last 2 years in the New Testament, I thought it was time to go back to the Old Testament and spend some time there. I've already preached through most of Genesis and Exodus, so the next in line is Leviticus and Numbers. I realize these are books that we often dread when we're following a Bible reading plan because they are filled with intricate rules and details and numerical data. But there's a lot more to them than that. We have the promise that all Scripture is God-breathed and useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so rather than skip these books we're going to see what God has for us in them over the next several weeks.

The context for Leviticus and Numbers comes from the book of Exodus, which I preached on two years ago. These books are a continuation of that story. God was forgotten in the ancient world as sin blinded the minds of unbelievers and they worshipped other gods instead. But God chose to reveal himself once again through one group of people – the people of Israel, descendants of a man named Abraham. They had become slaves in Egypt, but God delivered them and promised to take them to the land of Canaan and drive out the wicked nations before them so they could live there. Before going to Canaan, he brought them to Mt. Sinai where he entered a covenant with them. He would be their God and they would be his people – the people of “Yahweh,” the self-existent one.

At Sinai, Yahweh revealed all the rules and regulations that would guide and govern this new covenant community. They would be different than every nation on earth, so God had to teach them what that would look like. And at the core of everything he taught and commanded them was the astonishing promise that he would actually come to dwell in their midst – a promise that was truly amazing because of all the blessings they would receive, but it also presented a great dilemma: How could a holy God dwell in the midst of a sinful people? This question sets the stage for the Law which we see in Ex., Lev., Num.

We began to see how God would make that possible in the book of Exodus. He gave them instructions for a holy sanctuary in which he would cause his glory to dwell (Picture). It was a tabernacle that was fully enclosed and separated from the

sinful community by a second chamber and an outer courtyard. He also gave them instructions for priests who would minister in the tabernacle and especially for the high priest who had a unique role as mediator between holy God and sinful man. God gave instructions for sacred objects that were to be placed in the tabernacle and used for worship. He also gave instructions for exactly what the priests and high priest must wear and how they must prepare themselves for service.

All of these things were necessary for him to dwell among his people and they formed the rules and regulations for their new community. So after receiving them, the people prepared the tabernacle and all its contents, and at the end of Exodus we see that Yahweh descended upon the tabernacle and caused his glory to fill the inner sanctuary.

That brings us to Leviticus where God continues to give detailed instructions. These continue into Numbers where it also tells about the people leaving Mt. Sinai and traveling to Canaan where they rebelled against God and ended up wandering in the wilderness for 40 years. So that's the big picture of these books and my plan is to preach through them at a pace where we can learn together, but don't get bogged down in all the details.

Leviticus begins with instructions about offerings and sacrifices. These were familiar practices throughout the world and the Israelites would have been familiar with those in Egypt. But now they were set apart to worship their own God, Yahweh. What would offerings and sacrifices be like with him? I want to look at a few of the details in the first 7 chapters to point out some of the unique and intentional characteristics of the offerings and sacrifices and how they can help us understand the beauty of Christ and all he accomplished for us.

Read Leviticus 1:1-9.

The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, ² "Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock. ³ "If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord. ⁴ He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. ⁵ Then he shall kill the

bull before the Lord, and Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁶ Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, ⁷ and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. ⁸ And Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; ⁹ but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

Here we see Yahweh speaking to Moses from the tent of meeting, which at that time was the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle. (Anytime you see the word “LORD” in all capital letters, you know name “Yahweh” is being used.) God gives instructions to Moses about how the people were to offer sacrifices. He starts with burnt offerings, which were animal sacrifices. I learned a lot of things from the Reformation Study Bible about the significance of these sacrifices. I’m not going to try to explain all the details and symbolism, but I will point out a few.

When it came to a burnt offering, the people could offer a bull, sheep, goat, turtledove, or pigeon, depending on what they could afford. If they offered a bull, like we just read about, they were to choose an animal from their own herd and it was to be a male without blemish. One of the characteristics of the offerings is that they came from their own possessions. The RSB says that “these symbolized the worshipping Israelite, who, through the act of sacrifice, was giving himself back to God in some way.” The male without blemish is also a type of Christ and you’re going to see a lot of that kind of symbolism, especially in the animal sacrifices.

The worshipper was to bring his sacrifice to the entrance of the tent of meeting, which was just inside the outer courtyard of the tabernacle where the altar was. There were certain things that the worshipper was responsible to do and other things that the priests did. The worshipper was to first lay his hand on the head of the animal. This was to identify with the animal as representing him. The animal was determined by God to be acceptable to make atonement for the worshipper. That means, that through the death of that animal, it would cover over or shield the worshipper from the holy wrath of God. The RSB says, “The animal dying in the sinful worshiper’s place represented redemption from the death he deserved.” So the worshiper was offering the animal in his place and the death of

that animal shielded him from God's holy wrath, and redeemed him from the death he deserved.

So you can probably see this has significant symbolism and ultimately pointed to Christ's death on the cross where he represented us and died in our place, taking upon himself the death that we deserved and satisfying the wrath of God. The important difference is that the blood of bulls and goats could only cover over sin, whereas the blood of Jesus could actually remove it completely.

So the worshiper would bring the animal and lay his hand on its head, the next thing he had to do was kill the animal, probably by cutting its throat. Picture yourself in that situation. The priests would catch the blood of the dying animal and throw it on the altar. Then the worshiper would remove the skin and cut it into pieces while the priests got the fire ready. They would wash the guts and then the priests would arrange everything on the altar, except the hide, and burn it all as an offering to Yahweh. The RSB says: "This was to symbolize the total consecration of the worshiper to God's service, and served to cover the sins of the worshiper." The burning offering was a pleasing aroma to Yahweh, indicating that through the sacrifice, God's holy wrath had been appeased and he was able to look upon the worshiper with compassion and kindness.

So this was part of God's prescribed way for how he could dwell among a sinful people. And you can see that in the instructions for this sacrifice, it's filled with purpose, significance and symbolism. It's just rich and overflowing with meaning, even beyond what I described. So I want you to see that this law is good for many reasons. It's righteous.

But I also want you to begin to see how extremely complex and burdensome these regulations were. What we just looked at is just one kind of offering. If you look forward in Leviticus, you see in chapter 1 there are detailed instructions for two other kinds of burnt offerings. In chapter 2 you see all kinds of details about grain offerings. If you keep going... Chapter 3 gives all the details about peace offerings. Chapters 4-5 give intricate details about sin offerings. The end of chapter 5 and beginning of 6 speak of guilt offerings. Then the instructions switch in chapters 6 and 7 from addressing the worshippers to addressing the priests and what they were supposed to do with all the different kinds of offerings.

Overwhelming details. But these are just the beginning. If you look outside these 7 chapters, you see multiple chapters in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers that give many more detailed instructions about different kinds of offerings. That's part of the reason we don't like reading these portions of Scripture... Enough already! How is anyone supposed to keep all this stuff straight? If I was in Moses' situation, writing these things down, I think I would have eventually got to the point where I was asking, "Are you sure you want me to keep going?"

As I was thinking about what we could compare it to, I thought about the overwhelming complexity of government regulations we have to deal with. It is tax season. That means most of us are gathering our financial information to do our taxes. Most of us will end up doing them online with a robust tax preparation software to guide us, or we'll go to a tax professional to do our taxes for us. Very few people do their own taxes because the tax code and laws are so extremely complicated. I use Turbo Tax and even with that, my head gets spinning. There are so many rules and regulations and forms to fill out that it's mind boggling.

I get the same kind of feeling when I look at the sacrificial system that God prescribed for the community of Israel. An entire tribe was set apart and enlisted to become experts in this because it was such a complex and intricate system. And ALL of it has meaning and significance. None of the details are unimportant or empty ritual.

So I'm thinking, "God, what is the purpose for all this? Why would you want this much of a complicated system for your people?" None of these things existed in the Garden of Eden, when God was walking with Adam and Eve. We don't follow any of these things today. And it doesn't look like they'll be happening in heaven. So why did God impose all these overwhelming regulations on the people of Israel?

I think there were several reasons, but perhaps one that is most important. I think he was shaping and forming a whole new culture for his people that would put him at the center, and reveal his glory to the world as they walked in obedience to his commands, so that required a lot of regulations. But I also think he was preparing them for something of far greater importance that was coming in the future. He was preparing them for the coming of the Messiah. All the intricate details of the tabernacle, priests, and sacrifices ultimately pointed to Christ and

what he would accomplish at the cross, but they also pointed to how badly they needed him because of their sin.

I think God intended for his instructions to be rightfully burdensome so that people would know how destructive their sin was in their relationship with a holy God. Sin wasn't a minor problem, it was a monumental problem. It was so destructive that the only way Yahweh could dwell in their midst was if they followed all those burdensome commands. And even if they did that and followed them perfectly, they still couldn't be in his presence. The closest they could get was the outer courtyard. They were still separated from God and unable to be in his presence and they had to continually offer sacrifices all throughout their lives. Hebrews 10:1-4 says that the law *"can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near..."*³ *But in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.*⁴ *For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."* The blood of bulls and goats covered their sins and shielded them from God's wrath, but didn't remove them.

So I think the rules about sacrifices were meant to be burdensome, to reveal the destruction of sin, and to prepare them for the One who would lift the burden forever. Galatians 3:23-26 says: *"Now before faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed."*²⁴ *So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith.*²⁵ But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian,²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith."

Jesus made all the difference. When Jesus died on the cross, he didn't just cover over our sins like the burnt offerings, he removed them completely by bearing them on himself when he died on the cross. Our sin was put to death. And because he did that, he set us free from the burden of sin as well as the burden of following all the overwhelming rules and regulations of the law. Jesus was the perfect fulfillment of the law so that those who believe in him are no longer slaves to it, we are slaves to Christ. Instead of following the law, we now follow Christ. Christ replaces the law and his burden is easy, his yoke is light.

Hebrews 9:11-14 says, *"But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation)"*¹² *he entered once for all into the holy*

places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. ¹³ For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, ¹⁴ how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” In Christ, we have been set free from sin and the law so that we can joyfully devote ourselves to Christ, and for the first time since the Garden of Eden, we can actually live in the presence of God.

I encourage you to just try to read through the first 7 chapters of Leviticus. Let it overwhelm you. Feel the weight of all the details and all the rules. Imagine what it must have been like to be an Israelite who had to follow those things all their life. Imagine putting your hand on the soft, warm head of that beautiful lamb and then slitting its throat. Imagine doing that time and time again, and then imagine what it must have been like for those who came to know and believe in Jesus and realize what he accomplished for them – freedom from sin, freedom from the law – Freedom in Christ.

We haven't had to live under the weight of the law like they did, but we have lived under the weight of sin and its destructive effects, and I hope the things we've looked at today will help you realize just how heavy that weight was, and just how amazing our freedom in Christ truly is. Jesus has set us free from all our sins and all their consequences, so that now we can draw near to God and fully experience his love and blessings in our lives.

As we enter into a time of worship, the response Jesus calls us to, in view of his mercy, is to offer our lives completely to him as a living sacrifice. We don't just offer a bull, or goat, or loaf of unleavened bread – we offer everything in joyful worship and surrender to the one who set us free.