

How Deep The Father's Love For Us Leviticus 8-9

We are back to the book of Leviticus this morning and you can turn to Leviticus 8. To begin, I want you to try to think of something that you're really bad at – something you have to do from time to time, but you dread because you're just not good at it. You feel like a failure. It might even be embarrassing.

I don't know if you have anything like that, but for me, the first thing that comes to mind is dancing. I'm really bad at dancing. I have no coordination, I don't get into the music, it feels embarrassing, and I just can't do it. The problem is that most weddings have some kind of dance at the reception, and just because I don't like dancing doesn't mean my friends and family are the same way. In fact some of them seem to really enjoy it. So when we get to that part of the evening, I typically start to have a bad mood, unless the refreshments are really good, or I can find a fellow non-dancer to try to talk to over the loud music.

My family pretty much knows not to ask me to hit the dance floor anymore – it was fine when my kids were little or if there's a slow song that Amy and I can dance to, I can handle that. But other than that, I'm out. Maybe you have something like that and it makes you feel like a failure or disappointment. It's not that fun.

Unfortunately, I've just described what a lot of us feel like at times in our relationship with God. We feel like a failure. Maybe there's an ongoing temptation like anger or lust that you keep giving in to. Maybe you can't stop swearing at work or yelling at your kids. Maybe you don't pray or read your Bible as much as you think you should. Maybe you care too much about your career or money or hunting or sports. Maybe you're too scared to share your faith with an unbelieving friend or coworker. Maybe you don't send enough money to the poor.

There are a lot of ways that we can feel like a failure to God. It's easy to picture him being angry or shaking his head. Or at least distant and uncaring. It feels like he would love us a lot more if we didn't struggle with sin or weakness and had it all together.

The story we're going to look at today probably led the Israelites to feeling like that. Everything about their situation would have reminded them that they were a failure or disappointment to God. But there's something that happens at the end of the story that I want us to see. Something that I think puts a different spin on things and gives us a different look at the heart of God for his people. And I believe he has that same heart for us today – a heart that is much different than frustration and disappointment.

The people of Israel are at Mount Sinai, and they have just finished setting up the tabernacle for the first time. They watched as the glory of God descended and filled the inner sanctuary. Yahweh was in their midst. Last week we saw that the first thing God did after that was to speak to Moses and give him detailed instructions about offerings and sacrifices the people were supposed to give at the tabernacle, and now it's time to begin offering these sacrifices for the first time. This is a really big event in Jewish history – the inauguration of the sacrificial system. All the events of Exodus and beginning of Leviticus are leading up to this. For the first time they were going to gather to offer sacrifices to Yahweh in his holy sanctuary. Leviticus 8 and 9 tell us how they prepared and what it was like. So I want to walk you through a few of those details so you can understand what was going on and what that must have been like for those worshipers, and then I want you to see what happens at the end.

Back in Exodus 29, God had given Moses instructions for how the priests would prepare themselves for this big day. They were to go through ceremonial washings and put on their priestly garments. They had to offer sacrifices to atone for their sins and consecrate themselves for service. And then they had to isolate themselves in the courtyard for 7 days during which they presented sacrifices morning and evening. If they left the courtyard they would die.

When you get to Leviticus 8, you now see all of these things actually taking place. Moses and Aaron and the priests are simply walking through those earlier instructions, step by step, carefully preparing themselves to offer sacrifices for the people. So I want to show you a little bit of what they did.

Read Leviticus 8:1-4.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, ² "Take Aaron and his sons with him, and the garments and the anointing oil and the bull of the sin offering and the two rams and the basket of unleavened bread. ³ And assemble all the congregation at the

entrance of the tent of meeting.”⁴ And Moses did as the Lord commanded him, and the congregation was assembled at the entrance of the tent of meeting.

So everybody’s there to watch the ordination of Aaron and his sons (the priests).

Read Leviticus 8:5-9.

And Moses said to the congregation, “This is the thing that the Lord has commanded to be done.”⁶ And Moses brought Aaron and his sons and washed them with water.⁷ And he put the coat on him and tied the sash around his waist and clothed him with the robe and put the ephod on him and tied the skillfully woven band of the ephod around him, binding it to him with the band.⁸ And he placed the breastpiece on him, and in the breastpiece he put the Urim and the Thummim.⁹ And he set the turban on his head, and on the turban, in front, he set the golden plate, the holy crown, as the Lord commanded Moses.

All of these articles of clothing were described and fashioned in the book of Exodus and now it was finally time for Aaron to put them on. He would have had a glorious appearance to the people. After he got dressed, the chapter goes on to say that Moses went around and anointed him and everything in the tabernacle with oil. He brought the other priests in and clothed them. And then he presented a series of 3 offerings on their behalf. A bull was brought forward as a sin offering. A ram was brought forward as a burnt offering. And then came the ordination offering, which included another ram and unleavened bread, along with anointing oil over all the priests by Moses. So, lots of washing, lots of burning, lots of blood, lots of oil.

By this process, the priests were being purified and consecrated for their holy ministry. But this was just the first of several days of preparation. After all this was completed, this is what Moses commanded the priests to do at the end of chapter 8...

Read Leviticus 8:33-36.

And you shall not go outside the entrance of the tent of meeting for seven days, until the days of your ordination are completed, for it will take seven days to ordain you.³⁴ As has been done today, the Lord has commanded to be done to make atonement for you.³⁵ At the entrance of the tent of meeting you shall remain day and night for seven days, performing what the Lord has charged, so

that you do not die, for so I have been commanded.”³⁶ And Aaron and his sons did all the things that the Lord commanded by Moses.

At the end of seven days, the priests were ready, and now it was time to present offerings for the whole community. The people assembled at the tabernacle, and Aaron gave instructions for what they were to bring for their offerings: a goat, calf, lamb, ox, ram, and a grain offering. Once these were brought forward, Moses addressed the people...

Read Leviticus 9:6-7.

And Moses said, “This is the thing that the Lord commanded you to do, that the glory of the Lord may appear to you.”⁷ Then Moses said to Aaron, “Draw near to the altar and offer your sin offering and your burnt offering and make atonement for yourself and for the people, and bring the offering of the people and make atonement for them, as the Lord has commanded.”

So Aaron offered a sin offering and burnt offering for himself and then proceeded to offer the sacrifices for the people. He offered the goat for a sin offering, the calf and lamb for a burnt offering, the ox and ram for peace offerings, and then the grain offering mixed with oil. Again, lots of death, blood, washing and fire.

I want you to think about what this must have been like for the people. It seems to me that up to that point, all these things would have reminded them that they were a failure or disappointment to God – the tabernacle, the priests, the sacrifices. Their sins were so terrible all these things were necessary just for Yahweh to dwell in their midst. The priests even had to go into isolation for seven days to get ready to offer sacrifices for the people. Things were so bad between them and God that perfect, lively, young animals had to be slaughtered and burned to shield them from his wrath. I think the events of that day and the week leading up to it would have been a sobering experience. One of those times when you’re reminded of your failures and that you’re a disappointment to God.

But then we get to the end of this story and we see what happened when these sacrifices were complete. And here we see something much different than anger and displeasure...

Read Leviticus 9:22-24.

Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. ²³ And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. ²⁴ And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces.

When the sacrifices of atonement were complete and Moses and Aaron went into the Holy of Holies to be in the presence of God, they came out pouring out blessing, not wrath. The glory of Yahweh appeared outside those thick veiled walls, instead of staying hidden within. And the holy fire that came from his presence consumed the sacrifices, and not the people. This is a monumental shift. All the instructions about the tabernacle, priests, and sacrifices, and all the work to get everything ready – along with all the sacrifices that had been offered over the last several days, the outcome of all of that was that their sins were atoned for, they could see God’s glory, and received his blessing. I look at this and I see that this is what God wanted for his people – that’s what this whole system was for – NOT to pile on the weight of guilt, shame and a sense of failure and disappointment but to draw near his people and bless them.

This story reveals to me that God loved his people despite their sinfulness and failures and his deepest desire was to be with them, reveal his glory, and bless them. It made me think of what he said to them in Isaiah 43:1-4 even after centuries of failure and sin: *“But now thus says the Lord, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel: “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. ² When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you. ³ For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. I give Egypt as your ransom, Cush and Seba in exchange for you. ⁴ Because you are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you, I give men in return for you, peoples in exchange for your life.”*

I think it’s easy for us to assume that God’s heart toward us in our weakness, failure, and sin, is disappointment and anger, but I think that’s a faulty perception of the true heart and desire of God. What we see here is that God went to great lengths to actually atone for the sins of his people so that he could be near them

and bless them. He could have left them alone, forever separate and destined for destruction. That's what they deserved. But he didn't. He made a way to come near to them.

So I don't think he did all of those things to merely point out their failure and guilt, I think he did them so that he could reveal himself to them and bless them. Yes, sin is very destructive to our relationship with God, but the desire that compels him to do what he does in response to our sin, is not anger, it's love. God loves us and wants to reconcile us to himself so we can draw near to him.

Now if you walk that forward into the new covenant era in which we live, I believe we see that even more clearly by the lengths he went to by sending his own Son to atone for our sins so that he could be near us and bless us. It's astonishing if you think about it. The NT authors wrote about it on many occasions. John records Jesus' words to Nicodemus in John 3:16-17: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."* The world was already condemned because of sin, but God didn't leave us to die, he sent his only Son to die in our place so that we could be saved.

Paul writes about this astonishing love in Romans 5:6-8: *"For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. ⁷ For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die— ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us."* He goes on in Romans 8:31-32: *"What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"* John reflects on God's precious love in 1 John 4:9-10: *"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."*

I don't understand it. I have failed God so many times, he should be only angry and disappointed with me. But somehow he's not. Somehow he loved me so deeply that he covered my sins through the death of his Son. And if I confess my sins, he is faithful and just to forgive my sins and purify me from all unrighteousness.

He doesn't want us to dwell in our feelings of failure and disappointment, he wants us to see that he has overcome our failures and sins through the death of his Son and he loves us deeply. He wants us to draw near to him, to see his glory, and receive his blessing.