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thrive

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THIS ISSUE

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LEVITICUS TO DEUTERONOMY – walking with God

In this edition of *Thrive* we will return to the Old Testament and will be reading selectively throughout the books of Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. There are so many poignant lessons for us today in these ancient books; they are foundational for so many aspects of our faith. So join me as we journey with Moses and Israel and as we visit the fundamental principles of life in these profound books of the Old Testament.

MJ

WHO MAY ENTER?

Exodus 40:34-38
& Hebrews 9-10

The Bible is focused on one goal: that human beings might dwell with God again. The key question that rings out over the fallen human race is, as Psalm 15:1 says: “Lord, who may dwell in your sanctuary?” The final scene of the book of Exodus begs this question with a particular sense of unresolved tension. Here we see the glory of God filling the tabernacle and *Moses is unable to enter* (Exodus 40:34-35). This, again, raises the question: If even Moses is unable to enter the dwelling place of God, who indeed may enter? The book of Leviticus answers this question. The answer, in summary, is that only God’s anointed high priest may enter. And as God’s ‘anointed one’ (Hebrew: Messiah) offers the right sacrifice, so too are we cleansed of guilt and able to enter also. Leviticus is a book that many people skip over but it is in fact the climactic point of the unfolding drama that has built up through Genesis and Exodus. In Hebrew literature, climactic moments are often placed at middle points and Leviticus is that middle point as the third of the five books of Moses (The Pentateuch). And within the book of Leviticus, the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16 - when the high priest enters God’s dwelling place with a sacrifice to cover the guilt of all God’s people) sits at the central point. This highlights, again, what God is most concerned about: enabling us to dwell with him. This, in other words, is a book about what Jesus Christ did for us on the cross. In this book, God invites us to draw near to him.

Read Exodus 40:34-38 and Hebrews 9-10

Ask God to draw you closer to him.

The first instruction that God gives to Moses from within the sanctuary is given priority of order for a reason. The 'burnt offering' is the most important of the prescribed offerings because it is the only one in which the whole animal is burnt on the altar. Other offerings convey part of the picture that God wanted to convey, but this one captures the whole picture. The Hebrew word that is translated "offering" means 'to ascend,' and indeed this is the goal. The animal of the offering represented the one bringing it. And the goal is to ascend into God's presence. When the animal was burnt on the altar it was transformed into smoke which rose up to God and became "an aroma pleasing to the LORD". In prescribing this offering God was painting a graphic picture for his people; a picture that pointed forward to Christ's sacrifice for us. Christ is our sacrifice, and when we identify with him (symbolised here by the placing of hands on the offering) all that is signified by the burnt offering happens to us. As we offer ourselves to God through Christ (who is both the sacrifice and the high priest) we are (by his sacrifice) transformed *into something pleasing to God*. Our flesh (representing the sinful nature) is burned away, allowing our spirit to rise up and commune with God. I encourage you to reflect on each element of this ritual because there is a message in each part. But here is the main idea: to set your spirit free to commune with God you must offer your body to him as a living sacrifice.

Read Leviticus 1 and Romans 12:1

Offer yourself over to God and ask him to help you relinquish anything that you are holding back.

In ancient Israel, bread was the staple part of the average person's diet. In some ways *grain*, more than gold or silver, was therefore what people depended on for their sustenance. To bring an offering of your grain, therefore, was to offer to God a part of what sustained your life. That is the significance of the grain offering. It was a way of giving thanks to God for his provision and, in the same instant, it was a declaration of faith in God as provider. In fact, it is clear from the psalms, that expressing thanks to God was never just a verbal activity. It always involved giving back to God a portion of what he provided, as God says in Psalm 50:23: "Those who sacrifice thank offerings honour me." The psalmist exhorts us in Psalm 96 saying: "Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name; bring an offering and come into his courts." This wasn't an idea that died out with the Old Covenant temple system. The practice of responding to God with offerings is something we see continuing in the early church. Paul, for example, thanks the church in Philippi for their gifts to him in prison saying: "They are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God." Whenever you give generously to support the work of God and bless others you are honouring God above all. When was the last time you sacrificed something to support God's work or simply to bless another person? I don't mean giving something you could spare, but giving something that felt like a sacrifice? Respond to God's generosity by being generous to others.

Read Leviticus 2

Think about how you can be generous in response to God.

THURSDAY

4 FEB

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

Leviticus 3

The fellowship offering, also known as the ‘peace offering,’ was to be used to celebrate a specific act of God in the life of the worshipper. It was the only offering that both the priests and the worshipper shared along with the worshipper’s family. In other words, the fellowship offering was to become a celebratory meal that signified the fellowship we enjoy with God (Leviticus 7:31-35). So if God answered a prayer of yours, you would choose an animal from your flock or herd and, after presenting it at the temple with all the prescribed rites (that signified *how* we have fellowship with God), it would become the meal of a big celebration (Deuteronomy 26:12, 13). This, for example, is what the “fatted calf” of Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son would have been: a fellowship offering used to celebrate the return of the lost son. The picture of a family celebrating around a meal table is the very picture that Jesus drew on in instituting the “Lord’s Supper” or “Eucharist”. In this case, Jesus himself becomes the sacrifice and our fellowship with God and with each other is made possible by, and therefore centred around, his sacrifice. God is calling us to join his family; to gather around his table and to partake of his sacrifice. You don’t need to give anything to have fellowship with God. The sacrifice has been made by Jesus. All you need to do is come to his table and join the celebration.

Read Leviticus 3

Say what you would say to Jesus if he was physically sitting opposite you at a table.

It is interesting to note how the various sin offerings for different groups of people reflect an order of seriousness of sin. It is clear that a sin committed by an anointed priest has more gravity than the sin of another member of the Israelite community. In the case of the offering for the sin of the priest, the meat of the sacrifice could not be eaten, whereas the meat of the sacrifice for the sins of any other individual could be eaten. This difference, and others that you might note, serve to underline the extra responsibility of those anointed as priests. In fact, the offering-ritual required for the sin of the priest is the same as the offering-ritual required for the sin of the entire community. The reason is that the role of the priest was to mediate between God and the community. The priest carried a responsibility for the community and so when he sinned it would have implications for the community that he represented. We see this kind of thing when David, the anointed king, sins against God. We see the whole nation suffer as a result (see 1 Chronicles 20 and 21). Think about the fact that you are called to be a priest of God (1 Peter 2:5). There are people that God has made you responsible for. When you choose a path of sin it undermines your ability to perform your role and people will suffer as a result. Life is not just about you. Your choices affect others even when you don't perceive these effects.

Read Leviticus 4

Think about how your actions affect other people.

6/7 FEB

weekend

Making Things Right – Leviticus **5:1-13**

The sin offerings outlined in Leviticus 4-5 were used to deal with that general sense of ‘falling short’ that is an unavoidable part of being human. John says that, “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Due to the fact that we are broken people it is inevitable that all our thoughts, attitudes and actions are going to be tainted to some extent. I’m sure you know that feeling of failure; that general sense that you are not what you should be. That awareness is probably also accompanied by the feeling that you are unacceptable to God. This is the problem that these sin offerings are speaking to. I want you to note here in chapter 5 how provision is made for all kinds of people. If a person could not offer a lamb, they could bring two doves or pigeons, and if they could not afford these, they could just bring a bit of flour. In other words, God wanted everyone to be able to come and no one to be barred because of their inability to bring an offering. The fact is, in a literal sense, we are all unable to bring anything to God for our sin. But God has made provision for our spiritual poverty. He has provided the lamb for us. In other words, you don’t need to bring anything to God to be made right and acceptable in his sight, not even a bit of flour! Your debt is paid in full by Jesus and you are accepted by God.

Read **Leviticus 5:1-13**. Ask for God’s mercy in Christ and pray to God like one who is fully accepted.