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The Means of Atonement Leviticus 17:1-16

Intro: Our text is an introduction into another section of Leviticus (17-20) but it also relates to what has come before. Like 1-16, ch17 addresses issues related to the proper place of sacrifice (4), the proper use of blood (10, 12, 14), the importance of addressing ritual impurity (15-16) and the application of these laws to resident aliens (strangers: 8, 10, 13, 15). But, like 18-20, ch17 also has prohibitions against pagan cultic practices (7). Thus, ch17 serves as a smooth transition between ch1-16 and ch18-20.

This new section (17-20) constituted a legal code for the people of Israel, touching on many areas of their personal and public life. But, the emphasis of this section isn't simply focused on justice or civic righteousness, as important as they are, but on holiness. The key text of this section is 20:7-8. After all, Israel was God's people and the law was God's law. But here's the thing, the motivation for Israel's obedience had to be more than just a fear of punishment. The people also needed to possess in their hearts a real desire to please God and a determination to be a holy people who would bring glory to His name (Ex 19:3-6). Obeying the law and having holy character aren't necessarily the same thing.

24 times in 17-20 we'll hear the declaration, "I am the Lord!" God is giving His people divine laws that express His holy will, laws that He expected them to respect and obey. While obedience to the law is not God's way of salvation, a love for holiness and a desire to obey and please God are certainly evidences that we are the children of God. These chapters deal with 4 special areas of life that must be respected and kept holy: the sanctity of blood, or life (17); the sanctity of sex (18); the sanctity of the law (19) and the sanctity of judgment (20).

Our text concerns the sanctity of blood. According to NT scholar Leon Morris, the word blood is used 460 times in the Bible, 362 of them are found in the OT. In ch17, the word blood appears 13 times. We'll also find in this chapter the key text in biblical theology on the significance of blood in salvation (11). Long before medical science discovered the significance of the circulation of blood in the human body and its importance for sustaining

life, Scripture told us that the blood was the life. When a sacrifice was offered and its blood was shed, it meant the giving of a life for the life of another. The innocent victim died in the place of the guilty sinner. Throughout Scripture, it's the blood that makes atonement. Any theology that ignores or minimizes the importance of blood isn't founded on the Word of God.

1-7 – This passage contains an obvious prohibition (**3-4**) and it's context (**5-7**). In order for us to fully understand the prohibition, we must first understand the context in which it is given. **V7** seems to indicate that many Israelites were still offering sacrifices to demons. The word for demons here is also translated in other passages as wild goats (**Isa 13:21; 34:14**). The word can literally mean *hairy ones* – referring to male goats; thus, some translations render this word as goat demons (ESV) or goat idols (NIV). Clearly, the word refers to something more than an ordinary goat. It's a kind of demonic being that materializes in the form of a goat, much like the satyrs of Greek mythology.

Now, you may be shocked that the Israelites were still worshiping other gods but in the ancient Near East, most people not only believed there were multiple deities (polytheism) but they also worshiped multiple deities (polyolatry). It was the easiest thing to do in the ancient world to worship multiple deities and many ancient cultures worshiped goats or goat-gods in some form. For the Israelites, worshiping a being in the form of a goat was no stranger to them than worshiping a false god in the form of a calf. Let's remember that Israel had spent 400 years surrounded by Egyptian culture, which had a plethora of false gods in their own pantheon, and the 10 Commandments had only been given a short while before this. It wasn't decades or even years before this – think months.

Still, we might be tempted to look down on the Israelites of this time for being so easily swayed into such wicked idolatry but before we judge them too harshly, we need to understand that polytheism was to the ancient Israelite what materialism is to many today, particularly to the Western members of the Body of Christ. Polytheism was so much a part of the cultural air that they breathed that they were very slow to turn from it; even after deciding to follow the Lord (**Josh 24:14, 23**). Materialism is so much of the cultural air we breathe in American society that we hardly bat an eye at the control it has over many believers; even many ministries. Yet, we plug

along as if nothing is wrong when all the while we honor the Lord with our mouths but still worship at the throne of the almighty dollar.

Of course, the fact that it was the cultural norm didn't minimize the wrong in the eyes of the Lord, who describes such worship with the metaphor of prostitution: harlot (7). In Israel, to prostitute oneself was to engage in sexual activity outside the covenant of marriage. It is a fitting metaphor, since the Lord Himself had entered into covenant relationship with the Israelites, an exclusive relationship; and they betrayed that covenant whenever they worshiped other gods. The idea was that Israel was the covenant wife of Yahweh. When Israel worshiped, honored and sacrificed to idols, it was like committing adultery or even prostitution with the false gods and the demons the idols represented.

With that context in mind, we can readily understand what the Lord's prohibiting here. V3 prohibits the Israelites from slaughtering a sacrificial animal at just any place of their choosing. Instead, they had to bring it to the tabernacle and present it as an offering to the Lord. Note that this only applied to animals that could be used for sacrifices and in this case, the offering being referred to here would be the fellowship (peace) offering. The meat of the fellowship offering was shared with the offeror, the priests and other worshipers that happened to be there.

So what did this law accomplish? It accomplished 3 things: 1st) it kept the people from secretly offering sacrifices to idols out in the field. If they were discovered and questioned, they might claim that they were killing the animal only for a feast. But if that was the case, they still should have taken the animal to the tabernacle altar. Both the blood and the fat of the animal belonged to the Lord so they must be offered only to the Lord and only at His prescribed altar.

The people weren't allowed to offer sacrifice in any place or in any way they pleased. This command runs completely contrary to the way most people try to come to God in our current culture. The modern world emphasizes an individualistic approach for coming to God, where everyone does according to their own preference in how, when, where and with whom they will meet with God. This way of thinking dominates spirituality in the Western world but it's not the Biblical pattern for seeking God, for pleasing God or for becoming right with God.

2nd) through this law, the Lord dignified ordinary meals and made them a sacred experience. The slain animal wasn't just a piece of meat; it was a sacrifice presented to the Lord. According to v4, slaying an animal away from the altar would receive a severe punishment. Clearly, God wants us to treat His creation with greater respect. When we thank God at the table for our food, we're not just acknowledging His goodness to us in the provision of food; we're also sanctifying the meal and making the eating of it a spiritual experience.

3rd) by bringing the animal to the altar, the offeror was seeing to it that the Lord and the priest each received their rightful portion. Sure, the offeror wouldn't get as much meat for himself and his family but the Mt 6:33 principle, which is an eternal principle, would compensate him in other ways. The fellowship meal at the covenant King's palace would glorify the King and satisfy the needs of the offeror and those who ate with him.

Those refusing to obey would be considered guilty of bloodshed (4). This was because the blood represented the animal's life (11), which belonged to the Lord and could only be used as He allowed, in sacrifice to Him. Those who used it in prohibited ways would be held responsible for the animal's life and would be cut off from their people, which meant either exiled from the covenant community or suffer a premature death.

8-9 – This passage not only emphasizes the previous section but it broadens it beyond the common Israelite to include any and all strangers (any resident alien) that may have chosen to live within the covenant community. There are other passages in the Torah (Pentateuch) that make it clear that resident aliens could join the community of Israel and both Rahab and Ruth would be perfect examples of this; but, no matter what their religious background was, these strangers were required to leave all that behind and abide by the same laws and regulations the ethnic Jews lived by. While this may seem like a negative on its surface, the wonderful thing is, these laws served as an official welcome to all other nations into the blessing of relationship with the Lord, the very blessing He had always intended to extend to the nations through the Israelite people (Gen 12:3).

10-12 – This section presents another prohibition but it does it in a way that emphasizes it dramatically. First it states the prohibition against eating blood

in v10, then it gives the rationale for it in v11 and then it repeats the prohibition again in v12. This is the 3rd time Leviticus prohibits eating blood (3:17; 7:26), that is, eating raw meat that still has the blood in it. The text doesn't explain why meat would be eaten in this way but the Lord emphasizes the seriousness of the prohibition by declaring that not only will He "cut off" those who break this law but He also adds, "I will set My face against" them. This refers to the Lord's personal opposition to those who knowingly and rebelliously commit wrong, an opposition that results in some form of punishment. The Lord is making it clear that the cutting off will certainly take place. But why does the just punishment seem so out of proportion to the offense?

We know that the blood belongs to the Lord and clearly should not be used for any other way than that which He has chosen and purposed. Also, we may deduce from v11 that the Lord considers it objectionable to consume the blood that imparts life to the animal and provides atonement for the person who offers the animal. But these reasons still don't rectify the difference between the offense and the severe punishment but a story from I Sam 14:31-35 just might shed some light on it. One scholar has pointed out that the phrase ate them with the blood in 31 can be more literally translated as "over the blood." They argue that it actually means that the men killed the animals, poured out the blood on the ground and they ate the meat of the animals over the blood.

This action is related to the worship of bloodthirsty underworld deities. By this act, they were also performing some kind of divination rite in which they were attempting to consult these underworld deities to determine what their next action should be in their war with the Philistines. And they were doing this instead of worshiping their covenant King and consulting Him. This may seem like a bit of a stretch but interestingly enough, 19:26 uses the same language as I Sam 14 (literally, "do not eat over the blood") and is immediately followed by the command, nor shall you practice divination or soothsaying (seeking omens). This provides a clue as to 1 aspect of the problem of "eating blood." It refers to worshiping underworld goat idols, pouring out blood to them and consulting the spirits of the dead. It's no wonder, then, that the Lord says He will set His face in opposition to the Israelite who does such a horrendous act.

The rationale for this law is seen in v11 and consists of 3 related statements.

1st) the life of the flesh is in the blood. When a body loses its blood, it is lifeless, so it's very natural to equate the body's life with its blood. It could be that this was the reason ancient cultures considered lifeblood to possess special powers and so tried to use it for occultic purposes. Now, the Lord would agree that there's spiritual significance inherent in the blood of an animal or person. The big difference was that the pagan would say, The life is in the blood; so I must eat or drink it in order to take that life-force for myself. While the godly Israelite would say, The life of the flesh is in the blood, therefore, it belongs to God and not me.

This emphasizes a powerful idea that bears important implications, even for our modern world. Life belongs to God. God sets His face against that person who takes authority over life for themselves. God's granted the responsibility of executing capital punishment to human government. It's to be done in accordance to law as the just punishment for breaking the law against premeditated murder. Yet, more often than not, the guilty escape justice and too often, the innocent are executed for no other reason than they are an inconvenience. If God is concerned about the unjust spilling of an animal's blood, who much more concerned do you think He is with the senseless and selfish spilling of an innocent child's blood? Do you think God will set His face against that person? If [Lk 17:2](#) is any indication, I'd say He would...with extreme prejudice.

The Lord never intended blood to be used for occultic purposes as the 2nd statement explains: I have given it to you...to make atonement for your souls. This statement gives 2 reasons why blood must not be consumed or used for occultic practices. 1) All life is the Lord's, implied by the "I have given it to you." The Lord alone can determine how lifeblood is to be used because He sovereignly owns all life. 2) He's provided lifeblood to be used for a very specific purpose: to make atonement for (or ransom) your souls. To use blood for any other purpose is to deny the Lord's sovereign ownership of it.

The 3rd statement explains how the animal's lifeblood accomplished this ransom. The animal's lifeblood was accepted as the ransom payment in place of the offeror's: it served to satisfy the penalty of sin on the offeror's behalf which was graciously accepted by the Lord (the offended party). In this way, rescuing the offeror (the offending party) from the due punishment they deserved and what's more, it restored peace and reconciliation to the

relationship between the sinner and the Lord.

It can't be overstated that such a ransom could only take place because of the Lord's grace. Those who commit a wrong have no right to demand they be forgiven; such a decision belongs solely with the one who's been wronged. In this case, the Lord, in His great love and mercy, has graciously made such a means of forgiveness possible: through an animal's lifeblood. Sacrifice was certainly something the Israelites gave to the Lord, but first and foremost, it was something that the Lord gave to them, in His grace, as a means of atoning for sin and achieving the forgiveness they so desperately desired.

13-14 – Of course, there were various clean animals that could be eaten by the Israelites but not sacrificed. These included certain wild land animals like gazelles and deer and wild birds such as quail and partridge. Since these could not be sacrificed, their blood could not be placed on the altar. Instead, it was to be poured out on the ground and covered with dirt, thus providing it a decent burial. This would prevent it from being eaten or used for any other purpose, especially any nefarious ones.

Of course, because of this prohibition against eating blood, as a matter of practice, all animals that were butchered in Israel were drained of blood as much as possible. This prohibition became an important aspect of Kosher food. For food to be Kosher, an animal's carotid artery was cut and the animal had to bleed for a designated amount of time.

15-16 – Although not stated, we can assume these animals were pure and therefore edible. Since Israelites could eat pure animals that died naturally but not those torn by wild animals, this law addresses both the native-born Israelite and the resident alien (who could eat what was torn by wild animals). In each scenario, those doing the eating were rendered ritually impure by the eating and must go through the standard purification procedures for a minor impurity: washing clothes, bathing with water and waiting until evening. Again, these verses don't prohibit the eating of such animals and it's not usually wrong to become ritually impure, as long as the impurity was dealt with promptly and properly.

The significance of v11 is that there are echoes of this principle in the NT. **Heb 9:22b** without the shedding of blood there is no remission [of sins]. It's

also seen in [Rom 3:25](#), where Paul states concerning Jesus, whom God set forth as propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed. Quite literally, God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of His blood. Just as God gave Israel the blood of sacrifice to make atonement for their sins, so He also gave His only begotten Son as the ultimate and final sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the world!

It is impossible to overstate the significance of the blood of Christ and all that it accomplished on the cross:

The new covenant was established through His blood;
We have forgiveness of sins through His blood;
The church has been bought by His blood;
His blood provides propitiation for sins;
We're justified by His blood;
We participate in His blood;
We have redemption, reconciliation, sanctification and
 peace through His blood;
We have been brought nearby His blood;
Our consciences are cleansed by His blood;
We have confidence to enter the holy place by His blood;
His blood purifies the heavenly tabernacle;
His blood speaks to us a better word;
We're saved by the sprinkling of His blood;
We are freed by His blood;
We overcome by His blood.

Do we fully appreciate the importance of the precious blood of Christ? 😊