

Leviticus -- Lesson 6
Chapter 17 -- The Use of Blood

- □ I. Chapter 17 connects the first part of Leviticus, which is mainly concerned with ritual matters, to the second part, mainly concerned with ethical matters.
 - □ A. The former has to do with holiness within the sanctuary, and the latter with holiness outside the sanctuary.
 - □ 1. This chapter shares the earlier agenda and continues to show an interest in matters have to do with sacrifice and with blood.
 - □ 2. But it begins to open the door to the sorts of issues that will increasingly occupy the attention of the chapters that follow.
 - □ B. Chapters 17-26 are often referred to as the "Holiness Code."
 - □ 1. Their central theme is found in 19:2: "Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy."
 - □ 2. The absence of specific language about holiness has led some to contend that this chapter does not belong in the Holiness Code, but should be seen as a conclusion of the section on matters of sacrifice and purity.
 - □ 3. However, the absence of explicit language is unimportant where the implicit meaning is clearly about living a holy life.
 - □ C. In any case, chapter 17 spans the concerns of the earlier and the later chapters of Leviticus, and serves as a wonderful means of moving the agenda along to the next items of business.
 - □ 1. Moses remains God's spokesman, but not words are addressed to the whole community without distinction, from his brother Aaron, the High Priest, to the lowliest member of Israel.
 - □ 2. The commands even reach the non-Israelites who have chosen to live among them (8, 10, 13, 15).
 - □ 3. Holiness was a matter that embraced them all, and was not just of interest to the religious professionals who worked in the tabernacle.
 - □ 4. Every member of the Israelite community was called upon to live by a distinct code of ethics that would set them apart from their neighbors and to their God.
 - □ 5. The demands of holiness are egalitarian.
- □ II. The actions it prohibits -- vv. 1-16.
 - □ A. Like many subsequent parts of the Holiness Code, this chapter seems heavy on negatives.
 - □ 1. But the "thou shalt nots" of Leviticus have a positive purpose and are designed not to suppress life, but to release it in all its fullness.
 - □ 2. They set before Israel an ideal way of living which they were encouraged to adopt.
 - □ B. The chapter breaks down into five paragraphs, all of which have something to say about the use of blood.
 - □ 1. Non-Israelites are included so that their way of life would not be compromised.

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- □2. To make exceptions to this lifestyle for any reason would result in Israel's holy way of life being undermined and would before long end in the total erosion of their particular calling as God's covenant people.
- □3. While safeguards were put into place to ensure that resident aliens were not exploited, those who chose to live within the boundaries of Israel were, for the most part, expected to abide by the Israelite's way of life.
- □III. These laws prohibit five different specific actions in relation to blood: two of these pertain to sacrificial offerings and three of them pertain to the blood of dead animals.
- □A. Random sacrifices are forbidden -- vv. 1-9.
 - □1. The first prohibition is the forbidding of the slaughtering of any ox, lamb, or goat -- domestic livestock that were the principal animals offered in the sacrifices -- anywhere except in front of the tabernacle of the Lord (v. 4).
 - □a. The command is repeated twice in different forms -- vv. 1-7 and vv. 8-9.
 - □b. It is backed up by the most serious penalties against those who violated it.
 - □c. They were guilty of bloodshed and were to be cut off from their people. v. 4.
 - □2. Was this rule prohibiting the slaughter of all animals or only of those that were normally used for sacrifices?
 - □a. If the former, it would mean that families could not slaughter their animals to eat whenever they chose, and it would limit the slaughtering of all animals to the occasion of a fellowship offering.
 - □b. Most see it as prohibiting the sacrifices of animals for use in idol worship, and as banning the offering of sacrifices wherever a worshipper wished.
 - □c. The context, and the use of the word meaning "to slit the throat," suggests that it is a ritual slaughter and not ordinary butchering that is in view.
 - □d. This would leave people free to kill domestic animals for their own use whenever they wished,, as Deuteronomy 12:15 gives them permission to do in locations other than at the Tent.
 - □e. If this law was intended to ban the butchering of all edible domesticated animals except as a sacrifice, it would have been woefully inadequate because it did not cover, for example, questions of what to do in the case of animals with a defect, which would not have been acceptable in sacrificial worship.
 - □f. This law teaches that those who offered pagan sacrifices would be considered as guilty of bloodshed, v. 4.
 - □1. To understand this we need to understand the background of the law.
 - □2. God abhors the shedding of blood and says that anyone who sheds it will be culpable and liable to severe punishment.
 - □3. God's hatred of bloodshed was made known in his covenant with Noah in Genesis 9:4.

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- □ a. There he gave Noah and his family permission to kill everything that lives and moves so that they could eat, but insisted that the blood be drained from the slaughtered animals before they consumed them.
- □ b. God said he would require an accounting for the eating of any meat that still contained blood or the drinking of blood.
- □ c. Blood assumes this position of importance because it is symbolic of life, v. 11.
- □ 4. In addition to the need to respect blood, another reason for this prohibition is made explicit when the law is restated in vv. 5-7; it bans Israel from offering sacrifices randomly.
 - □ a. Sacrifices are not to be offered in the open field or to goat idols or demons.
 - □ b. Do-it-yourself-spirituality was to have no place in Israel.
 - □ 1) Once people begin to set their own forms of sacrifice, and perform them when, where, and how they liked, elements of pagan worship from surrounding cultures would soon be imported to "improve" the liturgy of Israel.
 - □ 2) No doubt it would be argued that the "improvements" were harmless or even necessary for the emotional satisfaction of the worshippers (while in reality probably satisfying their baser instincts).
 - □ 3) But God does not mince his words.
 - □ a) Since the incident of the golden calf, the folly of worshipping idols should have been seated into Israel's consciousness.
 - □ b) To commit idolatry was not to be compared to committing an unfortunate, but forgivable breach of social etiquette.
 - □ c) Rather, it was to be compared with sexual promiscuity; it was to prostitute oneself spiritually, .v 7, to turn one's back on a faithful and powerful God and sell oneself to gods that would fail.
 - □ c. The first time the prohibition is introduced it is tied to the fellowship offering, v. 3, but on the second occasion it is connected to the other sacrifices as well, vv. 8-9.
 - □ 1) No blood sacrifice was to be offered other than at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting, where it would be offered in the proper manner to the Lord and not in an improper manner to another deity.
 - □ 2) The regulations about sacrifices had reinforced the importance of approaching God with care over and over again.
 - □ 3) But nothing that concerns the worship of a holy God is left to chance.
 - □ 4) What was implicit in the earlier regulations -- that only prescribed forms of sacrifice should be offered and only in the prescribed place -- is now made explicit.

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- □ 5) Nothing is left to doubt.
- □ 6) Israel has no possible excuse for any disobedience in which they might engage.
- □ B. Eating blood forbidden -- vv. 10-16.
 - □ 1. This group of prohibitions focuses on the practice of eating blood -- a practice that was common among other peoples in the ancient world.
 - □ a. No one who lived within the borders of Israel was permitted to drink blood of dead animals , again on pain of severe penalties.
 - □ b. The general prohibition is set out in vv. 10-12 and is then amplified by two additional and more specific paragraphs.
 - □ 2. The first specific application is to animals killed in a hunt. vv. 13-14.
 - □ a. The blood of these animals was as precious as the blood of those whose throats were slit in sacrifice or slaughtered for the families' table.
 - □ b. The bottom line was that no blood was to be eaten.
 - □ 3. The second specific application announces an absolute ban on the eating of animals found dead either from natural causes or because they had been killed by a wild animal.
 - □ a. The infringing of this rule, however, was only a minor offense and meant that the guilty persons would be unclean until the evening, when they would have to undergo the washing of their bodies and their clothes to attain a state of cleanness again.
 - □ b. Again, the reason given for the prohibition against eating blood is because of what it symbolizes; the statement is repeated that the life of a creature is in the blood (v. 11, cf. v. 14).
 - □ c. The connection between life and blood seems obvious; loss of blood leads to loss of life -- blood shed is life terminated -- so it is natural to assume that blood carries the essence of life in it.
 - □ d. God has determined that it is by the means of shed blood that atonement should be made.
 - □ e. It is not, therefore, for human beings to seek to make use of blood for other purposes or to appropriate it for themselves.
 - □ f. It belongs to God alone.
- □ IV. The principles that may be learned from these laws.
 - □ A. The uniqueness of God.
 - □ 1. The Holiness Code endorses the Ten Commandments in various ways.
 - □ a. They begin by reminding Israel that it was to have no God other than Jehovah.
 - □ b. He alone had delivered them from Egypt and made them his people; he alone was the God to whom they were bound by a covenant commitment.

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- □ 2. Consequently, they were to offer sacrifices only at his sanctuary; they were not to set up altars elsewhere and offer devotion or sacrifices to any other so-called gods.
 - □ a. For them there was but one God, from whom everything came and for whose glory all were to live.
 - □ b. Therefore, it was both a gross insult to the Lord and an act of gross absurdity on the part of the worshipper to offer sacrifices to idols.
 - □ c. It would be like forsaking the good and faithful blessings of marriage for the experience of a one-night stand.
 - □ d. What good would it do them; it could only lead them into fresh forms of bondage and sorrow, as the references to Molech in the succeeding chapters illustrate (18:21; 20:2-5).
 - □ e. God deserved their undivided and undeviating loyalty; he was not merely to come first in their attention , but was to be the sole recipient of it.
- □ B. The sanctity of life.
 - □ 1. The root of the prohibition against shedding blood, as we have seen, is found in the covenant with Noah.
 - □ a. The intention of the restriction on eating blood in that covenant was partly so that life, and especially human life, could flourish once again on earth after the near total destruction of the flood.
 - □ b. While god may have given permission for humans to kill animals in order to eat, his permission is severely qualified so as to restrain people's blood lust and to prevent their appetite for blood from growing.
 - □ c. At the council of Jerusalem, in a judgment that reflects the connection Leviticus 17 makes between idolatry and the shedding of blood, the early Christians maintained the same attitude of reverence for life.
 - □ d. In the very letter that the leaders wrote to publicize a relaxation of many of the ceremonial laws of purity, Gentile Christians were instructed still to avoid eating blood. Acts 15:29.
 - □ 2. Life is sacred because all human beings bear God's image.
 - □ a. Bearing God's image means more than that all humans have dignity.
 - □ b. It means that all humans belong to God and are his possession.
 - □ c. One who takes life is accountable to God on two counts -- he has both desecrated God's image and fatally damaged God's property.
 - □ d. We hold life as a sacred trust from him.
- □ C. The meaning of blood.

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- □ 1. Leviticus 17:11 enshrines one of the most important principles in the whole book; it says not only that the life of a creature is in the blood, but also that God gives it to his people to make atonement for one's life.
 - □ a. As a result of this gift, remission of sins is possible.
 - □ b. The principle in this verse is that of substitutionary atonement; that is to say, atonement is made by a victim that takes the place of a sinner and shed its blood in the sinner's stead.
 - □ c. The wages of sin is death, and the only hope that we have is if a ransom is offered on our behalf -- a life laid down in the place of the life that is spared.
- □ 2. This understanding has been questioned in recent years by those who wish for a softer view of god and find it unacceptable that he should exact such a price for sin.
 - □ a. One writes, "...the substitutionary theory of sacrifice, based on this verse and championed by so many in the scholarly world, must once and for all be rejected."
 - □ b. He proposes that this verse means that if blood is drained and sprinkled against the altar of the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting, the victim's life will be returned to its creator and atonement will be made.
 - □ c. Others see the offering as bringing God a gift of worship in which the life of the animal is set free, rather than its having anything to do with expiation from sin or deliverance from death by exchanging one life for another.
 - □ d. For example, one writes: "The idea seems to be that the tainted and unclean life of the offending community is renewed by the pouring out of the fresh life present in the blood of the animal."
- □ 3. Such arguments seem tendentious -- especially for the sacrificial victim.
 - □ a. However one argues it, the pouring out of the sacrificial victim's blood means that the sacrifice dies.
 - □ b. Clearly the shedding of the blood doesn't stand for the release of life from the burden of the flesh, but for the bringing to an end of life in the flesh.
 - □ c. It is evidence of physical death and spiritual survival.
 - □ d. A Holy God exacts the just penalty of death from those who sin unless a substitute is made available.
- □ 4. The new covenant, no less than the old, is a covenant of blood.
 - □ a. It also holds that without the laying down of a life and the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. Heb. 9:22.
 - □ b. But the new covenant does not require the endless offering of blood sacrifices, because the offering of one blood sacrifice, the blood of Christ, the perfect sacrifice, is sufficient to cover all the sins of man.

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- □ c. The value of the Lamb, without spot or blemish, far exceeds that of all the liters of blood shed on Israel's altars. Hebrews 10:12-18; 1 Pet. 1:19.
- □ d. His blood is the redemption price that sets us free from the consequences of sin and the cleansing agent that purifies us from every defilement. 1 John 1:7.
- □ 5. In a curious reversal, while the people of Israel were forbidden to drink blood, the new Israel is commanded to drink blood. John 6:53.
 - □ a. To drink his blood is to assimilate the benefits of his death and infuse every part of our being with his life.
 - □ b. The Lord's Supper serves as a regular, enacted reminder of this.
 - □ c. Nothing is achieved by mere outward observance.
 - □ d. It is only as we grasp the meaning of it and participate in Christ by our eating and drinking that it translates into our lives and produces holy living.
- □ D. The grace of forgiveness.
 - □ 1. It is essential that we remember the words, "I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves."
 - □ a. Here is the wonder of God's grace.
 - □ b. The blood that is required to release us from our sin is not blood that God exacts from us, but blood that he provides for us.
 - □ 2. From the beginning to the end of scripture, the message remains the same -- God does not require of us what we cannot give, but graciously overcomes our poverty and spares our lives by providing an alternative sacrifice in our place.
 - □ a. He did it for Abraham on Mount Moriah when a ram was provided in place of Isaac.
 - □ b. As a result Abraham named the place, "The Lord Will Provide." Gen. 22:14.
 - □ c. And he provided for us centuries later by giving his own Son as the ultimate sacrifice of atonement.
 - □ 1. The old sacrifices did not happen without the involvement on the part of sinners.
 - □ a. They had to bring the gift, identify with it, slaughter it, and offer it to God as a sign of a penitent attitude and of obedient faith.
 - □ b. It could not be done by proxy.
 - □ c. Only with their personal involvement would the benefits of the atoning blood flow into their lives, forgiving their sins.
 - □ 2. So with us -- God has provided in abundance, but all to no avail unless we appropriate the gift of his Son by obedient faith.
- □ V. The five prohibitions of this chapter seem forbidding; they appear to cry out, "Thou shalt not."

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- □ A. But in reality each of them is an expression of the goodness of God, saving us from the folly of worshipping worthless idols, causing us to value life, and pointing us to his gracious provision of atoning blood.
- □ B. His prohibitions:
 - □ 1. Do not lead us to the restricted lives of prisoners, but set our feet free in a spacious place. Psa. 18:19; 31:8.
 - □ 2. They do not impair life, but enhance it. Psa. 119:32, 37.
 - □ 3. They do not kill joy, but release it. Psa. 119:35.
 - □ 4. For his laws are laws of liberty and life. Psa. 119:45; Jas. 2:12.