

Blood, Sacrifices, and Forgiveness

DAVE BAST

What does it take for forgiveness to happen? Well, on the one side, it takes a gracious spirit, an emotional maturity; on the other side, it takes a sincere apology, genuine sorrow at causing offence, and the promise of restitution where possible. That is for us when one of us has to forgive another, but what does it take for God to forgive us? It takes all those other things, plus one more that might surprise you. It takes blood. We will see about that when we dig into scripture today on *Groundwork*. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we have come now to the third of four programs looking at the Old Testament book of Leviticus; a book that unless you are an extremely serious Bible reader, you may be mostly unfamiliar with. It is sometimes difficult. It has a lot of laws in it. It has a lot of commandments that seem odd to us. We talked about the holiness code in our last program; in the first program, we sort of looked at an overview of the book and placed it in its context, coming right after the end of Exodus, with God in the tabernacle, right in the middle of Israel's camp; and so we are thinking about this whole series as this is what it takes to live with God; after you have been delivered from bondage; you have left Egypt like the Israelites; you have become a Christian now in our terms; now what? How do you live in the presence of God?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And sacrifice, as you hinted at in the opening, Dave, even the shedding of blood, is somehow involved in keeping our relationship with God intact; and so, we mentioned that the Hebrew title in the first program...we mentioned the Hebrew title of this book is: And he (that is, God) and [God] called Moses (to give them all these laws). The English title, Leviticus, is because this book is concerned with the Levites, the house of Aaron, who were the priests—priests in Israel. So, we often talk about prophet, priest, and king are the three offices in Israel, all of which combine in Jesus ultimately; but the office of the priest...the priest stood at the intersection between heaven and earth. The priest stood at the intersection between God and humanity, and did work to keep the channels of communication open, to keep the relationship alive; and so, Leviticus tells us what the priests are going to do and require from the people of God, to bring sacrifices that would keep the relationship intact.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, one of the things we find in Leviticus...we have already mentioned how the first seven chapters are all about the different offerings: The sin offering, the guilt offering, the burnt offering, the cereal or grain offering, the peace offering or fellowship offering; and how these had to be brought in a certain, specific way, and in a certain sort of order. They created or restored a relationship between God and the people, and they had to be offered by a priest. As you said, Scott, the priest was the key go-between—the mediator, we might say; and the priest had to be ordained and set apart. Just anyone couldn't be a priest. You didn't go to school and decide: You know, I am kind of looking at the priesthood. That sounds good to me. I think I will... No, no; they had to be descendants of Aaron...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And so, all of this is to say that this sacrificial system is both elaborate and essential; and the next thing we are told is what kind of sacrifice was suitable...what kind of animal it had to be.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and you couldn't bring just any old animal or a sick animal or something you were sick of and you kind of want to get rid of it. God didn't want your leftovers. Here are several things, even from the opening chapter. ³If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you are to offer a male without defect. You must present it at the entrance to the tent of meeting so that it will be acceptable to the Lord. ¹⁰If the offering is a burnt offering from the flock, from either the sheep or the goats, you are to offer a male without defect... And then there are similar things about grain and so forth; in other words, you had to take the most valuable animal you had. A male without defect, that would be like someone's prized bull...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That you want to use to breed future generations. This is the most valuable... In fact, it is interesting, Dave, this is Leviticus, but long before this system was put into place, we had a little preview of this in Genesis with Cain and Abel. Remember, Abel was a shepherd and he brought the firstborn of his flock—Abel brought the best. Genesis says Cain brought just some of his vegetables—that is how it puts it: Some of them. That was Genesis' way of saying Cain kept the best for himself, and guess what? His offering wasn't acceptable to God and it made him very angry and led to the murder of Abel; but, that is Genesis already giving us a preview. The idea is this is supposed to cost you something...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because this is serious.

DAVE BAST

Actually, it was also adjusted for means. We talk about being means tested with respect to income, but there was a step-down process. If you couldn't afford a bull, a very expensive animal, you could bring a goat or a sheep; if you couldn't even afford that, you could bring a pair of birds; and that, in fact, is what Jesus' parents brought as an offering, underscoring their poverty; but, the key thing...you mentioned Abel's sacrifice...it was an animal sacrifice and that meant it involved the shedding of blood, and that is an emphasis that runs through the sacrificial system. So, we read, for example, in Leviticus 4:

³If the anointed priest sins, bringing guilt on the people, (and bear that in mind—the priest himself needed a sacrifice)...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right, yes.

DAVE BAST

He must bring to the Lord a young bull without defect as a sin offering for the sin he has committed. It goes on to say he will take the blood and carry it into the tent of meeting and he will dip it and sprinkle it seven times before the Lord, in front of the curtain; not inside the Holy of Holies, but in front of it; and then put some of the blood on the altar. That is how he could make sacrifice for himself. So, the importance of blood is the key thing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we will talk about this a little bit more also in the next segment, Dave, but this is something that we don't usually visualize, even when we think about the Old Testament stories. A lot of churches years ago outlawed serving red punch because when kids spilt it, it would stain the carpeting. We don't like people spilling coffee in the narthex at church. The Church, if you will, in ancient Israel was a slaughterhouse! This was a blood and guts operation, burning the intestines and slitting animals' throats with the blood pouring out into five-gallon pails, as it were. It is nauseating; but the question is, why is that so important? And we will keep exploring that, but what is up with all of that?

DAVE BAST

Well, here is an explanation that God gives in Chapter 17...Leviticus 17: ¹¹[For] the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar. It is the blood that makes atonement for one's life. ¹²Therefore, I say to the Israelites, "None of you may eat blood, nor may foreigner residing among you eat blood."

SCOTT HOEZEE

The life of the creature is in its blood, and the shedding of blood costs a life, all of which has something to do with how serious sin is, and our ongoing need for atonement. In just a minute, Dave, we will think particularly about the *big* Day of Atonement, and what that meant, and why it was so significant for Israel.

So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and in this third of four programs on the book of Leviticus, the Bible's third book, we are thinking, Dave, today about the sacrificial system; and there were some sacrifices that didn't involve animals. There were grain offerings and so forth, but the main sacrifices for the worst of human sin did involve some sort of an animal. As you said, Dave, if people were poor they could just bring a pair of birds; and it was all about blood, and we were just saying, Dave, the reason that is significant is that the life of a creature was thought to be in its blood; and so, when the blood left, the life left, and somehow, that was required to bridge the gap that sin opens up between us and God.

DAVE BAST

Right; and on the big day, the greatest sacrifice of every year was on the Day of Atonement. At the heart of the book of Leviticus, in Leviticus 16, there is a long description of exactly what happened on the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur—still celebrated as the holiest day of the year by the Jewish people.

So, Aaron, the high priest...only the high priest...normally these daily sacrifices could be conducted by any priest; and in fact, they took their turns...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

By family or by clan; but on the Day of Atonement, it had to be the high priest, and that was the only day, Scott, that he could go into the Holy of Holies in the presence of the Ark of the Covenant and the Mercy Seat that sat on top of it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because that was the earthly throne of God. That is where God dwelled; and as we saw in a previous program, when two of Aaron's sons brought a sacrifice in an unauthorized way, fire from that Holy of Holies came out and consumed them...killed them. You didn't mess around with this; and right, only once a year did only the high priest go in there because you didn't trifle with the presence of God.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So on Yom Kippur, as described the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, we are told:

⁶Aaron is to offer the bull for his own sin offering... (By the way, that is going to be significant for where we will go next in this program before we close. Ultimately, we are going to need a priest who doesn't have his own problem with sin...)

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; doesn't have to offer for himself first, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Aaron has to clean up his own act, so he has to offer for his own sin...⁶to make atonement for himself and his household. ⁷Then he is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting. ⁸He is to cast lots for the two goats...

So, there are some instructions there; but ultimately, ¹⁵paraphrased Aaron is going to slaughter the goat, making a sin offering for the people, and take it...the goat's blood...behind the curtain...(so, this is the curtain of the Holy of Holies)...and do with it as he did with the bull's blood: He shall sprinkle it on the atonement cover and in front of it. ¹⁶In this way, he will make atonement for the most holy place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, this is profound, really; and as we pointed out, Aaron first had to sacrifice for his own sins. That is what the bull was for. Then he had taken a pair of goats that had been selected; and again, in accordance with the law, these had to be without blemish; they had to be young; they had to be healthy; they had to be whole—no defect of any kind; and one of them he sacrifices and brings the blood in for the sins of the people and applies it, in the version that we read, to the atonement cover on the Ark, which in some translations, and traditionally, is called the Mercy Seat, or the place of atonement. The Hebrew word is *kaphar*, which means both a covering...literally a lid...the lid on the Ark...the lid on the box...and figuratively—metaphorically—the covering of sin in the sight of God, who is held to be dwelling right there. He is enthroned upon the cherubim. If you remember how the lid was built, it has these two angels spreading their wings—the cherubim. So, this blood is literally placed before God, and then the *second* goat, we read, is taken, and the high priest puts his hand on its head, as if to identify the sins of Israel with it, and it is driven away into the wilderness. The scapegoat!

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; we have all heard that word *scapegoat*. Where does it come from? From here: Leviticus 16. It is as though, Dave, they are really covering their bases. So, one goat has to give up its very life symbolized by the shedding of its blood to make things right; but just in case there is anything left, or just to double, you know...the priest sort of puts sins on the scapegoat, who then is just sent away into the wilderness, where presumably it will die also probably; but it is like the scapegoat is a visual symbol of the sending away of the sins of the people; which, by the way, is very important, Dave. One thing we probably haven't emphasized enough in this series is that the other thing that you get in Leviticus is the whole setup of the camp of Israel; and it is a series of concentric circles, if you will. So, the Holy of Holies is right in the middle of the tabernacle, and ultimately in the Temple, and then there is an outer court, and then outer, outer courts, and it

kind of keeps going and going and going until finally you get to the very fringes of the camp, where the people live; and when people get really unclean, they would be sent beyond those borders; but the camp is what had to stay pristine and holy; and so, by sending the scapegoat *out* of the camp, it was a symbolic way of saying everything that could threaten the presence of God's holiness among us has to get out of town. It has to quite literally hit the road and get out of Dodge, and that is what you saw in the scapegoat, because the camp had to stay pure from the outer borders all the way to the Holy of Holies at the center of all things.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, it is really a graphic illustration of the problem, how do you get rid of sin? And the answer is sort of twofold. One, you've got to pay for it somehow, and the only acceptable payment is a death; and secondly, you've got to get rid of it somehow; you've got to remove it; you've got to be able to shed the guilt that you cannot live with; and so, the goat is driven right outside the camp; and I don't know if you have been thinking about Jesus as we have been talking about all these things...about the sacrifice and the blood and the animals...but clearly, this is underlying a whole bunch of the New Testament teaching about what Jesus' death accomplished, ultimately and perfectly, for us; including the fact that, as Hebrews said, he suffered outside the camp...outside the city walls.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

So, that is what we want to talk about as we conclude this program in the next segment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this program, third in a four-part series on Leviticus, where, Dave, we have been looking at the sacrificial system and the need for Israel to get sin out of the way so that they could have an unimpeded, unhindered, open relationship with the God of Israel, who wanted to dwell in the midst of God's own people; and we have been talking about the shedding of blood, and we mentioned earlier that we can hardly imagine in our tidy churches today what a messy affair the tabernacle, and ultimately the Temple in Israel must have been; it was more like a slaughterhouse than a church; and so, we also kind of like to think that maybe that is just old, superstitious, Old Testament stuff. A lot of people find this to be off-putting, the idea that blood must be shed...a life must...how barbaric. Modern people bristle at that; and so we would like to think that this has nothing to do with Christians or how we become Christians, but that is not quite true, the New Testament says.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; and if we look at the New Testament, which we take to be authoritative here at *Groundwork*, we find that no book more closely depends on Leviticus than the book of Hebrews in the New Testament.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It makes no sense whatsoever unless you have a prior knowledge of Leviticus; and in Hebrews 9:22, there is a basic principle laid down: ^{22b}Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

So, that is not Old Testament, that is New Testament; that is the writer to the Hebrews, who unpacks the reality that has come now with the true sacrifice in Jesus Christ, but he doesn't back away from the principle that there has to be a death; and frankly, Scott, this is one of the controversial beliefs of orthodox Christianity—of both orthodox Roman Catholic teaching, Reformed teaching, Evangelical teaching—it is that the death of Christ was necessary in order for sins to be forgiven; and a lot of people struggle with that. They say: Oh, God is God; why can't he just forgive? Why doesn't he just wipe it all away and say it doesn't matter? But according to scripture, it does matter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And you know, we have mentioned this, I think, on various episodes of *Groundwork* in the past. An observation my theology teacher, Neal Plantinga, used to make in class when I was in seminary...he said: You know, isn't it amazing in the Bible that the act of creation for God seemed like it was a lot easier than the act of salvation once things went bad. In Genesis, God speaks and poof, it is; but once we have fallen into sin, you get this long slog that ends with the death of God's own Son on this garbage heap called Golgotha...this Place of the Skull. Salvation looked like it was harder to pull off than creation. But what that should tell us, Dave, among other things...it probably means lots of things...but among other things, sin is real. Evil is real. And it is rather intractable. God cannot wave it away with a magic wand. He cannot pretend it is no big deal. We don't understand fully why that is, but if the Bible makes one thing clear, it is that this is a grievous, deep, cosmic matter that requires the extreme of the sacrifice of God's own Son and *his* shed blood to set things right.

DAVE BAST

Absolutely; so, if we could summarize what Leviticus says about the whole business of sacrifice, it would be: One, there has to be blood shed, there has to be a life forfeited, there has to be a death. Nothing less can pay; and two, just as importantly, God has provided a substitute. It doesn't have to be your blood and my blood. It *could* be; that is what we deserve. Paul says clearly at the end of Romans Chapter 6: The wages of sin is death...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

And then he goes on to say: But the free gift of God is eternal life. Free to us, not free to God. Grace is costly. That is why we should never think of it as cheap or treat it casually. So, yes; a death is required; God has provided a substitute, but it couldn't be those animals. They were only signs or pointers toward the true sacrifice. So, we read in Hebrews Chapter 10:

¹It can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ²If it could, would they have not stopped being offered? ³But these sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, ⁴because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

So, we pointed out, Scott, there are a couple of problems with the provisional sacrifices of the Old Testament. One is the priest himself needed it...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So that is not perfect; and secondly, they had to keep going on year after year after year after year after year. They didn't seem to take care of the problem.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; it is like the garbage in your home. You have to take it out every week. Once is never enough; but we did finally need one that would be enough; and as you say, Dave, you know, the sacrificial system in the Old Testament was pretty vivid...pretty raw; and as we said, pretty bloody, ugly, gross an affair; and yet, the writer of Hebrews says: Yes, but that was just a preview. That wasn't even the real deal. That was just the shadow of the reality to come, and the reality was going to be the perfect sacrificial lamb. Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, as John the Baptist says in the beginning of John's gospel. It is going to be Jesus, who didn't have his own problem with sin. So, that is a major plus over Aaron or any priest who ever lived; and therefore, he could give his life away for the sake of others, and that is exactly what he did.

Here is Peter in his first epistle:

1:18 For you know that it was not with perishable things, such as silver or gold, that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, ¹⁹but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect. ²⁰He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake.

It is the blood of the lamb that takes away our sin.

DAVE BAST

The indescribably precious blood of Christ—the perfect, sinless one—offered freely on our behalf, and as a result, as we said earlier, the way is wide open. We can go right into the Holy of Holies. We can freely approach. Our sins have been dealt with; our guilt has been removed. So, one question I have is why would you try any other way, you know?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

One of the things Hebrews hammers away at is, it is done. It happened once—once and for all. It doesn't have to be repeated.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; my good works cannot save me. They are a response of gratitude. If God's own Son had to go that far to make things right in this universe, why in the world would I ever think that I could contribute to that? Or that I could save myself or work my own way to heaven or build my own stairway to heaven? It will never, ever happen. It had to happen through that terrible sacrifice of God's own Son; and once it was done, it was—it was one and done. It is the perfect sacrifice, and what a blessing, Dave, that it is by grace that we are saved through faith; and as Paul said: This not of yourselves, it is the gift of God through the sacrifice of the blood of Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God.

DAVE BAST

Thanks be to God; amen. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we study and seek to understand the importance of the immigrant in the book of Leviticus, and in our Christian faith. Connect with us at our website, groundworkonline.com, to share what *Groundwork* means to you; or tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

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