

A Priest for the Priests

Good morning! Please turn to Leviticus 8.

Review

I know we talked about a lot of stuff last week. And you've slept since then, or maybe you weren't here, so let me start with a bit of review.

The book of Leviticus is right at the beginning of the Bible and the center of the first five books, called the Torah or the Law. And I suggested that this book could be summarized as God's invitation to His people to dwell in His presence. The question it's answering is this: who can dwell in God's House? Who can enjoy His presence? And the answer is only those who are holy and clean.

And we summarized the first seven chapters of Leviticus last week which lay out the requirements for the five sacrifices or offerings that Israel was to do.

What do the offerings show us?

That God is Holy, and we are sinful. And yet, God has made a way. He has invited us in to His presence by making atonement for our sin. Atonement describes what happens when our sin is wiped away and we are made 'at-one' with God. Think of atonement as "at-one" ment or how we are brought into fellowship again with a holy God.

The five offerings or sacrifices have a logic to them:

- The burnt offering makes atonement for sin – all of the animal was burnt up to reconcile the worshipper with God. This was offered every day, morning and evening, and additionally on feast days, and as a part of the atonement and cleansing for various things.
- The grain offering showed commitment or thankfulness to God.
- The peace offering was like a celebration meal between the people, the priests, and God
- The sin offering purified from ongoing sin in the life of the worshipper
- The guilt offering addressed sins that had a cost and needed restitution (defiled utensils, theft/oppression from one person to another)

*I want to note that the guilt offering also covered those things that you did that may or may not have caused impurity or defilement – no one confronted you about it, you don't know for sure that it was sin, but your conscience pricks you about it; this offering covered those things to purge the worshipper from guilt. God makes provision for our sensitive consciences.

Have you had the experience of someone saying, “Hey, we need talk...” Or just, “Call me when you get this...” And if you're like me, you may have that moment of, “Oh no, what I'd do?” Or there's this dread – *they know*. They finally figured out what a sinner I am.

But friends, Christ fulfills the guilt offering in His sacrificial death. Just like He fulfills all of the sacrifices – Jesus cleanses our consciences and makes us clean. He atones for our sins, even the ones we're unsure about. He atones for our guilt all the way down.

I was talking with my wife Eve about this idea this past week, and she said, “Hey! You didn't mention that thing in the message! You should say that.” So now I have.

We also mentioned that the very layout of the tabernacle and the camp put God right in the center, in the midst of His people. It is gracious and kind of God to invite His people in, but how can that happen if His people are sinful and unclean?

The problem – our sin

To state it another way, God intends to dwell among His people – but who can dwell with God?

This problem was recognized back when the people of Israel first came to Mount Sinai. They had been delivered from slavery in Egypt. God had redeemed them, He bought them as His own and rescued them. And then He led them to Mount Sinai where God had met with Moses before at the burning bush. And the presence of the Lord comes down to the mountain and there is fire and smoke and lightning and thunder. And the people are terrified. The presence of God feels like a threat to them.

So they say to Moses, we cannot go into the presence of God, you go in our place! You go on our behalf! And that's what Moses does. He goes up the mountain, and God gave Moses the Law. But then right after that, while Moses is away, the people become restless.

And then Aaron, the brother of Moses, leads the people to sin with the golden calf at the Mountain. He said, “Bring me all your gold, and I’ll fashion something.” And so he melts their gold and forms it into a golden calf and the people worship it. And then later, when Moses asks Aaron, how could this have happened? Aaron responds, “I don’t know! I put some gold in the fire and this thing popped out! I’m just as surprised as you!”

So there’s this failure, right at what should have been this glorious moment. We’ll see that time and time again in the biblical story.

Moses then goes back up onto the mountain and receives more instructions, including how instructions on how to build the tabernacle or this big tent thing that would be where God would dwell and also instructions on how to consecrate or ordain the priests. So Exodus 29 has all of these instructions for what to do when you come to ordain the priests.

So now, in Exodus we have this problem. God has come down – but who can go to God? Who can dwell with God? Leviticus tells us how God makes a way. We saw the sacrifices last week. And this morning from chapters 8 and 9, we’ll see the priesthood.

The Solution

1. The Sacrifices

2. The Priesthood

Leviticus 8 speaks about the consecration or ordination of the priests (what they must do to be made holy, what they were to wear, and the sacrifices that were to be made etc.). And Leviticus 9 speaks about the preparation of the priests and the people to dedicate the tabernacle for the presence of the Lord to come and dwell in it. These chapters show us that God can dwell in our midst because He provides priests who lead us in worship before the King.

Read **Leviticus 8:1-21, 31-36; 9:1-7, 22-24.**

Intro

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?

This is a Latin phrase from a Roman poet of the 2nd century. It translates roughly as, “Who will guard the guards themselves?”

Alan Moore, the graphic novel author and comic book writer, popularized it as, “Who will watch the watchmen?” It was also the name of a Star Trek episode.

The question he was asking is a good one, I think. Who will hold our leaders accountable? We can put people in charge who will make and enforce the laws, but who will make sure that they are keeping the laws themselves? How do we avoid dictatorships or tyrants? Who will keep those in power in check?

This presents a problem in all kinds of areas, doesn’t it? In government, in workplaces, in schools, even in churches. How will the leaders be held accountable? They’re all susceptible to corruption. And absolute power corrupts absolutely, doesn’t it?

This was a problem for Old Testament Israel as well. Who will watch the leaders of Israel? They are to be priests, but who will be priests for them?

God had made a covenant with Abraham that He would bless the world through his offspring. Another way to say that is that the people of God were to function as priests.

What is a priest?

Priests are those who mediate – those who go in between God and man. They sort of stand in the middle. Think of priests as those who represent God to the people and those who represent the people to God.

And God intends for His people to be priests. When the people of Israel get to Mount Sinai, one of the first things God says to them is that they are to be priests.

Exodus 19:5-6

Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; **6** and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

Abraham’s offspring were to be a kingdom of priests. They are to represent God to the world and help them see who God truly is.

The question is – who will be priests for them? Who watches the watchmen? And the answer God gives in Leviticus is that it’s the...Levites. Hence, Leviticus.

So the Levites are chosen to be the priests. They're going to be the ones who go into the presence of God on behalf of the people. But there's a problem. They're sinners too. They're unholy. They are unclean, like the rest of the people.

And so we have to deal with the fact that in order for any of God's people, including those who will serve as priests, for anyone to dwell in God's presence, they need to be changed. And God in His grace, invites His people in and makes a way for them to enjoy His presence. He will set up a ceremony for the priests to enter into the tabernacle and not die (Lev 8:35).

It's like how a wedding ceremony changes the status of the people involved. You go in single, and you come out married. Or think of how a graduation ceremony bestows the diploma or degree on the person graduating. That's what's happening here. God is setting up a ceremony for the priests to be set apart or consecrated to serve in the tabernacle.

So let's look at what is involved in this ceremony...

First, the congregation is assembled. Look at verses 1-4... **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.

By the way, that phrase at the beginning of verse 4, "Moses did as the Lord commanded him" – that's a repeated phrase. Eight times we have that phrase repeated. This chapter parallels the instructions given in Exodus 29 that we mentioned earlier. They are doing all of this just as the Lord commanded.

The first thing we see, then is that this ordination is done before the people. It's not some secret, hidden away thing. These priests are out in the open. There is a veil in the tabernacle – but it's between God and the priests, not the priests and the people. The Levites are just like everyone else. They've just been set aside for a specific purpose.

Second, there is the dress of the priests. They had these particular undergarments and then robes with blue and purple fabrics. These would have been expensive garments, and time-consuming to make. The high priest had these bells and pomegranates on the hems of his robe. He wore this ephod or breast piece that had twelve precious stones with the names of the twelve tribes on them. The idea is that he would do his priestly work in representing the people of the twelve tribes, and they would be on his heart.

He also had these two things – the Urim and the Thummim. Those are just the Hebrew words without translation because we don't know what they were exactly. The best guess seems to be that they were some kind of dice or instrument used to discern the will of the Lord. We don't hear much about them as the Bible unfolds. It seems that the prophets became the more commonly used method of hearing clearly from God.

The high priest might have looked something like this... [\(show picture\)](#)



There are some good guesses at what all of these elements represent, but we're not told explicitly. For example, we're not told what the priests were to wear on their feet. There's nothing about footwear in these laws. Later Jewish writers say that's because, like Moses at the burning bush, they had to remove their sandals to walk on the holy ground of the tabernacle. That sounds cool, but we just don't know for sure.

You may have also heard that the bells on the priests' robes were let the people know if He was struck dead in the presence of God and had to be dragged out. Those stories come from much later – like hundreds of years after Christ, so we're not sure.

While all of these details may seem strange to us, the main idea behind the clothing is that this guy would have been set apart. He is intentionally dressed in a specific way as a sign of His devotion to God and his work as high priest. He is set apart and even his clothing reflects that.

The next element is the anointing of the tabernacle and the alter and utensils and then Aaron himself. This would likely have been olive oil. And it symbolized the purification needed for the high priest and everything he would touch.

Then there were the sacrifices. First was the sin offering of a bull. Aaron and his sons put their hands on the bull, again to symbolize that they deserved to be killed but that this animal would die in their place. They then offered a ram as a burnt offering. And then another ram was sacrificed as an ordination offering. The blood of this second ram was then applied to the right ear, the right thumb, and the big toe of the right foot.

What is going on there?

The ear would have represented that they were to hear and obey the Word of God.

The right thumb represented that their hands needed to be purified to handle the holy things of God.

And the right big toe purified their steps as they walked on holy ground.

It reminds me of the children's song...Oh be careful little ear what you hear. Be careful little thumb what you touch. And be careful big toe where you go. The Father up above is looking down in love, so be careful all of you what you do.

And then, finally, they were to eat particular portions of the sacrifice. That concludes day one of the ceremony. But then, notice that it's not over after day one. Look at

Leviticus 8:33

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.

It's going to take seven days for this ceremony to be completed. Exodus 29 tells us explicitly that they were to do each of these steps with the offerings and the anointing and the blood each day. It's going to take a lot of work to set apart these priests.

So what do we learn from chapter 8?

The Extent of Sin

I think one of the big takeaways from this ceremony is the extent of sin.

Sin is corrosive and its effects are extensive. Sin is universal; it affects everyone. It is destructive and stains us all.

They had to do all of this work to be able to dwell in the presence of God because the priests were affected by sin just like all the other people.

Leviticus 8:34

As has been done today, the LORD has commanded to be done to make atonement for you.

The sin of the priests had to be dealt with if they were going to dwell in God's presence. Their clothes had to be changed. They needed to be purified. The alter had to be sprinkled with blood. Everything they touched needed to be purified. And it had to be done over and over – seven times!

There isn't an exact parallel between the priests of the Old Testament and modern day pastors, but there is some commonality.

Several weeks ago, we had a 'passing the baton' ceremony here. I was installed at the lead pastor, and Mike gave a challenge to me and our church family. And then he had some folks come and put their hands on me and pray for me and my wife. And it was a day of celebration, and made me feel a bit awkward, as I'm sure you could see.

Well, what if, instead of saying nice things about me, these men had come up and said, "Oh Lord, this guy is a great sinner. He needs your mercy. He needs your forgiveness. He has many faults and many weaknesses. He is a big sinner." And they all took turns confessing my sins and failures. And then after praying, they said, "You know, this was a good thing to do! In fact, we're going to do it again tomorrow. And we'll probably need to do it the day after that. And the next one too. Yes, let's do this every day for a week."

If they did all of that, what would that show us? The truth for one. I am a great sinner. And it would remind me and all of us about how extensive and universal sin is. The priests need forgiveness. I need forgiveness. You need forgiveness.

When was the last time you confessed your sins before God? Is that something that you do regularly in your life? If not, is that because you don't sin? Christians should be those marked by humility and confession, and not just to be heard by others and seen as 'authentic' or 'vulnerable.' God knows your sin. We should confess our sins specifically

and intentionally. Sin is universal and it is toxic. It stains all that we touch, and it goes down deep within us.

But if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. When's the last time you confessed your sins to God?

The Need for Holiness

Another related takeaway from this ceremony is the need for holiness. The priests were to be devoted to their work and were set apart for that special purpose. The whole nation of Israel was to be a kingdom of priests, set apart from the world as a city on a hill, showing the world the character of God. They were to live distinctly.

Likewise, the New Testament has repeated calls for the church to be a holy people because we are priests today.

1 Peter 2:4-5, 9

As you come to him [Jesus], a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, **5** you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.

We are called living stones as a spiritual house – the church is now the dwelling place of the Spirit of God. And we are a holy priesthood. You are a royal priesthood. And the word here is plural – y'all are a royal priesthood.

And why has God made us priests? So that we might proclaim the excellencies of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous light. We have been made holy priests so that we might go tell others about the excellencies of Jesus!

So did you know that you're a priest?

You have been made holy – you've been set apart from the world. And now you are to live differently. You are to talk differently. You are to value different things. You are to love and serve differently. You are not to chase the same things that the world chases. So does that describe you?

It was the Scottish pastor Robert Murray M'Cheyne who said to another pastor on his day of ordination. "Study holiness of life. Your whole usefulness depends on this."¹

Another way to say that would be to say – I'm only useful as a pastor if I am holy in my life. The same could be said in a number of different areas...

Deacons – our church family needs your holiness.

Parents – what your children need is your holiness.

Married people – what your spouse needs from you is your holiness.

Single people in our church – what we need from you is your own holiness.

Now, if by this point in the message, you're feeling rather guilty, that's understandable. Sin is toxic and touches all of us. The call for holiness is high. Even these priests fall short so that they have to be purified over and over again. But there is hope!

Look at what happens in chapter nine. They've done this whole week of ceremony, sacrificing bulls and goats, anointing with oil and blood on them. And even after all of that Aaron will now make a series of offerings to the Lord – a burnt offering, a grain offering, a peace offering, and a sin offering.

But first, even after this week of ceremony, he must first make atonement for himself.

And look at what he is commanded to do. **Leviticus 9:7-8**

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 drew near to the altar and killed the calf of the sin offering, which was for himself.

Aaron has to come and be made right with God himself *before* he can make offerings on behalf of the people. And what is he to offer? He is to offer a calf.

The text doesn't make this connection explicit for us, but I think we're not too far out to suggest that this calf that he is to offer would have perhaps reminded him of the golden

¹ SERMON XI. ORDINATION SERMON. At the Ordination of the Rev. P. L. Miller, Wallacetown, Dundee, 1840 on 2 Tim. 4: 1, 2 in his works, Vol. 2 pages 60-70.

calf that he had formed for the people not too long ago. And now, as he puts his hand on this calf, he is symbolically being shown that his sin has been dealt with; he is forgiven. The sin of his past is now behind him. It has been wiped away by the blood.

I wonder what past sins may still haunt some of you? Some of them big things, perhaps. Some of them that feel small. Some sins that feel like they just keep clinging to you, and no matter how hard you try to shake them you just can't seem to break free. Some of you are holding on to the shame and guilt of sins when you know that Christ stands ready to forgive. Sin is toxic and touches all of us. The call for holiness is high.

Brother, sister – won't you receive the forgiveness offered by the blood of Jesus today? It is enough! It's really enough! You don't need to add to it, in fact, you can't add to it!

The blood of Jesus cleanses us from all of our sin. He is the fulfillment of all of these ceremonies and rituals – they all point to Him! It's all about Jesus. The sacrifices and the priesthood – they both point us to the work of Jesus in the place of sinners.

And that brings me back to the question we started with: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*. Who watches the watchmen? Who will intercede for the priest? Every priest is a sinner. And because of that, they too are weak and will die. But one day, a better priest arrives.

The author of Hebrews explains how Jesus is the better and more perfect high priest. He is the one that we were waiting for. I want us to spend some time thinking about what Jesus has done. I'm going to read several passages from Hebrews that will help us understand what Leviticus was pointing to. Listen to what is said... **Hebrews 5:1-4** For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. **2** He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. **3** Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people.

All of the high priests, from Aaron onward, were beset with weakness. They all had to offer sacrifices for their own sin. He goes on...

Hebrews 7:23-25

The former priests were many in number, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office, **24** but he [Jesus] holds his priesthood permanently, because he

continues forever. **25** Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Jesus is not like the other priests of Levi. He has been raised from the dead and now continues forever. So He is able to save to the uttermost – all the way. And He always lives to make intercession. Jesus always, now and forever, lives to make intercession. He takes no breaks; He doesn't need to! He never gets tired. He never regrets saving you. He never thinks – oh, not you again. No, Jesus is today, right now, in heaven interceding before the Father making atonement for our sins.

Hebrews 7:26-27

26 For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. **27** He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself.

Jesus is better than all of the earthly high priests. He had no sin, so He had no need to offer His own sacrifices. And His offering of His own blood saves us to the uttermost.

Hebrews 10:11-14

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. **12** But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, **13** waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. **14** For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

The sacrifices were not able to fully remove the stain of sin because they were not able to change the hearts of the worshipper. The priests were beset with weakness and sin and their work was never done. But now, Jesus has come and has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. All of our sin is covered by the blood of Jesus. So He sits down, having given the perfect sacrifice that will atone for all of our sin all the way down.

There is a fountain filled with blood drawn from Immanuel's veins. And sinners plunged beneath that flood lose all their guilty stains.

And because of the finished work of Jesus, we have access to God. The ceremony of Leviticus 8 and 9 are God's invitation to His people to dwell in His presence. And the amazing thing, the incredible thing, the marvelous thing...is that it worked.

Leviticus 9:22-24

22 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.

The Lord has made a way for His people to enjoy His presence. The glory of the Lord comes and takes up residence in the tabernacle. And the fire comes out and consumed the burnt offering. And the people respond as they always do in the Scriptures to the appearing of the glory of the Lord, with joyful fear. They rejoice because the Lord has come, but they fear the awesome power and justice of a Holy God.

And that should be our response as well. I think an appropriate application of this text is also spelled out for us in Hebrews 10.

Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, **20** by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, **21** and since we have a great priest over the house of God, **22** let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. **23** Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. **24** And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, **25** not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Here is what you should do...

Three things:

1) Draw near to God. Do so with a clear conscience.

Don't you love that? The first application for our lives is – buck up! Have some courage! And come near! You've been invited in because the sacrifice of Jesus and His work as a priest on your behalf is sufficient for you. Yes, the problem is our sin, but Jesus is the answer!

2) Hold fast to the truth of our confession.

Don't let go of the gospel. Keep a tight grip on it. Don't waver from it. Persevere! The one who promises to forgive and to cleanse and to keep you forever is faithful to keep His promises to the end. Other people may let you down, you may let yourself down, but Jesus is faithful.

3) And consider how to help each other love one another and do good works.

Stir one another up towards love. Don't isolate yourselves from one another – come together! And encourage each other! Help each other! Build one another up!

Why? Because we have a great high priest. Our salvation is sure. He saves to the uttermost. No matter what's coming ahead for you or what's in your past – He can save to the uttermost because He is a priest forever. He is not weak or in need of accountability. The other priests fail but Jesus never does.

We can have confidence because Jesus watches the watchmen. He is the great and perfect high priest who never fails, who is not tainted by the stain of sin, and who ever lives to intercede for us.

Let's pray...