

THERE IS POWER IN THE BLOOD

LEVITICUS 17:1-16

**THE ONLY WAY TO BECOME SPIRITUALLY ALIVE AND TO LIVE
THE ABUNDANT LIFE FOREVER IS THROUGH THE PRECIOUS BLOOD OF JESUS.**

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There Is Power in the Blood

Leviticus 17:1-16

This morning, we are going to start a new section in the book of Leviticus. Chapter 17 verse 1 through chapter 26 verse 46 describes regulations that govern the every day lives of the Hebrews. The section is known as the Holiness Code by many commentators. It is God's statement of what His expectations are of His people in their relationship to Him, to the community, and to one another.

It is both interesting and understandable to me why the first subject dealt with is the prohibition of slaughtering animals outside the temple area and the prohibitions of eating blood, or sacrificing blood to demons. One of the big mistakes I think many people make when studying through the Old Testament laws like these is to simply dismiss them as prohibitions given specifically to the Hebrews without pursuing the deeper meaning that still applies to us. In one sense, they are right. These laws were given specifically to the Hebrews. It is part of the laws that govern them. It would be impossible to implement these regulations today because there is no temple and we do not live in a theocratic society where there is no distinction between the social, civic, and religious life. For the Hebrew, like for many modern day Muslims, there was no separation between the civil and the religious. Further, for Christians, Jesus has fulfilled the law on our behalf. He has become the ultimate sacrifice for us once for all.

But it is clear that God still demands that we live holy lives, that we pursue holiness, and that we become the men and women He has created us and redeemed us to be. So how can we use these laws? I think that we need to find the heart and holiness of God in these commands that do apply to us. I think that if we try and state the prohibitions in the positive rather than the negative, we may find the attitudes and behaviors God wants from us. For example, if the command says, "Thou shall not commit murder," we can state the positive by saying the God is the creator of life. As part of his holy society, we ought to be about the business of bringing life to people. We can do that practically in several ways. Since we know people who have not received Jesus as Lord and Savior are physically alive but spiritually dead, we can bring life to them by evangelizing them. That can bring life. We can bring life and fulfill the commandment; "Thou shall not steal," by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the sick, and taking care of people in our midst.

I said that today's passage is both interesting and understandable in starting out the section known as The Holiness Code. It deals specifically with blood. To be sure this has to do with the blood of animals, but for Christians, it doesn't take much of an imagination to jump to the most precious blood in all of history, the precious blood of Jesus. The Jews held a special, reverential, and mystical view of blood. We Christians have lost that special, reverential, and mystical view of blood. And because we have, we have forgotten how Jesus brought about our salvation and redemption.

We have replaced true reverence, belief, and faith with religious talk. Let give you an example of how even our children learn to use hypocritical religious language. One day, I was visiting a deacon and his wife. We were sitting on the back patio enjoying the day. All of a sudden, out of the bushes came the deacon's son, yelling excitedly, waving a dead rat above his head. He was yelling, "Don't be afraid mom. It's dead. We beat him and bashed him and thumped him good until "until he caught sight of me sitting there. All of a sudden, in mid sentence, he bowed his head and in his most reverent voice finished the sentence, "until God called him home."

It is fitting for us to start this section by recalling how it is that God brought about our salvation, our redemption, our healing, and our wholeness. We were purchased and set free by the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

I definitely want to explain what these passages meant to Hebrews, particularly while living in the wilderness. But I would like for us to take some time and think about what this means for us.

Therefore, the main idea for this morning's text is this. **THE ONLY WAY TO BECOME SPIRITUALLY ALIVE AND TO LIVE THE ABUNDANT LIFE FOREVER IS THROUGH THE PRECIOUS BLOOD OF JESUS.** In other words, while studying through this morning's text, we can see the emotion and passion of God as He talks to Moses about blood. We can come to appreciate in a more profound way what Jesus did for us on the cross. When I was a child, Protestant hymnals were filled with songs about the blood of Jesus. Roman Catholics used to talk about the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Sacred Marks of Jesus. For some reason, these themes have dropped out of daily and weekly themes. Many Protestant hymnals no longer print songs about the blood of Jesus. Thankfully the hymnals we use still contain many of these hymns.

I. GRATITUDE FOR LIFE (VS 1-6)

In Order To Enter The Abundant Life, We Must Learn To Live With Continual Thanksgiving.

Verses 1-6 remind us that we ought to remember to express gratitude for life when contemplating the blood of Jesus. Instead of complaining about things that we encounter in life, we need to remember this principle. **IN ORDER TO ENTER THE ABUNDANT LIFE, WE MUST LEARN TO LIVE WITH CONTINUAL THANKSGIVING.**

A. THE GIFT OF LIFE (1-2)

Verses 1-2 are to remind us that God has given us the gift of life. God the Father has given us life through creation. God the Son has given us new life through His death and resurrection. In order for us to get the full force of this passage, we have to remind ourselves of the context. They have been set free for about one year at this point from their slavery in Egypt. God redeemed them, set them free, and gathered them together as a people around Himself in the wilderness. And when giving Moses these commands, you will notice that He uses His personal covenant Name here. Our Bibles write it as LORD with all capitals. This is God's personal Name in Hebrew, Jehovah or Yahweh, whichever you are used to.

Secondly, we must remember how God saved them. God had the Hebrews smear the blood of a lamb on the doorposts of their houses. Then He sent the Angel of Death throughout the land of Egypt. The Angel passed over the houses with the blood on them but killed the firstborn in every Egyptian household. So blood redemption would still be fresh in their minds. But certainly the blood stories from earlier in their history were being told over and over again. Back in the beginning, Cain killed his brother Abel. God called out to Abel:

"¹⁰... What have you done? Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10 / NIV).

After the flood God approached Noah saying:

"⁴But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it. ⁵And for your lifeblood I will surely demand an accounting. I will demand an accounting from every animal. And from each man, too, I will demand an accounting for the life of his fellow man. ⁶Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man" (Genesis 9:4-6 / NIV).

The word used describing life in that passage is the Hebrew word *nephesh*. It literally means *soul*. It is the same word used later in this passage used to describe the life that is in the blood.

And just to bring things to the early church after the death and resurrection of Christ, the Jerusalem Council gave this command to all the new converts to Christianity who were not Jews:

"²⁸It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: ²⁹You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things" (Acts 15:28-29 / NIV).

There is something about blood that God wants to remain sacred in our thinking.

Next, there is no distinction in the Hebrew thought patterns between the sacred and the secular. All of life, every moment of it is sacred. We have become very efficient at separating our religious life from our every day life. However, for the Hebrews, there was no separation. Now to be sure, we live in a very diverse society and it is impossible to legislate morality, even though there are Muslim communities throughout the world that try this. Christians have tried to do this during the crusades and there are modern day Christians that try to do this politically. However, holiness and morality cannot be legislated.

Legalism is a substitute for true holiness. The reason is that people who are legalistic tend to turn salvation and holiness into a system by which they become right with God based on how well they are able to keep the rules. Again this is the mistake of thinking we are somehow good, worthy, and moral. The truth is that the Hebrews were saved by grace through faith. We are saved today by grace through faith. Legalists forget that it is only the blood of Jesus that saves us and makes us right with God. The pursuit of holy living is our expression of gratitude for God's salvation and the pursuit of holiness is a joint partnership between the Holy Spirit and us.

Finally, in this passage you will notice that the Israelite community is addressed 9 times. Foreigners living in the community are also included in these laws. In this passage they are also addressed 5 times.

B. RECEIVING THE GIFT OF LIFE (3-4)

The passage is broken up by the phrase "cut off" or "be held responsible." I will explain the meaning of those phrases as we move into this next section. In verses 3-6 we are instructed how to receive the gift of life. Now there is some disagreement as to what this exactly describes. If you look at your NIV Bibles, verse 3 describes this as a sacrifice. The NASB translates the word slaughter. The people who view this as the description of a sacrifice mark off verses 3-9 as one continuous section.

You can see from your outlines that I have chosen not to view this as a sacrifice. I have taken verses 3-4 as the description of the normal slaughtering of an animal for food. I would not argue this, because I can see the reasoning for both views. I take this position because I think the passage is organized according to the phrase "be cut off." In verse 16 the phrase becomes "be held responsible."

At this time it is important to review some of what we studied already.

When a person had a skin disease that made him unclean, he was cut off from social and religious relationships. He was sent to live outside the camp until the condition cleared up and he was once again declared to be clean by the priest. At the Day of Atonement ceremony, the scapegoat was sent outside the camp. The word *karath* in Hebrew literally means *to cut*. It is used of making an agreement. When God made a covenant with Abraham and others, the language used is that He cut a covenant with Abraham. The circumcision ceremony is described as a cutting of the foreskin.

In talking about punishment the phrase to be cut off can mean to be expelled from the community and it can mean to be put to death. In other words, in expulsion, the person is being cut out of God's covenant with Israel. The expelled Jew now becomes like a foreigner who is cut off from all the promises. In describing execution, it is like cutting one off from life. I'm not sure which is meant here. But if we keep in mind that they are in the middle of the wilderness where

enemies and wild animals lurk, their only protection is having God in the camp. To be sent away from the camp would be the same as receiving the death sentence. At the very least it is being alienated from God and His people.

In verse 16, the phrase held responsible literally means to bear the consequences. The language is exactly like what purpose the scapegoat serves. The scapegoat bears all the guilt, sin, and alienation of the offenders. But in this case, the violator must carry his own consequences of the sin he has committed. Even if we cannot decide if this all refers to expulsion from the community or death, we can see that God takes these commands very seriously.

What I think is happening in these 2 verses is that when a person wanted to take an animal and slaughter it for food, they had to bring it to the worship area. Now keep in mind, they were being fed manna from heaven everyday by God. There would be very limited opportunities for them to eat meat. When they finally settle in the land, they would be located sometimes days from reaching the temple in Jerusalem. So in Deuteronomy, Moses emends the rule:

²⁰When the LORD your God has enlarged your territory as he promised you, and you crave meat and say, 'I would like some meat,' then you may eat as much of it as you want. ²¹If the place where the LORD your God chooses to put his Name is too far away from you, you may slaughter animals from the herds and flocks the LORD has given you, as I have commanded you, and in your own towns you may eat as much of them as you want" (Deuteronomy 12:20-21 / NIV).

Here in the wilderness God had to teach them how to be thankful for everything. We know that was not an easy task because many died on the way to the Promised Land for their lack of thankfulness. In bringing the animal to the worship area, they were acknowledging that this animal was a gift from God. It would be good for us to learn to be thankful for everything we have and we need to receive all of life as a gift from God.

A good practice that Jews and Christians have adopted over the years is to pray before meals. I think it is a great reminder that even though we have worked to earn money, purchased the food, and cooked it, in reality, the food we eat is a gift from God. Unfortunately, like a lot of good ideas, I think that we sometimes do this out of habit, and that really we don't look at the gift of God. Rather we look at the food as being provided by our hard work. I think that one of the attitudes that I have developed over the years is genuine gratitude to God for everything. I'm sure there may be times when I get something and mistakenly think that I deserved it. But in general I don't think I fall into that wrong thinking much.

Personally, I am not diligent about praying before meals. I pray when I'm with others that pray, but when I'm by myself, I generally don't. It's not that I have any great theological reason why I don't. Maybe it's time for me to rethink my attitude about my personal prayer before meals. If we pray before meals or if we don't pray before meals, we must absolutely develop personalities of gratefulness for the food we eat. If we ever catch ourselves thinking that we are eating or enjoying anything that we have purchased, and coming to believe for one second that we deserve it because we worked hard for it, we are in danger of being ungrateful. In order to receive gifts, we must develop grateful dispositions. Every day, every hour, every moment is to be lived in being grateful to God for everything.

C. SHARING THE GIFT OF LIFE (5-6)

Verses 5-6 portray the sharing of the gift of life. We have already described the fellowship offering. The worshiper would slaughter the animal, have the blood sprinkled on the altar, burn up the fatty portions along with the internal organs on the altar as a sacrifice to God. The priest would receive his portion of the meat, and the worshiper would take the rest home and share the rest in a meal with his or her family and friends. If we were to think about this for a moment and make it applicable to us, can you see how Jesus has given us life through His blood? We received

life when we came to Jesus in faith and allowed God to apply the blood of Jesus to our sinful and rebellious lives. Shouldn't the grateful response be to dedicate ourselves to living for Christ and sharing the gift of life with others by sharing the gospel message? We should constantly ask ourselves when the last time we shared the gospel with someone was. Further, when it comes to not stealing or anything like that, shouldn't we be eagerly sharing our time, money, energy, and resources with others since all we have really belongs to God? Developing attitudes of constant thanksgiving are critical because **IN ORDER TO ENTER THE ABUNDANT LIFE, WE MUST LEARN TO LIVE WITH CONTINUAL THANKSGIVING.**

II. ACKNOWLEDGING THE GIVER OF LIFE (VS 7-12)

Jesus Said That He Was The Only Way To Eternal Life. We Are Not To Live Superstitiously.

So in order to teach them thanksgiving, God had them bring animals for food to the tabernacle area to remind them who the Giver of life is. Verses 7-12 are meant to teach them how to acknowledge the Giver of life. **JESUS SAID THAT HE WAS THE ONLY WAY TO ETERNAL LIFE. WE ARE NOT TO LIVE SUPERSTISIOUSLY.**

We are often critical of the Hebrews for falling into idolatry when God was living and working in their midst. But how often have we seen God work in our lives and in our midst? Yet we continue to chase after the idols of our world, which are fame, success, money, sex, gratification of all sorts, etc.

A. CHOOSING LIFE (7-9)

Verses 7-9 warn the Israelites to choose life. They had just left Egypt where the Egyptians sacrificed goats to idols. The word in verse 7 that refers to goat idols is *sair*. Goat demons were rumored to live in the wilderness areas. During the Day of Atonement ceremony, they saw the priest send the scapegoat out into the wilderness. All the people who occupied The Promised Land that the Hebrews were headed for worshiped idols. It would be very tempting for them to pick up their neighbors' idolatry views. God wanted to make sure they would not be tempted so He set up the tabernacle area as the only legitimate place to offer up a sacrifice. Any sacrifice offered by the Israelites or anyone living among them was to be offered up to Jehovah alone.

Another interesting thing about worshiping false gods is that in almost every case, sexual immorality goes along with it. The NIV says they should not prostitute themselves by worshiping other gods. The NASB says they should not play the harlot. The King James says they should not go whoring after these false gods. God views His relationship with His people as a marriage. Worshiping false gods is being adulterous to God. The word used here for prostitute is *zanah*. It can be used to describe a prostitute in general or male and female prostitutes that work in the cult temples. All the neighbors that surrounded Israel and occupied The Promised Land with them worshiped idols and part of their worship was to engage temple prostitutes. Some even sacrificed their children to these false gods.

I don't think it takes much of an explanation to compare the false gods of these people with the false gods our culture worships. As a culture, we are sexually immoral and we worship worldly things like power, wealth, etc. In addition, we sacrifice one million unborn babies to these gods every year.

God was forcing the Israelites to make a choice to live by bringing all sacrifices only to Him at only at His designated place. If they offered the sacrifice to any other god, at any other place, or in any other way, they were to be cut off.

We know that the Hebrews made choices right from the beginning. When things didn't go their way, they had Aaron build a golden calf. They worshiped it, got drunk and acted out sexually. Please, take some time to think about how even we as God's children have been seduced by the gods of this world. We know the Hebrews did pick up the bad habits of their neighbors once they entered The Promised Land. They ended up worshiping false gods, acting out sexually, oppressing one another, and some even sacrificed their children. God kicked them out of the land by having other nations come in and destroy them.

I can see that in my thoughts and attitudes, I have become desensitized to sin around me. I need to constantly make a choice to remain pure, to not adopt the lies of our culture, and to be theologically correct, not politically correct. It is a constant battle to reject the values of our culture since some of them sound so noble. But if you want to know how noble our society is, think about how we reject God's values, how we worship money, power, and success. Think about how sexually immoral our culture is and how we oppress the less fortunate. And top it off with the execution of one million unborn babies each year. We live in a godless society. To remain untainted is going to be real hard work, but God is calling us to make a choice. We must reject the world and bring everything before Him to evaluate.

B. UNDERSTANDING LIFE (10-12)

Verses 10-12 portray an understanding of life. Since I want to take a little different direction for these two verses, let me say something about superstitious living. Why would the Hebrews be tempted to worship other gods in the behaviors of sacrificing to idols, drinking blood, or becoming sexually immoral? In one word, "fear". When Christians start to follow and adopt the world's values, it's because we are afraid. Acting superstitiously is in reality hedging our bets. We feel, God will take care of some stuff, but I'm not sure if He is really interested in doing this or that for me. Even further, I don't think God will do this for me.

The Israelites were afraid and many wanted a back up plan in case God could not or would not come through. So if they found themselves in a situation where God would not or could not come through, they wanted to be in a good relationship with these false gods who perhaps could help them when God didn't. We may chuckle at that because it seems so absurd. But when we chase after money, fame, power, influence, and material things, we are really saying that we don't trust that God will care for us and provide for us. When we act out sexually we are saying that we don't trust God will satisfy our desires.

Now back to verses 10-12. God forbade anyone living in His camp to eat blood. Many ancient cultures and indeed many modern cultures and religions believe that they can gain supernatural power by drinking the blood of animals or humans. Again that is easy to identify as idolatry.

However, I want us to focus in on verse 11. The NIV reads like this:

"¹¹For 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" (Leviticus 17:11 / NIV).

In this verse, God states one of the main reasons that He has set blood apart as sacred. Please follow this closely because this is one of the places that God gives a reason for His command. The word translated as life in the Hebrew is *nephesh*. It means life, but with the nuance of soul. In the Hebrew the first part of the verse reads like this, "For the soul of the flesh is in the blood." In other words, two things are true. First of all, we are a combination of body and soul. Secondly, the blood is what carries life to every part of the body. The blood makes the body a living soul. Blood represents life. Then God goes on to say that because we are born sinners, and because we personally rebel and disobey God, we deserve to die. In other words, we deserve to have the souls drained out of our bodies. In order to provide a way in which we can

be brought into a relationship with Him, God allowed the blood of Jesus to be poured out and shed on the ground.

The Hebrews had to understand that they deserved to be cut off from God. They deserved to have the life sucked right out of them. But in order to provide a way in which they could repair their damaged relationship with God, God provided them with the sacrificial system by which He allowed to lifeblood of an animal to be spilled out instead of theirs. Blood is sacred because it is the way in which God chose to cover Israel's sins and to forgive all their impurities and wickedness. Blood is sacred because God set it apart for this purpose only. For Christians, we can see that the blood of Jesus is the most powerful and valuable substance in the entire history of human being. Without reading too much into the text, we can see that by placing such a high value on blood that He was preparing humanity to understand the power and value of what Jesus did on the cross.

In the rejection of the postmodern cultural idea that all religions are equal and that they have equal value, I am not willing to hedge my bet. I know clearly that I deserve to have the lifeblood sucked right out of me. I know that I deserve to spend an eternity in hell separated and alienated from God for an eternity. And I also want to confess my belief that it is only by the shed blood of Jesus that can make up the difference in my life, cleanse me of all my sin, and clean me up for all my wickedness.

I think that I will go with what Jesus said. **JESUS SAID THAT HE WAS THE ONLY WAY TO ETERNAL LIFE. WE ARE NOT TO LIVE SUPERSTITIOUSLY.**

III. RULES FOR LIFE (VS 13-16)

The Blood Of Jesus Only Covers Those Who Live According To His Commands.

In verses 13-16 God gives them rules for life. In other words **THE BLOOD OF JESUS ONLY COVERS THOSE WHO LIVE ACCORDING TO HIS COMMANDS.** Our culture values individual thought and creativity. We are a culture that feels free to make up our own rules for living and for determining what is right and wrong. But the point is that God has given us very specific instructions regarding life.

A. RULES FOR HUNTING (13-14)

In verses 13-14, God gives rules for hunting and how to handle the blood. If the Hebrew was hunting and killed an animal, he or she was required to butcher the animal in a way in which he or she would ensure to drain out all the blood. The blood was to be poured out all on the ground, and then covered with dirt. Again, God wants to ensure the Israelites understand that blood is holy. It is sacred and to be treated as sacred.

B. RULES FOR ROAD KILL (15-16)

If you think that God isn't serious about this theme, look at verses 15-16. He even lays down rules for road kill. Notice that the Hebrew is allowed to butcher and eat a dead animal. However, she must take the proper precautions in order to pay proper respect to the blood. She will be considered unclean until evening. She must bathe and wash her clothes. If she doesn't, she will be held responsible. I mentioned this already, but the words held responsible match the words used to describe the mission of the scapegoat in the Day of Atonement ceremony. If the

person does not give the respect due as designed by God, she will bear the consequences of her own sin. She will be alienated from God and risk permanent alienation from God.

We are without a doubt saved by grace through faith. But a life of faith is a life dedicated to serving and loving God by keeping His commands. Most of us are more afraid of looking bad in our friends' or families' eyes than we are in disobeying God. That should never be. I think that we can see from this passage and from other passages in the Bible that **THE BLOOD OF JESUS ONLY COVERS THOSE WHO LIVE ACCORDING TO HIS COMMANDS.** Jesus made it very clear that the ones who love Him are the ones who obey Him.

IV. EPILOGUE

I'm hoping that as we study through passages like this, we will gain a new appreciation for the blood Jesus spilled out at Calvary for us. Here is the truth. **THE ONLY WAY TO BECOME SPIRITUALLY ALIVE AND TO LIVE THE ABUNDANT LIFE FOREVER IS THROUGH THE PRECIOUS BLOOD OF JESUS.**

Martin Luther, the great reformation theologian used to tell this story about a dream he had in which he stood before God Himself on the Judgment Day:

"Satan was right there to accuse him. When Satan opened his books full of accusations, he pointed to transgression after transgression of which Luther was guilty. As the proceedings went on, Luther's heart sunk in despair. Then he remembered the cross of Christ – and turning upon Satan, he said, 'There is one entry which you have not made, Satan.' The Devil retorted, 'What is that?'

And Luther answered, 'It is this – the blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanseth us from all sins.'"

I just want to leave us with this thought. There is no gift I could ever give to God that would demonstrate my love and gratitude for Him. Jesus said that the only way we can demonstrate our love for Him is to obey His commands. I need to focus my life on obeying Jesus, and all His commands. How about you? We are called to live holy lives because Jesus died to make us holy.