

LEVITICUS: THE WAY TO WHOLENESS

by Ray C. Stedman

Have you ever embarked on a journey through the Bible, only to get bogged down in the book of Leviticus? You go through Genesis in fine style, learning about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the things that happened to them. Then you get into Exodus where you have such dramatic incidents as Moses' confrontation with Pharaoh in the court of Egypt, the opening of the Red Sea, and the giving of the Law. Then you start into Leviticus. After you have plodded through the offerings you get into the priesthood, the ceremonies, all the restrictions of diet and specifications for the dress of the high priest, and various other strange functions and feasts. About that time, your interest evaporates, you run out of gas, and that is the end of your reading through the Bible. Isn't that right?

I know this book is a bit difficult. It does appear to be very dry. It could be called "the dryness barrier," but if you can penetrate the dryness barrier, you will find the Bible a fascinating book indeed to read all the way through.

Leviticus reminds me of visiting a factory without a guide. When I first came to this area, I went to San Francisco where a friend of mine had a large steel products factory. I went into the factory to see what they were doing. My friend was busy at the moment and couldn't come with me, so I went by myself. My first impression as I stepped into the huge building was one of tremendous clamor. The noise was fantastic! Great machines were pounding away, big trip hammers were smashing down, and other machines were grinding up metal and spitting out parts. I couldn't even hear myself think. My second impression was of mass confusion. Nobody seemed to know what they were doing. Men were running here and there, paying no attention to one another, some getting in the way of others, and the machines were all working away with no apparent harmony or connection at all.

Then my friend joined me and began to take me through the plant. First, he showed me one area and explained what they were doing there, and then a certain machine and what it did. We continued in this way until we ended up in the shipping department. When I saw the final product, I understood the factory. It all made perfect sense. I was no longer confused.

This is what you may experience with the book of Leviticus. You come into it and find many strange ceremonies and sacrifices, many odd restrictions, diet problems, and various other difficulties which all seem to be so meaningless. But then you discover that they have a very complex, intricately articulated relationship moving toward a purposeful end. That end is stated clearly in this book, and if you want to understand Leviticus, one verse right near the center of the book will help you:

You shall be holy to me; for I the LORD am holy, and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine. (Lev. 20:26)

That is the purpose of the book of Leviticus. God is saying to these people of Israel, "I have separated you from all the nations around you in order that you might be mine." When we Christians read this, we must understand that we are the people of God today. What God said to Israel he also says to us, for in the new relationship we have in Jesus Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile; there is but one man, one body in Christ. The promises which appear in picture form in the Old Testament belong also to us who live this side of the cross.

Perhaps you were turned off right away by the word "holy" in this passage. I don't know what you think "holy" means, but you probably read into it things from your past experience which make it unpalatable to you. Most of us associate it with some kind of grimness. We think "holy" people are those who look as if they have been steeped in vinegar or soaked in embalming fluid. I used to think of the word that way, and holiness was not attractive to me at all. It repelled me. But I ran across a verse in Scripture which spoke of "the beauty of holiness," (Ps. 29:2, KJV) and I asked myself, "What in the world is beautiful about holiness?" When I

found out, I had to agree that holiness is indeed a beautiful thing.

But most of us react initially to this word as did the little girl who happened to see a mule looking over the fence at her. She had never seen a mule before, and she said to it, "I don't know what you are, but you must be a Christian -- you look just like Grandpa." Others associate it with strangeness, apartness, as though holy people are weird, peculiar individuals who live out in the desert somewhere, remote from the rest of us. They are "different."

But the Bible itself suggests none of these ideas concerning holiness. If you want to get at the meaning of this word, you must go back to its original root. This word is derived from the same root from which a very attractive English word comes. This word is wholeness. So holiness means wholeness, being complete. And if you read wholeness in place of holiness everywhere you find it in the Bible, you will be much closer to what the writers meant. We all know what wholeness is. It is to have together all the parts which were intended to be there, and to have them functioning as they were intended to function.

That is what God is talking about. He says to this people, "you shall be whole, because I am whole." God is complete; he is perfect. There is no blemish in God; he lives in harmony with himself. He is a beautiful person. He is absolutely what a person ought to be. He is filled with joy and love and peace. He lives in wholeness. And he looks at us in our brokenness and says to us, "You too, shall be whole."

That word wholeness has power to awaken desire within us. We long to be whole people. Don't you? Don't you want to be what God made you to be, with all the ingredients of your personality expressed in balance? That is what the book of Leviticus is all about. In fact, so is the whole Bible.

We are so aware of our own brokenness, of our lack of wholeness. We know how much we hurt ourselves and each other. We are aware of our inability to cope with life. We sometimes put up a big facade and try to bluff our way through as though we are able to handle anything. But inside, half the time, we are running scared. That is a mark of our lack of wholeness. We also know our diabolical power to irritate, to enrage, and to inflame others -- and ourselves. But this great statement in Leviticus 20:26 declares that God knows all about human brokenness and hurt. He knows that we are that way. He sees this in sharp contrast to his own wholeness. And his love reaches out and says to us, "You shall be whole; for I am whole. That is my purpose," he declares to his people.

Man has lost his way. He was made in the image and likeness of God. When man first came from the hand of God, he was whole. Adam functioned as God intended man to function. He was functioning in the image and the likeness of God. But now we have lost that likeness. We still have the image, but the likeness is gone. T.S. Eliot says,

All our knowledge brings us only closer to our ignorance,
And our ignorance brings us closer to death.
But closeness to death does not bring us closer to God.

And then he asks this question:

Where is the life we have lost in living?

Isn't that the question so many millions are asking today? Where is the life I have lost in trying to live? Why don't I know the way out? How come I am so up-tight, so hurting, so broken?

God determines to heal man's brokenness and to make man whole again. And he knows how to do it -- he says so: "I have separated you from the peoples." (Lev. 20:24) It is a process of separation. The reason we are so broken is that we are involved in a broken race. Our attitudes are wrong. Our vision of life is twisted and distorted. We believe illusions, take them to be facts, and act upon them. We are following phantoms and fantasies and delusions. So God must separate us. He has to break us loose from conformity to the thought patterns and attitudes and reactions of those around us. He has to deliver us from all that, straighten out our thinking, set our minds and hearts aright, and correct our tangled, fouled relationships.

This is a process which takes infinite patience and love, because it is voluntary -- God never forces us into it. It can occur only to those who trust God enough to respond to his love. When I was a boy in my early teens, I once tried to entice a female deer out of a thicket into a little clearing to get her to take an apple from my hand and eat it. She was a wild doe, and very much afraid. She saw the apple and obviously wanted to come and take it. She would venture a few steps toward me, but then would become frightened and retreat into the woods. Then she would come out again, stand still and look around for a minute, then start grazing as though indifferent. I stood perfectly still, holding out the apple. She would come a bit closer -- then a twig would snap and she would disappear back into the bushes.

Now, it was perfectly possible for her all along, if only she had known it, simply to walk right up and grab the apple and start eating it. I would not have hurt her at all. I wouldn't have tried to capture her nor do anything else to her. But she didn't know that. I was there a long time, at least half an hour, trying to get her to come out of the woods. Finally, she came about halfway toward me and stood there with her neck stretched out, trying to muster the courage to reach for that apple. Just as I thought she was going to do it, a car passed nearby and she was gone. I had to eat the apple myself. That strikes me as such an apt picture of what God contends with in reaching out toward man. It takes infinite patience and love to impart the necessary understanding to fearful, hurting men and women like us.

That is why God gave us his book. He starts in kindergarten with us. He starts with pictures and shadows, with visual aids, in order to show us what he is going to do some day. All the ceremonies and offerings of the Old Testament are shadows and pictures of Jesus Christ. So Christ is here in the book of Leviticus. God shows us, through his people Israel, his way of healing human hurt. This is God's way to wholeness.

"Well," someone might say, "I thought Jesus Christ was God's way to wholeness." That is exactly true. He is. But his availability is not limited to us, you see. Men and women before the cross were also hurting and broken and fragmented, just as we are. They needed Christ also and he was available to them. The way they saw him was through these pictures. Thus, as they understood what these pictures depict, and laid hold of that, they came to the same joy and peace that we have.

If you do not believe that, read the Psalms and see how much David understood of the presence and the grace of God in his life. He was a man who was healed by God. He came to understand that God was his strength and his very life, and that God could meet every need of his heart and work out all the tangled relationships in his family and in his personal life. All this is reflected in the Psalms he wrote.

Leviticus, then, is full of Christ. All the sacrifices, the rituals, and the ceremonies pictorially describe Jesus Christ and his work, and how he was available to men and women then. And as we read this book from our vantage on this side of the cross, we will learn a great deal about how Jesus Christ can meet our needs now. Therefore, this is not just a historical book. It isn't just for "news." It is a tremendously practical manual on how to live as a Christian.

But there is even more: when you read the book of Leviticus and understand what it is saying, it will help you to understand yourself. You see, in Jesus Christ God took upon himself the form of man. Jesus came to this earth, God in the flesh, and dwelt among us as man -- man as God intends man to be. He came to where we are. And everything that he was and did as man is what we also are or can be. So, as you read this book, you will understand more about yourself, and about what your great, crying needs are, and about how you operate.

We are a mystery to ourselves. We don't even understand how we think. We are baffled by our own experience. Don't you feel that way? Remember the way Paul expresses this in Romans: "The good things that I want to do I cannot do; and the evil things that I don't want to do are what I do." (Rom. 7:19) This is a picture of life. It is a very penetrating, probing analysis of what is going on in your life and mine. This is what the book of Leviticus shows us -- the reasons why, the understanding of ourselves. It is designed to meet the hurt of man, just where we are. And as we learn how to accept the healing of God, it will show us what we can be.

Because that is true the book falls into two basic divisions. The first part speaks to man's need. It reveals

where we are as people, and sets forth God's answer to that need. The second part reveals what God expects from us in response. First comes God's provision, and then the performance which results from that provision.

In the first sixteen chapters, there are four elements which set forth man's need and reveal what we are like. The first is a series of five offerings. I am sure that God gave us five fingers on each hand so that we can remember the five offerings. First is the burnt offering, then the meal offering, the peace offering, the sin offering, and finally the trespass offering. These are all pictures of what Jesus Christ does for us, but they are also pictures of the fundamental needs of human life. They speak of the two essentials for human existence -- love and responsibility.

We can never be complete persons if we are not loved, nor if we do not love. Love is an absolutely essential ingredient of life. Nothing harms or distorts or disfigures or blasts a person more than to deny him love. But there is another essential, too. In order to be whole, in order to have self-respect and a feeling of worth, we must have a sense of responsibility. We must be able to accomplish what is worthwhile. So, we need both: love and responsibility.

The second element in these chapters is a priesthood. This priesthood is provided to help us handle the emotional and intellectual problems we face in trying to work out the relationships involving love and responsibility. We constantly run into emotional and intellectual problems; we get upset, turned off, or turned on, excited or depressed -- we have all kinds of emotional problems. And we get puzzled and bewildered, baffled and uncertain as to what to do -- all kinds of intellectual problems. So, a priesthood is provided to help us with these problems.

In the Old Testament this priesthood was the sons of Levi. That is where Leviticus got its name. But for us, the priesthood is not only Jesus Christ, our Lord and High Priest to whom we can freely come, but it is also each other. In the body of Christ we are all made priests, one to another. (1 Peter 2:5) That is why we need each other. Basically and fundamentally we cannot get along without each other, because we have these problems with which we must have help.

The third element is the revelation of a standard by which we can tell the difference between the true and the false, the phony and the real, the helpful and the hurtful -- between death and life. Isn't it strange that man in his natural condition cannot tell the difference? That is why there are thousands and thousands of people who are doing things which they think are helpful but which end up to be very hurtful -- and they do not understand why! When the results begin to come in they cry out, "What happened, what has gone wrong? Why am I in a mess like this?" It is because they could not tell the difference. So, a God of love tells us the difference. He sets forth a standard by which we can distinguish between that which is essentially hurtful and that which will actually help us.

Finally in this first section there is an opportunity to respond -- voluntarily. We need that, too. God never imposes his will upon any of us. We constantly need help. We need to be brought to a place where we can recognize this. Then we have to answer in some way; we must give a response. This opportunity was provided in the Day of Atonement. If, when we thoroughly understand our need and God's provision to meet it, we then say "No" to him he will let us do so. We might never return to that point again. But God always gives us a long period of preparation in which he leads us into a full understanding before our rejection of him can become final.

The second section of the book, chapters seventeen through twenty-seven, describes the performance which is possible on the basis of the provision God has made, the kind of a life that can be lived on this basis. But notice the order! God never mentions performance to us until he has fully discussed provision. He never speaks about our behavior until he has made clear the power by which we are to act.

I must admit that we in the church often get this backwards. And a great deal of damage has been done to people by insisting that they act according to a certain behavior pattern without giving them any understanding of the power by which to do so. There are times when, in all sincerity and because the Scriptures are not understood very well, people are taught that they must live up to a certain standard before God will accept

them; that they must produce, come through, or God won't love them. That is totally wrong! That is the lie of Satan That is deadly legalism -- yet we have all had our part in it.

But that is what God is here to correct. He never does that. He always helps us first, and once we understand the basis upon which to act, then he sets forth for us the pattern, the standard of performance.

Here again there are four elements. First, there is a need to understand the basis for wholeness. This basis is blood. Anyone who has read the Old Testament knows that it is full of blood. There are all these strange sacrifices, thousands of them offered every year -- bulls and calves and goats and sheep and birds of all kinds, offered up all the time -- a veritable river of blood flowing through the Old Testament. Many people, looking at this, say, "Christianity is nothing but a slaughterhouse religion."

Why all this bloodshed? Because, by this means God is trying to impress us with a fundamental fact. He is telling us that the issues of our life run very deep, that they can be solved only by a death, that the basis for wholeness is a life given up, that we will never make it merely on the basis of our natural life. We must somehow discover a new kind of life. And we have to give up the old before we can have the new! That is what he is telling us. We can't have both! The struggle of the Christian life is that we keep trying to hang on to the old way of life and refuse to accept the new. This is what the blood speaks of.

The second element is the practice of love in all the relationships of life. The Bible is intensely practical. It is not nearly so concerned about what you do in the temple as about what you do in the home as a result of having been to the temple. So this book goes into the relationships within the family, among friends, and with society in general. It shows us exactly the kind of love relationship that God makes possible for us in all these areas.

The third element in this last section is the enjoyment of the presence and power of God -- man in relationship to God, worshipping God, and turned on by a living, exciting God! We can learn here what the temple portrays about our relationship to God and about how to think of him. The most important thing in life is to know the living God who is behind all things!

The last element is an awareness of the issues at stake and their importance; of how our entire life stands in the balance at this very point, and a decision is expected of us. There is a choice that we can make. And God brings us finally to that very place and helps us to see that in the final analysis it is entirely up to us to choose. God never says, "I'm going to make you leave your misery." Rather, he says, "If you prefer being broken and don't want to be healed, you can stay right where you are. But if you want life, then this is what is ahead." God never forces his will upon us. But he sets the choice before us, makes it very clear, and then expects a response on the basis that he has given.

In closing, we should return to our key verse: "You shall be whole because I am whole, and therefore I am separating you from the peoples in order that you should be mine." That, finally, is what God is aiming at. He wants us to be his. Here the verb tense becomes very interesting. In our English text, this is in the future tense: "you shall be mine." But the Hebrew has a strange usage, very different from English. You can put all three tenses in one word, and that is what we have here. God is saying, "You were mine, you are mine, you shall be mine." "Mine," he says, that's all: "Mine!" It includes all the tenses of life -- the past, the present, and the future.

If you pursue this idea through the Bible, you can see how true it is. Many of you know from your own experience that after you became a Christian, became God's, you realized that there was a sense in which you had belonged to him all along. Paul, the apostle, says, "He [God] set me apart before I was born." (Gal. 1:15) And yet he was a blustering, threatening enemy of Christianity until his experience on the road to Damascus. But, looking back, he knew that he had been God's all along. "You are mine," God says. "Even though you are an enemy, even though you are against me, hostile to me, and fighting me, you are MINE!"

Then, in the present tense, God looks at us in our brokenness, our hurting condition, our fragmented, flawed, imperfect state, and he puts his hand upon us and says, "You are mine, right now, just the way you are. You belong to me"

A friend of mine told a story recently of a true incident which I think is so illustrative of this. He told of a children's service at a rescue mission in a midwestern city a few years ago. Children were putting on the program, and one little boy was to give a recitation. He was only about five or six years old and he had a deformity; he was a humpback. As he walked across the stage to give his recitation it was evident that he was very shy and afraid, and very much aware of his condition. In fact, it was the first time that he had ever tried anything like this and it was a great struggle for him.

Two older fellows had come into the back of the room intending to ridicule the service. One of them called out to this boy as he walked across the stage, "Hey, bud, where are you going with that pack on your back?" The little boy was completely demoralized, and he just stood there and sobbed.

A man got up out of the audience and came up to the platform. He knelt down by the little boy and put his arm around him. He said to the audience, "It must take a very callous and cruel person to say something like that to a little boy like this. He is suffering from something that is not his fault at all. In spite of this deformity, he was trying for the first time to venture out and say something in public. This remark has cut him deeply. But I want you to know that I love him just the way he is; this little boy is mine, he belongs to me, and I'm proud of him" And he led the boy off the platform. That is what God is really saying to us. He sees our hurt and our heartache and our longing and our brokenness, and he says, "You're MINE!"

But that isn't all. Because of his power and wisdom, God says, with that wonderful hopefulness of a loving father, "You shall be mine -- healed, made whole, with all your blemishes and deformities corrected, all your faults straightened out, all your iniquities set aside, all your tangled relationships unsnarled. You shall be whole, for I am whole." That is what this book is about, that is what the Bible is about, and that is what Jesus Christ is about.

Not long ago, I had the encouraging experience of talking with three people who I would have said were absolutely hopeless two years ago. They were hostile and rebellious and so torn up inside that they could not get along with themselves nor anybody else. No one could even talk to them much less reach them with the truth. They were ruined, literally ruined. But now the healing has begun. It is very evident that they are on their way to wholeness. God is correcting the problems of their lives. And that is what he is doing here with us.

I don't know anything more suggestive of this activity for us than the Lord's table. This event tells us of how God, in love, began the process of healing. It portrays for us how he began to reach out to us in the cross, in the suffering of Jesus, and how he broke the power of darkness and began to set us free. Our Lord Jesus gave us this event to teach us the meaning of these ancient sacrifices: a life poured out for us, a life given up in order that we might have a new basis of living, in order that we may be his.

Prayer:

Our heavenly Father, each time we come to the Lord's table, we ask you to make it very rich and meaningful to us. May we, in our mind's eye, see the Lord Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, who has broken through the sin barrier, broken through the fear barrier, and now reaches out to us in tender, forgiving, accepting, understanding love, and who offers us everything it takes to straighten out the tangled relationships of our lives. Lord, help us to understand this and to lay hold of it, to give thanks for it. We know that for many, the healing has begun and is still progressing. For some, it is just beginning. There may be some for whom it has not yet started. We pray that in your love, Lord Jesus, you will reach them and heal them. We ask it in your name, Amen.

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