

THE NEED TO BELONG

by Ray C. Stedman

Last week we started our studies together in the book of Leviticus, this fearsome book which many of you have attempted to read before, perhaps, but have given up on because it seems to deal only with apparently meaningless regulations, sacrifices, and rituals. But these are "pictures" which portray truth which God wants us to know. I hope that you recognize that the Old Testament is filled with these pictures. They are called "types." They prefigure something yet to come. The New Testament calls them "shadows," {cf, Col 2:17, Heb 8:5, 10:1}. Just as a shadow takes the form of the object which casts it, so these ceremonies and rituals are shadows of something yet to happen.

When you read the Old Testament you can't help but see the emphasis laid upon the future. "Someone is coming," these Old Testament shadows and pictures and types are saying to us. We know, of course, that they are pointing toward the coming of Jesus Christ. That in itself is a most remarkable testimony to the Divine authorship of this book. Only God could have prescribed offerings which so accurately depict the coming of Jesus. As we go through them you will see that this is true.

These pictures are a kind of visual aid which God uses to impress truth upon our minds. After all, we human beings are not very smart. We think we are, at times, because we can invent some rather complicated gadgetry. But in contrast to the vastness of the knowledge which remains undetected and to the wisdom and greatness of God our minds are very puny and weak and we have really learned very little. And so God teaches us like children. Kindergarten teachers never start out by writing complex mathematical formulas on the blackboard for the children to learn. They must start with simple arithmetic, using pictures to illustrate the concepts involved. This is the way God has started teaching us -- with these types and shadows.

He uses nature for this purpose as well. Last night I went out under the sky and looked up into the stars. I felt, as you have often felt, a sense of wonder and awe. Especially if you can get to a place where there is no artificial light to interfere, and the heavens are blazing in beauty above you, you can feel the mystery of the wisdom and the power of God. The night sky is God's overhead projector, by which he is teaching us truth about himself. The same is true all the way through nature and all through the Bible as well.

In Leviticus we will learn to understand some of these pictures. But they also appear in other books.

Just before Leviticus comes Exodus, the book which tells the story of Israel's redemption out of Egypt. They were in slavery and bondage under a cruel and vicious king. This stands forever in Scripture as a picture of enslavement to Satan, of bondage to sin, of the cruelty, hurt, and heartache that comes upon anybody who has not yet found deliverance. All this is graphically portrayed, as you can see, in the story of Israel in Egypt. And then, by means of the Passover, when he sheltered his people under the blood, and the angel of death passed over them, God began to set them free. Through a series of mighty works he led them out of Egypt. That is a beautiful picture of what happens to an individual who comes to know Jesus Christ. He is set free from sin.

In Exodus it is also recorded that God gave Israel two more great pictures which convey marvelous truths that they needed to know.

One was the Law. You remember that terrible scene when Israel gathered as a people before Mount Sinai. A trumpet began to sound. I think it must have been very much like an air raid siren today -- so intense that the people could not stand it.

The mountain smoked, flames covered it, it trembled and shook with great earthquakes, and the people were terrified. God said to Moses, "Come up here; I want to talk to you!" And Moses went up on that mountain alone. I have never envied him that trip. That was a fearsome encounter to go into. But there God gave him the Law.

The Ten Commandments are nothing more than the revelation of the kind of people that God expects us to be, or, in other words, the kind he designed. He made humanity to do the kinds of things which are recorded in the Ten Commandments {Exod 20:3-17}. Some of the commandments pertain to our relationship with him: "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain." Others deal with our relationships with our neighbors: "Thou shalt not commit adultery." "Thou shalt not steal." "Thou shalt not bear false witness..." Those are merely a description of what God intends us to be. They come with remarkable force upon humanity because there is something in us which recognizes that they are right. God has, in a sense, written aspects of the Law into every human heart. This is why everywhere in the world, no matter what culture you observe, you will find a sense of responsibility and accountability to God, an awareness that man is expected to be something and that he ought to be what he is expected to be. This "oughtness" is in evidence everywhere in the human race.

Along with the Law, God gave to Moses the pattern of a building, the tabernacle. He told him, "Don't vary the pattern; build it exactly as I have told you!" The reason for that is that the tabernacle, as we learn from the book of Hebrews, is the picture of man and of what God intends to do and to be in man, which is to live in us. So he designed the tabernacle like he built us -- in three sections. We have spirit, soul, and body. In the tabernacle there was the outer court, which corresponds to the body, the holy place, corresponding to the soul, and the holy of holies, which represents that unfathomable, mysterious place deep in our human spirit which we call "the unconscious" and from which everything keeps rising, like bubbles from the bed of a lake, and breaking upon the surface of our life. So God designed the tabernacle in order that we might understand ourselves. And his purpose was to live there. In the tabernacle was a bright, shining, uncreated light called the Shekinah which was the mark of the presence of God. Now, it was only a picture of God; it was not God himself. No man can see God. But the light reminded Israel that this is where God intends to dwell -- in man.

The Law from the Mount of Sinai was the Old Covenant. God has said to man, "This is what you ought to be." Thus the Law made a demand upon men. And it was absolutely inflexible. God said, in effect, "Any deviation from this Law must be punished because it means that you are failing to be what you were made to be, and this can't be ignored!" And man said, "All right, we'll keep the Law." And everybody girded up their loins and said, "If God wants us to do this, this is what we're going to do!" And they tried. But what they had failed to take into consideration was the very thing that people are still failing to recognize today. It is that someone has thrown a monkey wrench into the machinery. Man is fallen!

The Law is like the instruction book for operating your automobile. But it is as if every time you try to run it according to the instruction book, you discover that somebody has put water in the gasoline, and sand in the oil, and nothing will work quite right. So the law becomes a demand that can never be met. This is why God, after the tabernacle was built, gave a whole series of sacrifices as a picture of the New Covenant, the new arrangement for living, in which a death would occur, and a priest would be present to help us with our emotional and intellectual problems, and he would make it possible for us to live with a wholesome God even though we had been violators and breakers of the Law which he had set before us. That is what these sacrifices are all about.

Now, they were just shadows. They weren't the real thing. The real thing is Jesus Christ. These are a picture of Christ, of his coming and having done a work in our life. And as people observed them they were doing the equivalent of what we do when we believe in Christ and accept his work for us. That is why the book of Leviticus opens with these words:

The Lord called Moses, and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, [the tabernacle] saying, "Speak to the people of Israel, and say to them, When any man of you brings an offering to the lord, you shall bring your offering of cattle from the herd or from the flock." {Lev 1:1-2 RSV}

Here is the introduction to the offerings. Notice that this whole system of sacrifices was never given from Sinai. It was given from the tabernacle, the place where God had come to live with man. This is significant for us. God never placed the demand of the law upon us without also intending to meet it from within, from the life of Jesus Christ within us -- God dwelling in us. Therefore all of this is God's provision for meeting the

problem of the breaking of the Law -- the problem of guilt, of condemnation, self-hatred and all the other afflictions which come to us from within, and which keep us from being the kind of whole persons that God made us to be.

There are five offerings, as we saw last week: the burnt offering, the meal offering, the peace offering, the trespass offering and the sin offering. We are going to look at them individually. All five represent aspects of the work of Jesus Christ. If you want to read ahead and study these through you will find it very instructive to do so because the more you learn on your own the more it all will mean to you.

This morning we want to look at the first offering, the basic one. But before we get to it, if you will be patient with me for just a while longer, we need to do a bit more donkey work. In the course of these studies I want to show you that each of these offerings followed a pattern which was fulfilled when Jesus Christ became man and died on the cross, thus meeting the requirements of God. We will see that, but we also want to get behind that. Because when Jesus died so he was also taking our place. One of the great truths of the Gospel is that when Jesus died he became exactly what we are, just before he died. That, in fact, is why God put him to death. Therefore each of these offerings is a revelation of what we are, as fallen human beings, as bearers of Adamic life. So if you want to understand yourself then take heed of these offerings. They represent what Jesus Christ had to become in order to help us, and that is what we are.

The first offering is the burnt offering. It followed a five-step pattern, like all the rest of the offerings. First a selection of the sacrifice had to be made. If an animal sacrifice were required then either a male or a female had to be chosen. In the case of the burnt offering, as we will see, it was always a male. It had to be without blemish, without any kind of disfigurement at all. Animals were the most valuable possession of these nomadic Hebrew people. It was a costly sacrifice taken from their treasure, their animals.

Then, after selecting it they laid their hands on it. What does that mean? Well, that is God's way of teaching the great truth of substitution, the fact that we human beings are all tied together with each other, that we belong to one another and share life together, and that there is a way by which one of us can substitute for another. Now, in the case of dealing with our deepest guilt that substitute had to be a spotless, sinless person. And the only human being who ever fulfilled that qualification was Jesus Christ. That is why he is the only one who can redeem us. But there are other ways in which we are linked together. And this rite of identification, the laying on of hands, is God's expressive way of teaching that we belong to each other. That is why when we send someone out on a mission we bring them up front here and lay hands on them. By that we are saying, "We're with you, Brother! We are going to be praying for you and helping you to meet your need for financial support, whatever it is. We belong together in this project!"

The third step was to kill the animal involved immediately. God never allowed any compromise on this. He did not say, "This is a nice, cute little lamb, and he is innocent of any wrongdoing himself. So if you'll just drain a half pint of blood from him I'll be satisfied." God would never say such a thing because he wants to impress upon us the fact that the problem he is dealing with is so intense and so deeply rooted in our human lives that nothing but death can solve it. It cannot be palliated by some temporary expedient. It requires the immediate death of the substitutionary animal.

The fourth step was the sprinkling of the blood, or the burning of the portions of the sacrifice, as an act of consecration, of commitment to God. You see, the instant one of these animals died it became acceptable to God. Death solved the problem of separation, of alienation, and then the sacrifice could be offered to God.

The final step was a ceremonial indication of a restored relationship. Usually they sat down and ate part of the meat of the sacrifice. This was where the Hebrew people got their meat dishes, for they could eat only the meat of their sacrifices, that is all. Every animal they killed had to be slain at the door of the tent of meeting. There were some offerings, like the burnt offering, from which they could not eat. But with these God gave them other means of indicating that the relationship was restored and that there was peace again.

Now let's focus our attention upon the burnt offering. This was the most frequently offered sacrifice in Israel. Every morning and every evening the priests in the temple in Jerusalem would give a burnt offering. It was called the continual burnt offering. It had to fulfill certain requirements. The first distinction of the burnt

offering, and an important one, was that it was always a male without blemish. They had three choices as to the kind of animal. Verse 3:

"If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it at the door of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord; he shall lay his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. Then he shall kill the bull before the Lord; and Aaron's sons the priests shall present the blood, and throw the blood round about against the altar that is at the door of the tent of meeting." {Lev 1:3-5 RSV}

If you were rich enough you brought a bull. But if you could not afford a bull or if you did not have a herd of cattle but only a flock of sheep or goats then another provision was made. Verse 10:

"If his gift for a burnt offering is from the flock, from the sheep or goats, he shall offer a male without blemish; and he shall kill it on the north side of the altar before the Lord, and Aaron's sons the priests shall throw its blood against the altar round about." {Lev 1:10-11 RSV}

(Their every act was significant in terms of the coming and the work of Jesus Christ. We will see more of that as we go along.)

Finally, if you were very poor and had no animals at all you could bring a bird. Verse 14:

"If his offering to the Lord is a burnt offering of birds, then he shall bring his offering of turtledoves or of young pigeons. And the priest shall bring it to the altar and wring off its head, and burn it on the altar; and its blood shall be drained out on the side of the altar; and he shall take away its crop with the feathers, and cast it beside the altar on the east side, in the place for ashes; he shall tear it by its wings, but shall not divide it asunder. And the priest shall burn it on the altar, upon the wood that is on the fire; it is a burnt offering, an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the Lord." {Lev 1:14-17 RSV}

All this sounds very bloody and gory, doesn't it? But God is saying something very important through all this. He is indicating by these three sources of sacrificial animals that this is a provision made for everyone. Even the poorest can offer something as a burnt offering. You remember in the New Testament that when Joseph and Mary took the baby Jesus up to the temple to be circumcised on the eighth day they gave a burnt offering. They were so poor that all they had to offer was a pair of turtledoves. So that is what they offered for him.

There were certain other things that were important about this burnt offering. The reason why it always had to be a male was because in the Scriptures a male always stands for leadership, initiative, dominion. Females, in Scripture, always signify support, following, response. There were certain offerings for which a female was specified. These were not simply matters left to their own discretion. They were specifically told what to do because this would teach them the truth they needed to learn. So for the burnt offering they had to bring a male without blemish or disfigurement. That was a recognition of the fact that in this most basic of all offerings God was dealing with man as a king, as a sovereign.

Man was made to rule. He was never made to be in bondage to anyone. He was never made to be a slave. That is why we are restless when we are enslaved or held in bondage of any sort. We cannot stand it, for something deep within us was made by God to rule.

Remember how David puts it in Psalm 8? He looks up at the stars and asks,

**What is man that thou art mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him?**

And he answers his own question,

**Thou hast given him dominion over the work of thy hands;
thou hast put all things under his feet, {Psa 8:6 RSV}**

All the fish and other inhabitants of the seas, all the animals and birds, everything is put under the authority of man. That is man as God created him.

And man still feels this. That is why we are not content unless we are running things in this world. No scientist is content to be excluded from an area of knowledge. No explorer can rest if any mountains are left unclimbed. You remember the famous remark of Sir Edmund Hillary, who conquered Mt. Everest. When asked why he did it he said, "Because it was there." All this is a dim, sometimes subconscious remembrance of the dominion God gave man.

This is symbolized by the selection of the male for this offering. The most basic expression of our life is that we are made to rule, every one of us. We are not made for being dominated but to dominate.

The second distinctive of the burnt offering, also very important, was that it was to be totally consumed. Nobody ever ate the meat of the burnt offering. Look at Verses 6-9:

"And he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces; and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar, and lay wood in order upon the fire; and Aaron's sons the priests shall lay the pieces, the head, and the fat, in order upon the wood that is on the fire upon the altar; but its entrails [intestines] and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn the whole on the altar, as a burnt offering, an offering by fire, a pleasing odor to the Lord." {Lev 1:6-9 RSV}

There were three sacrifices that were said to be pleasing odors to God, delights to God. The first of these is this burnt offering. God says that there is something about man which, when he recognizes his right to rule and gives himself wholly to it, is pleasing to God. God is thereby teaching us that man was meant to be his, wholly, totally. The whole man -- body, soul, and spirit -- is to be the dwelling place of God. Only this enables man to rule, and rule adequately.

This is recognition of the most basic hunger of man. It is a reflection of our need to belong, to be accepted, to be loved, to have an identity, a relationship, a cause to live or die for. Man is forever restless if he does not have this sense of belonging. And we will never find fulfillment in our humanity, in expressing ourselves, until we find it in committing ourselves totally to God. You and I are searching for someone to love us. That is the most primitive and basic hunger of our life. Because, you see, man is not God. We like to think we are, sometimes. We try to act like God. We try to run the universe and have everything revolve around us. You know the poem which goes:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.

In the fell clutch of circumstance
I have not winced nor cried aloud.
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.

Beyond this place of wrath and tears
Looms but the horror of the shade,
And yet the menace of the years
Finds, and shall find me, unafraid.

It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate:
I am the captain of my soul.

But it is a satanic lie that man is master of his fate. God could flick off a few little switches inside your body

and you would be gone -- right now! And you'd have nothing to say about it. No man runs his own life or controls what happens to himself. Because man is not God. Man was not made to exist by himself. He was made to be possessed, to be owned by another, to belong to someone else.

Now isn't that strange? Here are two great truths, linked together in Scripture, which seem to be contradictory. Man was born to rule, but he was made to be possessed. He was born to be king over all, but he was made to be under the authority of and to be possessed by God. And he is very unhappy unless he is possessed by God. These appear to contradict, but they do not at all. May I suggest that you can see this truth illustrated in yourself, in your family, and everywhere around you. For example, this is why a child desperately wants and needs a family. A baby who does not have a name or an identity is a restless, unhappy person. He needs to belong to a family.

A few years ago a young man came to this church. He was in his late twenties and was in trouble with the law. He was a confidence man, a slick artist. He was a master at conning you into doing something which would work to his financial advantage. But he was in trouble because he had been caught. We tried to help him and in the process I learned his story.

It was an amazing story. He had not known anything about his own identity until he was fourteen years of age. But then he had found out that he was the illegitimate son of a girl who had gone to the Philippines with her missionary parents. There she had fallen in love with a young Filipino man and, without benefit of marriage, they had had a baby. Because of the involvement of the family -- because of pride, basically, which always results in cruel treatment -- the baby was sent back to the United States and put into a foster home. Nothing was told the foster parents as to where he came from or who he was. He was finally passed along to an orphanage and there he grew up, knowing nothing about himself nor his family background and history. He was given a name which he knew was not his real name, but he didn't know what his real name was.

When he was fourteen he was given access to certain funds in connection with his work and one day he embezzled five thousand dollars. He did this for one purpose only. The first thing he did when he got the money was to hire an agency to trace his family background and to find out who he was and where he had come from. He spent the entire five thousand dollars for that purpose. And he found out. But he had been so disturbed that he could not rest (he was even willing to risk prison and punishment and he got them) until he found out who he was and where he belonged.

This is what the burnt offering is telling us. The most basic quest of our life is to belong to someone, to be identified with them, to be loved by someone and to be accepted and possessed and owned by someone else. And nothing is more pitiable and pathetic than someone who feels that no one loves him, that he doesn't belong to anyone, that no one cares for his soul.

A third characteristic of the burnt offering -- and this is most important -- is that it had to involve a death. Death in these offerings is always a picture of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ on our behalf. So when these Israelites offered this sacrifice they were learning the great truth that only by means of the death of an acceptable substitute can man ever satisfy this great longing to belong to and to be possessed by God.

Of course, this is telling us that only in the recognition of the death of Jesus Christ for you can you ever satisfy that longing. He is the expression of the love of God. So we must give ourselves to God through Christ, acknowledging that he owns us, that we belong to him: "You are not your own; you are bought with a price," {1 Cor 6:19b-20a RSV}. God does not and will not exploit you and run you like a robot or a slave. He loves you and wants to fulfill you and set you free. But you do belong to him. That is the most basic truth of all.

You can find a certain amount of satisfaction in having a family. You will be very restless if you do not have a family. You can find satisfaction in having a background, an identity. This is what the black community is so anxiously searching for -- some sense of their true identity. They cannot stop searching because this is a fundamental urge in their lives. But you will never satisfy it wholly that way. You will find that this cry of your heart, this clamant hunger to be possessed and to belong, can be satisfied only by God in Jesus Christ coming into your life. By the death of Christ that door is open.

This summer my wife and I were down at Forest Home Conference Grounds where I shared the platform with Dr. Henry Brandt who as many of you know, is a Christian psychologist. I was so interested to hear him talk in his humorous style about the relationships of husbands and wives, parents and children. He told us that while his wife and he were still courting they said to one another that they wanted to give themselves to each others' happiness. He said, "I'll never forget the night my wife said to me, 'You know, dear, I want to spend the rest of my life just making you happy!'" He said, "Wasn't that great!? Imagine this beautiful woman dedicating herself for the rest of her life to making me happy! I thought it was tremendous -- then we got married."

The first week of their marriage he said to his wife one evening, "You know, on Thursday nights I've been accustomed to going out with the fellows. So tonight I'm going to go out with them. I'll probably be very late so don't wait up for me." His wife reacted very strangely. She said, "But, you can't leave me all alone!" He said, "You really won't be alone. There are lots of things you can do, and I'll just be out having a good time." She said, "You can't do that! You're married now!" And he remembered saying to himself, "What happened to her promise? Here is her first chance to make me happy and she has blown it completely!" After awhile it began to dawn on him that though there is a lot of joy in marriage and much satisfaction in belonging to another it will never fully satisfy that hunger to belong.

He thought he would find his need met in parenthood. And as he held that first little child in his arms he anticipated with joy that now he would find his sense of identity in another of his own flesh and blood! But he discovered that babies regurgitated, and needed their diapers changed, and made heavy demands upon him at ungodly hours while giving nothing in return. And his need was never met in that way.

This is what the burnt offering is saying. Only through the death of Christ, and only through the relationship with the living God which that death enables can this hunger be stilled, can this basic desire to belong be met. That is what accounts for the sense of joy and relief upon becoming a Christian. Do you remember that? "Now I belong! God is my Father! I'm in a family. I'll never be alone again! God will never forsake me nor abandon me! I belong to God!"

The fourth and final distinction of the burnt offering is given in Chapter 6, where there are some additional instructions to the priests about how to make these offerings. In Verses 12-13 they were told:

"The fire on the altar shall be kept burning on it, it shall not go out; the priests shall burn wood on it every morning, and he shall lay the burnt offering in order upon it, and shall burn on it the fat of the peace offerings. Fire shall be kept burning upon the altar continually; it shall not go out." {Lev 6:12-13 RSV}

What is God saying by that? Simply that this is the most basic relationship of your life, that no other need can ever be met until this need is met. Every morning and every evening they were to offer the burnt offering. It would consume the wood and the meat all through the day and all through the night, so that the fire never went out. This was the central and most basic of the offerings. By it God is saying that you can never find any other hunger of your life stilled until you have found this one answered, until you have found that you belong to God, that you are his wholly and completely, body, soul, and spirit.

If you want to solve any other problem of life you have to begin there. "I belong to the Father, I am one of his family. I'm a child of God. I know him as my heavenly Father. I have been accepted by him. He loves me." If you do start there you have a basis upon which all the other relationships of life can all be worked out, for there, you see, this deep and clamant cry of the human heart is met. Jesus Christ meets us in that place.

This is the burnt offering -- the need to belong.

Prayer:

Thank you, our heavenly Father, for this marvelous provision, this graphic way of teaching us through these instructive offerings what is true about ourselves. Each one of us knows that this is true, knows how restless we are, how unsatisfied, how unhappy we are if we do not

have a full sense of identity. But thank you, Father, that you have made provision for this most basic of all needs to be met in Jesus Christ our Lord, who died for us that we might have it. Teach us then to rejoice in our relationship with you and to understand that it lies at the base of everything. May we never forsake it or turn away from it but rejoice forever in this relationship which can never be broken. We will never be abandoned again, never be forsaken, never be lost, never again have no identity. We belong to you, O God, through Jesus Christ. We thank you in his name, Amen.

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