

LESSON 7 – HOLINESS AND SACRED SPACE

Last week we talked about how Israel needed to learn more about God and His character. Because of this, they would spend a year at Sinai – their classroom. Why so long? They had received the 10 commandments – the Law. But there was more to it than promising to believe in God and being loyal to Him. They also had to know what God expected and what He was like. A relationship had to be formed. And relationships take time to build.

THE CONCEPT OF HOLINESS

We tend to look back at practices, liturgy and sacrifices of the OT and think, “What was that all about?” We understand some of it, but it just seems to go on forever, not necessarily making much sense. But there was a purpose to

all of it. And this purpose was based in the need to teach Israel that God is UNLIKE everything else. Because of this, God, in His nature and character is unique. Meaning that He is completely OTHER than humanity and anything else. This truth had to be reinforced at all times and was at the fore of Israelite life and culture. Otherwise, God and many of His attributes may have come to be thought of as ordinary.

The Biblical word for this idea of God's unique otherness is **holiness**. It means, "**to be set apart**" or "**to be distinct.**" God is in a category all His own.

We tend to think of holiness as just being about moral conduct – the idea that we are to behave in a certain way in which to reflect God's distinct moral character and standards (**Lev. 19:2**). But there is more to the concept than that.

God wanted Israel to have more than just an intellectual idea of holiness. Things have a tendency to hang out in the intellect and gather dust. This happens when we know, in the abstract what we should do, but then do something different anyway. God wanted this concept to permeate and manifest in all aspects of Israelite life and society. How would He continue to reinforce this concept? He would do it through rituals (symbolic acts) and by regulations for approaching sacred areas (space).

SO HOW IS GOD “OTHER?”

The sort, pat answer is that God is “other” in every way. But, once again, that leaves the answer in the abstract category. We need to bring it down to earth. And the rules of Israelite life reflect that down to earth aspect.

The Bible teaches us that God wasn't only the source of Israel's life, but that He is life. God is supernatural. Therefore, He isn't of this earth where there is death, imperfection and disease. He is supernatural and we are terrestrial, meaning of or from earth. When God inhabits/ occupies space here, on earth, His presence sanctifies that space. The space we occupy is ordinary and God is the polar opposite of ordinary.

So, how did God convey this concept to Israel? Israelites had to be chosen/ invited to occupy the same space as God. This was regulated by certain laws in the OT.

If Israelites were seen to be qualified to enter sacred space when they were deemed to be "clean." They could be disqualified from entering sacred space by being deemed "unclean." A variety of activities and/ or conditions could render one unclean. Having

sex, losing blood, touching a dead body, whether human or animal, having certain physical handicaps or diseases rendered someone unclean. These things aren't to be confused with sin. This was just life and life happens. It wasn't sin unless it was done in an improper context or unless one knowingly entered sacred space without being cleansed. That would be rebellion. Israelites were forbidden to eat certain birds of prey that ate dead animals (e.g. buzzards and hawks; **Lev. 11:13 – 19**) or animals that might be found inside a carcass (e.g. lizards, mice, possums; **Lev. 11:24 – 40**).

Once again, in these instances, uncleanness was not about morality. Things in this category dealt more with everyday life. Rather, these issues were symbolic of the loss of life and the incompatibility of that with God's perfection. God is life. The logic is simple, but somewhat incompatible with our modern, foreign, minds.

The loss of blood and other bodily fluids were perceived as the loss of that which created and sustained life. And God wasn't to be associated with the loss of life but rather as the giver of life itself. Therefore, requiring "purification" after the loss of such fluids or contact with the dead was a reminder of God's nature. One could also be excluded from sacred areas in Israel due to some physical imperfection, injury or illness because such things are incompatible with God's perfection. All these laws were intended to drive home a particular worldview – a supernatural worldview.

MAKING THE UNCLEAN, CLEAN

Being rendered unclean and/ or unfit to approach sacred space was a big deal to ancient Israelites. If they couldn't approach or enter sacred space, then they couldn't offer sacrifices. But there was a solution to the

problem. And that solution was ritual purification, which could involve a sacrifice in and of itself or a waiting period.

Most of the sacrifices in the Law speak to this – the purification of the people or places; not to sin offerings. Sacred space could be polluted, and it had to be cleansed as the people entering it. There was really one major sacrifice for sin. We will get to that shortly.

THE LOGIC OF BLOOD SACRIFICE

The sprinkling or dousing of blood on a person or object in order to render them clean so they can enter sacred space is something of a foreign concept to us. But there was/ is a theological purpose behind it. That concept is one of substitution. Since blood was the life force, (**Lev. 17:11**), the taking of an animal life taught the lesson that approaching God on any terms other than His own meant death. The

blood of said sacrifice was merciful substitute to rectify an Israelite's defiled, unclean state. The object lesson, in this case is that God was preserving a human life by substituting the sacrifice. Human life is more sacred than animal life because humans were created in God's image (**Gen. 1:26; 9:6**).

The very existence of Israel as a nation was owed to the fact that by supernatural means, God enabled Abraham and Sarah to have a child (**Gen. 12: 1-3**). But still, human life was in peril in the presence of a Holy God. The sacrifices and rituals reminded the Israelites that God had power over life and death – and that God wanted to show them mercy.

The whole idea of God's otherness telescopes into another aspect of God and sacred space. If where God's presence was, was holy, then wherever His presence wasn't, couldn't be holy. It was either neutral or, hostile or even

downright evil. This is known in scholarly circles as **realm distinction**. If we go back to the imagery of Eden, we can see aspects that mark ideas of God's presence. Many Christians are aware of some of the many items in the temple – mainly some of the furniture. And they've probably been taught these items "all point to Jesus." But there is yet more to it. Many features in the interior of the temple were designed to take people back to Eden. Eden, like the later tabernacle and eventually the temple, were places where heaven and earth met. For instance, the golden lampstand was fashioned and decorated as a tree (**Ex. 25: 31-40**), which was an analogy of the tree of life in Eden. It stood guard in front of the veil that blocked the way to the Holy of Holies, where the ark of the covenant sat. The lid was designed to function as throne for God (**Ex. 25:10 – 22**).

The cherubim inside the Holy of Holies also have a clear connection to Eden. After the fall,

two cherubim stood outside the garden gate, not allowing anyone inside. Man had fallen and could not enter sacred space (**Gen. 3:24**).

Mankind had been exiled from the garden due to rebellion. The cherubim inside the Holy of Holies guarded the lid to the ark of the covenant (**Ex. 25:18 – 20**). Later, after Solomon's temple was built, the tent structure of the tabernacle was moved inside the temple and two giant cherubim were installed over the ark as the throne for God, making the ark His footstool (**1 Chron. 28:2**).

The temple was also decorated like the garden of Eden, with images such as lush vegetation and animals (**1 Kings 6-7**). Flowers, palm trees, pomegranates, and even lions were carved into the architecture. It was a visual reminder of the place where God had first come to earth to live with humanity. But the Israelites needed to be reminded of the dark, malevolent side of cosmic geography. If the camp of Israel, and

later the Promised Land was holy ground, then the surrounding land was deemed unholy. Remember, in Dt. 32, back at the dispersion of Babel, God had given the other nations and their lands over to lesser gods (**Dt. 4:19-20; 32: 8-9**). And though God would later move to reclaim those nations and their lands - during what we refer to as the “Bible days,” they were realms of darkness. One Israelite ritual paints this image very vividly. It is known as **Yom Kippur or The Day of Atonement**. It is described in Leviticus 16. It serves, among other things, to remind people of the difference between holy and unholy ground.

AZAZEL

There are two goats involved for Yom Kippur. One was sacrificed while the other wasn't. The sacrificed goat was “for the Lord.” Its blood was sprinkled in the sanctuary in order to cleanse it from “human pollution” (defilement) for

another year. Once again, the majority of sacrifices of which we read, were for similar purposes. They were to cleanse various areas of the temple of human pollution. Very few of the prescribed offerings were made to cover sin. But we do have one here.

The second goat was not sacrificed. It was sent out into the wilderness after the high priest had symbolically transferred the sins of the people onto it, via laying his hands on its head. This goat was for Azazel.

That begs the question, “Who was Azazel?” **The word is usually translated, “scapegoat” in English Bibles.** And that is the basic concept. But in Hebrew it is a proper name. It is the name of a demon. We read in Leviticus 17:7, that Israel had been sacrificing to demons while on their wilderness journey.

Lev. 17:7

⁷ So they shall no more sacrifice their sacrifices to goat demons, after whom they ^awhore. This shall be a statute forever for them throughout their generations.

Though this was obviously wrong, only YHWH should be worshipped, their logic was that, they were in the wilderness, they were not in the Promised Land, therefore they sacrificed to the demons of the wilderness for protection. This had to stop and the goat for Azazel did just that. The goat for Azazel wasn't an offering to an evil entity. The goat was never sacrificed. Rather, it was a symbolic way of cleansing the holy ground – the camp of the Israelites. The sin was sent back to where it belonged – the wilderness, where all sorts of evil was thought to reside.

WHY DOES ALL THIS MATTER?

We need to see that there are parallels in the NT. Some things stayed the same while others changed. **God is still “other.”** His holiness requires that we be purified to enter His presence. That is accomplished, for us, by believing in Jesus’ finished work on the cross. Jesus’ actions usually had supernatural overtones. Remember how He went into the wilderness and was tempted by Satan? Why the wilderness? Because that’s where was said to reside. Jesus’ ministry then began and eventually culminated in overcoming the Devil, who had the power of death (**Heb. 2:14**). Where was Jesus crucified? It had to be outside the city gate because crucifixion as well as the fact that our sins had been placed upon Him made Him unclean (**Heb. 13:12**).

We are made clean, fit for His presence because of Jesus’ death and resurrection sanctify us. Our sins have been taken away. Though in one sense we are unclean sinners,

we are seen to be holy if we are in Christ. It's that simple, yet that profound.

Sometimes we are tempted to think that things would be better if there was still a temple with the presence of God indwelling it, in our midst. **The reality is that you, the believer, are a temple. The Holy Spirit resides in every believer.** Because of this, Paul refers to our bodies as a "tent" (**2 Cor. 5:4**) because of this indwelling. We are filled just as the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle and the temple were (**Rom. 8:9-11**).

Eventually our body, this earthly tent will die, only to be replaced by a "house not made with hands..."

2 Corinthians 5:1

1 For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from

God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

And we will live in that holy body, in the new Eden, on a new earth.

Rev. 22:1-5

1 And he showed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding from the throne of God and of the Lamb. 2 In the middle of its street, and on either side of the river, was the tree of life, which bore twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. 3 And there shall be no more curse, but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it, and His servants shall serve Him. 4 They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. 5 There shall be no night there: They need no lamp nor light of the sun, for the Lord God gives them light. And they shall reign forever and ever.

Each church is holy ground. You are holy ground. How does that effect your life? You, and thereby your home is holy ground. How does that change things? You've been removed from the realms of darkness and adopted as a child of God! Never forget who you are in Christ! Know what that means to you, your family and the world.