

Living Messages of the Books of The Bible

GENESIS TO MALACHI

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CHAPTER THREE THE MESSAGE OF LEVITICUS

A. THE PERMANENT VALUES

I. Recognition of Sin, and Revelation of its Nature

Man and his Need.

- i. The Fact of Sin recognized by the whole Book.
 - a. Offerings.
 - b. Priests.
 - c. People.
 - d. Feasts.
 - e. Signs.

- ii. The Nature of Sin revealed, in that all these things indicate Relationship between God and Man; and thus reveal that by Sin Man is excluded from

Nearness.
Knowledge.
Communion.

- iii. The revealing Light, the Holiness of God.
(The Hebrew Word 159 times.)

II. Recognition of Redemption, and Revelation of its Nature

God and His Provision.

- i. The Fact of Redemption, the Key to the whole Book.
- ii. The Nature of Redemption revealed in the Method.
 - Substitution.
 - Imputation.
 - Death.
- iii. The unnamed Love revealed.

B. THE LIVING MESSAGE

I. Concerning Sin

- i. Sin is Unlikeness to God.
- ii. Sin is Distance from God.
- iii. Sin is Wrong done to God.

II. Concerning Redemption

- i. Redemption is founded on Righteousness.
- ii. Redemption therefore is only possible by Blood - i. e. by Life poured out.
- iii. Redemption is in order to Holiness.

THE opening words of Leviticus reveal the necessity for acquaintance with the book of Exodus: **“And the LORD called unto Moses, and spake unto him out of the tabernacle of the congregation.”**

If we had read this statement without such acquaintance we should at once enquire, Who is the Lord? Who is Moses? What is the tent of meeting? Having read Exodus, we have no need to ask these questions. The book of Exodus ends with the story of the covering cloud; and there is really no break between the close of that book, and the beginning of Leviticus.

The book of Leviticus deals with the first half of the second part of the message of Exodus, having to do wholly with worship. In common with the books already considered, Leviticus has no final teaching. Its instructions leave us unable to worship in the way in which it declares we ought to worship. It reveals the underlying necessities of the case, and thus prepares the way for all that fuller unfolding of the true method of worship, which came in the fullness of time by the mission of Christ.

We shall follow the method adopted in dealing with Genesis and Exodus, and ask first, what are the permanent values of the book; and from these deduce its living message to our own age. There are two supreme values.

- First, a recognition of sin, and a revelation of its nature; and
- Second, a recognition of redemption, and a revelation of its nature.

Or, more briefly, sin and redemption, the fundamental matters concerning man and his need, and God and His provision.

On the subject of sin there is much with which Leviticus does not deal. Indeed, there are mysteries connected therewith which the Bible does not attempt to explain. We have no final teaching in the Scriptures of Truth concerning the genesis of sin in the universe. I use the word sin rather than evil, because it indicates a moral wrong, whereas evil includes not only the moral wrong, but all suffering and sorrow resulting therefrom.

The Bible makes it perfectly clear that suffering and sorrow are the result of sin. It gives us, however, no explicit teaching concerning the origin of sin. Neither does the Bible enter into any details concerning the ultimate issues of the presence of sin in the universe. We do find, however, all that it is necessary for man to know, and the simplest thing stands revealed upon the pages of this book of Leviticus. The fact of sin is recognized from beginning to end. If there be no such thing as culpable moral perversion, then this book is a farrago of nonsense.

To pass in review its five divisions is to be conscious of sin. The offerings described were rendered necessary by the sin of those who were commanded to bring them. The mediation of the priests as between the soul and God was called for as the result of sin. The laws of separation recognized the sin from which the people must be separated, in order that their separation from God might be cancelled. The feasts of consecration emphasize the benefits gained as the result of escape from sin.

The nature of sin is revealed in that in all these things the fundamental relationship between God and man is taken for granted; and yet the necessity for man's redemption and restoration to God is revealed. Sin is, therefore, so far as man's experience is concerned, exclusion from nearness to God, from knowledge of God, from communion with God.

In the light of the New Testament we know far more of these matters than the book of Leviticus reveals; but in this book they are stated in their first simplicity, and fundamental values. The whole economy of worship, as herein set forth, emphasized the fact of the distance of God from man, because of sin; and of man's consequent need of some process by which he might be brought back to God. The creation of a way of entrance indicates the necessity for its making. The necessity for its making reveals the fact that sin separates between man and God.

The truth stands out in clear and awful relief by virtue of another fact. The revealing light throughout the book of Leviticus is that of the holiness of God. The awful word is stamped upon its page, occurring more often in this than in any other book of the Divine Library, either in the Old or the New Testament.

The Hebrew word, translated "holy" more often than in any other way, but sometimes by other words, occurs over one hundred and fifty times in the course of the twenty-seven chapters. This is a mechanical and technical suggestion, but if the word be marked in the reading of the book with a blue pencil, it will be seen how the thought is interwoven with the texture from first to last.

The superlative instance of its use occurs in the midst of the commandments which have to do with the ordinary and every-day cleanliness of the people.

In connection with matters so apparently prosaic, the great word is spoken, "**Be ye holy; for I am holy.**" The holiness of God shines like a white, fearful light upon the whole book. It is in contrast with that holiness that the sin of man is seen and understood. Because of the absolute holiness of God, man in his sin is excluded from His presence. According to the teaching of this book, sin is fundamentally, essentially, wrong done to God.

This recognition of the fact of sin, and revelation of its nature, constitutes the background which throws up into clear relief the teaching concerning redemption.

The whole scheme of worship as set forth in Leviticus serves to place before the mind of humanity,

- First, the idea of redemption, as existing in the purpose and economy of God; and
- Second, that in process of time it would be wrought out into visibility and actuality in the history of man.

The supreme value of the book, therefore, is its revelation to man of the Divine purpose of redemption.

The offerings constituted provision for approach:

- The mediation of the priest was the method for the appropriation of the provision.
- The laws of separation revealed the conditions upon which such appropriation might be made.
- The feasts of consecration revealed the benefits of approach; and
- The symbols of ratification were the signs of restored relation.

The thought running throughout the whole economy is that of man, who has sinned, and so been excluded from God, being brought back to Him.

The offerings indicated the provision of a method by which man might be brought back into nearness to, and knowledge of, and communion with God.

The first three revealed the ideal relationship:

- The burnt, speaking of complete devotion;
- The meal, of established communion; and
- The peace, of the experience growing therefrom.

The final two suggested the method by which those away from communion might be restored; both the sin and the trespass offerings in different applications teaching the possibility of the canceling of sin, and the restoration of the soul to God. Whether our interpretation of the individual significance of the offerings agrees or not, we shall all agree that the underlying teaching is that of the possibility of restored approach to God.

The priesthood was that by which it was possible for man to appropriate the provision. No man was permitted to bring his own offering to God. It was necessary that there should be one to stand between the sinner and God, and present the offering. The thought is still that of the possibility; and the fact that a mediating ministry is created, by which the provision for approach can be appropriated, is a revelation of the purpose of God.

The same underlying thought is discoverable in the conditions laid down, upon which conditions man might avail himself of the mediation of the priests; and also in the feasts which symbolized restored relationship, and the signs which ratified the same.

It is of the utmost importance that this one unifying revelation of the book of Leviticus should never be lost sight of. While there is great value in a minute and detailed examination of all the ancient economy of worship, we need to be most careful that, while attending to details, we do not lose sight of the consistent revelation of the fact of redemption as provided by God, existing in His purpose, and wrought out in His plan.

A general survey of the book with that unifying truth in mind will reveal the nature of that redemption by which sinning man is brought back to God.

Three words indicate the consistent method.

They are:

- Substitution,
- Imputation,
- Death.

For the moment I am not discussing the question as to whether this is the true method of human redemption, but am simply endeavoring to emphasize what this book suggests. The first thought is undoubtedly that of substitution. Every sacrifice was that of a life standing in the place of another. In order to the restoration of a sinning man to God, someone must take his place as a sinning man. This substitution is closely associated with imputation. In the ceremonies of this ancient ritual there were constantly included acts which suggested the transference of the guilt of man to the life which stood in his place. Finally, the one substituted, and to whom the guilt was imputed, must die. That was the one and only way of redemption suggested by all the economy of the Hebrew worship.

It is well that we should remember that all the sacrifice of animals was that of sinless life. No animal has ever sinned. It is moreover true, and to be considered most carefully, that all the consciousness of the animals who died through the long years of the Hebrew observance of these religious rites was, in the last analysis, consciousness homed in God. No animal feels pain of which God is unconscious. **“The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now . . . The Spirit Himself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.”**

To put God away from His universe, as distant from it, and unconscious of it, and then blame Him for asking for the slaughter of animals, is to break in upon the teaching of unity obtaining in the universe. Of all the suffering of sinless life God was more conscious than the life that suffered, or the men who watched the suffering. Whether the devout souls of those bygone days were conscious of it or not, through all that ancient economy there was a revelation of the awful truth of the passion of God in the presence of human sin, which had its final manifestation and method in the suffering and death of Christ.

Therefore, in this book of Leviticus there is most evidently present, though unnamed, a recognition of the love out of which the work of redemption proceeds. It is unnamed, for the word love does not occur in the book; but it is present, for the whole economy is evidence thereof. The only sufficient reason for redemption, and the only sufficient impulse for suffering, is love.

I am aware that this is a theological question, and that other reasons have been assigned for God's work of redemption. I am only able to state that which is the profound conviction of my own heart, that the final explanation of the Divine provision of redemption is to be found in the all-inclusive statement of the New Testament, **“God is love.”**

The holiness of God might have been vindicated, and the last demand of His righteousness satisfied, by the absolute annihilation of everything that had failed.

The deepest meaning in the mystery of redemption, as shadowed in the book of Leviticus, is expressed by the prophet Hosea, “**How shall I give thee up, Ephraim?**” Though love is not mentioned in Leviticus, if I study it until I am overawed by the white light of infinite holiness, overwhelmed by the insistence upon righteousness, indicated by the blood and suffering, by fire and ashes, I am being taught that God’s heart of love compelled Him to make a way back to His home and heart for sinning man, even though the process was one of infinite cost.

The living message of the book is already declared, in some senses, when its permanent values are recognized. This book speaks to us of sin and of redemption. Concerning sin it has a threefold declaration:

- Sin is unlikeness to God.
- Sin is distance from God.
- Sin is wrong done to God.

Sin is unlikeness to God. That is taught in Leviticus by all the economy of worship, which insists first of all upon the fact that God may only be thought of as distanced from man. While we have already declared that the supreme teaching of Leviticus is that of God’s determination to bring man near to Himself, it is perfectly evident that such determination is in itself an evidence of existing distance. The ceremony which commenced with the erection of the tabernacle, and continued through all the ritual, is one that emphasizes the fact that God is unlike man. God is thought of as within the holy of holies, protected from the approach of man by veils, and by laws so stringent, that any violation of them has the death penalty attached to it. Man is thus excluded from God, because of the dissimilarity in character between them. Man made in the image and the likeness of God is a being on whom the image is defaced, and in whom the likeness is unrecognizable.

Sin is distance from God. We have dwelt on the one aspect of that truth in emphasizing the teaching of the book concerning the distance of God from man, by the unlikeness of man to God. There is another side to this, however, that, namely, of man’s distance from God in experience. Because he is excluded from intimate fellowship he does not know God, does not love God, does not serve God. All this, moreover, is a condition out of which it is impossible for him to rise, save by the way of redemption, according to the purpose and power of God.

Sin is wrong done to God. This is the supreme message of the book of Leviticus concerning sin. The sinfulness of sin is always emphasized in its aspect of relation between man and God. While it is perfectly true that it is difficult for the finite mind to comprehend the fact that wrong can be done to God, it is nevertheless true that the whole teaching of the Hebrew economy of worship emphasizes the fact that wrong done to man is ultimately wrong done to God. Thus sin is wrong done to God in Himself, and in His creatures.

If it be held that sin consists only in wrong done to our fellow men, it will inevitably ultimately weaken the sense of sin, and its degree will be decided by the character of the man wronged. The only way in which the keen sense of the heinousness of sin against our brother can be kept alive in the heart is by the perpetual recognition of the fact that he also belongs to God.

If upon every face is seen the impress of the Divine relationship as revealed in Genesis; and if, therefore, it is perpetually remembered that to hurt my brother is to harm God, the sinfulness of sin against man will be recognized. On the other hand, if this be lost sight of, men will be seen everywhere as separated units; and distinctions will be made as between sin against one man, and sin against another.

To recognize the truth of what Leviticus teaches, that sin is finally wrong done to God, will be to get the only sense of its awfulness, which has in it anything calculated to produce repentance in the presence of wrong done, and a motive for the doing of right.

The whole truth was ultimately summarized by Christ in His epitome of the law and the prophets, by quotation from the ancient writings, "**Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart. and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. And . . . thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.**"

The book of Leviticus says little about wrong to the neighbour; not that it is forgotten, but that its true meaning is only recognized, as sin is known as wrong done to God. The psalmist saw deeply into the true meaning of sin when he said, "**Against Thee, Thee only have I sinned.**" It was that fundamental conviction of the meaning of sin which created his keen consciousness of the wrong he had done to Bathsheba and to Uriah. Take away from the heart of man the sense that when he sins it is against God, and he will grow careless about Bathsheba and Uriah.

The message of Leviticus concerning redemption is naturally connected with this message concerning sin.

This also is threefold:

- Redemption is founded upon righteousness.
- Redemption is only possible by blood - that is, by life poured out.
- Redemption is in order to holiness.

Redemption is founded upon righteousness. It is not the operation of a pity which says that sin is of no consequence. There can be no restoration of man to God, save upon the basis of right; and the activity of tenderness is always that of the severity of righteousness.

Redemption is only possible by blood. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews gathered up the whole message of the Levitical economy in the words, "**without shedding of blood there is no remission.**" The shedding of blood is life given up. It is necessary to make this statement emphatically, because it is now sometimes asked whether it is not permissible to say that we are saved by life, rather than by blood, seeing that the old economy declared that "**the blood is the life**"? While that is perfectly true, it would still be utterly false to say that the teaching of Leviticus is that a man is saved by life. It teaches rather that he can only be saved by life given up, given up through suffering - not by blood, but by blood-shedding. The ancient symbolism was indeed awful and appalling, but the final weight of awe and horror ought to be that of the sin which made such symbolism necessary, in order to teach its real meaning to God.

There are those who speak of the doctrine of salvation by the shedding of blood as being objectionable and vulgar. The shedding of blood is objectionable; it is awful, it is dastardly; but it is the ultimate expression of the activity of sin; and the whole meaning of the appalling truth is that sin, in the universe, touches the very life of God with wounding.

I know the book of Leviticus is terrible reading; it is a tragic story of blood and fire. It is time that this living message was heard anew, that sin smites God in the face, and wounds Him in the heart; and that redemption is the outcome of the tender compassion, which receives the wounding, and bends over the sinner, pardoning him by virtue of that infinite and unfathomable mystery of which the shedding of blood is the only equivalent symbolism.

Redemption is in order to holiness. The final note of the message of Leviticus is that redemption does not excuse man from holiness, but that it is the method by which man is made holy. To fulfill all the requirements of the external ritual, and yet continue in sin, would be to commit the most heinous sin of all.

Leviticus speaks forevermore:

- Of the awfulness of sin in the light of the holiness of God,
- Of the plenteous redemption springing from the love of God, and
- Of the possibility of holiness of life, created by communion with God.

~ end of chapter 3 ~

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