

INTRODUCTION TO LEVITICUS CHAPTER 17

After the law concerning the atonement to be made for all Israel by the high priest, at the tabernacle, with the blood of bulls and goats, in this chapter we have two prohibitions necessary for the preservation of the honour of that atonement.

I. That no sacrifice should be offered by any other than the priests, nor any where but at the door of the tabernacle, and this upon pain of death, **#Le 17:1-9**.

II. That no blood should be eaten, and this under the same penalty, **#Le 17:10**.

Ver. 1. thru Ver. 9.

This statute obliged all the people of Israel to bring all their sacrifices to God's altar, to be offered there. And as to this matter we must consider,

I. How it stood before.

1. It was allowed to all people to build altars, and offer sacrifices to God, where they pleased. Wherever Abraham had a tent he built an altar, and every master of a family was a priest to his own family, **#Job 1:5**.
2. This liberty had been an occasion of idolatry. When every man was his own priest, and had an altar of his own, by degrees, as they became vain in their imaginations, they invented gods of their own, *and offered their sacrifices unto demons*, **#Le 17:7**. The word signifies *rough or hairy goats*, because it is probable that in the shape the evil spirits often appeared to them, to invite their sacrifices and to signify their acceptance of them. For the devil, ever since he became a revolter from God and a rebel against him, has set up for a rival with him, and coveted to have divine honours paid him: he had the impudence to solicit our blessed Saviour to *fall down and worship him*. The Israelites themselves had learned in Egypt to sacrifice to demons. And some of them, it should seem, practised it even since the God of Israel had so gloriously appeared for them, and with them. They are said to *go a whoring after these demons*; for it was such a breach of their covenant with God as adultery is of the marriage covenant: and they were as strongly addicted to their idolatrous worships, and as hard to be reclaimed from them, as those that have given themselves over to fornication, to *work all uncleanness with greediness*; and therefore it is with reference to this that God calls himself *a jealous God*.

II. How this law settled it.

1. Some think that the children of Israel were by this law forbidden, while they were in the wilderness, to kill any beef, or mutton, or veal, or lamb, or goat, even for their common eating, but at the *door of the tabernacle*, where the blood and the fat were to be offered to God upon the altar, and the flesh to be returned back to the offerer to be eaten as a peace-offering, according to the law. And the statute is so worded (**#Le 17:3-4**) as to favour this opinion, for it speaks generally of killing any ox, or lamb, or goat. The learned Dr. Cudworth puts this sense upon it, and thinks that while they had their tabernacle so near them in the midst of their camp they ate no flesh but what had first been offered to God, but that when they were entering Canaan this constitution was altered (**#De 12:21**), and they were allowed to kill their beasts of the flock and herd at home, as well as the roebuck and the hart; only thrice a year they were to see God at his tabernacle, and to eat and drink before him there. And it is probable that in the wilderness they did not eat much flesh but that of their peace

offerings, preserving what cattle they had, for breed, against they came to Canaan; therefore they murmured for flesh, being weary of manna; and Moses on that occasion speaks as if they were very sparing of the *flocks and the herds*, #Nu 11:4,22. Yet it is hard to construe this as a temporary law, when it is expressly said to be a *statute for ever* (#Le 17:7); and therefore,

2. It should seem rather to forbid only the killing of beasts for sacrifice any where but at God's altar. They must not offer sacrifice, as they had done, *in the open field* (#Le 17:5), no, not to the true God, but it must be brought to the priest, to be offered on the altar of the Lord: and the solemnity they had lately witnessed, of consecrating both the priests and the altar, would serve for a good reason why they should confine themselves to both these that God had so signally appointed and owned. This law obliged not only the Israelites themselves, but the proselytes or strangers that were circumcised and sojourned among them, who were in danger of retaining an affection to their old ways of worship. If any should transgress this law, and offer sacrifice any where but at the tabernacle,

(1.) The guilt was great: *Blood shall be imputed to that man; he hath shed blood*, #Le 17:4. Though it was but a beast he had killed, yet, killing it otherwise than God had appointed, he was looked upon as a murderer. It is by the divine grant that we have the liberty to kill the inferior creatures, to the benefit of which we are not entitled, unless we submit to the limitations of it, which are that it be not done either with cruelty or with superstition, #Ge 9:3-4. Nor was there ever any greater abuse done to the inferior creatures than when they were made either false gods or sacrifices to false gods, to which the apostle perhaps has special reference when he speaks of the vanity and bondage of corruption to which the creature was made subject, #Ro 8:20-21, and compare #Ro 1:23,25. Idolatrous sacrifices were looked upon, not only as adultery, but as murder: he that *offereth them is as if he slew a man*, #Isa 66:3.

(2.) The punishment should be severe: *That man shall be cut off from among his people*. Either the magistrate must do it if it were manifest and notorious, or, if not, God would take the work into his own hands, and the offender should be cut off by some immediate stroke of divine justice. The reasons why God thus strictly ordered all their sacrifices to be offered at one place were,

[1.] For the preventing of idolatry and superstition. That sacrifices might be offered to God, and according to the rule, and without innovations, they must always be offered by the hands of the priests, who were servants in God's house, and under the eye of the high priest, who was ruler of the house, and took care to see every thing done according to God's ordinance.

[2.] For the securing of the honour of God's temple and altar, the peculiar dignity of which would be endangered if they might offer their sacrifices any where else as well as there.

[3.] For the preserving of unity and brotherly love among the Israelites, that meeting all at one altar, as all the children of the family meet daily at one table, they might live and love as brethren, and be as one man, of one mind in the Lord.

III. How this law was observed.

1. While the Israelites kept their integrity they had a tender and very jealous regard to this law, as appears by their zeal against the altar which was erected by the two tribes and a half, which they would by no means have left standing if they had not been

satisfied that it was never designed, nor should ever be used, for sacrifice or offering, [#Jos 22:12](#), &c.

2. The breach of this law was for many ages the scandalous and incurable corruption of the Jewish church, witness that complaint which so often occurs in the history even of the good kings, *Howbeit the high places were not taken away*; and it was an inlet to the grossest idolatries.
3. Yet this law was, in extraordinary cases, dispensed with. Gideon's sacrifice ([#Jud 6:26](#)), Manoah's ([#Jud 13:19](#)), Samuel's ([#1Sa 7:9](#); [9:13](#); [11:15](#)), David's ([#2Sa 24:18](#)), and Elijah's ([#1Ki 18:23](#)), were accepted, though not offered at the usual place: but these were all either ordered by angels or offered by prophets; and some think that after the desolation of Shiloh, and before the building of the temple, while the ark and altar were unsettled, it was more allowable to offer sacrifice elsewhere.

IV. How the matter stands now, and what use we are to make of this law.

1. It is certain that the spiritual sacrifices we are now to offer are not confined to any one place. Our Saviour has made this clear ([#Joh 4:21](#)), and the apostle ([#1Ti 2:8](#)), according to the prophecy, that *in every place incense should be offered*, [#Mal 1:11](#). We have now no temple nor altar that sanctifies the gift, nor does the gospel unity lie in one place, but in one heart, and the *unity of the spirit*.
2. Christ is our altar, and the *true tabernacle* ([#Heb 8:2](#); [13:10](#)); in him God dwells among us, and it is in him that our sacrifices are acceptable to God, and in him only, [#1Pe 2:5](#). To set up other mediators, or other altars, or other expiatory sacrifices, is, in effect, to set up other gods. He is the centre of unity, in whom all God's Israel meet.
3. Yet we are to have respect to the public worship of God, not *forsaking the assemblies* of his people, [#Heb 10:25](#). The Lord loves *the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob*, and so should we; see [#Eze 20:40](#). Though God will graciously accept our family offerings, we must not therefore neglect the door of the tabernacle.

Ver. 10. thru Ver. 16.

We have here,

I. A repetition and confirmation of the law against eating blood. We have met with this prohibition twice before in the levitical law ([#Le 3:17](#); [7:26](#)), besides the place it had in the precepts of Noah, [#Ge 9:4](#). But here,

1. The prohibition is repeated again and again, and reference had to the former laws to this purport ([#Le 17:12](#)): *I said to the children of Israel, No soul of you shall eat blood*; and again ([#Le 17:14](#)), *You shall eat the blood of no manner of flesh*. A great stress is laid upon it, as a law which has more in it than at first view one would think.
2. It is made binding, not only on the *house of Israel*, but on *the strangers that sojourned among them* ([#Le 17:10](#)), which perhaps was one reason why it was thought advisable, for a time, to forbid blood to the Gentile converts, [#Ac 15:29](#).
3. The penalty annexed to this law is very severe ([#Le 17:10](#)): *I will even set my face against that soul that eateth blood*, if he do it presumptuously, and *will cut him off*; and again ([#Le 17:14](#)), *He shall be cut off*. Note, God's wrath will be the sinner's ruin. Write that man undone, for ever undone, against whom God sets his face; for what

creature is able to confront the Creator?

4. A reason is given for this law (**#Le 17:11**): because *it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul*; and therefore it was appointed to make atonement with, because *the life of the flesh is the blood*. The sinner deserved to die; therefore the sacrifice must die. Now, the blood being so the life that ordinarily beasts were killed for man's use by the drawing out of all their blood, God appointed the sprinkling or pouring out of the blood of the sacrifice upon the altar to signify that the life of the sacrifice was given to God instead of the sinner's life, and as a ransom or counter-price for it; therefore *without shedding of blood there was no remission*, **#Heb 9:22**. For this reason they must eat no blood, and,

(1.) It was then a very good reason; for God would by this means preserve the honour of that way of atonement which he had instituted, and keep up in the minds of the people a reverent regard to it. The blood of the covenant being then a sensible object, no blood must be either eaten or trodden under foot as a common thing, as they must have no ointment nor perfume like that which God ordered them to make for himself. But,

(2.) This reason is now superseded, which intimates that the law itself was ceremonial, and is now no longer in force: the blood of Christ who has come (and we are to look for no other) is that alone which makes atonement for the soul, and of which the blood of the sacrifices was an imperfect type: the coming of the substance supersedes the shadow. The blood of beasts is no longer the ransom, but Christ's blood only; and therefore there is not now that reason for abstaining from blood which there was then, and we cannot suppose it was the will of God that the law should survive the reason of it. The blood, provided it be so prepared as not to be unwholesome, is now allowed for the nourishment of our bodies, because it is no longer appointed to make an atonement for the soul.

(3.) Yet it has still useful significance. The life is in the blood; it is the vehicle of the animal spirits, and God would have his people to regard the life even of their beasts, and not to be cruel and hardhearted, not to take delight in any thing that is barbarous. They must not be a blood thirsty people. The blood then made atonement figuratively, now the blood of Christ makes atonement really and effectually; to this therefore we must have a reverent regard, and not use it as a *common thing*, for he will set his face against those that do so, and they shall be cut off, **#Heb 10:29**.

ii. Some other precepts are here given as appendages to this law, and hedges about it,

1. They must cover the blood of that which they *took in hunting*, **#Le 17:13**. They must not only not eat it, but must give it a decent burial, in token of some mystery which they must believe lay hidden in this constitution. The Jews look upon this as a very weighty precept and appoint that the blood should be covered with these words, *Blessed be he that hath sanctified us by his precepts, and commanded us to cover blood*.
2. They must not eat that which *died of itself or was torn of beasts* (**#Le 17:15**), for the blood was either not at all, or not regularly, drawn out of them. God would have them to be curious in their diet, not with the curiosity that gratifies the sensual appetite, but with that which checks and restrains it. God would not have his children to eat every thing that came in their way with greediness, but to consider diligently what was before them, that they might learn in other things to ask questions for conscience' sake. Those that *flew upon the spoil* sinned, **#1Sa 14:32-33**. If a man did, through ignorance or inconsideration, eat the flesh of any beast not duly slain, he must *wash himself and his clothes*, else he *bore his iniquity*, **#Le 17:15-16**. The pollution was

ceremonial, so was the purification from it; but if a man slighted the prescribed method of cleansing, or would not submit, he thereby contracted moral guilt. See the nature of a remedial law: he that obeys it has the benefit of it; he that does not, not only remains under his former guilt, but adds to that guilt of contemning the provisions made by divine grace for his relief, and sins against the remedy.