

The dangerous and holy God

Introduction

Over the next two weeks we're going to be looking at the book of Leviticus together. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that Leviticus is a weird book. It's full of these ancient Israelite laws that seem so foreign to us today. The first seven chapters are regulations on offerings and sacrifices; there are loads of laws about clean and unclean things, some of which make lots of sense and others of which are strange and at times offensive; the idea of holiness comes up in a number of ways that don't make much sense to us today; there are laws for the priests, and a bunch of laws about different kinds of Sabbaths. All of this makes it very difficult for us to figure out how this particular part of God's word could be relevant to us Christians today. We feel like it should be relevant somehow, because it's God's word, but we just can't figure out how.

Over the next two weeks, my hope is that we can start making some sense of this book together. We'll start to see how Leviticus lays the foundation for thinking about what it means for God to live among his people and how we're supposed to respond to that. Of course, we see this in Jesus as well, but in Leviticus all the different elements that go into this are separated out from one another, which makes the whole picture a little bit easier to digest if you know what you're looking for. By understanding how God started working through the nation of Israel, we can better understand how he completed that work in Jesus. Hopefully by the end of these two weeks you'll be a little more excited to read Leviticus for yourself.

Now, there's too much in the book for us to be able to get through it all in two weeks. So, what we're going to do is focus in on the ideas explored in chapter 10 that we read tonight. These are at the heart of Leviticus, and every other idea in the book is built on top of them. This week we're going to start with the idea of God's holiness, and next week we're going to look more deeply at what the law means for God's people.

The problem of holiness

In our reading tonight we saw the first two offerings being performed by the first ever priests of Israel. In chapter 8, Aaron and his sons were ordained as the priests. In chapter 9, Aaron gave his offering according to the laws, and God accepted it. So, at the end of chapter 9 we read:

Moses and Aaron then entered the tent of meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people, and the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. Fire came from the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell facedown. (Lev 9:23–24)

God is so powerful that his acceptance of Aaron's offering managed to freak out the people watching. Immediately following this acceptance, in chapter 10, things don't go as well for two of Aaron's sons. There we read:

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu each took his own firepan, put fire in it, placed incense on it, and presented unauthorized fire before the Lord, which he had not commanded them to do. Then fire came from the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. (10:1–2)

We don't know exactly what they did wrong, all the text says is that they presented unauthorized offerings to God. Perhaps they didn't cleanse themselves properly before approaching, or they didn't present the right sort of animal according to the laws, or they brought it at the wrong time, or in the wrong way. Whatever the exact issue was, the consequence is that instead of the fire from God consuming *the offering* — like it did with Moses and Aaron — this time the fire from God consumed *the offerers themselves* — the two sons of Aaron.

This sort of response from God might make us a little uneasy. The God of Christianity is known for his love and mercy and forgiveness, so when he responds to the sons of Aaron like this it comes across as surprisingly violent or harsh. Why did he need to kill them? What could they possibly have done that deserved this kind of response?

The next verse gives us the answer to these questions — or at least the beginning of an answer:

Moses said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord has spoken: I will demonstrate my holiness to those who are near me, and I will reveal my glory before all the people." (10:3)

What we can take from this is that the incident with the sons of Aaron was a consequence of their sinfulness coming into contact with God's holiness. God had just begun living within the nation of Israel, and they needed to understand how serious that was. The contrast between Aaron and his sons is a symptom of the complicated situation that exists when a holy God comes to live in the presence of sinful people. Now, in order to better understand what that means, we need to go back to the beginning of the biblical story, and pay attention to how the layers of this situation were introduced one at a time. Then, we'll be able to approach this incident with clearer eyes.

Supreme creator, holy God

When we go back to the beginning of the Bible, God is the first person we meet:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1)

Notice that when God is introduced here, his holiness is not the first thing we're told about him. What the author of Genesis wants us to understand first is that God is the *supreme and good creator over everything*.

Now this may sound like an obvious thing to say, but it wasn't obvious back in the day when Genesis was being written. In ancient times, people tended to believe that there were many gods, each of whom was in control of this or that part of nature. If you needed sunshine for something you would try and appease the sun god, if you needed rain for your crops then you would try and appease the rain god, if you needed good yield for your crop there would be a different god, and if you wanted to conceive a child there would yet another god, and so on. There wasn't one God over all creation, but many different gods

over the different parts of nature. These gods came into existence themselves, they fought among one another, and created humans as something of an afterthought to help them in their jobs.

The God of the Bible is very different. Instead of their being many gods each in charge of their part of nature, the Bible tells us there is one supreme God, powerful enough to create and reign over everything by himself. Instead of coming into existence, this God has always existed. Instead of wars and fighting among the gods, this one God fashioned and planned everything according to his will, and he created everything good. And instead of needing us to help him, he lets us share in his rule over his creation, to help it flourish and grow. This is what it means for God to be the supreme and good creator; it's the way God is first introduced in the Bible, and it is the fundamental way he relates to us and the rest of creation.

It's also what makes him the *holy* God. These days, when we hear the word "holy" our minds jump to thinking about morality, so that when we say someone is holy we typically mean that they are a good person. And then when we talk about the holiness of God, we're mostly talking about how he is morally perfect. But this isn't really the best way to think about holiness — it does sometimes have implications for how we behave, but at its core, holiness is the *status that something has when it is set apart in some way*. To use a simple example, consider all the different things in your house that have a special purpose of some kind. The kitchen is a place for preparing food, the couch is where you watch TV and relax with guests, and your bed is for sleeping in. Each of these places are set apart from the rest of the house for their particular purpose, and so if we were speaking loosely we could say that they are each holy in their own way. And in each case this holiness has implications for how we behave in each of these places: we tend not to cook food in our lounge, and we avoid sleeping in our beds with muddy clothes because we like to keep our sleeping place clean. Each thing's holiness is *the status* it has by being set apart, but what *follows* from that status is that certain behavior is appropriate and other behavior is inappropriate.

Coming back to God, because he is the supreme and good creator, he is set apart from everything else in the most fundamental way possible. Everything else is created, but God is the creator. Each of us began to exist at some point and we need God to sustain us, but God is eternal and depends on nothing to sustain him. Our power to influence things is limited to our bodies and our understanding of the world — right now I can't know what's happening outside this very building, and if I want to change anything there I first need to walk outside — but God's power is unlimited — he is active everywhere, all the time, without ever tiring or running out of energy. And when we are good it's only because we reflect God's design for us, it's only because we are these tiny windows into God's goodness, but God is the source and definition of all goodness — we're constantly trying to improve ourselves, but it's literally impossible for God to be any better than he is, or for there to be anything better than him.

When the Bible speaks about holiness it almost always has in mind this fundamental holiness of God as the supreme and powerful creator — God is at the center of holiness, and everything else is made holy by being associated with him in some way. For example, the

seventh day of creation was holy because God ***made it his special day of rest***. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush, the ground around the bush was holy because God ***chose that place to specially present at***. The nation of Israel was holy because God ***chose them as his nation***, to live with them. And the priests of Israel were holy, because God ***gave them the special job of serving him*** at the temple and teaching all the people.

This close connection between being the creator and being holy is one of the key things we need to understand about God's holiness, because it can help us think more deeply and properly about that holiness. Sometimes when I think of God's holiness, the first picture that comes to mind is something cold and distant, unapproachable, dangerous, or harsh. But once we appreciate that the holy God is the creator God, we can see that while he certainly is dangerous, he is warm and loving, and eager to bless us, because this flows from the heart of the creator who cares for the wellbeing of his creation.

The holy creator among his creatures

Many of you would have heard of Stephen King. He is a prolific fiction author, having written more than 50 books, many of which have been turned into movies or TV series, such as IT, Carrie, Dreamcatcher, and The Dark Tower. The Dark Tower is a series of eight books — or nine, depending on how you count — that King has written over a period of forty years. The main character is called Roland, who in a recent film adaptation was played by Idris Elba, which I think is a great casting choice for a character called Roland. Anyway, one of the interesting things about the Dark Tower series is that, in the sixth book, Stephen King — the author of the books — ***appears as a character in the books themselves***. It's quite a strange thing for an author to write themselves into their story — imagine JK Rowling enrolled one day into Hogwarts, and became friends with Harry, Ron, and Hermione; or imagine JRR Tolkien joined the Hobbits on their trek to Mount Doom, or bumped into Gandalf as he travelled across middle earth. It's a strange thing because the author is on a different level of existence to their story, and so we would expect them to stay out of their story.

We don't always appreciate it, but this is quite similar to the relationship between God and his creation. He is so unlike his creation, so holy, that we would expect him not to get involved in all of its messiness. But what the Bible tells us is that when he created humans, he chose to enter his creation and live with us. In Genesis we are told of Adam and Eve who walked with God in the garden of Eden, and this special association with God would have made them holy, even though the book of Genesis never explicitly tells us this. When God created us to rule over his creation, he also chose to live with us, and in doing so shared his holiness with us. And access to this holiness would have meant all sorts of blessings for us, because it meant living with the giver of life and source of all goodness.

You would think that something so good would be impossible to give up, but that's exactly what we did. Thinking that we could make our lives better than they were, we chose to act against God's design for us, and lost out on the holiness and blessings he had shared with us. Instead of devotion, humility, justice, peace, and love, we now have rebellion, selfishness, injustice, war, and hatred.

This is what the Bible calls sin. Even if we don't intend to, when we sin we set ourselves against God, we make ourselves enemies of the good and supreme creator over everything. This is not a situation you want to be in. As the author of Hebrews says,

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (Heb 10:31)

It's like a character in a book insulting the author of that book, without realizing that he could write them out of the story at any moment, in the blink of an eye.

So, depending on the situation, holiness can mean the greatest possible thing, or it can mean the worst possible thing — it can mean life with the giver of life, or it can mean falling into the hands of the living God. The thing that makes up the difference is our sin.

And so through our sin we introduced a problem into God's creation: before, we were living with God in his holiness, but because of sin we were excluded from that and no-one could access him any more. Thankfully, God promised Abraham that through his descendants he would somehow fix this problem that we had created. And this brings us back to Leviticus, where we see the beginning of that solution through Abraham's descendants in the nation of Israel.

After saving Israel from Egypt, God's plan was to live with them in his temple. By doing this, God was once again creating a holy zone in the world where anyone in the world could come to him — for the first time since being kicked out of the garden of Eden, God was somewhere in his creation again, and humanity could access their creator. They could bring offerings, they could have fellowship with him, they could pray to him, and they could call on his name. But things were different — they were more complicated this time, and we see these complications in our passage. In Eden, humans walked with God and lived with him face-to-face, but in Israel God was kept at arms length inside the temple. He was hidden behind two curtains in a place called the Holy of Holies; only the priests could enter the first curtain, and only the high priest could enter the second curtain, and even this only once a year. So, humanity could access God, but not as fully as once was once possible in the garden of Eden.

By living with Israel in the temple God had started fixing the *consequences* of our sin, but he had not yet started to fixed the *sin itself*. He had made a way to live with us again, but had not yet cleansed us from the sin that got us kicked out of his presence in the first place. So, the situation with God in the temple was a delicate one, a mixed bag. On the one hand we had the opportunity to come again into our creator's holiness without being destroyed, which was awesome; but on other hand our sin was still around, so we had to be careful to approach God properly, so as to keep our sin from coming into contact with his holiness.

This is the setting of the passage we read in Leviticus. God isn't being inconsistent in his responses to Aaron and his sons, and he's not being harsh to them either. God had made every effort to live with humans again even though we had made ourselves unworthy of his holiness. And he made it possible to approach him again, but because sin was still around, this required a certain level of care. When the proper care was taken, as Aaron did, then things went well, and we were able to live with God in harmony. But when people were

careless like the sons of Aaron, then they bore the severe consequences of bringing their sin into contact with the holiness of the supreme and good creator.

When we first read this passage, we're tempted to see it as describing an angry and violent God. But when we read them in the context of the biblical story, we see a merciful and patient God trying to live with us. He didn't need to do that, he could have left us in our sin or destroyed us, but he chose to work around our sin instead. The deaths of Aarons two sons are not a consequence of God being unloving, they're a consequence of them acting carelessly with their holy creator who out of his love had made a way to live with them.

The end of God's solution

The temple in Israel was the *beginning* of God's solution to the problems that we introduced with our sin. And if Jesus hadn't come we would have thought that it was the *end* of the solution as well. Sin had gotten in the way of humans living with their creator, and God had fixed that by making himself accessible again in the temple.

But as the story of the Bible goes on, we realize that something more is needed if God's solution is to be complete. And when Jesus came we realize that God had always planned to take his solution to this next level. His plan was not just to live with humans again, but to cleanse us from our sin. When Jesus died on the cross, he took our sins off of us and onto himself, so that they no longer stood between us and God. The barrier that had separated us from the holiness of God was no longer there.

What this means is that God could live with us in a way that was previous not possible. He didn't have to live at arms length anymore, separated by two curtains in a temple while his people walk around outside. Because of Jesus, he is now able to live directly in us by his Holy Spirit. This is why, in our second reading tonight, the Apostle Paul doesn't say that we *have* the temple of God, but that we *are* the temple of God. Let me read it again in case we've forgotten:

And what agreement does the temple of God have with idols? **For we are the temple of the living God, as God said:**

I will dwell and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. Therefore, come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord; do not touch any unclean thing, and I will welcome you. And I will be a Father to you, and you will be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty.

So then, dear friends, since we have these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from every impurity of the flesh and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.

In this passage, Paul is reflecting on how through Jesus, God's people have become his temple, and he's unpacking some implications that that has for us.

The fear of God

The key thing that Paul says, at the end of this passage, is that we should cleanse ourselves and bring holiness to completion in the fear of God. We'll take a closer look at what it means to cleanse ourselves next week, so tonight we're going to close by thinking about what it means to fear God.

On the face of it, “fear” doesn’t seem to be the proper response to God. We’re supposed to love him, and fear seems like the opposite of love — love draws you near to someone, fear makes you run away from them. We might be tempted to think of fear as an Old Testament idea, before Jesus came and made everything right. Now that we live after Jesus, the thought goes, we don’t need to fear God anymore. But this isn’t quite right: Jesus himself tells us to **fear** God, the one who can destroy both the soul and body (Matt 10:28), Paul encourages us to work out our salvation **with fear and trembling** (Phil 2:12), Peter tells us to **conduct ourselves with fear** while we wait for Jesus to return (1 Pet 1:17), and Jude tells us to show mercy **with fear** (1:23). The Bible could not be clearer that fear is the proper response to God, both before and after Jesus.

So what does it mean to **fear** God?

A few weeks ago, some friends and I were on a beach together, and as we were walking we came across these tall rocks. They were very high, but they also looked very climbable, so being responsible adults we decided to climb to the top of them. As we were climbing it dawned on me just how high these rocks were, and this became very clear when we got to the top of them and were able to see this wonderful view of the beach, the ocean, and everything else around us. Now, at the top there was a decent amount of room to move around. You could find a comfortable spot somewhere and just take in the beautiful view without having to worry about falling off. But if you moved closer to the edge, you needed to be a lot more careful with your movement. One wrong step and you’d be falling a very long way, with a very slim chance of surviving.

This is something like the situation we have with God because of his holiness, although with God it’s this times a million. When we’re with him it’s safe and we get to enjoy the blessings of our creator, but against him we will lose everything. The fear of God is what you experience when you appreciate both of these things together. Put another way, the fear of God is what happens when you understand that a life with God is the greatest possible life, and that a life without God is the worst possible life.

Our creator has opened his arms and offered us mercy and blessing through Jesus. If we cling to him, then he will accept us, like he accepted Aaron’s offering, but if we continue to reject him, then we will bear the consequences of that just as the sons of Aaron did. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” A holy God is a genuinely dangerous and scary thing, and it’s important that we remember that, that we never take our creator for granted, that we fear him. But because our holy creator offers us mercy, the fear of God is not opposed to the love of God. The fear of God turns us **away from** a life **without** him, and the love of God turns us **toward** a life **with** him.

And not only this, but the fear of the holy God frees us to love others as well. When I am afraid of what others might think of me or what others might do to me, then I will find it more difficult to love those around me. But when I am with the holy creator himself, then what do I have to fear? When I am a child of the sustainer of life, who through Jesus has defeated death itself, then what can anyone do to me? As Moses said to Israel, God “will be with you; he will not leave you or abandon you. Do not be afraid or discouraged.” (Deut

31:8) And as the Apostle Paul said, "If God is for us, [then] who [can be] against us?" (Rom 8:31)

When we look at God's actions in Leviticus, with Aaron and his sons, the first things that come to mind might be harshness and violence. But when we look again, with eyes informed by God's word, we see the merciful and holy God making a way to live with his people, we see the fear of God in action, a fear which when properly understood teaches us to love God and empowers us to love each other.