Leviticus - Commentaries by Samuel Ridout

Lectures on the Tabernacle: A Full Exposition Examining the Types and Their Doctrinal Applications — Fully Illustrated, Way of Approach to God, The

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Leviticus 16:1-22

We have now gone through the entire tabernacle. We might say that all the furniture could be divided into two parts: what are called the vessels of approach, and the vessels of display. There are certain things which display what God is in Christ, as the table and the candlestick; while there are others which are directly associated with approach to Him. It is striking that all the vessels of approach are in one straight line between the gate and the mercy-seat within the sanctuary. This line could be drawn from the gate, through the altar of burnt-offering, the brazen laver, through the hanging at the tabernacle entrance and the veil separating the Holy place from the Most holy, to the mercy-seat itself; and practically everything upon that straight line was to set forth in some manner the way of approach to God. Some things were not so primary as others; notably, the altar of incense, which might easily be considered as a vessel of display; and yet, even as to that, it had a place in connection with approach to God.

There are two ways of looking at this straight line: from God's point of view, and from man's. Looking at it from God's point of view, we would start from the mercy-seat, which is the throne of God—everything there speaking of divine righteousness, majesty and glory. We would pass out through the veil, past the altar of incense, where worship as sweet incense was offered up to God; out through the hanging at the door of the tabernacle; past the laver where the washing took place; past the altar of burnt-offering where sacrifices were offered; and out through the gate.

Let us now reverse that order, and begin where the sinner has to begin—from outside, and see how God in His grace has provided a way for him to draw near.

There are three gateways which would seem to emphasize the thought of man's exclusion: the gate at the court, the hanging in front of the tabernacle, and the veil within. When sin had come into the world, our first parents were shut out from the presence of God; as soon as they heard His voice in the garden, nothing in Eden could enable them to stand in His presence. All their surroundings, which spoke of His goodness, could not hinder our guilty parents from hiding from His presence. Although they had endeavored to clothe themselves, they realized in a moment that their guilt rendered them unfit to stand before God; and from that day to this man has been away from God. Why is it that men can talk freely about the world, its business and material progress? They can even talk about moral things, questions of reform, etc., and do not hesitate to tell their minds about them; but the moment you speak of God, or Christ, the moment the truth and the holiness of God are directly presented, if the soul is estranged from God there is at once a shrinking back into silence. And the silence indicates a state of soul which says unto God, "Depart from us, for we desire not the knowledge of Thy ways." Even where the soul has been awakened, there is a sense that it cannot draw near to Him. When our Lord had done an act of grace for Peter and his companions in the miraculous draft of fishes, when they brought the boats to land, Peter fell down at Jesus' knees, saying: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."

In order to know man's sinful condition, we do not need to know what is the record of his life. The proof of sin in man is that he is at home outside of God's presence, and absolutely unhappy in that presence—a proof that includes all men. We need not lay specific transgressions to men's charge. God, who knows the heart, alone can do that; and He knows there is plenty in every man's life that, when the records are opened, will show much actual transgression. But that man is at a distance from God, none can dispute: the thought of God, as the psalmist says, gives him trouble. This is where God must find a man if He finds him at all. The apostle speaks of it in that way. To saints in the assembly at Ephesus who had been Gentiles, he says: "Ye were... strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world." How did the creature become a stranger to the Creator? There can be but one answer: Sin has come in and brought in alienation and distance from the God of goodness and love. But, thank God, it is just there that His grace begins.

First of all, there is a gateway to the court, a way of access to God, of having a share with His people in the joys and blessings which He provides. What is the way? To use the imagery of the court, the way is not through the white curtains that are around it; but in their very center is a broad gateway, twenty cubits wide, as the way of approach to the holy places.

We have previously seen what the veil and the hanging at the entrance of the tabernacle mean. The gate has the same significance. They represent Christ in the various characters of His Person; He is the One presented to the inquiring soul who says, I would love to draw near to the courts of the Lord's house; I would love to share with His people. How can I do so? What attainments must I have to fit me for it? And the answer is the broad invitation of the Lord Jesus Himself: "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Here is an invitation that meets man just where he is, in his place of distance; it shows him God's way to draw near, through the gate—through Christ. There, facing the sinner, is the gateway: "I am the Door," says Christ, "by Me if any man enter in, he shall be saved;" and "him that cometh unto Me, I will in no wise cast out."

That is the great truth of the first gateway—apart even, so far, from the understanding of the work of Christ. It is not necessary that one could explain just how Christ saves. It is not our knowledge that saves us; it is not how He does it; but the first great thing before a sinner is, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," and he as a sinner draws near through the gateway that is open wide for every one that will come. Thus he finds himself, through faith, a member of the company of God's people, and able to enter into their joys, to understand something of the happiness that fills their hearts—the happy company that is journeying on to glory into the manifest presence of God.

Here, alas, most people stop. They think this is all there is in our approach unto God—the knowledge of salvation through faith in the Lord Jesus; they go perhaps through life with little more knowledge than this.

We can thank God for that much; for it is not the amount of our knowledge that saves, but the One in whom our faith is. Faith may not be very clear or very strong, but if it is in the right Object, if it has linked us with Christ, it puts us among the saved who have entered into His courts, and true praise will surely follow.

But now that we are inside the court the first great lesson to be learned in the way of approach practically unto God is that of “the brazen altar.” Here we learn the ground of peace; how it is that we are welcome to God through Christ; that what was so freely offered outside the gate has been so perfectly paid for inside, at the altar. Outside, it was a poor sinner, welcome to come in. Inside, we find the witness of the price that has been paid, that has opened wide the gate. This is the great truth of the altar, the truth of the cross of Christ. Well might we dwell upon it in its varied aspects as set forth in connection with its different sacrifices. It must suffice us here to say that it was at the cross that our Lord Jesus made atonement for sin.

It might be asked by one who has come to Christ: How is it that my sins could be forgiven? Here we find the divine answer: That on God’s holy Lamb our iniquities were laid: that “His own self bare our sins in His own body on the tree;” that God dealt with Him in justice, pouring out upon Him the judgment that we deserved. As our hymn expresses it:

It is when the soul enters into the truth of the cross of Christ that it has solid, assured peace—not based upon experiences or attainments or knowledge, but a peace that rests upon the finished work of Christ upon the cross. A touch of faith will save, but oh, what solid ground there is to stand upon as we know the truth of the brazen altar, the place where Christ settled every question between God and the sinner!

There is a wonderful verse in Zechariah, Ch. 6, “The counsel of peace shall be between them both.” The “both” there are God and Christ, and the counsel of peace, the terms of peace, were made between the contracting parties: God, on the one hand, with all His holy righteous demands; and, on the other hand, the Surety, the Representative of His sinful people. The chastisement of our peace was upon Him. God alone knew all that His holiness required; He knew what barrier there was between our souls and Himself; He meted out the full righteous requirements of His holiness upon our blessed Substitute, and we have our Lord’s words as to it: “It is finished”—all that was needed to bring a guilty sinner into the presence of a holy God he is forgiven, cleansed and fit for heaven.

I will ask you to notice a remarkable connection between the truths of the altar and of the mercy-seat. We pass instantly, as I may say, from the altar of burnt-offering, which speaks of the Cross, into the very presence of God at the mercy-seat in the inner sanctuary. Let us turn to a passage in the Gospel (Matt. 27:46, 50, 51) which presents this to us in a very striking way. Here we have connected with our Lord’s giving up His life on the cross (the brazen altar), the rending of the veil, that which separated God from man. The veil represented the flesh of Christ, as we know, which, in His spotless purity and perfection was a witness of the distance of all men from God. Compare men with Him; it shows how absolutely they were away from God. You will remember that upon this inner veil were cherubim, which spoke of God’s righteousness and judgment which bar the way to His presence. So, practically, as long as Christ was here in flesh, He was the judicial veil between man and God. Here was One who had access into God’s presence, who lived in the joy of that presence, a witness that men are away from God and have no right to enter into the Divine presence. The life, and words, and works of our Lord proved how everyone else was at an infinite distance from God.

How all that is changed when we come to Calvary! There we see One who, Himself sinless, was ` made sin “for us—our iniquities being laid upon Him. God dealt with His holy Son as He should deal with an unholy, guilty sinner; and when Divine Justice thus dealt with our Substitute it brought forth that fearful cry of anguish which has echoed from that day to this:” My God, My God, why halt Thou forsaken Me! “Notice, that cry reaches the very throne of God: for, “the veil of the temple was rent in twain, from the top to the bottom.” Divine holiness and righteousness were fully satisfied; the separation between man and God—God in His infinite holiness, man in his unworthiness—is removed. The way into the presence of God is thus made manifest. Through the rent veil we can draw near into His presence. This is why we have spoken of the cross and the rent veil in closest connection. The throne of judgment, which would have banished man into the outer darkness forever, becomes the sinner’s refuge, through the blood sprinkled upon and before the mercy-seat, showing that God’s claim and the sinner’s need are both fully met by the work of God’s beloved Son on the cross. In what a place of nearness to God the Cross has brought us! The line has reached from the poor sinner in his outside place to the very heart of God on His throne. Christ has opened the way, as Heb. 10:19-22 plainly declares: the veil is rent, the sanctuary is open to us.

Contrast this with what we have in the 16th of Leviticus. You will remember that after the judgment had fallen upon Nadab and Abihu for offering strange fire to God, when they dared to approach Him in a way He had not provided, God warned Aaron himself that he could draw near to Him only once a year, for a short time within the veil. Typically, it showed how sin put man at a distance from God, and that the way into the holiest was not yet made manifest. Notice, too, how he was to draw near. Everything in the type was suggestive of Christ—except that in the shadow some things are in contrast.1 The priest having laid aside his garments of glory and beauty, washed in water and clad from head to foot in spotless linen, emblematic of the purity of Christ, intensified the thought that the one approaching to God must be spotlessly clean. Then he entered with a cloud of incense; and it is repeated again and again in connection with these things, “that he die not.” To draw near to God in any other way would have meant certain death: the cloud of incense concealed him, as it were, as God looked upon the incense. Thus God smells a sweet fragrance of Christ’s infinite preciousness while we draw near.

The priest thus was a type of Christ in His spotless purity, entering in, not once every year, but once for all, in the holy place. It was the blood of the sin-offering which the priest carried within the veil and sprinkled seven times before the mercy-seat, and once upon it: once is sufficient for the majesty of God, while there is a seven-fold perfection of standing for us by the sprinkled blood before the throne.

The priest has entered in, and sprinkled the blood in God’s presence; he comes out now and makes atonement, as Scripture says, for all that has been in connection with the guilty people. All these things are typical of how the work of Christ brings nigh and makes possible God’s dwelling with His people.

But we must touch upon some essential truths connected with the value of the cross. First, there must be practical fitness in drawing near to God. This brings us to the truth of “the laver” which stands between the altar of burnt-offering and the tabernacle. The laver, filled with water, is first of all typical of the washing of new birth. It is utterly impossible for an unregenerate man to enter into God’s presence. He could not be happy there. He needs, first of all, to be born again, though he may not necessarily learn it first. If one asks: How can I be sure that I have been born again, that I have passed from death unto life, and am fit for the presence of God?

The simple answer is, Have you accepted Christ? You remember our Lord's words in John 5:24: "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth My word, and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation, but is passed from death unto life." Thus the way is clearly stated. Christ being received by faith, we have passed out of death into life. We have had the washing of regeneration and the renewing of the Holy Ghost. This is the first great truth which the laver conveys.

But not only does the laver speak of regeneration, which is once for all, but it speaks of the daily cleansing by the word of God, morally to fit us to enjoy His holy presence.

We know too well that one who has entered the gate by faith in Christ, who knows the value of the sacrifice offered upon the brazen altar, who has had a knowledge of the rent veil and the mercy-seat, may allow the soil of this world, the corruption of his own nature, to come in and hinder all his enjoyment. Alas, it is possible for a child of God to wander far from Him; for the joy of communion to become a thing of the past; for the joy of holiness to be forgotten for the time, and the soul to be in that state where it cannot enjoy God, and yet cannot rest satisfied in the world, and in sin. There is a longing desire in the heart to turn again to God, to find His grace which once was known and rejoiced in. Thank God, He has provided for the restoration of His wandering children, even as He has provided for the salvation of the sinner at a distance from Him. The laver is the word of God which brings to mind our sin, which reminds us of our alienation of heart: that holy Word is used by the Spirit of God to bring home our condition, to lead us to confess our sin, our wandering, and to turn to the God against whom we have sinned. We come then as children to a Father, owning that which has separated us in heart from Him, and we find how perfectly our Lord Jesus restores. If salvation is free, restoration is free. It means simply letting the Word search us and try us; it brings us into God's presence, there to own our condition, our wandering from Him. There, defilement is confessed and judged; that which had prevented our enjoyment of God is now gone and, with the freshness of first love restored, we can enter the tabernacle and enjoy ministry at the altar of incense.

That brings us to the hanging at the tabernacle entrance, of which I have not yet spoken. What then is this gateway? It speaks again of Christ. He is the Door. No matter where you are in your experience, Christ is always the next step. And so this hanging at the door of the tabernacle speaks to us of Christ, and declares that the only way for heavenly enjoyment and worship is through Christ. We have this emphasized for us in the epistle to the Hebrews, Ch. 13:15, "By Him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips, confessing His name." By Him we enter into the sanctuary practically, and enjoy its privileges.

Look at it again for a moment. Christ, the gateway whereby a poor sinner comes to God; Christ, the doorway whereby a saint enters into the sanctuary; Christ, as the veil rent whereby we approach the presence of God and have boldness to stand before Him.

That brings us to the last great truth of access, the truth of the altar of incense, on this straight line from the gate to the throne, I have already alluded to the fact that the altar of incense was not provided for until the priesthood had been spoken of. There could be no true worship of God apart from priestly service, so that it fits beautifully with what we are dwelling upon. We have seen how the cross of Christ has rent the veil that barred the way into the presence of God, and made the holy and most holy places into one grand chamber. In fact, that word in Hebrews is not merely "boldness to enter into the holiest," as though it were the inner sanctuary, but it is to enter into "the holy places," where God is manifested, enjoyed, and worshiped. As long as the veil was unrent, the altar of incense was outside the veil, but with the veil rent, it stands right before the mercy-seat; that shows what is our privileged place and occupation.

The golden altar of incense is typical of the worship of the believer. You cannot be enjoying the presence of God without being a worshiper, and that is the service at the golden altar. The material for praise is Christ Himself. Our praise is not our happy feelings; not anything of our own that we bring to God; but the worship we bring is the fragrance of Christ's precious name: and that not as the ground of our acceptance, but as that which is infinitely precious to God.

Take the Lord's Day, for instance, with all its privileges; if we have been in communion with the Lord, gathered at His table with thanksgiving and worship poured out unto Him, is it not deepest enjoyment? But have we exhausted the theme? Do we cease because we have had sufficient? I am sure we would love to continue the out-pouring of worship with thanksgiving, confessing to God the preciousness of Christ. But being in the body, under limitations speedily reached, the special seasons of our united worship are justly limited. But is there ever a limit to the preciousness of Christ to God? Everywhere and at all times we are privileged to be offering the sacrifice of praise unto God, "the fruit of our lips confessing His name."

This spontaneous, free and full-hearted worship settles the great question of what is the occupation of heaven? What is heaven? Is it the street of gold? the river of water of life? the magnificence of the place? These are the outward display, the outward accompaniments of heaven. What is it that makes heaven actually that? In one word, it is that "God and the Lamb" are there. It is access to God visibly, which now is only by faith. What is the occupation of heaven? Joy and praise, surely, and a place for service as well. All our ransomed powers will be happily employed there. Perfect intelligence as well as perfect bodies will be fully in exercise. But what is it that gives fragrance to all there-that makes heaven the place of unsullied, unspeakable delight? It is that worship permeates it all. We still serve, and shall worship as we serve. We shall have communion and intercourse with one another, but all that will simply lead to fresh delight and worship—not a distraction to turn from one occupation to another, but all rendered fragrant by the sweet savor of Christ unceasingly.

This is a test for our communion here. If heaven is such a place of worship, what about our life on earth? Our hands may be employed—as they should be; we may have to do with men of the world, and all that, but underneath all, yes, connected with it all, is the sweet fragrance of Christ to God, in connection with the faith of His saints in communion with Himself.

Here, then, is approach to God. Would that one could speak more worthily of such a theme, but the truth of it is thus before us: Christ, the Truth, the Way, the Life; Christ the Way for the sinner in his sins, when he turns to God; Christ the Way for the saint to enjoy the privileges of communion. Christ by His death bringing us into the presence of God; Christ on the cross the foundation of our peace; Christ as the laver to cleanse His disciples' feet, fitting them to enjoy that communion which God craves for all His people.

Let it be a straight path for us ever. Let it be a beaten path for us as priests to enter the sanctuary of God with thanksgiving, praise, and worship; then out to the world with the word of invitation to our fellow-men, witnessing to them that they are as welcome to come as we ourselves, who have found a welcome to the bosom of Christ Himself!

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