

God's Strict Holiness

Is Near Enough Good Enough?

"Near enough" is an expression that can sum up the approach of many people to matters of faith and ethics. There is an assumption that the Bible was written for days long ago, when people did not have electrical power and everything else, and that the Bible is long outdated. The recently proposed steps toward a super-church by a gradual merging of the Anglican and Uniting churches, together with the Lutheran Church of Australia, could not proceed without compromising the doctrinal positions of the existing churches. Many people, mostly at a distance from a Christian church, have the view that they may safely choose a religion for themselves that suits their particular preferences. In ethics few people think of some actions as categorically forbidden. Multiculturalism is a popular phrase that covers toleration and relativism. Some people vaunt their "alternative life styles" without a thought about God's commandments, His holiness, or His coming judgment. Although advances in technology today affect many aspects of our lives, human beings have not advanced morally. For all our squeamishness, the twentieth century saw more people killed in two world wars than in any previous century. Our newspapers and electronic media also keep before us all the violence, murder, unfaithfulness, and selfish greed of our present generation.

A look at the books of Exodus and Leviticus reveals a God who is holy and exact. The Israelites heard God's voice give them the Ten Commandments against the background of thunder and lightning flashes, a heavy cloud over Mount Sinai, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people trembled. God's instructions for the building of the tabernacle were extremely detailed. Moses was punctilious. His record in the later chapters of Exodus of the construction of the tabernacle repeats the very phrases and details recorded in earlier chapters, which God had given him on the mountain. There are repeated statements that the workers complied with God's instructions to the letter. At the conclusion, Moses recorded, "The Israelites did everything exactly as the LORD had commanded Moses."

We are probably impressed today with the expense and beauty of the tabernacle and its equipment. For example, the curtain at the entrance of the tent, according to God's instructions, was of purple wool, wool dyed with maroon, crimson material, and twisted fine linen, worked by a weaver of coloured fabric. In Exodus and Leviticus there are surprisingly few reasons given for why things were made as they were, and for the elaborate sacrificial arrangements. If we reflect about this, we see the reasons for design and accuracy. The tabernacle in its functions must have resembled a slaughterhouse. Today, with our squeamish attitudes, we easily ignore that God's choice of reddish colours fitted what was done there. Today we do not like the thought of blood-spattered material. If a priest committed a thoughtless sin, much depended in the making atonement on what was done with the blood. It had to be sprinkled over the curtain at the entrance to the holy place. It had to be daubed on the horns of the bronze altar, and sprinkled all around against its sides. What was left of it was poured out at the base of the altar. We think: "All that blood! There must have been a drain for it to run away! No wonder that there were provisions for a basin for the priests to wash in, and for the use of incense!" We muse about God's calling the burning of kidneys and fat a "soothing aroma." God's strict holiness instilled fear. Hardly had the sacrificial system begun, when two of Aaron's sons were killed for using fire from the wrong source. Today we would be likely to think, "It was fire. Surely it could not make so much difference where it came from!"

Then there was the expense. Today we hear reports on the fluctuations in the price of gold, recorded in ounces. Moses recorded, "The total amount of gold, that is, the gold that was contributed and used for all the work of the holy place weighed one thousand and twenty three kilograms and seven hundred and sixty grams, according to the monetary weight used in the holy place." Wait a minute! That is over a tonne of gold, to say nothing of the even greater amount of silver, over three and a half tonnes!

God made provision for different sacrifices to make atonement for sins by different people, a priest, a tribal leader, and the common people. He always prescribed whether a sacrificial animal had to be male or female, and it always had to be without blemish. The sins were regularly specified with reference to God's commandments. We read a passage like this, for example: "When anyone sins thoughtlessly and does something that is forbidden in one of the commandments of the LORD, if the anointed priest sins and brings guilt on the people, he shall, for his sin, which he has committed, offer to the LORD a young bull without blemish as a sin-offering." We see in all this the holiness and the exactness of the Lord.

Where the Law of God is applied in slovenly fashion, the Gospel suffers. There is another side to all this, which presents God's mercy and compassion in sharp relief. The provision for the tabernacle came soon after the Israelites' worship of the golden calf. God was compassionate in relenting from His fierce anger, at Moses'

intercession. The legislation that affected many aspects of the Israelites' lives repeatedly showed God's compassion. For example, "If you indeed take your neighbour's cloak as security, you shall give it back to him before the sun goes down. For that is his only covering in which to wrap his skin. What else can he sleep in? When he cries to Me for help, I shall hear, because I am compassionate. "

Much more than this, God's detailed plans for the tabernacle are later taken up in the temples of Solomon and Herod. The measurements are reflected in the priest Ezekiel's detailed description of a temple, from Ezekiel chapter 40 on. Still more, they point Christians forward to the heavenly tabernacle, of which the Letter to the Hebrews speaks.

The coming of the incarnate Son of God fulfilled the whole sacrificial system of the Old Covenant. The two copies of the Law of God were inside the Ark of the Covenant, and on the Day of Atonement the priest sprinkled blood particularly on the "mercy seat", or the "propitiatory cover." The propitiatory cover of the Ark of the Covenant has its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. The sprinkling of His blood has stilled the accusations of the Law of God. He is the Propitiation. Paul wrote, in Romans, "They are justified freely by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God has publicly displayed Him as the atonement cover through faith in His blood, to show His righteousness, because the sins that had been committed in the past He had let go unpunished, in His patience. God has done this to show His righteousness at the present time, that He may be righteous, and the One who declares righteous the person who believes in Jesus." Here is the meeting between God's strict, holy justice and His mercy. It is evident in the cost, the atoning death of His own Son. The enormous cost of the tabernacle in the wilderness pales into insignificance in comparison with this cost.

We should read Exodus and Leviticus with an eye on Christ, their fulfilment. He is the true Passover Lamb, which has brought freedom from sin and death. He is the fulfilment of all those animal sacrifices. The very repetition of them, as Hebrews points out, shows that they did not permanently take away sin. They pointed forward to His one sacrifice. There are other important things. The rest of the blood of various kinds of sacrifices was poured out at the base of the bronze altar. When Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper, he made pointed use of the expression "poured out." "He took a cup and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you. For this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" He gives the meaning of His death.

Many things in the Old Covenant have been superseded. Even the Israelis of today, who still vainly look for their Messiah, no longer have many features of the Old Covenant. They have no temple, no priesthood, and no daily sacrifices. We have the great privilege of seeing God's grand and exact design fulfilled in the obedient life and death of His Son for our sakes. Because of what He has done, we know that our sin has been atoned for, and that in God's sight, through faith in Him, we are righteous and holy.