Hi,

Today is the fortieth of these emails. In the Bible “forty” usually conveys a period of hardship, affliction, and even punishment. I think we might all feel that way about this particular “forty.” But on we go, with Christ in our hearts!

Here are today’s updates:

* In my noon Sunday class, I’m beginning a series titled, *God and the Virus*, in which we will be looking at the theological, pastoral, and personal challenges posed by a pandemic. As always, it will be on my personal Facebook page.
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org/). All of this week’s videos and podcasts have been posted.
* Keep sending in those movie and book recommendations.

Across human history, cultures have used sacrifices, esp. blood sacrifices, to turn aside the wrath of the gods from human wrongdoing. A mysterious illness sweeping through every town and village (sound familiar?) is a great example. Somebody or many somebodies must have displeased the gods, so a sacrifice is offered. (There’s a commercial out now where a poor soul is going to jump into fire to make it rain -- selling insurance, I think.) God gave the Israelites a sacrificial system of their own, not as a permanent solution to the problem of human sinfulness, but more as a temporary bridge to the ultimate high priest and the worthiest of all sacrifices: Jesus. Today and tomorrow we are going to look at sacrifice.

***Leviticus 1:1-9 (NRSV)***

**The Lord summoned Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When any of you bring an offering of livestock to the Lord, you shall bring your offering from the herd or from the flock.**

**If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, you shall offer a male without blemish; you shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, for acceptance in your behalf before the Lord. You shall lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be acceptable in your behalf as atonement for you. The bull shall be slaughtered before the Lord; and Aaron’s sons the priests shall offer the blood, dashing the blood against all sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. The burnt offering shall be flayed and cut up into its parts. The sons of the priest Aaron shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange the parts, with the head and the suet, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; but its entrails and its legs shall be washed with water. Then the priest shall turn the whole into smoke on the altar as a burnt offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord.**

You might never have heard a single sermon on Leviticus chapter 1. The only reading from Leviticus in the Revised Common Lectionary is from chapter 19, regarding loving one’s neighbor. In contrast to that, this passage from Leviticus is just . . . well . . . gross. There is nothing in our lives that prepares us for this, no point of reference. In fact, like the preparers of the Lectionary, we’d probably prefer to skip it, seeing nothing here of value for our own day, our own lives. But when we commit to being biblically-based, we don’t get to skip parts. This is all Scripture, inspired by God and given to us so that we might come to know God. Granted, though all Scripture is equally inspired, it is not all equally useful. But, surprisingly, even in passages like today’s, we can find important insights into God’s nature and our own.

*God calls to Moses -- again*

As told in Exodus, God has decided to dwell among his people and given them instructions to build a suitable place, a tabernacle. The divine presence of God, the *Shekinah*, rests above the ark of the covenant inside the “tent of meeting,” where God’s will is revealed to the people through Moses.

As Leviticus opens, God summons Moses to the tent. This is only the third occasion that God has “called to” Moses: first, at the burning bush (Exodus 3:4); then at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:3); and now from the tent. Notice that God does not command that the offering ritual be performed. God simply says that when the people do make an offering, it is to be done in a certain way. The covenant relationship entered into by God and the people at Mt. Sinai is two-way. It is a matter of the heart, of desire, not of requirement or demand.

There is another general instruction here that is revealing. The animal to be sacrificed must come from the herd or flock (verse 2). Why? Walter Kaiser, Jr., notes several reasons why wild animals were not to be used in the offerings of the Israelites. Wild animals are not taken from one’s own possessions. Only what costs the offerer something can be given. King David said, “I will not sacrifice to the Lord my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing” (2 Samuel 24:24, NIV). Further, only perfect animals can be given. If the Israelites make an offering, it is to be the very best from their herds and flocks.

But even more about God is revealed in this burnt offering. The explicit purpose of the sacrifice is to make atonement for the offerer (verse 4). God’s acceptance of the sacrifice means that God and the offerer are again “at one.” The offerer’s sin has been cleansed and God’s wrath averted. How? By substitution. The purpose of the laying on of hands (verse 4) is to transfer the sin and impurities of the offerer to the animal. As Kaiser notes, there is more to this than a simple transfer, “it is just as if the person who brings the offering dies.”

*Shadows and signs*

Even these brief observations about the burnt offerings in Leviticus ought to help us understand why the New Testament writers used so much of the OT imagery to make sense of Jesus’ crucifixion.

Despite their usefulness and importance in shaping the Israelites as God’s people, the blood sacrifices were mere shadows or types, pointing us toward Jesus. The sacrifices were not reality, they only pointed us to reality. An offering freely made. An animal without blemish. An offering that costs. An offering of life itself. A substitute in our place. Without Leviticus, what sense would we make of John the Baptist when he refers to Jesus as the lamb that takes away the sin of the world? Would we appreciate Isaiah’s depiction of a suffering servant like a lamb being led to slaughter (see Isaiah 53)? Without Leviticus, what image would be at the center of our rose window? The slaughter of the Passover Lamb (Exodus 12) prepared the Israelites for the burnt offerings of Leviticus. And the sacrifices in Leviticus prepare us for the cross.

Further, the burnt offerings of Leviticus enable us to understand Paul when he urges believers to offer their bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God (Romans 12:1). This is a call to total commitment. Just as the burnt offering was totally consumed on the altar, our whole selves, every last bit, are to be at God’s disposal. On to Jesus and the book of Hebrews tomorrow.

*A bit more: the theology of Leviticus in a few sentences*

The theme of Leviticus is expressed in 20:26, “You are to be holy to me because, I, the Lord, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own.” To speak of God as holy is to refer to (1) God’s *separation* from his creation and (2) God’s *moral* character.

The first part of Leviticus (chapters 1-16) speaks to the gulf, the separation, between God and humanity. How can an unholy people approach a holy God? As Kaiser writes, “A holy God graciously provides these rituals to make it possible for mere mortals, who are also sinners, to walk in fellowship with one who is pure.” The rituals are foreign to us. They seem distasteful and even bizarre. But it is important to appreciate that such rituals were commonplace among the religions of the ancient Near East. God taught them about holiness using words and rituals that they could understand.

The second half of Leviticus (chapters 17-26) focuses on moral character. Our character is to reflect God’s character. Every thought, word, and deed that makes up our lives are to be grounded in mercy, kindness, and grace. It surprises people to discover that when Jesus says “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (see Matthew 22:34-40), he is quoting from Leviticus 19:18.

*Movie recommendation*

A few years ago, I saw *Sunset Boulevard* for the first time. Gloria Swanson is mesmerizing as Norma Desmond. The film is #16 on the AFI list of the 100 best movies. If you’ve never seen it, find it. In fact, I may have to watch it again!

*Book recommendation*

Here’s a book that I didn’t think I would like at all: *The Year of Living Biblically* by A.J. Jacobs. But it surprised me. The book is a memoir of sorts, telling the story of Mr. Jacob’s attempt to live out all the details of the Law of Moses for one year. It is quite funny and not the least disrespectful. It would interesting to talk to the author and ask him what “stuck.”

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott