

Leviticus 21 (21) – Ugly, Weak, & Unwanted

Have you ever felt like you aren't good enough? Maybe you've felt like you didn't belong in a certain crowd or in some situation. You weren't smart enough, strong enough, wealthy enough, pretty enough, cool enough, spiritual enough, or just not enough. Most of us have known what that feels like. Maybe some of us know that feeling all too well.

What if it was more than a feeling, though? What if you were actually told that you're not good enough? And what if everyone else knew you're not good enough? And what if all of this was because there was some standard that you obviously could never meet? So that, no matter what you could do or say, no matter how good you could get, you could never be good enough. How would that affect your attitude? How would that shape your life?

Let's take this even further. What if you weren't allowed to do something important, but other family members or loved ones were? And what if it was God who told other people to exclude you? Wouldn't it seem as if God didn't want you, or didn't love you? How would that make you feel about God?

We like to think that all people are created equal. But sometimes people are disadvantaged because of something they have no control over. They're not included, not invited, not important, not welcome. It's probably the worst feeling you can have. To feel unlovable and unloved. Especially if you think you are unloved by God. But the Bible gives you hope. God loves you.

Let's read Leviticus 21:16-24. Now, this passage seems to exclude some people from hope. But God uses this to actually give you even more hope. But you have to dig into it. Because there is a question that immediately arises. Why did God prevent Israelites with a blemish from approaching the altar? These "blemishes" are described in terms of physical abnormalities. Is God saying that some people are worthy enough to worship, but some of us are not? And is God saying that our worthiness is based upon physical appearance, or physical attributes? I hope not!

Still, look at the list from vs.18-20. You can't approach God if you're blind, or if you can't walk, or if your face has a scar, or if your body is out of proportion. You can't come to the altar if you have a bad foot, or a bad hand, or your back isn't straight, or your eyes aren't clear, or if you've got a rash, or scabs, or your private parts don't work. That covers a lot of people.

And oh, yeah, I see one more. I see where it says "dwarf", and since I am very short, I want to know if that means me. So, I look at the word in Hebrew and it seems to mean any kind of small, or maybe even some types of skinny, or someone who is frail. Well, I may not fit the skinny profile anymore, but I'm still small. So, I would be in the excluded list. I wouldn't be able to sacrifice at the altar. It makes me feel like God doesn't want my worship.

I hate feeling excluded because someone else says I don't fit in. I've had to deal with that a lot in this world. But with God?! For my worship?! How can this be right?! Is God saying it's right that I don't get the blessings others do? Even when it's not my fault? And there is nothing I can do about it? Am I missing something here? Does God exclude some of us based on looks, or physical attributes? It sure seems like he does.

What is God saying to me? To you. About all of us? How can this not cause me to compare myself with other people? And wouldn't this cause some people to be puffed up with pride, as if they are better than you, and special to God? Isn't this just like the world thinks? Like I'm a born loser. Didn't Jesus warn about this in the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector?

I don't like feeling ugly. And now it seems like God is telling me I'm ugly. And it's like he's saying that he doesn't want ugly. This kind of thing can really hurt your feelings and mess with your mind and make you think wrong thoughts about God. However, this seemingly strange and cruel and hurtful passage is actually very beautiful. And God uses beauty to show us himself. God wants us to want beauty. But he wants us to want beauty in a far greater way than just the physical beauty of people or places or things. Don't settle for temporary beauty. God wants more for you.

You know, some of these sacrifices of worship in the Old Testament required unblemished animals as well as unblemished people. But here's the thing. It wasn't that the unblemished animals or unblemished people were so beautiful. It is that Jesus Christ is so beautiful. Only he can offer the true sacrifice you need. And only he can be that true sacrifice itself.

This exclusion is a picture of the Gospel. It points to our sin; we are all blemished. And it points to Jesus Christ, our redeemer, who is without blemish, and who saves us from our sin. So, let's explore and explain that, so you can see the beauty when something or someone is called ugly, weak, and unwanted. Because Jesus takes what is ugly, weak, and unwanted, and makes it beautiful and beloved in the eyes of God.

So, the first thing you need to see about this exclusion is that almost everybody was excluded to start with. Vs.21 starts with, "*No man of the offspring of Aaron the priest*". Only men were to offer the sacrifices. And only men who were in the family line of Aaron the priest could offer sacrifices. So, that means no women, and almost no men, either. And then, after those qualifications, it says in vs.21 that no one *who has a blemish* would be allowed to come to the altar to make an offering. They could be a priest, but they could not make a sacrifice on the altar of fire. They could not serve in the Tabernacle, the place of formal worship. They weren't good enough.

Of course, almost everyone was excluded to begin with. But imagine being in the family line of priests, and not being allowed to serve or worship in the Tabernacle. It's like if you went to school, got good grades, worked hard, you had the background, and the talent, but you were excluded. Wow, how would you deal with that? A perpetual hurt from God.

And the question remains. Why were priests with physical blemishes prohibited from offering sacrifices in the OT? Imagine how it must have felt to be in the priesthood but prevented from participating. So, how can we take comfort and be encouraged by this? Because the truth is that we all have issues. How can this picture become such a blessing to us?

One of the blessings of being an unblemished priest was that you got to make those sacrifices. But another blessing was that you got to eat the food from the sacrifice. Now look at vs.22. The disqualified priests didn't get to make the sacrifices, but they still got to share in the benefits of those sacrifices. They were also an important part of the picture, the part that reflects you and me in our sin. But we still get the blessing. Christ is the only true and lasting and once for all sacrifice for sin. And we get to feed on him.

So, the animals offered for sacrifice had to be the best of what the people had. And only the priests who didn't have a blemish could offer those sacrifices. But let's dig deeper. Because there is something else to see that is very important. In the sacrificial worship, the priests were not just to prepare the *offering*. They were also to prepare *themselves*. You see the very detailed regulations for the priests in Leviticus 8-9. And here is the point. All of this was looking forward to the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. You see, the prohibition against those with physical defects reflected the need to be free from spiritual defect when coming to God. But no priest was perfect. This is why all the washings and details and such were part of their preparation. And those priests had to repeat those sacrifices over and over.

Look at vs.23. It is not as if only the beautiful people or the cool kids are good enough to approach God. No, this is about Jesus as our Great High Priest, and the Lamb of God without spot or blemish. Jesus was the perfect priest, and also the perfect sacrifice. Once for all. As Hebrews 7:26-28 says – *For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. As Hebrews 10:11-12 says – ...every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But...Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins...And Hebrews 10:14 says – ...by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. It's all about Jesus.*

It isn't that those priests without the blemishes were somehow better than those who did have blemishes. It is that those physical blemishes pointed to the moral and spiritual blemishes that everyone has. We all have blemishes. We are all ugly and weak. Only Jesus isn't. And only Christ could make the sacrifice for sin and be the sacrifice we need as only he has no moral or spiritual blemish. Only Jesus can take us and make us acceptable to God.

This is why we make our prayers and our offerings and our worship of any kind in the name of Christ, our Great High Priest. The exclusion of those blemished priests was no bar to fellowship with God, only a bar against the public service of God in the Tabernacle itself. But now, every Christian has direct access to the presence of God through the person of Jesus Christ.

When Jesus ministered on earth as our high priest, he healed the sick, opened the eyes of the blind, and the ears of the deaf, made the lame to walk, and raised the dead. Those earthly, temporary, physical healings were signs. They were signs that pointed to the greater, eternal healing. Those with blemishes are not barred from the presence of God. Rather, they are brought into the presence of God and redeemed. Hallelujah!

We all have moral and spiritual blemishes. No one is perfect. Everyone has sin. So, we don't have what it takes to make the sacrifice. But we get to share in the blessings of the sacrifice. We don't participate in the sacrificial action. But we partake in the sacrificial benefits. If you are a Christian.

Did you know that Jesus wasn't physically beautiful? Isaiah 53:2 says that Jesus *had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him*. Isaiah 53:3 says – *He was despised and rejected by men...and we esteemed him not*. Jesus wasn't physically beautiful, but he was morally and spiritually beautiful. He was absolutely perfect, and the only one who ever really was or could be. That's the point. Those unblemished priests with those unblemished animals were only a shadow of the substance. They had no redeeming qualities. All of us need a redeemer. A Christian's identity is centered in Christ, not in ourselves.

Still, I wonder about those excluded priests. It was still like they belonged but didn't belong. How did those who may have known to look forward to the Messiah but who still were presently excluded take comfort in this? And how do we do so when we are excluded in some way but other people aren't? How do you fight the envy (I wish I had what they have)? How do you fight the jealousy (they have what I ought to have)? By faith, that's how. By faith that whatever your role may be, and whatever other labels people put on you, it doesn't stop you from tasting the goodness of God.

Christian, you may be limited from serving in some way. But you are still beautiful to God, and beloved by God. Because when God sees you, he sees you in Jesus. And he is making you into the image of Jesus. And one day, you will be exactly like Jesus, perfect in your character.

We are no longer under the Old Covenant. But what about our sacrifices, our worship, in the New Covenant? What are you supposed to do?

The New Testament speaks about us as a kingdom of priests to God (Revelation 1:6). But the sacrifices we bring are not animals. Romans 12:1 says we should give our *bodies* as a living sacrifice, which is our spiritual worship. 1 Peter 2:5 says that the people of God "*are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*" Hebrews 12:28 says – *Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe.* Hebrews 13:15-16 specifies those spiritual sacrifices – *Through him (Jesus) then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.*

All Christians have been ushered into the Holy of Holies. We are always in the presence of God for worship. And our offerings of praise, and our giving of ourselves and our substance, these are acts of worship. What a privilege! May we be faithful to such an awesome responsibility, the priestly ministry of offering spiritual sacrifices to God! Because Jesus has made it beautiful.