

Leviticus – Part 1

Entering God's Presence (Leviticus 1-5)

As we begin the third of the five books of the Bible, thought of as the Law, the Pentateuch, or Torah, God helps us learn what is required to go into His presence. This book immediately follows Exodus where the Tabernacle was completed, and the glory of God had filled it. God is now dwelling among His chosen people. Moses, however, was not allowed to go into the Tabernacle even though he had been regularly communing with God. Why is that? If he can't go in, how will the people live in the presence of such a holy and powerful God? How is God going to reconcile the conflict between His holy presence with the sin and corruption of His own people?

Abraham had been chosen by God to be the father of His people. He gave him an everlasting covenant that would be to him and his seed forever. (Gen. 17:7). His people became slaves in Egypt, but God redeemed them and brought them out of bondage like He has redeemed us from the bondage of sin. (Ex. 20:2). Now that God has redeemed Israel, they are expected to be holy, set apart, a people worthy of Him—a new normal. “You shall be holy unto Me, for I the LORD your God am holy, and have severed you from other people that ye should be Mine” (Lev. 20:26;19:2)—a key verse in understanding Leviticus. He expects the same from us as His children.

Leviticus is laid out in a unique symmetrical design. The outer chapters (1-7 and 23-25) are the ritualistic sacrifices that Israel had to practice to come into the presence of God's holiness. The inner sections (8-10 and 21-22) focus on the role of Israel's priests as mediators between God and Israel. Inside of that section are two matching sections (11-15 and 18-20) that focus on Israel's purity. In the center (16-17) is the key, the Day of Atonement, which brings everything all together. The book concludes with Moses calling Israel to be faithful to the covenant. (26-27).

Although Leviticus bears the name of the priestly tribe of Levi, in the Hebrew scrolls it means, “The LORD called” or “The LORD summoned” as we see in the first words of the book. God is calling His people to approach and relate to Him as He lives among them. He wants us to be His, but we must do so on His terms. In this “Book of Rules,” God gives laws regarding diet, sacrifice, and social behavior, and instructions to the Levites on how to handle the Tabernacle and the priestly duties. The book of Leviticus was the first book studied by a Jewish child because it was filled with rules that the ancient Israelites believed they had to follow to be close to their God.

Many of us, though, avoid reading it because it doesn't seem to apply to us. However, this couldn't be further from the truth. Within its pages we discover the holiness, or sanctification—the separateness, distinction, and “otherness”—of God. Sin devastated humanity's relationship with their Creator, but God shows us through pictures and shadows how we can be brought back to a wholeness, a oneness, with Him.

Knowing this, we should approach the book in a far different thought process than thinking it is unimportant because it's about stuff we no longer do. If it is about how we are to approach God and relate to Him, there surely must be something here that applies to us. This should be just as important now as it was in Moses' day.

I. The Foundation

Not a lot of “story” happens in Leviticus. The people remain camped at Mt. Sinai throughout the book and won’t resume their journey to the Promised Land until we reach the book of Numbers. Their journey will be completed in the book of Joshua. Exodus has shown God’s holiness on a grand scale (plagues, parting the Red Sea, etc.), but as we continue our Walk Through the Word in Leviticus, we will see it in fine detail. The foundation for coming into God’s presence has been laid in the Tabernacle and now His expectations and practical applications are ready to be put into practice so they may appropriately worship and dwell with Him.

While it is a very different type of book than the first two we’ve studied, it should not be considered boring—bloody definitely, but not boring. Sacrifices naturally make this apparent. The men who performed the duties of priests were “he-man,” not sissies. It took a lot of strength to handle those bulls, to keep the animals corralled and sacrifice them, let alone having to carry all the Tabernacle pieces from place to place, tear down and put them back together. It also took a lot for a man, and a woman that supported him, to be in the society of Jerusalem. Life wasn’t easy on anyone in a society that was surrounded by idolators, so while this book with its blood and gore might appeal more to a guy than a woman, it is just as important for us as it is for them.

This book is prophetic; it points us to Jesus more than many other books of Scripture. Its sacrificial nature also makes it a worshipping book as it lays out the specific details, the how and what, of the sacrifices. Additionally, it is a costly book because they were bringing the very best of their herds, their flocks, their birds, and their harvests. They were also giving the best of their time during the festivals and feasts. To them, it wasn’t a ho-hum, here-we-go-again worship, it was intense. To be part of true Israelite society required holiness.

Holiness, to be set apart, is foundational for understanding Leviticus. God is set apart from all things because of His unique role as Creator, the author of life itself. Since He is holy, when He takes up His abode in person, the space around Him also becomes holy and set apart because His presence permeates everything around Him with His life, power, and purity. God wants Israel to live in His presence and represent Him on earth, but to do that, they must become holy by dealing with their sin.

Most of us may associate holiness with religious solemnity, a stick-in-the-mud, or a perpetually frowning old person, but that is not how the Bible describes it. In Psalm 29:2, it says we are to “worship the Lord in the *beauty* of holiness.” That doesn’t fit our mental picture at all! Holiness actually means “wholeness, the state of being complete.” God says that He is whole, complete, perfect, without blemish. He lives in harmony with Himself with none of the inner conflicts we experience. He is filled with joy, love, and peace; He lives in wholeness. God sees sinful man, although still in His *image*, needs to be remade because his *likeness to God* has been destroyed. Then, He looks at our messed-up lives, and says, “You, too, shall be whole.”

As we begin, God has given the unholy Israelites a way to address their sin and help them to interact with God, to get back to what was lost in Eden. Three things were required: 1) the right meeting space; 2) the right sacrifice, and 3) the right priesthood. All the rescue and redemption of Israel from Egypt, all the commandments and laws, all the instructions for the Tabernacle and priesthood that were found in Exodus have been preparing Israel for Leviticus.

II. *The Right Meeting Space*

This may seem a little odd, but coming into God's presence requires a meeting space. Sacrifices and the priesthood would have meant nothing without God's intention to dwell in the Tabernacle. This was the meeting space that God had sanctioned. Just as He had made Eden to meet with man and descended Mt. Sinai to meet with Moses, He has designed the Tabernacle as the meeting place for man. Since it was patterned after God's throne room, it brings with it the idea that this was the one space on earth where God and man could fully interact at this time.

John wrote that this would change again because, "The Word [Jesus] became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14). This makes Jesus the new "tabernacle" or meeting space that allowed man to come into God's presence. When Jesus died, the veil of the Temple was ripped in two from top to bottom, opening the replacement path to God's presence for us through the blood of His Son.

III. *The Right Sacrifice*

Moses' inability to enter the Tabernacle pictures the relational rift between God and Israel. In the very first verse, God reminds us of this problem when "The LORD called to Moses from the tent..." (Lev. 1:1). No longer is God meeting on Mt. Sinai in thunders, lightnings, and a thick cloud, but in the dwelling place that was prepared for Him. God desires that these selfish, rebellious people be reconciled to Him and live in His holy presence and graciously provides a way for this to happen.

God is "calling" to Moses, not just speaking to him, because this is a special communication. On only two other occasions is this word used with Moses. In Exodus 3:4, God called to Moses from the burning bush to deliver the Israelites from Egypt. In Exodus 19:3 and 20, He called to Moses from the top of Mt. Sinai to give the Law to Israel. Now, God calls from the tent of meeting to give instructions for worshipping Him.

In the first 17 chapters, God establishes four elements to show how we, as sinful people, can approach Him. The first element, found in the opening chapters of Leviticus (Lev. 1-7, 16), shows that we are unworthy to come into His presence without a sacrifice. To be complete requires two essentials: love and responsibility. Without love, our perspective is distorted and injures us, leaving us incomplete. We also must have responsibility to have self-respect and self-worth. Sacrifices of animals, grain, and oil made a way to understand God's love because they show pictures of what Jesus has done for us; the responsibility of sacrifice is what we give back to Him.

The Lord begins Leviticus by calling to Moses from the Tabernacle, saying, "Speak to the Israelites and tell them: If any of you brings an offering to the LORD from the livestock, you may bring your offering from the herd or the flock..." (Lev. 1:1-2). With this statement, we see the first of five types of ritual sacrifices Israel was to perform. (Lev. 1-7). Three of them were ways an Israelite could thank God by offering back to Him symbolic tokens of what He first gave them. The other two are ways of apologizing to God. A chapter is devoted to each offering.

There is a *progression of closeness* in these sacrifices like that of the furniture in the Tabernacle setting (Ex. 39-40), creation (Gen. 1:1) and even the way our bodies are described: spirit, soul, and body (I Thess. 5:23). This may seem backwards to us, but God usually begins from His perspective, not ours. Three different approaches can be taken when looking at the purpose of these offerings: 1) they provided a way for the

Israelites to make and keep a right relationship with God; 2) they are a type of Jesus Christ and a description of His sacrifice for us; and 3) they are a pattern of our own approach to God through Christ.

When an Israelite offered up the lifeblood of an animal, their sin was acknowledged. It was clear that God would rather forgive a person than destroy them, symbolically, the animal had to die in their place and “atone” for, or literally, “cover” their sin. These rituals constantly reminded the Israelites of God’s grace; it also reminded them of His justice and the seriousness of evil and its consequences. Various aspects of Christ’s character are seen in each of the sacrifices.

The Burnt Offering (Lev. 1) was, as the name implies, to be burnt, totally consumed on the altar except the skin which the priest received for his work (Lev. 7:8). It is the first offering mentioned by name in the Bible (Gen. 8:20), and it is the most common (mentioned 197 times). It was a voluntary offering since God says “If” (v. 3). It produced a sweet savor to the Lord. Because it was totally consumed, it was a picture of a sinner’s entire surrender to God. It also showed Christ’s character as He “made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men. And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:7-8).

For offering required a male, the best you have, from the herd (bovine) (v.3-9) or flock (sheep/goats) (v. 10-13) or even from your birds (turtledoves/ pigeons) (v. 14-17). The person had to “put his hand upon the head” of the animal before killing it, as a symbol that they were transferring the guilt of their sin to the animal. The blood of the animal would make atonement, or pay the price, for their sin, and “it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.” (v. 4). By consecrating or purifying their own life this way, God was pleased, and it would be a sweet savor to Him.

The person offering the bull must personally kill it after his sin has been “transferred” to it. Aaron’s sons, the priests, were to gather the blood and “sprinkle, splatter, splash, throw” it against the sides of the altar. The ESV uses the word “throw,” a better translation than the KJV “sprinkle.” “Throw” indicates an intentional word of force, not a casual tossing since the priest would throw it from one corner to the next across the 7½’ brazen altar and then move to the opposite corner and do it again so it was spread across the altar. (Ex. 29:16). This indicated that the offerer deserved to have his blood spilled this way and was a picture of Christ’s blood that would be “poured out” for us. (Mt. 26:28).

Verse 6 says that the sacrificer then had to flay, or cut, the offering into pieces. After raising, transferring your guilt to it, and killing the animal, this would have been an emotional moment for the person offering the sacrifice. It was a time-consuming process, something intentional that required the person’s active participation.

The priests would then start their work. Everything had to be arranged just so on the wood of the fire. Parts had to be washed and then ALL of it would be burned on the altar except the skin that was given to the priests. The word “all” is significant because it is the only offering that this pertains to. ALL of it was given to God; it was a food offering that was pleasing to Him. (v. 9). This same or similar procedure was performed if it was an offering from the flock or birds, but only on a smaller scale.

Why were they allowed to sacrifice different things? It was a matter of economics. Not everyone could afford to give their one bull in sacrifice. The poor may only be able to give a turtledove, so they were allowed to choose from various animals. But the one thing you mustn't do was come empty-handed. God, in His wisdom, knew that everyone was able to give something. He wants everyone involved in worship; it is essential no matter your financial status. Remember, a bird, by the time it is divided, doesn't have a lot left to burn on the altar but God still honored its sacrifice.

The other thing we see about this offering, besides being voluntary and complete, is that it was continual. Leviticus 6 gives additional parameters and one of these is that it was the priest's job to make sure the fire never went out. That way, whenever people brought their offering, it was able to be given; it was available 24/7. Hebrews 13:15 tells us that, "By Him, therefore, let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name." Like the burnt offerings, our worship of God should never go out.

From this offering, we can learn that God inhabits unending praise, so we should be in a continual state of praise and devotion to Him, a continual lifestyle of worship and commitment to Him. Some think that we can only worship through music, but although that is important, it is really a lifestyle, giving everything we are and have to God because of everything He is and does for us. When this is our lifestyle, everything we do becomes an act of worship. The burnt offering is technically not an offering for sin, although it is an acknowledgement of our sin nature. It is more accurately a sweet savor, an offering of devotion, completely consumed by love for God.

True worship should never cease because it is Christ-centered. It is centered on our substitute because God is holy, and we are not. In the Levitical system, that substitute was an animal, but when Jesus came, that was done away with, and Jesus became the final substitute. God looked upon His sacrifice, and when Jesus said, "It is finished," God declared those who believe in Him as forever righteous. Without Jesus, we can't be holy. Without Him, there is no worship of God. Because God demands that our approach to Him must be holy, we must have Him become our substitute.

True worship demands our all, our very best just like the people brought their very best to God from their animals. It costs us something. It can't be our leftovers or what we no longer need from our finances, our relationships, our time, or our obedience. He must have the very best *first*, and we can have the rest. We must give Him our all.

Conclusion:

One further application of the burnt offering has direct ties to the believer who is trying to help someone else know or grow in the Lord. We might offer sermons, books, and classes, hoping these resources will turn these people into devoted followers of Jesus. Too often, though, we leave out the first step, which belongs to us—dying to ourselves—our thoughts, our way of life, our emotions, and our health.

Giving an offering should be given from a heart of genuine pure worship of God. He has given us everything we need (His love), so shouldn't we give ourselves back to Him (our responsibility)? What tangible, physical, concrete thing can we give back to Him? I think the Holy Spirit will tell you if you ask Him! Will you give Him your all?

Jesus said, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24). We often get the false impression that a person

can follow Jesus without first denying himself and embracing the cross, but that's like giving a burnt offering and forgetting the animal!



The Altar of Sacrifice (Leviticus Part 2)

1) Read Leviticus 6-10 and continue to fill in the chart from last time with any new information that you find in chapters 6-7. Remember to continue to highlight the phrase, “The LORD spoke to Moses” or similar as you find it.

2) What two things have you seen that were not to be eaten in the Hebrews’ diet?

3) What were the 3 primary types of peace offerings?

Lev. 7:11-15

Lev. 7:16-17

Lev. 7:28-35

4) Read Ephesians 2:11-22. How does this show how Jesus, as our peace, is like the sacrifice of Leviticus 3 and 8? What does this show that peace looks like?

List the steps that Moses took to sanctify the priests.

5) What types of sacrifices were offered during the sanctification (setting apart for service) of the priests?

6) What were the results of the sin committed by Aaron’s sons?

Conclusion:

What does it cost you to worship God? Two or three hours on Sunday and an hour on Wednesday night? Does it cost you a little time to get ready for the services? Does it cost you a little extra sleep on Sunday morning or a little less time that you would rather be cleaning the house (really???) or finding a church to attend when you go on vacation? And speaking of vacation, is that just a time when worship doesn't even enter the picture because this is time for you and your family to do "fun stuff" and not bother with God? Ouch. Some of that could hit us in places we really don't want to think about.

Let's look for a moment at what God expected these Israelites. Remember, at this point they don't yet know where they are going. They knew it as the Promised Land, and they haven't arrived there. There are about two million of them wandering in a desert land of wildernesses with little water and hardly any food if God hadn't provided it. And if you really wanted to complain...well, they did...

But God is providing everything that they could possibly need, manna and quail enough for each day, water in a dry land, shoes and clothes that never wore out, and freedom to worship Him. Shouldn't He have expected them to be thankful? Of course He should. Should He expect them to give them their best of their animals, their time, their hard-earned living, and most of all, themselves. But should this be any different for us?

Hasn't God given you everything you could possibly need? Sure, we have wants, but that's when we go to Him and converse. How many of us wouldn't even bother to pray if we didn't "want" something we thought we needed? And yet, when it comes to giving back, we skimp on our tithe if we even give any, we skip being in church faithfully because we need some "me" time, we don't bother to open our Bible unless we're at church and someone is force feeding us something from it. And to share Him with others??? Well, they might think we're weird or fanatical or something...so we don't.

Stop for just a few minutes and ask God to forgive you for your slights to Him, for not spending time with Him or being faithful in what He asks us to do. It seems that He isn't really asking much of us when you really think about committing to 7 hours a week (I allowed an hour of travel for three services and 4 hours of service) out of 168 hours He gives us each week. Even if you spent an hour a day reading and studying your Bible and in prayer, which would only give you 14 hours a week with God and that's not even 10% of our time!

Ask God to show you how to be more faithful to Him and commit to doing what He asks. "