

Old Testament Overview Leviticus

Exodus ends with the Tabernacle being built

- God's glory comes down upon the Tabernacle
- That's a sign of God's pleasure and acceptance

Then we encounter the book of Leviticus

- In some ways, it almost seems like this book is out of place in our Bibles

I would venture to say that the book of Leviticus is the most neglected book in the Bible

What are some reasons why Leviticus is so hard to understand?

- Talks about offerings (grain, peace, sin, guilt, burnt)
- No real "action"; just data and information
- Series of rules and legislation
- It doesn't follow a normal story line or narrative
- On the surface, it seems like the topics don't have much relevance to our lives

Even though Leviticus is hard to read and understand, it is still a part of our Bibles

- We must remind ourselves that it, too, is "inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16)

We need not skip the book of Leviticus, just because it is harder to understand

- It is inspired of God, and we need to take the time to dig deep into this book

Let's remind ourselves that the Torah (or Law or Pentateuch) is really one book

- Although we have it listed as five separate books, it is really "the book of Moses" (Mk 12:26)
- That certainly includes the book of Leviticus

In the Hebrew Bible, Exodus begins with the words, "And These Are the Names"¹⁵

- It was a continuation of the book of Genesis

Similarly, the book of Leviticus begins with "And He called"

- Once the Tabernacle was constructed (end of Exodus), then God could meet with Moses

¹⁵ Bruce Wilkinson & Kenneth Boa, *Talk Thru the Bible*, 13.

It may sound strange, but Leviticus actually affirms divine inspiration more than many other books of the Bible¹⁶

- 38 times this book affirms that God spoke to Moses
- This reminds us that these requirements were from God Himself, not some made-up philosophy of man

If you remember, the events in the book of Exodus covered a span of 430 years

- It began with the arrival of Jacob in Egypt (ca. 1875 B.C.)
- It ended with the building of the Tabernacle some 431 years later (ca. 1445 B.C.)

The book of Leviticus, however, covers a much smaller span of time

- Not 430 years
- But 30 days¹⁷

We get this information from two different verses

- Exodus 40:17, "Now it came about in the first month of the second year, on the first day of the month, that the tabernacle was erected."
- Numbers 1:1, "Then the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt"

That is amazing when you compare these three books and their time periods

- Genesis – roughly 4000 B.C. to 1804 B.C. (Joseph's death) – **almost 2200 years**
- Exodus – 1875 B.C. (Jacob's arrival) to 1445 B.C. (building of Tabernacle) – **430 years**
- Leviticus – one month (1st to 2nd month of second year)

The book of Exodus ends with the construction of the Tabernacle

- This is the place where God would come and communicate with His people
- *This is an act of mercy and grace!*

In Exodus, God speaks out of Mount Sinai where the people were not allowed

- In Leviticus, God speaks out of the Tabernacle where He dwells among the people¹⁸

Throughout this one month period, Israel does not make any geographical movement

- They remain camped at the foot of Mt. Sinai¹⁹
- This is where they were in the latter chapters of Exodus

Prior to this encampment of Israel at Mt. Sinai

- "The presence of God's glory had never formally resided among the Israelites
- "A central place of worship, like the Tabernacle, had never existed

¹⁶ Archer, 258.

¹⁷ TMS notes, pg. 13.

¹⁸ Dr. Alan B. Stringfellow, *Through the Bible in One Year*, 15.

¹⁹ Wilkinson and Boa, 21.

- “A structured and regulated set of sacrifices and feast had not been given
- “A High-Priest, a formal priesthood, and a cadre of tabernacle workers had not been appointed”²⁰

Consider this progression of thought in the first three books of the Bible

- Genesis – the fall and ruin of man
- Exodus – redemption of man through the power of God
- Leviticus – the proper worship of and communion with God

It makes sense that the next book would answer the question, “How does a sinful people approach a holy God?”

- That is exactly what the book of Leviticus seeks to answer

What are some key themes that emerge in this book?

1. The Presence of God

The book of Exodus ends this way, “Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle” (Ex 40:34)

- The phrase “before the Lord” is used 61 times in this book
- God was very much present among His people

2. Holiness

This should not surprise us, since God is inviting sinful humanity to come into His presence

- God will not lower His standards, just to let mankind come to Him
- *Rather, mankind must raise their standards and manner of living*

What does it mean to be holy?

- To be set apart
- To be different
- To be unique
- Not to be like everyone else! (i.e., other nations, the world)

God wanted Israel to be different, so that people would know that they are the people of God!

- But oftentimes, they mingled and mixed Biblical truth with pagan error, and this brought displeasure to God

²⁰ MacArthur, 29.

Let's keep in mind that Israel had been enslaved in Egypt for many years

- Egyptian religion was based on many gods (polytheism)
- Yahweh demanded sole worship (monotheism)

God's very character is that of holiness

- He cannot tolerate sin

Many things mentioned in Leviticus are considered holy

- God Himself – this is to be expected
- Israel
- Things – Tabernacle, grain offering
- Times – Sabbath days of rest

The opposite of holy is “profane” or “common”

- To disobey God's requirements for holiness is considered “profane”
- “**And everyone who eats it (peace offering after three days) will bear his iniquity, for he has profaned the holy thing of the LORD; and that person shall be cut off from his people**” (19:8)
- “**And you shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the LORD.**” (19:12)
- “**I will also set My face against that man and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given some of his offspring to Molech, so as to defile My sanctuary and to profane My holy name**” (20:3)

Part of the reason why Israel needed to be reminded of God's holiness is because of where they had been for years²¹

- Israel had been in Egypt

Egypt was a place of false gods and false worship

- Israel's view of worship was severely distorted

3. The Sacrificial System

God was gracious to allow sinful humanity to approach Him – to communicate with Him

- **But what happens when humanity disobeys God's requirements?**
 - o ***They must make a sacrifice!***

The first 7 chapters of the book deal with various sacrifices and offerings

- Burnt offering; meant as an atonement for sin (placing hands on head of animal ~ identifying with animal)
- Grain offering; offered as acts of devotion and remembrance

²¹ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 133.

- Peace offering; everything belongs to the Lord
- Sin offering; dealing with sins that were committed unintentionally or in ignorance
- Guilt offering; highlights the vileness of sin

How do we outline this book?²²

- 1-7 Various sacrifices and offerings
- 8-10 Beginning of the priesthood
- 11-16 Dealing with uncleanness
- 17-27 Practical holiness

As we have already noted, one of the recurring themes of this book is that of God's holiness

- On four separate occasions, we read these words, "**be holy, for I am holy**" (11:44, 45; 19:2; 20:7)

Of course, these words are a call for God's people to be holy

- Precisely because their God is holy, so should they

Israel was called to be distinct from the world around them

- This distinctness would be used to highlight the distinctness of their God
- Thus, it was to be a means of telling other nations about who God was

If the people of Israel were to be distinct and holy, then certainly the priests were to be distinct and holy

- Who were the priests?

We have seen priests mentioned briefly in Genesis (7x) and Exodus (25x)

- But priests are much more prominent in Leviticus (194x)

Aaron and his sons would be prominent in the book of Leviticus

- Eventually, the Levites would be the tribe that served as priests

The obvious responsibility of a priest is to offer sacrifices²³

- An Israelite would bring an animal to the priest
- That Israelite would kill the animal by slitting its throat
- The priest would then carry the blood to the altar

The other responsibility of a priest was to teach

- Look with me at Leviticus 10:10-11, "**And so as to make a distinction between the holy and the profane, and between the unclean and the clean, 11 and so as to teach the sons of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them through Moses**" (emphasis mine)

²² John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 136.

²³ Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament*, 112.

The priests were called to teach the children of Israel the various statutes that God gave to Moses

- There was certainly a lot for the priests to teach and remind the people!

God saw to it that the priests were taken care of

- The priests were able to keep some of the animals used for sacrifice
- After the animal was killed and the blood collected, the meat went to the priest

But not all priests were holy

- We read about two individuals in Leviticus 10

Their names are Nadab and Abihu

- They are sons of Aaron

Let's read the short account in Leviticus 10:1-2

- "Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the LORD, which He had not commanded them. 2 And fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD."

No doubt these two sons of Aaron had seen their father perform multiple offerings and sacrifices before

There are several things that we don't know about this situation

- We don't know what prompted these two men to do what they did
- We don't know what "strange fire" refers to (something that God didn't command)

We do know that Nadab and Abihu demonstrated²⁴

- Carelessness
- Irreverence
- Lack of consideration for God

They took the holy and treated it as common

- Thus, they dishonored the Lord

The fire from the Lord that had accepted multiple offerings now consumed these two men

- It was definitely designed to serve as a warning for others in the future
- It was immediate, Divine justice

Look at the Divine commentary in verse 3

- "By those who come near Me I will be treated as holy, and before all the people I will be honored"

²⁴ MacArthur, *The MacArthur Bible Commentary*, 147.

God demands two things from those who come near to Him

- Treat Him as holy
- Be honored before the people
- *These two men had violated both of these principles!*

Also notice their father's reaction at the end of verse 3, "Aaron, therefore, kept silent"

- Who was he to argue with God's decision?

The priests couldn't remove the bodies of these two men

- Otherwise, they would be unclean
- So two of Aaron's relatives who weren't priests came in and took the bodies away

This account reminds us that God is to be obeyed and honored as He has outlined in the Bible

- We don't have the freedom to make up our own rules for how we approach and worship God

I am not shocked that something like this occurred

- I am shocked that more instances of Divine judgment didn't occur in the Bible

Even today, I marvel at God's patience

- His patience toward me
- His patience toward His church
- His patience toward unbelievers

God is profaned and mocked so much these days

- But one day, there will be perfect judgment rendered by the perfect Judge

The book of Leviticus also reminds us that there is only one perfect Priest

- That is Jesus
- The book of Hebrews speaks of Jesus Christ as this perfect High Priest (Heb 8:1)

Not only were the priests to be holy

- But the people were to be holy as well

Leviticus has many passages that speak of cleanness and ritual purity

- Over half of the occurrences of the word "unclean" in the Bible are found in the book of Leviticus!²⁵

God was teaching His people that everything was either holy or common

- They had to think through everything according to these two choices

²⁵ Dever, 115.

God was also showing that He cares greatly about how He is worshipped

- He wouldn't allow Israel to worship Him in the same way that the surrounding nations worshipped their gods

When we think of holiness, we oftentimes think of the really bad things that we need to avoid

- False worship
- Idolatry
- Sorcery
- Child sacrifice

But holiness also includes things that we need to do

- Not cursing the deaf (how would they know that you are cursing them?)
- Not perverting justice
- Not showing favoritism
- Showing respect to the older people

Do you remember the command, "**Love your neighbor as yourself**"?

- That is from Leviticus 19:18
- The only time that this phrase is mentioned in the Old Testament!

This reminds us that holiness isn't just about abstaining from sin (negative)

- But it is also promoting obedience (positive)

Leviticus also teaches us that God holds us responsible and accountable for sins committed in ignorance

All of this was designed to show Israel that they were to be holy (distinct, different)

- Because God Himself was holy (distinct, different)

God's people were also sinful, so they needed to offer sacrifices

- With all of these instructions on holiness, the Israelites were sure to fall short of God's goals
- Time and time again

When the Israelites sinned, they needed to offer sacrifices

- This was God's way of having His people deal with their sins

Let's look at Leviticus 9:22-24

- "Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he stepped down after making the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings. Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting. When they came out and blessed the people, the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. 24 Then fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the portions of fat on the altar; and when all the people saw *it*, they shouted and fell on their faces."

The people present their offerings to the Lord

- God accepts their offering through fire consuming the animals

The first seven chapters are dedicated to various offerings

- These sacrifices were designed to be valuable and costly
- The whole point of a sacrifice is that it cost the sinner something

Much of the sacrificial system seems foreign to us

- But this was a regular occurrence for the Israelites

The sinner would bring his sacrifice to the priest²⁶

- The sinner would lay his hands on the head of the animal (publicly identifying with the offering)
- The sinner would slit the throat of the animal (penalty for sin was death)

This was a clear picture of substitution

- The sinner deserved to die
- However, God allowed an animal to die in order for the sinner to be forgiven

Think of how often these sacrifices took place

- Daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly

God knew that His people would continue to sin

- So He built in regular times in which His people needed to offer sacrifices

All of these animals, however, couldn't atone for sin

- All of those sacrifices pointed toward the death of Jesus Christ

Listen to what the author of Hebrews

- "For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, 14 how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" (Heb 9:13-14)

²⁶ Dever, 123.

Once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest was allowed to go into the Holy of Holies

- He first had to offer a sacrifice for himself (b/c he was a sinner and he himself needed to be cleansed)
- He then offered a sacrifice for all the people

So the high priest brought the blood inside the Holy of Holies

- No other human was in there with him
- But God was there

The high priest would also lay his hands on a second goat

- This was the scapegoat
- The animal would be alienated, signifying that sin has been removed from the people

I have oftentimes imagined what it must have been like for the high priest to enter the Holy of Holies

- If he was careless, God would strike him dead
- He must be careful to obey God's Word

The Day of Atonement would be repeated every single year

- Without exception, God's people would need to repeat this every single year

On the one hand, there was joy as the people celebrated that their sins were forgiven

- On the other hand, there was discouragement because the sacrifice was not enough

Not even the sacrifices of the high priest were sufficient, however

- Again, listen to the words of Hebrews, "For the Law, since it has *only* a shadow of the good things to come *and* not the very form of things, can never, by the same sacrifices which they offer continually year by year, make perfect those who draw near. 2 Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? 3 But in those *sacrifices* there is a reminder of sins year by year. 4 For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." (10:1-4, emphasis mine)

Remember the words of John the Baptist when he saw Jesus?

- "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29)
- This takes more significance in light of what we have been discussing from Leviticus, right?

The apostle Peter refers to Christ as "a lamb unblemished and spotless" (1 Pet 1:19)

- He was the only perfect Sacrifice

As Jesus died on the cross, He uttered the words, "It is finished"

- It was a Greek word denoting that a debt had been paid

In His one sacrifice, Jesus satisfied the ENTIRE sin debt of everyone who would ever believe

- He would never need to be sacrificed again
- No one would ever need to atone for sin again
- That's what we celebrated this morning in Communion!

The book of Leviticus should cause our hearts to be thankful for Christ!

- Without Him, no amount of animal sacrifice could bring about atonement and redemption

In chapter 23, various festivals are described

- Again, we are not going to study these in great detail

Listen to these festivals

- Passover
- Unleavened Bread
- Firstfruits
- Pentecost
- Trumpets
- Day of Atonement
- Tabernacles

These special days would be meaningful for the Israelites in the coming years

- They would remember God giving them the book of Leviticus

Chapter 26 is a list of both blessings for obedience and consequences for disobedience

- This is a reminder of the Mosaic Covenant, which is contingent upon mankind's obedience
- God was showing His people that His Word was to be obeyed
- Obedience was not optional!

What can we say is the overall purpose of Leviticus?

- **Yahweh gives instructions that enabled Him to live among His people and enabled His people to have fellowship with Him²⁷**

Why should we study this book?

- Why not skip it?

²⁷ TMS notes, pg. 14.

1. Leviticus reveals the holy character of God

- God has not changed from the OT to the NT
- God still demands holiness in the life of His people
- **"YOU SHALL BE HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY"** (Lev 11:45; 19:2; 21:8)
 - o This same phrase is captured in 1 Peter 1:16 – God expects the Church and her members to be holy (set apart, different, unique, unlike the world)

2. Leviticus emphasizes the sinfulness of mankind

- With God's holiness displayed, mankind can only see how unholy and "common" we are when compared to Him
- Israel is seen to fall short of God's holy expectations
- One writer has put it well, "It took God only one night to get Israel out of Egypt, but it took 40 years to get Egypt out of Israel"²⁸
- The process of sanctification for Israel was lengthy and time-consuming
- Leviticus continues to call us to be holy, because our God is holy (and we are naturally sinful)

3. Leviticus prefigures the redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ and His ultimate sacrifice for sin as the only means of fellowship with God

- The sacrifices that are offered all point to the final, future sacrifice of the Lamb of God on the Cross of Calvary for the sins of those who would believe
- The author of Hebrews tells us that **"it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins"** (Heb 10:4)
- The offerings in the book of Leviticus point to this substitutionary sacrifice for sin
- As Paul wrote to the Corinthians believers, **"For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed"** (1 Cor 5:7)

Yes, we sense the weight of our sin at times

- We can be discouraged when we see our hearts leaning toward sin time and time again

But dear Christian, remind yourself that one day, there will be no more sin

- When we are with Christ, we will be done with sin, FOREVER
- No more confessing sin
- No more guilt over sin

For those of us in the Church Age, how should we respond to this?

- Let's be honest, the idea of sacrificing animals is just foreign to us in the 21st century

How do we apply this book to our lives?

- **How is it "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness" (2 Tim 3:16)?**

²⁸ Wilkinson and Boa, 23.

I think that the wrong approach is to try and practice the old ceremonies or to look for some “deeper spiritual significance” in them

- Rather, we should see the heart and character of God as explained in the book
- As we see the character of God, we should pray for those qualities to be lived out in our lives (holiness, obedience, etc.)²⁹

Christ Himself said, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill” (Mt 5:17)

- He is the only One who can fulfill the requirements of the Law!

The book of Hebrews is clear that we are no longer under the authority of the Old Covenant

- We are under the New Covenant

We should read the book of Leviticus with the following principles in mind

- Be grateful for the ministry of Jesus Christ!
- Be thankful that we are no longer under the Old Covenant

So the next time that your Bible reading takes you to Leviticus, I hope you won't cringe

- I hope that you will see that this book is practical, beneficial, and helpful in your growth as a Christian

Next month, we will cover the last two books of the Pentateuch

- Numbers
- Deuteronomy

²⁹ MacArthur, 38.