

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY LESSON 4: *Leviticus*

“Relating to the Priests (Levites)” (Gk.), “And the Lord called” (Heb.).

INTRO: Addressing common misconceptions of Leviticus.¹

AUTHOR: Moses (Lev 27:34), “the LORD called to Moses” (56x in Leviticus).

DATE: Between 1446 and 1406 B.C., shortly after Exodus was written (see Lev 7:38; during the wilderness wanderings before conquest of Canaan).

STRUCTURE: There are (roughly) two central divisions in Leviticus.

1. **The Way to God** through appropriate worship (Lev 1–16).
2. **The Walk with God** through obedient lifestyle (Lev 17–27).²

THEME: *The God Who is Holy*³

OBJECTIVE FOR STUDENTS: The objective for students is to understand and articulate how the book of Leviticus teaches that God is holy and that the only way for Him to dwell with sinful people is through sacrifice and holiness.

1. The Way to God (Lev 1–16):

QUESTION: How Can a holy God dwell with sinful people?

ANSWER: Through Sacrifice.

- Leviticus 1 picks up where Exodus left off, introducing the answer to how a holy God can dwell with sinful people – that the way to God is through sacrifice, giving a general overview of burnt offerings.⁴

¹ Many people approach Leviticus with the thought of “Boy, am I sure glad that I was not under the Levitical system.” And in one sense, it is true, that it is amazing to be living in the Church age and released from the Levitical law. However, it is not a fair understanding of the Levitical system to view it as a dreary system. We may not like the emphasis on holiness in Leviticus if we view sin as a small offense, see the system as one of works-righteousness (anti-Gospel), overlook God’s grace in the inherent benefits of His commands, forget God’s sovereign prerogative, or because we are afraid of what we do not know or we are afraid of God’s perfect holiness (in contrast to our own sinfulness). This book forces us to reckon with how a holy God may dwell with a sinful people.

² This structure has been proposed by Dr. Brian Bidebach in his Ordination Preparation class.

³ This theme has been proposed by Paul House. Another proposed theme by Dr. Paul Twiss is “the presence of the LORD,” which also fits. Again, these structures and themes proposed are a bit subjective – they *are not* inspired, but the text of Leviticus itself and its meaning *is* inspired.

⁴ God delivered the Hebrews in the book of Exodus to bring them to Himself (Ex 19:4), and so they would be to Him “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19:6). This means that Israel’s role was to obey and be holy (pure and different from the nations around them) as God was holy, and that would have an attractive influence on

- Leviticus 2–6 speaks of the laws concerning grain, peace, sin, and guilt offerings, respectively.⁵

The priest's placement of his hand (first mentioned in Lev 3:2) on the offering teaches that sacrifices are substitutionary, that is, the animal is in the place of the person making the sacrifice.⁶

Atonement: Atonement means the covering of sin.⁷

Substitutionary Sacrifice: When the sacrifice is made in place of the worshipper.

the other nations. Things seemed to be working quite well until the Exodus narrative introduces the Golden Calf incident (Ex 32). God is gracious and patient with the people but also is a just God demonstrates through His judgment that the guilty must still be punished (Ex 34:6–7). With His special presence (glory) entering the tabernacle (Ex 40:34–38), the reader is left wondering how it will be possible that God will dwell among His people (Israel), though the effects of the fall are still present and the people are still sinners. The presence of God is a common motif in the book of Leviticus: “before the Lord” (60x), “tent of meeting” (41x), “tabernacle” (3x).

Though animal sacrifice may seem weird to us, it is only because we are further disconnected from the Hebrew culture and setting. God is gracious to not only provide a way to enjoy His presence but also to reveal the way to Himself through these detailed instructions found in Leviticus.

All references to sacrifices being “without defect” (beginning in Lev 1:3), are important! Since the dwelling of God is in the tabernacle, in some ways it points back to the last time God's special presence dwelled among humanity, in the Garden of Eden – where there was no imperfection. This shows God's goodness in His creation, that He created everything and saw that it was very good. The sacrifice without blemish was a reminder that the effects of the fall had not always been in place. This will be important to remember when we get to our discussion on those with disabilities being barred from the tabernacle's presence.

⁵ Technically Leviticus 2–6:7 carries this discussion, for 6:8 begins the discussion of the priest's role in those offerings. The burnt offering (1:1–17) was for the atonement (covering) of the sin of the individual more generally. The Meal offering (2:1–16), consisting of flour and grain, was given out of thankfulness to God. The Peace offering (3:1–17) was voluntary and indicative of a desire of fellowship with the Lord. The Sin offering (4:1–5:13) was sacrificed where one needed to become clean. The Trespass offering (5:14–6:7) involved a sacrifice for the breaking of the law if one took something or someone who belonged to God (Benware, 63–64).

⁶ The priest comes alongside the worshipper in the sacrificial offering to guide their worship, therefore, they will be held to a higher standard (which will be seen in the requirements of the priests as well as the account of Nadab and Abihu. Also notice how the elders of the congregation lawing their hands on the sacrifice is for the nation (Lev 4:15), identifying with the sacrifice.

People are guilty of their sin even if they do not know it (Ex 5:17–19) and still need a sacrifice to be forgiven, because their guilty is weighed against God's standard of holiness (perfection) instead of the intentions of the individual alone.

⁷ That is why after atonement is made the people are actually (not just potentially) forgiven – their sin is covered. Without the proper sacrifice, people will “bear their guilt” (Lev 5:1) instead.

- Leviticus 7–8 speaks of the priests’ role in the offerings and the consecration of Aaron and his sons in the priesthood.⁸
- Leviticus 9 switches from instructions to narrative as Aaron offers the first sacrifice in the tabernacle and the special presence (glory of God) consumes it.
- Leviticus 10 shows God’s seriousness towards sin and improper worship and zeal for His own glory in the deaths of Nadab and Abihu.⁹
- Leviticus 11–15 reveals what makes one clean and unclean in the areas of eating animals, motherhood, and leprosy.¹⁰
- Leviticus 16 speaks to the Day of Atonement, that is one day of sacrifice that would atone for all of Israel.¹¹

2. The Walk with God (Lev 17–27):

- Leviticus 17 speaks to God’s gracious gift and provision of sacrifices to His people.¹²

⁸ These priests were also sinners in need of atonement too (Lev 8:34). It also seems relevant to mention that the seemingly redundant and comprehensive instructions were part of God’s grace and highlight the importance of following the directions of worship the way God revealed them.

⁹ Commentators spill much ink over the subject of what Nadab and Abihu’s sin really was, when the point of the text is that they “offered strange fire,” that is, a sacrifice which the Lord had not commanded. It is very likely that Aaron’s two oldest sons did so drunk, for God warns Aaron shortly after to stay away from alcohol when coming into the tabernacle (Lev 10:9).

¹⁰ “Unclean” does not mean sinful, however it may overlap in some contexts. It primarily refers to their ritual uncleanness – or their inability to approach the tabernacle or others who are ritually clean until they follow the instructions for purification.

The requirements of one unclean with leprosy (Lev 13:45–46) bring a particular vividness to the account of Jesus healing the leper (Matt 8:2–4). No one was supposed to touch him or else they would become unclean. Jesus alone could touch him and not become unclean because instead of becoming unclean, His touch made the leper clean.

¹¹ Dr. Paul Twiss described this day as essentially “the reset button” for Israel’s sin as a nation, where one goat would be sacrificed in place of the people and another would receive the guilt Israel’s sin and be sent off into the wilderness once a year. It is interesting too that this event was “a sabbath of solemn rest” (Lev 16:30) for Israel, not working but resting in the work of the sacrifice.

¹² God actually forgave those who brought sacrifices by faith in the promises of God and their sins were covered... but since the blood of animals could not pay for sins (Heb 10:4), the true payment for sins was at the cross, where Christ fulfilled God’s promise of Genesis 3:15. In short, these sacrifices covered sin, but sin was actually paid for at the cross.

- Leviticus 18–20 describe God’s laws with respect to Israel’s lifestyle – they are not to be like the other nations because they are a holy nation.¹³

APPLICATION: Sin is Serious! See Leviticus 20:9 for a vivid example.

“You are therefore to keep all My statutes and all My ordinances and do them, so that the land to which I am bringing you to live will not spew you out. Moreover, you shall not follow the customs of the nation which I will drive out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I have abhorred them. Hence I have said to you ‘You are to possess their land and I Myself will give it to you to possess it, a land flowing with milk and honey.’ I am the LORD your God, who has separated you from the peoples. You are therefore to make a distinction between the clean animal and the unclean, and between the unclean bird and the clean; and you shall not make yourselves detestable by animal or by bird or by anything that creeps on the ground, which I have separated for you as unclean. *Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the LORD am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine*” (Lev 20:22–26; cf. 11:44–45; 19:2; 20:7).

- Leviticus 21–22 describes regulations and rules for the priests.

QUESTION: Why were those with disabilities not allowed to become priests (Lev 21:17–24)? Was it because God loved them less?

ANSWER: Absolutely not! It was because the temple was God’s dwelling with man and pointed back to the Garden of Eden. To have priests with these disabilities would be to imply that God had created the world that way. The same goes with the sacrifices (Lev 22:21–24).¹⁴

¹³ Random notes: The conquest of Canaan was not only because of God’s promise of land to Abraham and his descendants, but also as an act of judgement on the nations’ sin (Lev 18:24–30). The Israelites were commanded to love their neighbor as themselves (Lev 19:18). God’s compassion is demonstrated towards the helpless (Lev 19:9–16). The obedience of the Hebrews was to be grounded in their gratitude for their redemption (Lev 19:36).

¹⁴ Physical disabilities are a product of the fall that God has nonetheless decreed in the lives of individuals to bring His name glory (John 9:2–3).

- Leviticus 23–25 lists laws for religious festivals, sanctuary elements, Sabbatic Year (and Year of Jubilee), and the laws concerning redemption.¹⁵
- Leviticus 26 is key for understanding Israel’s future where they are promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience to the Mosaic (Israelite) covenant.¹⁶
- Leviticus 27 describes rules concerning valuations.¹⁷

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: While Leviticus emphasizes God’s holiness, its very nature demonstrates God’s grace. God had drawn Israel out of Egypt to take them as His people, and they demonstrated that they had a tendency towards idolatry. With Egypt behind and Canaan ahead, God knew that Israel would be tempted toward idolatry through the practices of other nations around them. So, God graciously prescribed sacrifice to cover their sins (which was ultimately paid for by Christ on the cross) and holiness so that they would stay away from the idolatrous practices of the pagan nations (in areas of lifestyle, diet, etc.) and enjoy the presence of the Lord. As believers in the age of the Church, Christ’s once-for-all sufficient sacrifice is superior to the perpetual sacrifices under the Levitical system (Heb 9:12; 10:1–4, 11).

POSSIBLE PAPER TOPIC: So often Leviticus is portrayed in a way that makes God out to be overbearing, which is wrong. The Levitical system highlights God’s grace to His chosen people, Israel. In a 2–3-page paper explain why the Levitical system was an act of God’s grace (using at least 5 examples from the book).

¹⁵ This section is broken up by a brief narrative account of a son of an Israelite woman who blasphemed God’s Name, and who was put to death to demonstrate the people’s commitment to God’s zeal for holiness and seriousness towards sin (Lev 24:11–23).

¹⁶ Leviticus 26, like Deuteronomy 28, serves as the paradigm for how Israel’s future failure or success is to be understood. It is also worth asking which section is bigger (curses), which seems to indicate that Israel will experience exile in the future. Ultimately, however, even in their future exile God is faithful to the Abrahamic covenant: “Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God. But I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am the LORD” (Ex 26:44–45).

¹⁷ Leviticus ends its exhortations with a re-affirmation of Mosaic authorship (Lev 27:34), bringing the reader back to narrative account and preparing them for what is to come in the book of Numbers.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY (Not going to be on quizzes or exams):

What is the key text in Leviticus that can be used as a paradigm for Israel's future and what is implied?

Leviticus 26 serves as the paradigm for Israel's future according to their covenantal (agreement with God) context, where they were promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Because the section on curses for disobedience is substantially larger, there is an implication that the future will consist of much disobedience, leading even to exile.

What is the primary reason why Israel is commanded so many specific laws?

Though many try to argue that there are several health benefits for Israel's diet and lifestyle (which is true), this is not the reason why God gave them so many specific laws. These laws were to keep them from the idolatrous culture of the nations so that they could enjoy God's presence.

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