



A word on the Word

A monthly series on the Bible by Carrie Boren, Missioner for Evangelism

Leviticus

The introductory words of Leviticus, “The Lord called Moses and from the meeting tent gave him this message ...” embody the thrust of this book. God is defining and declaring laws, regulations, and standards for his people. Leviticus is crucial to Jewish tradition. It contains almost half of the laws and commandments that have shaped Jewish life and practice. From public worship to the establishment of feast days; laws on clothing, food, disease, and sexual activity; ethical decisions regarding love and justice — Leviticus delineates holy guidelines that priests are meant to monitor for the good of communal life. For hundreds of years, rabbinic commentators have poured over this diverse book looking for the method by which they should apply it. Even though people of the Jewish faith have not been able to perform over one-fourth of the book’s laws since the Roman destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 AD, Leviticus remains central to Judaism and key to understanding primary tenets of Christianity.

Some Christians hint that Leviticus is archaic and irrelevant because of the detailed nature of topics such as Levitical priestly practices, animal sacrifices, and body purity laws. Many of the rules seem outdated and usurped by a newfound theological freedom from the law. However, to dismiss Leviticus as *passé* is to forgo key insights into God’s nature and ways.

Structure of Leviticus

Leviticus has two primary parts, which equip the Jews to live within their covenant with God. Chapters 1-16 provide regulations for priests and chapters 17-27 address laws and provisions for worship and community life.

PART I — Chapters 1-16

FOCUS: Priestly function and regulations

Chapters 1-7 — Laws of sacrifice

- *Holocaust or whole burnt offering*: male sheep, goats, birds, or cattle without blemish to atone for the sins of the offerer

- *Grain offering*: grain for the atonement of the poor AND a thanksgiving offering for good crops

- *Peace offering*: fatty parts of male or female cattle, sheep, or goats burnt for the “well-being of the person” — offerers eat the remains of the animal

- *Sin or purgation offering*: a bull (if offerer is a priest) or a goat (if offerer is a layperson) — when a

priest or layperson has violated a sacred thing. Offerer must sprinkle the animal’s blood on the altar.

- *Guilt or reparation offering*: sacrifice offerer makes to God on behalf of something he/she should have done or left undone — to cleanse the sinner of guilt, he/she offers a ram and sprinkles its blood on the altar

Chapters 8-10 — Priestly anointing and the first sacrifice (by Aaron)

Establishes the priesthood from the line of Aaron

Chapters 11-15 — Laws of purity regarding proper foods and bodily functions

- Emphasis on animals, childbirth, contagious diseases, genital discharges

Chapter 16 — Ritual for the Day of Atonement

- The annual Jewish ritual that cleanses all people from their intentional and unintentional sins during the past year

PART II — Chapters 17-20

FOCUS: Daily and personal regulations pertaining to the entire community

This section of Leviticus commonly bears the subtitle, “the law of holiness” — they are positive actions that the community can take to draw close to God and live in His image

Chapters 17-20 — Moral and ethical laws on holiness

- Offerer must perform these sacrifices in the central sanctuary and give back to God all blood — blood is not for human consumption.

- God’s people are to confine sexual behavior to relations between a husband and wife.

- Generous manner in which the community is to treat its weak members and the importance of caring for the poor

- Penalties defined for offenders of idolatry and incest

Chapters 21-25 — Ritual requirements for holiness

- Defines bodily and animal perfection

- Defines feasts: weekly Sabbath, Passover, First Fruits, Weeks, New Year, the Day of Atonement, Booths, and eight Days after Booths

- Death penalty for blasphemy

- Sabbatical year to occur every seven years

- Jubilee year to occur every fifty years. All

property and debt must return to the original owners

PART III — Conclusion

Chapter 26 — Covenant conclusion

- Series of blessings on all who keep the covenant and curses on all who offend it

- Emphasizes the pain that disobedience causes and the blessings that follow obedience

Chapter 27 — Appendix of laws and vows

Leviticus illuminates for us God’s holiness and transcendence, His call to holiness for all His people,

the establishment of His laws, the centrality of sacrifice for sins, the need for obedience, and our need of a Savior. The laws in Leviticus emphasize God’s holiness and His desire to see all of His people enter into holiness. You can read Leviticus as God’s call, persuading His people to enjoy obedience and holiness. God set these laws to protect His people and help them grow in holiness. Leviticus encompasses God’s just and loving act to further bridge the gap between Him and His creation. God defines right living, but He also knows full well that His fallen creation will not be able to maintain His perfect standard. In Leviticus, God makes provisions to cleanse His people from sin through the sacrificial system, which serves as a necessary stopgap until God sends Jesus, the perfect sacrificial lamb. “Unless we learn the central role that sacrifice played in Leviticus as both acknowledging God’s saving blessing and also asking forgiveness, our interpretation of Jesus’ own death and the Church’s explanation of the Eucharist will be seriously weakened and perhaps even incomprehensible.” (*The Catholic Bible*, Second Edition, p. 125)

Finally, Leviticus embodies a way of life. It depicts a posture of obedience to God for all His people to follow. The result of obedience to God is joy and success in life. Over and again, the Bible emphasizes our need to follow God’s commandments. The Psalmist writes, “Happy are those whose way is blameless, who walk by the teaching of the Lord” (Psalm 119:1 [*New American Bible (NAB)*]). The Lord said to Joshua, “Above all, be firm and steadfast, taking care to observe the entire law which my servant Moses enjoined on you. Do not swerve from it either to the right or to the left, that you may succeed wherever you go. Keep this book of law on your lips. Recite it by day and by night, that you may observe carefully all that is written in it; then you will successfully attain your goal” (Joshua 1:7-8 [*NAB*]). God’s Word echoes this synthesis of obedience and successful living throughout salvation history, and it is as relevant to us today as it was for the Israelites.

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