

Elementary

*For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.
(Leviticus 11:44 ESV)*

*I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.
(Leviticus 26:12 ESV)*

What Does The Law Teach Us About God?

June 20th, 2021

Leviticus 1:1-9

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! If you have your Bible with you, I would love for you to open it now to Leviticus 1:1. We're starting something NEW this morning – we're going to take a few weeks over the summer to walk together through the Book of Leviticus. Now, truth be told, most evangelicals today have a pretty well developed fear of the Book of Leviticus. The Book of Leviticus is the DEATH of many a Bible reading plan. We start off so well in January, reading through Genesis and Exodus. We're loving that – we're loving the stories and the characters and the miracles – and then all of the sudden, sometime in the month of April, probably, we run smack dab into the wall known as “Leviticus” and all your good intentions go crumbling down into the dust. You just CAN'T get past the sheer STRANGENESS and BLOODINESS of the book.

Has anyone here had an experience like that?

That's very common.

But the truth is that the Book of Leviticus is actually the CENTRE of the entire Pentateuch – the first 5 books of the Bible. It is the FOCAL POINT.

The Book of Genesis gives us the backstory. It tells us where the WORLD came from and where WE came from. It tells us why we are not now the way we sense that we should be. It tells us about the fall and our exile from Eden. And it tells us about the promises that God made to our Father Abraham to bring us home and to restore us to the blessings we were created and intended to enjoy.

The Book of Exodus tells us about God's great work of redemption on our behalf. We were slaves in the land of Egypt. We were CAPTIVE to a FOREIGN POWER but God LOOKED, GOD SAW and GOD CAME. He sent Moses to speak to our oppressor on our behalf – and do you remember what he said? He said:

“Let my people go, that they may hold a feast to me in the wilderness.” (Exodus 5:1 ESV)

Did you catch that?

The purpose of our redemption was so that we would WORSHIP GOD in the wilderness. God wanted to set up a TABERNACLE in the desert. An OASIS of worship in a fallen and hostile world.

That's what Leviticus is – that's what the CHURCH IS – that's what our PURPOSE IS. So actually, Leviticus, is a really important book. It teaches us the BASICS of what it means to be WITH GOD AS HIS PEOPLE IN A HOSTILE AND FALLEN WORLD.

And that's why we chose the name Elementary for this series. The name comes from a quote by John Calvin about the purpose of the ceremonial law, as contained in the Book of Leviticus. He says:

“The ceremonial law of the Jews was a tutelage by which the Lord was pleased to exercise, as it were, the childhood of that people, until the fulness of the time should come when he was fully to manifest his wisdom to the world, and exhibit the reality of those things which were then adumbrated by figures, (Gal. 3:24; 4:4).”¹

¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, Accordance electronic ed. (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1845), paragraph 3315.

So the ceremonial Law – that part of the Bible WE FIND MOST CONFUSING and FOREIGN – was intended by God as a TUTELAGE for baby worshippers. It was something he designed for the covenant community in their CHILDHOOD. It was KINDERGARTEN. It was INTRODUCTION. It was ELEMENTARY.

It intended to teach, in very primitive terms, who God is, who we are and what it looks like for us to worship him and serve him in this world.

This series then is intended as a REVIEW OF BIBLICAL FUNDAMENTALS. We're not going to DISSECT ALL THE RITUALS – because the rituals are merely ACTED DRAMAS intending to COMMUNICATE BASIC RUDIMENTARY PRINCIPLES – and it is those BASIC RUDIMENTARY PRINCIPLES that we are after.

So hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse:

The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting,

Now I just want to pause here for a second. In the original Hebrew this verse actually begins with the word AND - the first word in Leviticus is "*Vayikra*" which means "AND the Lord called". The Hebrew particle "va" is a continuative - meaning that the text is positioning itself as a continuation of the story left off at the end of Exodus.

And that's important, because at the end of Exodus the tabernacle has been built - according to all the pattern that Moses was shown and the instructions that he was given - and then when all was in place, according to Exodus 40:34:

"the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle." (Exodus 40:34 ESV)

So God was THERE now, IN THEIR MIDST, in a glorious, tangible sense. This is not some sort of spiritual experience – this is the real thing! Exodus 40 says that after Moses had finished building the tabernacle:

the cloud covered the tent of meeting, (Exodus 40:34 ESV)

The presence of God descended – MANIFESTLY, TANGIBLY, REALLY upon the Tent of Meeting at the CENTRE of the Israelite camp. So you have to picture that in your head as you begin to read this book. The tabernacle is standing there - brand new - just built - never used - and all of the sudden the pillar of cloud representing the very presence of God descends upon the entire compound and all is shrouded in fog - and from inside that fog - the voice of God calls to Moses.

That's what's going on here!

This entire book was narrated to Moses from inside the Holy of Holies - inside the tabernacle - inside the cloud! From IN THERE God narrates a course of instruction in the RUDIMENTS OF LIFE WITH and the WORSHIP of the 3 times Holy God.

So that's the set up.

Alright, now with that in your minds – let's keep reading.

The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying,² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock.

³“If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the LORD.⁴ He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.⁵ Then he shall kill the bull before the LORD, and Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting.⁶ Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces,⁷ and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire.⁸ And Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar;⁹ but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest

shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD. (Leviticus 1:1–9 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

So – again you have to picture this, imagine you are just a regular old Israelite and you’ve been told to come on out to celebrate the opening of the Tabernacle and so, you are standing there, looking at this tent, which looked for all the world like the compound of a wealthy nomad prince, and then suddenly, a huge cloud appears way up in the sky and it is bright and luminous and clearly supernatural and it descends and it stops **RIGHT ON TOP** of the Tent of Meeting – the centre piece of this royal compound that has just been set up in the middle of nowhere. It **DESCENDS** and then it speaks. A voice comes from inside the cloud, which can only be the voice of God – and it calls to Moses and **MOSES GOES INSIDE THE CLOUD** and he pulls back the curtain door and he walks inside to **TALK WITH THE CREATOR OF THE UNIVERSE**.

That’s what just happened!

And from outside, as you stand by your tent, you can hear the **MUMBLE OF CONVERSATION** as **THE LORD SPEAKS** to **MOSES** as a man might speak to his friend.

That’s the story here.

And the gist of the conversation is that regular people – ordinary men and women - can now approach God and deal with God provided they follow his instructions very carefully. So regular Joe Israelite can come – provided he brings an animal – the absolute best one he has – he’ll bring that to the door of the tent and lay his hand on the head of the animal and he’ll pray and confess his sins and then he’ll kill the animal by slitting it’s throat and then the priest will take the blood and do some priestly things with the blood and he’ll put parts of the body of the animal on the alter, which is a sort of outdoor bar-b-q and he will cook that and the smell of all that will apparently be a pleasing aroma unto the Lord.

That's the ritual whispered to Moses from inside the tent that will allow human beings to resume some sort of fellowship with God.

Now, there are 3 different versions of this foundational ritual described in chapter 1 – the only difference being the value of the animal being offered which is based on the relative wealth of the worshipper, but the BASIC ELEMENTS are all the same.

This is a TEACHING RITUAL.

Andrew Bonar very usefully compares these rituals to our modern-day church ordinances. He says:

“The Lord may use them as he uses Gospel ordinances at present, to convey light to us, and leave more indelible impressions.”²

I love that line – to LEAVE MORE INDELIBLE IMPRESSIONS!!

I imagine that was true! I imagine that these teaching rituals left a very indelible impression on all those who participated in them. I imagine they went home having LEARNED SOME STUFF – and today we are most interested in what they learned about God.

What Does The Law Teach Us About God?

I think the first thing they learned is fairly obvious. I think they learned that God is holy.

1. He is Holy

It would be hard to miss that, wouldn't it?

Again – you have to imagine living through this! Imagine that you are regular Joe Israelite. You are from the tribe of Reuben, say, and so normally you would be camped out on the SOUTH part of the national encampment. And then there would be a big GAP between where your tents are

² Andrew Bonar, *Leviticus* in the Geneva Series Of Commentaries, (USA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2020), 3.

and where the TABERNACLE complex begins. And remember, the Tabernacle is a COMPLEX or a COMPOUND. It was designed to look like the compound of a wealthy nomad prince. It had a BIG TENT in the middle and then a BIG TALL fence around the outside.

And the fence was GUARDED!

It was guarded by the Levites – and the Levites were no joke. The Levites were WARRIOR PRIESTS who were radically committed to the holiness of God. Do you remember how they got ordained to that particular role in the first place? It happened in the aftermath of the Golden Calf debacle. While Moses was up on the mountain the people fell into gross idolatry and sexual revelry. Moses came down and saw what was going on. The story is told in Exodus 32:

And when Moses saw that the people had broken loose (for Aaron had let them break loose, to the derision of their enemies),²⁶ then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, “Who is on the LORD’S side? Come to me.” And all the sons of Levi gathered around him.²⁷ And he said to them, “Thus says the LORD God of Israel, ‘Put your sword on your side each of you, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and each of you kill his brother and his companion and his neighbor.’”²⁸ And the sons of Levi did according to the word of Moses. And that day about three thousand men of the people fell.²⁹ And Moses said, “Today you have been ordained for the service of the LORD, each one at the cost of his son and of his brother, so that he might bestow a blessing upon you this day.”
(Exodus 32:25–29 ESV)

That’s how the Levites were ordained to this service! Because they volunteered to strap on their swords and walk through the camp and EXECUTE ANYONE engaged in idolatry or sexual immorality. THOSE ARE THE GUYS patrolling the perimeter of the Tabernacle Complex and they have standing orders to KILL ANYONE WHO APPROACHES INAPPROPRIATELY.

That adds a little something to a church service, don’t you think?

Imagine going to a church where the ushers walked up and down the aisles with DRAWN PISTOLS looking for anyone displaying sloppiness or disrespect in their approach.

I think that would add a little something.

Nobody went to church in those days QUESTIONING THE HOLINESS OF GOD.

Everybody understood that HE WAS OTHER. He was not us. He was GOD. There was US over here and there was GOD OVER THERE and you better be careful how you approach him.

These various rituals are making that point unmistakably clear to everyone.

But they were also teaching that God is relational.

2. He is relational

He is OTHER but he is WITH US.

And that is somewhat unexpected.

Because human beings can be AWFUL! We are rebels! We are fallen! We are FICKLE in our affections, we're careless in our obedience - we are a walking, rolling TIRE FIRE generally speaking – so why in the world would the God of the Universe want to live with us?

I'm a human being and I'm not sure that I want to live with us – and yet, apparently, God very much does.

That's the whole point of this story – this story that began back in the Book of Genesis. Back in Genesis we learned that the universe was created as a CONTEXT for God to live and dwell with human beings. That was the PLAN – but we ruined the plan by rebelling against our Creator. We didn't want to be under God and over everything else – we wanted to be GOD – so God cast us out – which of course begs the question, why didn't God just SCRAP the entire project? Why didn't he roll up the universe like a scroll and start again?

And the answer – apparently – is that he loves us.

That's the miracle in this story!

God comes down – and he sets up a tent – a little compound - right in the middle of this camp of travelling refugees – and he says:

I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.
(Leviticus 26:12 ESV)

What?

Why would God do that?

And the answer can only be that he loves us.

Old Testament and New – this is what the story is saying!

This STORY is the Old Testament precursor to everyone's favourite verse in the NT:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16 ESV)

Old Testament and New God LOVES US and is therefore MAKING A WAY FOR US to live with him and to be his covenant people.

There is no escaping that theme in this story. Visualize this, right: Regular Joe Israelite is standing OPEN MOUTHED in front of his tent having just seen a CLOUD DESCEND FROM HEAVEN and take up residence over the TENT OF MEETING as a pretty clear and obvious way of saying that the God of the universe has just moved in NEXT DOOR.

Right? What in the WORLD?! That's what he's thinking.

He's blown away because APPARENTLY God wants to live with his people.

That's the main idea of this story. These ordinances – this whole book - is saying that God is holy – he is not us – but he loves us and he wants to live in the midst of us. Praise the Lord!

And then thirdly these Old Testament ordinances are also making it pretty clear that is narrow and particular.

3. He is narrow and particular

There is no getting around that. God wants to live with us – but CLEARLY it is going to have to be on his terms. This is not a “Choose Your Own Adventure” kind of thing. There are no options here; no wiggle room. God comes down and he says: “If you want to live with me, and if you want me to live with you, then this is exactly how it’s got to be, and any deviation from this plan will be met with immediate and deadly consequence.”

And so it was! Do you remember the story of Nadab and Abihu? The sons of Aaron – Jewish nobility? Do you remember that? In Leviticus 10:1-2 it says:

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them. ² And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD. (Leviticus 10:1–2 ESV)

Can you imagine being regular Joe Israelite and seeing that!

The sons of DID SOMETHING that God didn’t ask for – they weren’t worshipping demons in there – they were just innovating a little bit - and FIRE CAME OUT FROM THE LORD AND CONSUMED THEM.

I imagine that THAT LEFT AN INDELIBLE IMPRESSION on the minds of worshippers like ordinary Joe Israelite. I think that says, loud and clear, that the Lord is in charge here and he alone determines the manner of our approach. You come to God HIS WAY or you don’t come at all – that’s the BASIC MESSAGE here – that’s the ELEMENTARY PRINCIPLE. And it is just as true in the New Testament as it is in the Old Testament. What did Jesus say?

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6 ESV)

I am the sacrifice – I am the leader – I am the teacher - I am the Lord, Jesus says. If you don't listen to me, trust me and follow me then you DON'T come to God – period. That's the same basic principle - and the same consequence for disregarding it. Jesus said:

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’ (Matthew 7:21–23 ESV)

You don't get to say to Jesus: “I may not have done what you asked, but I did do many religious things.”

No.

That's not an option.

That's unauthorized fire.

And Old Testament and New – that kind of rebellious, arrogant innovation will get you killed. In the Old Testament it got you killed on the spot – in the New Testament it gets you killed on Judgment Day. But either way, the principle is the same. You come to God on his terms – PRECISELY and NARROWLY – or you don't come at all. This is an ELEMENTARY BUILDING BLOCK OF BIBLICAL FAITH – Old Testament and New.

Fourthly in this story – in this ACTED RITUAL OF FAITH we learn that while God is narrow and particular, he is also gracious and merciful.

4. He is gracious and merciful

After all - he MAKES A WAY. It isn't “any way you want”; it isn't “anything you might CHOOSE” – but it is a way, where there ought to be no way. Remember – this story begins with

the word AND – meaning it is inseparably associated with the stories that come before it. It is connected to Exodus and before that to Genesis and in Genesis – way back at the beginning of the story – after our rebellion and fall – it did not look to anyone that there was going to be a way home. In fact it looked like there was definitely NOT going to be a way home. God said:

²² “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—” ²³ therefore the LORD God sent him out from the garden of Eden to work the ground from which he was taken. ²⁴ He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:22–24 ESV)

That, to me, does not scream out “future home coming”.

You see, read in CONTEXT, the great mystery of the bible is not “why are some saved and not others” – the great mystery of the Bible is “why does God save anyone at all?” We are rebels. We are arrogant. We are fallen. We are OUT and yet here in this story – GOD COMES DOWN TO BRING US HOME.

That is mercy! That is God NOT TREATING US as our sins deserve.

That’s the point! That was the EFFECT that this story would have had on the hearts and minds of those who originally experienced it. They would have been blown away by the mercy and graciousness of God.

And then lastly, through all of these Old Testament ordinances the people who have learned something about the beauty and the goodness of God.

5. He is good

So you see this whole system wasn’t about meeting the needs of God – it was about God meeting the needs of people. God wasn’t hungry. The animals and the rituals weren’t for him – they were for us. The people learned that in the very first service. In Leviticus chapter 9, after all the instructions for how to do this had been given and after the ordination of the people who would

facilitate – once everything was in place, they were finally able to have a service and so they did.
Leviticus 9:22-23 says:

Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he came down from offering the sin offering and the burnt offering and the peace offerings.
²³ And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people.
(Leviticus 9:22–23 ESV)

That’s what it was all about! It was about BEING BLESSED IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD and then turning around and BLESSING OTHER PEOPLE! That was the rhythm they were being invited into – which was exactly what God promised to Abraham back in the beginning. He said in Genesis 12:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. (Genesis 12:2 ESV)

That’s the whole point of this story – that’s the whole point of worship! We come in here to BE BLESSED; we come in here to be MADE A GREAT PEOPLE – and then we go out there to BLESS THE NATIONS!

Are you seeing that?

I hope you are seeing that – we literally PAINT THAT ON THE WALLS so that you SEE THAT every time you go in and out from this place. What did you see this morning over the doors when you came in to worship? You saw a reminder:

Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! (Psalm 34:8 ESV)

And then what do you see when you leave this place of worship? You see a reminder to:

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19 ESV)

COME IN – GO OUT.

BE BLESSED – BE A BLESSING TO ALL THE NATIONS.

That is BASIC!! That is ELEMENTARY! That is the ESSENCE of what it means to be a worshipper. This isn't FOR GOD – it's FOR US! We need to be here! IT is a privilege for us to be here! It is literally LIFE CHANGING. In here we taste and see that the Lord is GOOD and then we go out there to DECLARE his GOODNESS to the nations.

That's it in a nutshell! That's the story! That's our calling – that's our privilege - thanks be to God! Let's pray together.