

# Introduction to Leviticus

To Read:

1. Galatians 3
2. Mark 12:30-31  
Romans 13:8-10  
Galatians 5:14

## I. The Introduction: The Challenge of Leviticus

- A. This morning we are starting a new book together, and, at the request of several in the congregation, I have decided to do Leviticus next**
1. And I'll be honest, Leviticus was not my first choice of a book to preach through - Leviticus can be a confusing book, and there are parts of this book that wouldn't necessarily be my first choice for a passage to preach on
  2. With that said, looking back, I feel that we did an adequate job of Genesis and an adequate job of Exodus, but looking forward to Leviticus, I am much less sure of myself
  3. So, as we start Leviticus, perhaps we should view this study more as - let's explore Leviticus together and see what we can learn - we'll try to answer some questions along the way and try to understand some of the main points, but there will probably still be questions after we're done and times when I may just have to say, "I don't know"
- B. And this is probably how we all feel, to some degree, about Leviticus**
1. If I asked people to raise their hands if Leviticus was their favorite book in the Bible, I doubt anyone would be raising their hands
  2. Leviticus can be a confusing book, a challenging book, sometimes even an uncomfortable book and we don't know exactly what to do with it often
  3. We can all affirm that it is part of Scripture, and therefore it should be for our benefit and application, but it often doesn't seem very applicable to us because it was written to a people camped out in the Arabian wilderness some 3500 years ago - and on top of that, it seems to be a core part of the law that Paul repeatedly tells us we are not bound to
  4. So, maybe we pick and choose a few things out of the book that make sense and then ignore the rest - but that makes for poor hermeneutic and makes us uncomfortable, so maybe we just avoid the book altogether
- C. But we shouldn't be scared of Leviticus, because Leviticus is central to the story of the Bible**
1. Leviticus really stands at the core of the Old Testament - it describes for us what Israel's life and worship should look like as the people of God - and it is the central book of the Torah, the books of Moses
  2. In fact, Leviticus seems to have been the central book to Old Testament Judaism - over half of the Talmud, an ancient Jewish commentary, deals with Leviticus and the rabbis used to teach their students Hebrew by making them memorize Leviticus
  3. But not only was Leviticus important to the Old Testament, Leviticus is found all over the New Testament as well - there are dozens of quotes from Leviticus in the New Testament and almost innumerable allusions
  4. Without Leviticus, important concepts like the purpose and meaning of sacrifices and the meaning and practice of holiness, would be significantly underdeveloped in the Old Testament and would leave the New Testament reference-less
  5. The New Testament demands and assumes at least a general understanding of the concepts of Leviticus - without Leviticus, the New Testament simply doesn't make sense
- D. So, the challenge of Leviticus is to figure out how this book applies to us**
1. We need to take this book that is full of confusing and uncomfortable passages and figure out how it stood at the center of the Old Testament people of God
  2. And then we need to figure out how Leviticus supports and undergirds the New Testament and how Christ has become the fulfillment of this law
  3. And then we need to figure out what this means for us today and to do so in a consistent way, not merely cherry-picking some passages that make sense to us, but understanding how this book as a whole relates to us and then how the individual passages relate to us
- E. To do this, we need to figure out what story Leviticus is telling us, where is Leviticus coming from and where is it headed**
- ①✘1. So for our second point this morning, I'm going to exam the story of Leviticus from three similar but complementary angles (\*OUTLINE\*)
2. First, we'll look at Leviticus in light of the grand story of the Bible - what we might call Biblical Theology
  3. Second, we'll connect Leviticus to specific promises and patterns that had come before
  4. Third, we'll try to determine what question the book is answering and see how that helps us understand the book

## 1 II. The Answer: The Story of Leviticus

### 1 A. We'll start by looking at a brief overview of redemptive history

1. I'm going to spend a few minutes telling a story this morning - it's a story you all know, but I want to emphasize some important details and hopefully elicit some specific emotions which will bring us to Leviticus
2. And the story starts: In the beginning God created the land and the sky, the sea and all they contained
  - a. And as His special creation, God created man and appointed him as regent - to enjoy and to rule over the land that God had made
  - b. God took the man and his helper, his wife, and placed them in a tended garden and told them to take dominion of the land, to fill it and bring it under subjection, putting all things in order
  - c. Limitless possibilities lay at the feet of the first man and woman - they had eternity to explore and to mold and to enjoy God's land
3. Unfortunately, this glorious state was quickly lost as the first man and woman decided that regency was not enough, but reached out to take hold of their own destiny rebelling against their Creator and Master
  - a. And their rebellion polluted the land, it introduced a deep stain of corruption into what had been very good
  - b. And, as the only right response to such a grievous act, the man and woman were thrust out of the land so they could no longer pollute it - first being thrust out of the garden in the center of the land and eventually being thrust out of the land forever in death
  - c. But, in an amazing display of His gracious nature, God hinted that man might not always be separated from the land, perhaps someday man's descendant would be welcomed back to take dominion
4. So the story didn't end there, mankind continued to be fruitful and multiply - they filled the earth and took dominion - in a way, in their own way
  - a. But the land was not subdued - instead it had become full of every kind of evil and violence - the stain that man brought upon the land only deepened with every new generation as evil multiplied and beget more evil
  - b. Mankind ruled with ruthless vengeance in the land - but they never enjoyed its goodness or had any lasting claim to the land - every new ruler was born, participated in corruption and was then thrust out in death
  - c. But even this temporary passing through became too much, eventually the stench of the pollution reached up to God who regretted that He had ever loosed mankind in His land - and he decided to make an end
  - d. The corruption of the land had become so great that it needed to be washed away - the polluters needed to be destroyed and their corruption washed away from the surface of the land
  - e. So God sent a great flood of waters to wash away the pollution - for forty days and forty nights the waters rained down upon the earth and the earth was scoured clean
  - f. Mankind was cast out of the land forever so that the land could enjoy peace and rest in his absence - but again God displayed His grace because not every man was destroyed - God chose one family to continue after the washing, to try to again take dominion of the land
5. Unfortunately, the new generation was no different than all the previous generations and corruption reigned again
  - a. As though nothing had been learned, mankind banded together to build a tower to reach up to the very heavens and take the place of God - regency would never be enough, man demanded absolute sovereignty
  - b. So once again mankind was scattered across the land having no lasting place and no lasting claim - no matter how great a claim a man might make, that claim was always forfeited in death
  - c. Mankind, it appeared, could never have any lasting claim to the land - he was bound merely to pollute and corrupt and destroy and to be eventually thrust out in death
6. But once again, something amazing happened - God called a man from among the scattered nations and told him that he could once again come and take possession of the land
  - a. And this promise was greater than the previous promises had been, because there was a promise that the land would belong to him and to his offspring forever - though man had lost their claim to the land because of the rampant pollution of their rebellion, somehow this new man would come and be reconciled to the land
  - b. Now, the story of this promise could fill volume upon volume, but after many amazing and astounding events, this man's descendants were free and on their way to take possession of the land
  - c. It was a joyful occasion, a time for celebration, but also a time for terror - every previous attempt to take possession of the land had ended catastrophically, what would make this attempt any different?
  - d. What would prevent this man's offspring from once again polluting the land and being cast out? What could cleanse the corruption that man inevitably brought? Could the promise really be true?
7. This is the background of Leviticus - God's people are on the way to God's place, but their corruption had always polluted the land and ended with them being thrust out
  - a. How would God provide so that His people would not once again be thrust out? How would God provide so that His promise could be true? How would God provide so that man could take possession of the land?

- 1 B. So Leviticus is intimately tied to what had gone before, but now that we've seen the big picture leading up to Leviticus, I want to look at three specific events, three passages that overshadow and explain Leviticus**
1. The first story is the story that went right before, the story of Exodus, and I just want to call our attention to a couple of high points in the story that lead us directly to Leviticus
    - 1 a. First, we need to remember the promise that was the basis of the Exodus, Exodus 6:6-8 - *Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. I will bring you into the land that I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. I will give it to you for a possession. I am the LORD.'*
      - i. God promised that the Israelites, Abraham's descendants, would be His people and He would be their God - no longer would they be cast out of His sanctuary and separated from Him, but they would be intimately welcomed
    - 1 b. And this is seen in the promise of the second half of the book, Exodus 29:45-46 - *I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God,*
      - i. Not only would they be God's people, God Himself would be dwelling in their midst as their God
    - c. But this was an enormous problem - God's people had proven themselves to be full of every sort of corruption, so much corruption that its stench reached up to heaven - how could God dwell in their midst without destroying them?
      - i. And this is the question Leviticus sets out to answer - how could this be? Is this possible?
      - ii. Leviticus sets out a way that God can dwell with His people without destroying them by providing a means for washing away corruption so that the land will not become polluted again
    - 1 iii. So after all is concluded, Leviticus finishes with a similar promise, Leviticus 26:11-13 - *I will make my dwelling among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves. And I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.*
  2. So, Leviticus answers the problem of God's presence with His people, but this tension directs us to the next story that Leviticus is intimately connected to, the story of the flood
    - 1 a. Genesis 6:11-13 - *Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth. And God said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth.*
    - b. The story of the flood is exactly what Leviticus is trying to prevent from happening once again, and the language of the flood is found in warnings across the book
      - 1 i. For example, Leviticus 18:24-25 - *"Do not make yourselves unclean by any of these things, for by all these the nations I am driving out before you have become unclean, and the land became unclean, so that I punished its iniquity, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.*
      - 1 ii. Or Leviticus 26:27, 32-34 - *"But if in spite of this you will not listen to me, but walk contrary to me, then ... I will lay your cities waste and will make your sanctuaries desolate, and I will not smell your pleasing aromas. And I myself will devastate the land, so that your enemies who settle in it shall be appalled at it. And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheath the sword after you, and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste. "Then the land shall enjoy its Sabbaths as long as it lies desolate, while you are in your enemies' land; then the land shall rest, and enjoy its Sabbaths.*
    - c. And allusions or references to the flood will happen several times throughout the book, perhaps most poignantly in the food laws described in Leviticus 11
      - i. The food laws parallel the commands that God gave to Noah after the flood, using the same breakdown in types of animals, but they also make a contrast, something new and different is happening now
  - 1 3. And the third story that lies behind and beneath Leviticus is the first promise, the protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15 - *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."*
    - a. All of the story that leads up to Leviticus and flows from Leviticus is really an outworking of this first promise, and Leviticus is no different, this promise stands behind the story of Leviticus
    - b. And we can see some clear ties back to this first promise as Leviticus starts to unpack what happened right after this promise in the first sacrifice and how that first sacrifice pointed forward to something greater
    - c. So we need to keep this promise in mind as we go through Leviticus - this promise is going to help us understand some of the more challenging and confusing parts of Leviticus as we tie them back to this promise

### 1 C. This background is going to help us understand and apply Leviticus

One of the first steps in understanding a book of the Bible is trying to determine what question is this book answering. Fortunately, as we've just seen, for Leviticus, this question is easy. Leviticus is the fleshing out of the grand promise of Exodus, "I will dwell among the people of Israel and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God," (Exodus 29:45-46). But how could this be true? How could God ever dwell in the midst of any people without destroying them? How could any people be a kingdom of priests unto God?

These are the questions that Leviticus sets out to answer, and the answer is simple: holiness. For God to dwell in the midst of the people and for the people to serve God, they must be holy, they must be cleansed. But how will the people be made holy? Leviticus answers in two complementary parts. First, Leviticus celebrates judicial holiness - that God would cleanse the people to make them holy. So Leviticus starts with the explanation of the sacrificial system, looking for an atoning sacrifice that would make holy and bring peace between God and the people. And the first half Leviticus builds toward the day of Atonement, the yearly enactment of a great sacrifice that would cleanse the tabernacle and the people and the land and make the people worthy of being God's people. But Leviticus also celebrates applied holiness - the sanctification of turning away from sin and embracing God's rule. So the second half of Leviticus is full of commands about how the people would embrace God's rule and God's holiness in their midst.

In fact, Leviticus introduces a pattern that will continue through the rest of Scripture - the pairing and ordering of judicial and applied holiness. Leviticus never separates the two sides of holiness. Judicial and applied holiness cannot be separated. Sanctification can never be your work - you can never do enough to make yourself set apart to God, to wash away the uncleanness of sin. But at the same time, cleansing never happens without real change in our lives. Judicial sanctification without applied sanctification is merely hypocrisy; applied sanctification without judicial sanctification is self-righteousness. The two sides cannot be separated, but they must be ordered correctly. Leviticus celebrates applied sanctification only after and in the context of a covenant made with God (in Exodus) and judicial sanctification won through the sacrificial system and this is how we must approach the book. And this becomes the pattern for the rest of Scripture, most easily identified in Paul's letters which describe first the basis of salvation and then the effects of salvation - how are we cleansed and what does being cleansed look like?

At the center, that is the story of Leviticus - it's easy to get lost in the details and arguments over this law or that law. But as we study this book, we need to keep this great mystery at the forefront of our minds - if Israel is to be a kingdom of priests, they must both be holy and be made holy. Leviticus holds out hope that this could be a real possibility, but at the same time, Leviticus could never bring this hope to fruition. For all the hope that the book holds out, the people of Israel still fail. We know in the end Israel did not possess the land. Eventually they were thrust out and the land enjoyed its Sabbaths. If the ultimate purpose of Leviticus was to cleanse the people, then in the end it failed. But Leviticus didn't fail, because that wasn't Leviticus's ultimate purpose. In the end, Leviticus was a promise - a promise that someday something or someone would come that would be able to fulfill the promise of the sacrificial system, to fulfill the promise of the day of atonement and to fulfill the promise of lived out sanctification. Leviticus couldn't do this, but Leviticus held out hope that it could be done. Leviticus couldn't do this, but it set out a pattern for how it would be accomplished. Sometimes we can get bound up trying to figure out what each law meant and how or whether we should obey these laws. But, there's a significant danger that if we get too bound up in understanding and applying the rules of Leviticus, we might miss this grand promise - there will be a way for God's people to be cleansed again.

In the final analysis, Leviticus was written to a different people under a different covenant and its rule over God's people has come to an end. So Leviticus isn't directly applicable to us anymore. We don't live under its covenant and we aren't bound to its laws. But its promise should hold great joy for us and as a promise of the covenant that we have entered with God we can learn from its prescription and patterns. When we can see and rejoice in the promise of Leviticus, then we can take Leviticus and see how it is teaching us about our greater sacrifice and use it to follow after Him.

### 1 D. Outline

21. Judicial Holiness - How do we become holy?
  - 1 a. Provision for holiness - the sacrificial system (Leviticus 1-7)
  - 1 b. Mediator of holiness - setting apart the priests (Leviticus 8-10)
  - 1 c. Reminders of holiness - clean and unclean things (Leviticus 11-15)
  - 1 d. Day of holiness (Leviticus 16)
22. Applied Holiness - What does holiness look like?

### III. The Goal: The Plan for Leviticus

#### A. With this background and framework in mind, I want to set out some goals for our study of Leviticus together

1. As I've meditated on Leviticus, these are the things that I want to learn and that I want to bring forward out of this book - these are the things that I hope to exalt as we go through Leviticus
2. And I've identified three goals for Leviticus that will lead to three questions that I want to answer

#### 1 B. So we'll start with my three goals for our study of Leviticus:

1. First, I want our study of Leviticus to be Gospel-centered
  - a. That is, as we go through Leviticus, I want to highlight as first and foremost the gospel implications of a passage before and above any application of a passage
  - b. I want to know what this passage teaches us about God's nature, what it teaches us about man's nature, and what it teaches us about the answer to our problem
  - c. So before we ever go into any application of any part of Leviticus, I want to have those questions clearly answered because we can't apply Leviticus until the gospel has been understood in it
2. Second, I want our study of Leviticus to be Christ-centered
  - a. Leviticus was written some 1400 years before Christ, but Jesus emphatically claims that it is about Him
    1. For example, Luke 24:25-27 - *And he said to them, "O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*
  - b. So, as we go through Leviticus, I don't want to merely make general observations about God and man and salvation, but to show how Leviticus specifically points us to Christ, how Leviticus is a tutor pointing us to Him
3. Third, I want our study of Leviticus to be applicable
  - a. Now, I've carefully stated this goal in the third and last place, because the first two goals must come first - but we really haven't understood Leviticus unless we can understand what Leviticus is calling me to
  1. b. So, I want to work each week to make Leviticus applicable to us - not merely knowledge, but passion and pursuit - fulfilling what James calls us to in James 1:22-25 - *But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.*
  - c. Application can be a broad category, though - sometimes the most powerful applications aren't a command to go do something, but a command to feel something, to have a certain attitude, to be something
  - d. But we'll try every week to get to the point of saying what this has to do with me - how should this make me feel? How should this change my attitude? And, perhaps sometimes, what does this call me to do?

#### 1 C. And those three goals lead to three questions that I want to answer each week:

1. My plan right now is to take these questions and answer them each week about the passage as the outline for each of our studies in Leviticus - although I reserve the right to change my mind about that if I find it isn't working well
1. 2. First, what did this teach the ancient Israelites about God?
  - a. We'll try to set the passage in its original context and try to understand what it communicated to the people of Israel gathered around the mountain
  - b. We'll especially try to answer, "what did this passage teach them about the God that would dwell in their midst?" and, "what did this passage teach them about themselves?"
  - c. In other words, we'll try to see how each passage contained a glimpse of the gospel, a pointer or a promise or a warning or a command that called the Israelite to look for God's grace
1. 3. Second, how should this point us forward to Christ?
  - a. If we can catch a glimpse of the gospel in the original content of Leviticus, then I want to take that glimpse and trace it forward to Christ and see how the gospel reaches its full glory in Him
  - b. So we'll think through: How is this passage fulfilled in Christ? How is this passage ultimately a promise of what Christ would do? How can we rejoice in Christ in this passage?
1. 4. Third, how can we apply this passage to ourselves in the New Covenant?
  - a. This is perhaps the most challenging question in Leviticus, but this is where I want to end each week
  - b. Having seen the seeds of the gospel in Leviticus and having followed them to Christ, what does that mean for me? How should hearing Leviticus this morning change me into Christ's image?

## ① IV. The Application: How does Leviticus apply to us?

### A. Now, like I said, that last question is going to be the hardest and usually the most controversial

1. So, as we start our study of Leviticus together, I want to finish by describing how I am going to try to make application of Leviticus to us - what is going to guide my meditation and my answer to that question

### B. I want to start by reading a short section out of the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary on Leviticus that says it better than I probably ever could (READ)

### ① C. Principles of Application - five things I want to affirm before we make any application of a passage:

- ① 1. The purpose of the law was to highlight grace and display salvation, which means it finds its ultimate end in Christ
- ① 2. Therefore, we are not bound to this law or under this covenant
- ① 3. Classifications like ceremonial, civil, and moral law are foreign to the text and don't make good exegetical principles (although the result may look very much like this)
- ① 4. The whole law is summed up in the command: love your neighbor as yourself
- ① 5. The law is useful and applicable to the Christian

### ① D. Method of Application - what questions will I ask as I try to apply a passage to us

- ① 1. What was the purpose of this command in its original context?
  - a. What did the command reveal about God? About us? About holiness?
  - b. If laws are an expression of values, how does this law tell us what God values?
  - c. How did the command point forward to the promise?
- ① 2. What did the command require of the worshipper?
  - a. What attitude did the command require?
  - b. What principle does the command point to?
- ① 3. How is this command fulfilled in Jesus?
  - a. How did it point to Him?
  - b. How did He live it out?
- ① 4. How is this command summed up in love?
- ① 5. How is this command reflected in the New Testament?