Leviticus 21–22

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Preacher: David Helm

[0:00] Well, good morning. Welcome to Christ Church Chicago. You know, one quality that I appreciate when reading a well-told story is the author's ability to create an entire universe unto itself.

! So, foreign to ours. In fact, these storytellers have the capacity to create worlds that readers wish to inhabit for a season.
And not only inhabit for a time, but they're able to create worlds unlike our own in which we want to inhabit in ways that help us navigate the world in which we live.
I mean, just think about it. Some of your favorite stories. The other night I just watched one of the Harry Potter films. I was introduced again to the world of Hogwarts, the imaginative genius of the writer and love inhabiting that space for a time.
Some of you like the Marvel Comics multiverse. Worlds that I have not yet been exposed to, yet should probably do so with Earth 616 from what I am told.
[1:30] Some of you might like the stories of Narnia and Middle Earth, where the greatest pleasure is not only being there and learning how to navigate the world in which you live, but that sorrow almost when those stories or those movies ends.

I've got to tell you, the book of Leviticus has been that kind of story for us. Here we found ourselves walking over weeks now amid a multitude of people who reside in tribal units with their nomadic dwellings encircling a football field sized outer rectangular made of hanging fabric with an interior tent 45 feet long and 15 feet wide itself comprised of two rooms.
One a holy of holies in another place just the holy place. So unlike our own. But here we have learned, have we not, how to draw near to God.
In the book of Leviticus, we've seen sights. You've heard words even read today that surprised you. We've heard sounds. We've smelled fires fueled by large beasts which have been slaughtered, drained blood, animal, food, and animal flesh, smoke seemingly to ever rise to the skies.
But by it, have we not seen a need for a sacrifice for our own sins? Here, even the terrain of the storyteller has created a world for us to inhabit that is foreign.
[3:14] These are not city dwellers. These are not city dwellers. We have been reading of this indigenous wilderness wandering group. Men and women who just beyond them are rising surrounding mountains that evidently have distended crags, elevated rock structures where shunned goats are sent.

And lone travelers sense the absence of God the further away I am from his people who have been saved by him and are now waiting to set out for him.
Tell me, tell me, is this not true? Can I get a witness here this morning? Well, each time the scripture reading Leviticus ends, you sit in your seat immediately perplexed, if not intrigued, to wonder at the world the writer has created and asked you to inhabit for at least 30 minutes in a week's time.
And all week and every week you take your seat after the reading, some of you even turning to the one next to you, raising the eyebrows without having to say a word or perhaps mumbling under your breath, and what will he do with this?
Yeah, this is Leviticus. Of course you have. But be honest, each week haven't we all walked out of these doors at the close of the service carrying two things with us that we didn't have when we came in?
[4:46] A greater appreciation for the world that Leviticus is asking us to inhabit for a time and fresh insight on how to better navigate the world that we inhabit?

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It's true. This has been an exciting, if not foreign time together. And so, you're in your seat, and I'm here.
And we ought to ask, again, the same two questions. What world is this writer asking me to inhabit this week?
What world is this writer wanting our church family to inhabit this week? And what fresh insight will help me better navigate the world that we inhabit?
Well, in regard to where this thing is going over time, the destination to which we're going to go, I'm going to tell you that the world of those priests, which are foundational to this chapter, is going to reveal that our role in the world is more exalted than we know.
[6:01] Take a look. What world are we inhabiting? He's asking us to inhabit a world of those priests.

Just look at the header over chapter 21. Holiness and the priests. Or take a look at the opening line of chapter 22.
And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his sons, for indeed they were the priests. And in particular, two things.
It's a long reading, and we only read half of what the sermon will hold. Chapter 21 concerns those priests, but in particular, their conduct.
Chapter 22 also concerns those priests, but it outlines their calling and what they're to be doing on behalf of the people.
[7:03] Let me get it even cleaner for you, because if you glance your eyes, scan them rather than read at all, you'll see that chapter 21 has two speeches to the priests.

And that chapter 22 has two speeches to the priests. And the stepping stones through the text are like this. In 21, you're looking at their personal conduct with a nod toward their personal appearance.
That's the second speech there in 21, beginning at verse 16. But in chapter 22, you're looking at their calling as they bring forward sacrifices.
But then the second speech, verse 17 and 22, talks about what will make their sacrifice acceptable.
So if you're wondering how to make sense of these distant foreign worlds, there it is in a large print for you.
It's about those priests. It's about their conduct. With a nod toward their appearance. It's about those priests. It's about their calling.
[8:20] With a nod toward what would make it acceptable. And so there it is. Let's look at a couple of things here. We ask, what is it about their conduct?

There it is. Put your eyes on it. Chapter 21, verses 1 to 15. And I'm only able to give you some observations. But it seems to be it's their conduct as it relates to how they handle death around them and how they will and will not handle marriage concerning them.
Verse 1 of 21. Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them, no one shall make himself unclean for the dead among his people. Conduct in regard to those who have passed.
But then again, verse 7. They shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who's been defiled, neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband. Again, their conduct, both in regard to death and marriage.
Those observations continue to hold the whole if you look at verse 11. For there it's repeated. He shall not go into any dead bodies nor make himself unclean, even for his father or his mother.
[9:44] The priest was to stand almost pure from the passing away. And not only that, but when you get down to it, even in regard to marriage, again, verse 13 and 14.

He shall, and we're talking about the high priest now, he shall take a wife and her virginity, a widow, not a divorced woman, a woman who's been defiled or a prostitute. These he shall not marry.
In other words, and all of these are wrapped in these words that keep repeating themselves through, like little bombs being lobbed into the text. I'm concerned with my priest being clean, not unclean.
That's really the force of their personal conduct. Let me make it clear. God gives Moses specific instructions concerning the priest and the high priest.
On their conduct, they are not to mourn for family members as the rest of the people do. They may only openly mourn for a close family member, such as their own mother or father.

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[10:51] And then God explains the reasons for these strange practices of conduct. Look at 21.6. They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God, for they present the offerings by fire to the Lord, the food of their God, so they shall be holy.

Because of their closeness in regard to what they did for the people on behalf of God, they were to remain separate from the things that would, well, just be earthly in relationship to God.
It's not only their conduct in regard to death or marriage, but look how it shifts that second speech beginning in verse 16.
This Lord spoke to Moses again saying, and now it's with a nod toward their appearance. All the ways they could or could not be. Some of you know, many of you don't, when I was five, I lost my left eye.
We were having a great mud ball fight at the time, but by the time it was concluded, and four surgeries later, nothing could be done, and I've got one eye.
[12:06] So you'll notice that even as I stand here today, the people that have been around, that are on this side of me, they're always within my gaze, and therefore there are fewer of you on this side.

Whereas I've known Claire Rothschild for decades. She can do whatever she wants over here, and I can't see her. Do you know, if somebody was blind, though, they couldn't be the holy priest that went into the Holy of Holies, and a number of other things mentioned as well, by way of appearance.
It's not that God doesn't like ADA ramps. It's not that he's prejudiced against defect or deformity. No, he's saying something here that direct access to him is a world where blemishes don't really come.
You can still be there in the priesthood. You can still eat the holy food. You can still even go to the holy place. But, but when you're representing all the people for the sacrifice of sin, well, that person's conduct and their appearance ought to have the sense of without stain, without blemish.
[13:24] It was a self-selecting out process to say, God's holy, we're not, let's send the closest approximation we got, and no one else.

Well, when you look at it that way, we have to understand that the repetition of the phrase in that appearance is about blemishes. Do you see it? Verse 17, none of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish.
Or verse 18, for no one who has a blemish. Or 21, no man of the offspring of Aaron is a priest who have a blemish. Or all the way down in 23, because he has a blemish.
Because all these things would profane, that is, denigrate, that is, show disregard for God who has no blemishes, at all.
Taken together then, this personal conduct on death and marriage, this nod to appearance, is actually saying something to the reader.
[14:36] The whole chapter is saying, the Lord has set those priests apart, he made them holy, he sanctifies them as holy, and they ought to remain holy.

What a strange practice in this world he's asked us to inhabit. But the reason is, in verses 15 and 23, at the end of each of these speeches, that they might not profane his offspring among his people, for the Lord sanctifies him.
Or, verse 23, he may not profane my sanctuaries, for I am the Lord who sanctifies them. God is setting something apart.
Let me put it as clearly as I can. Those priests are nothing less than the presence of God on earth. What a calling!
There's an ancient sultan of Delphi by the name of Balbin. I think this is probably the 13th century, maybe. I love what this ruler called himself.
[15:48] His reign lasted 20 years, but his fame rests in the name that he gave himself. You know what he called himself? The shadow of God. I mean, that's got some, that's got some stickiness to it.

I am the shadow of God. In other words, where he was, underneath his crossing shadow, God was, so it is and was with those priests.
They were the shadow of God, under which Israel was to find his shade. for mercy. Beautiful picture.

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But that's not all. 22 comes in. Chapter 22. To their personal conduct comes their professional calling.
Look at this third speech. Chapter 22. It really runs just for nine verses. But we get a repeating refrain refrain of don't be bringing diseased sacrifices and think you can get your calling accomplished.
[17:00] And even to the people itself. Don't walk in with your sacrifices, oh priest, or oh people, and think that somehow you can walk in here with deformities of sacrifices.

For the priest himself had to carry his calling in ways that demonstrated all that he was to do was pure and right and good.
not only that, but marriage comes in again. Not only death and disease and even diet the way they were to handle the food, but marriage comes in again.
Who can eat? What can eat? But this one shifts at verse 17 not to how they officiate their work, but to what would make it acceptable.
Does your Bible have a heading like that? Mine does. Right over 17, acceptable offerings. So where the conduct of the priest was connected to their appearance, the calling of the priest was definitely connected to what would be accepted or not by God.
[18:17] In fact, verse 17 reads, Speak to Aaron and his sons and all the people of Israel and say to them, When any of the house of Israel or the sojourners in Israel present burnt offerings as his offering for any of their vows or freewill offerings that they offer to the Lord, if it is to be accepted for you, it shall be a male without blemish.

Verse 20, If you don't do it this way, it will not be acceptable. That's the emphasis of the speech. And again, notice by repetition of refrain, this word about blemish.
I see it there in verse 19. It's got to be without blemish. 20, if it has a blemish, it's not going to work for you. 22, there must be no blemish.
Scan your eyes down to verse 25. Since there is a blemish in them, you don't do it that way.
Fascinating. Fascinating how these chapters kind of now in the grand scheme of things mirror one another, don't they?
we've been looking at those priests and the world he's in wanted us to have it with attention on their conduct and their calling, their appearance, and what would make it acceptable or not to God.
[19:42] at the close of the chapter, scan your eyes, chapter 22, verse 32 and 33, you see the full orbed purpose behind this part of the story.

you shall not profane my holy name that I may be sanctified among the people of Israel. I am the Lord who sanctifies you, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt to be your God.
These priests who were the shadow of God under which the people of God found mercy from his wrath and his indignation were not to profane God.
And if you wonder what it is to profane God, well, I looked it up. Webster's Dictionary. It would be to treat something sacred with abuse, irreverence, or contempt.
It basically says, you know what? You may be God, but I'm going to bring you whatever I want and it should be good enough for you. Basically, then it's to desecrate yourself or his place or what it takes to meet with him.
[20:58] The priests are God's representative to Israel. They must be holy as an expression of his holiness. If they acted in a way that was common or a way that he had not commanded, then they would defile his name.

They were indeed held to a higher standard and each of these things then indicate the world that he has asked us to inhabit today.
So let's stop for a moment, catch our breath. What do we do with this world that he's asked us to inhabit?
And what about this story finds a conclusive moment? Well, that's actually where the Bible story moves this thing forward into not stories about those priests but a story about our priests.
if you're a reader of the whole Bible, what happens in like Hebrews chapter 9 and 10 is the writer is going to say, these guys used to be God's shadow in which you found God's mercy, but they've been replaced.
[22:22] They've been replaced by Jesus who offered himself as a sacrifice who in both appearance and what he brought God was acceptable in both his conduct and his calling.

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He was unlike any other. What a story the Bible tells. What I'm trying to do right now is make for you a gospel connection between Leviticus and the whole story.
There's a big word I could throw on it. Imputation. that God will impute to you Christ's righteous sacrifice on behalf of you if you place your faith in his work rather than in your own.
Well, that's a good thing. That's actually what we're getting ready to give thanks for down here at the table. They actually call this a table of thanksgiving. It's a table that's open to anyone here this morning who acknowledges their sin, the inability of themselves or any priest in our fallen world to make pure, acceptable sacrifice, and we give thanks for what he has done.
I hope today that there's some of you who will look at that table in that way, Jesus as our priest replacing Leviticus and those priests.
[24:04] But let me ask a question. So then, is the cross the place where the story of this priesthood comes to an end? In other words, should my sermon be done?

Whether you think it should or not is a separate question. does the sermon only need to go directly to telling you to come to Jesus so that you can go back out through those doors and wait for his return?
Am I going to call you to the Lord's table and then tell you to go wait out a lifetime of table gatherings of your own? In other words, having gotten to Jesus, are we done?
The answer is no. Because the Bible story isn't done. The sermon can't end by making a mere connection to the gospel. It's got to make a connection from the gospel.
Let me put it differently. This can't conclude simply by inhabiting another world for a while. It's got to help me know how to navigate the world I'm going back into for a while.
[25:15] How does it do that? Well, here it is. Those priests which give way to our priest actually has something to say concerning we as priests.

Catch this. I've been preaching to get to this moment. As those priests were the shadow of God to a world in need of his shade until the coming of Christ, God's mercy so too, according to this same story, the church is the shadow of God's mercy until every eye shall one day see Jesus face to face.
You. Now, when he called Israel out of Egypt, he said you're going to be a holy nation, a priesthood led by priests. And Peter is going to pick up on this in 1 Peter and he's going to say, yeah, well, what Israel was to the world, the church now is.
A holy nation, a priesthood, with conduct that ought to represent his character, with a calling that ought to make himself known in the world.
I mean, this is a stunning thing. It's like I said at the outset, in one sense, as we look at texts like this, those priests end up showing Christ's church that our role is more exalted than we ever knew.
[26:49] We stand before God and his son in heaven and a world in need of a three dimensional living picture of what the gospel is.

2 Peter 3 15 puts it really interesting because it picks up on these ideas of blemishing again. He's alluding to these stories and he says, you know, you got heaven coming for you, you got this earth leaving for you, but verse 13, according to his promise, you're waiting for that heaven, but look at verse 14, therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot, here's our word from our text, or blemish and at peace.
We're to be found without blemish. We're to be just like the priests of old. So how you doing? How you doing?
How's your conduct and your appearance? Are you walking out your calling and what is or is not acceptable? Let's sit here before we come to the table.
Since we're waiting for a new world that's more intriguing or interesting that we will inhabit forever, we are to be diligent now in being without blemish.
[28:26] You don't wait. Don't do like those fourth century rich guys who never got baptized until they were old men because they wanted to do what they wanted all their life until they knew the end was come.

Then they'd make a profession of faith and give all their money to the church. Don't do like that. Do it when you're young. Do it when you're 13. Do it when you're 8. Do it when you're 20.
Do it. It's your calling. Your eternal prospects ought to govern your present purpose. Heaven ought to make your time on earth a pursuit of holiness.
Just as a destination determines the journey, just as the point of terminus dictates which train you get on or not. So too, your conduct, my conduct, let's get around out of the individualized sense.

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Let's talk Christ Church Chicago. Our conduct, our appearance, will and will not determine our usefulness to Christ in this world. Whatever Peter is saying is simply this.
[29:32] Hey, you're heading to heaven. Dress for it. put on your priestly garments. And so, well, we're right as a church to look back at the cross and to thank God for what he's done.

We will fail if we don't look forward to the world he's going to inhabit or ask us to inhabit and actually fulfill his design for us until we get there. Our conduct, our appearance, our calling, our acceptable or not, it all matters.
There's one way of showing the relationship between those priests and we priests and it's by living lives without blemish. Having been chosen to become the everlasting bride of Christ, we get to work now on becoming beautiful in appearance for him.
Knowing that you are going to be presented to Christ as his bride means you are now in the dressing room to prepare for that day. Christ Church Chicago has a lot to thank God for.
but we have a lot to get ready for. We have got to dress for action. Let me put a word picture on it. Why do you think we see at times in the dead of winter people walking around a terminal in O'Hare Airport when it's freezing out already in shorts and sandals?
[30:54] Why do you see that? Because they're dressing for where they're getting off. You may be going to Buffalo, still got your parka, your mittens, your boots, waiting on wings.

They're going to Miami. How foolish does it look, and I've seen it, to see somebody get off in a warm destination like Miami trying to shove their parka into a carry-on that's got no more room because they know that the clothes they were wearing are not fit for the destination in which they are now living.
that's what this chapter is telling you. We have got to wear the wardrobe of heaven. The sad thing about the amount of worldliness that we put up with in our own lives is that we're just carrying a lot of extra baggage, and I'm not talking weight, although I got a bit of that too.
You don't want to carry stuff that when you get off the airplane, he's like, what'd you bring that for? That's not coming in here.
That got blemishes all over it. You might buy jeans down there with holes on it on purpose, but you're not doing that up here. Sorry. Sorry. Just an old man talking.
[32:18] Imagine how embarrassing it would be when Jesus gets ready to present this church to the Father, because it's His church, and God the Father looks at Him and says, why are they still dressed like this?

I thought I gave them the robes of your righteousness. Worse yet, how horrific it would be not for God to say, somebody washed this guy up before he walks in, how horrific it would be as one of the parables says, to say, oh, you don't have the right clothing.
You never wore the right clothing. You didn't put it on. You're not coming in here. You should have listened to that Leviticus 21 and 22, and it should have been the focal point of everything you did in your life from that very moment.
The effect will be if we grabbed hold of Leviticus 21 and 22 right, that Christchurch Chicago will continue to put on the clothing of another world.
It'll be an interesting world. It'll be an intriguing world. you are part of the story that other people are to come and inhabit.
[33:42] Stay for a time. Be intrigued by you. Drawn to you so that under the shadow of this church, people are finding shade in the mercy of our Lord.

Can you imagine if that's to be the case? John Calvin said, all the godly ought to by all means possible exert themselves in the work of gathering together the church on every side, for we are called by the Lord on this condition that everyone should afterwards strive to lead others to the truth, to restore the wandering to the right way, to extend a helping hand to the fallen, and to win over those who are without.
It makes perfect sense to me. People ought to be able to read us, Christ Church Chicago. They're going to read us, like you read a story or you attend a movie.
They're going to watch us. They're going to read us, and in doing so, I want them to see a story that they want to inhabit for themselves, not just for a time, but for time unending.
Oh, let the nations now declare his worth. Let the nations declare his worth because they've come under the shadow of our wing.

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[35:11] And for that, we're going to need this table. The Lord's table is the table of thanksgiving where we do celebrate his kindness to us.

We come forward as sinners. We receive these elements in thanksgiving to the Lord. But, did you know that the Westminster Confession of Faith, which is our church's belief document, document, also says something else.
He says, what is the duty of Christians after they have received the sacrament of the Lord's Supper? Listen to this. The duty of Christians after they have received the sacrament of the Lord's Supper is seriously to consider how they have behaved themselves therein and with what success if they find quickening and comfort to bless God for it, beg the continuance of it, watch against relapses, fulfill their vows, and encourage themselves to be a frequent attender at that ordinance.
You're coming in thanksgiving. You're leaving to live as the shadow of God. the priesthood.
May he, by his spirit, give us the strength to do so. Our Heavenly Father, as we now come to the table, strengthen our family to represent you well.
[36:56] Help us to cast off the sins that have too easily entangled us. Help many, even as they stand and wait on it, to consider the garments that our conduct and calling presently speak to.

May we exchange those garments at this table for the garment of Christ that we might fulfill our calling for the world needs us in this way even as we need you in Christ's name.
Amen.

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