

Fellowship with a Holy God

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[0 : 0 0] We read from Exodus chapter 40, verse 34, through to Leviticus 1, verses 1 to 2. Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out.

But if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.

The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting. He said, Speak to the Israelites and say to them, When anyone among you brings an offering to the Lord, bring as you're offering an animal from either the herd or the flock.

Amen. You are probably aware that the book of Exodus sets out the instructions for the construction of the tabernacle.

[1 : 1 6] And amongst those instructions, there is the lampstand. The lampstand that gives light. Numbers chapter 8, God gives instructions for how that lampstand is to be installed within the tabernacle.

The Lord said to Moses, Speak to Aaron and say to him, When you set up the lamps, see that all seven light up the area in front of the lampstand. Aaron did so.

He set up the lamps so that they faced forwards on the lampstand, just as the Lord commanded Moses. This is how the lampstand was made. It was made of hammered gold from its base to its blossoms.

The lampstand was made exactly like the pattern the Lord had shown Moses. So the lamps on the lampstand are designed to shine their light forwards.

Why to shine forwards? What's in front of the lampstand being illuminated? Well, in front of the lampstand, there's a table. A table on which is arranged what's called the showbread.

[2 : 1 7] The showbread, 12 loaves representing the 12 tribes of the people of God. So the light of the lampstand shines on the tribes of Israel.

That's picture number one. Alongside that, consider the probably familiar blessing of Numbers chapter 6. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

The Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace. So in the symbolism of the lampstand, and in this quintessential blessing, in both of these pictures, Israel lives before God.

Lives under the light of his presence. Lives before his face, under his blessing. This turning of God's face towards his people is and should be a source of blessing to them.

This has always been God's plan. Life with God in the house of God. The original goal of the creation of the cosmos. This is God's design. God's people in his presence.

- [3 : 25] We're designed to live coram deo, before the face of God. That's the kind of closeness that God created human beings to have.
- And that knowledge of God's sight, of God seeing his people, that knowledge should impact every area of our lives. Well, there's a problem.
- See, just as when we had our series in Exodus a couple of years ago, we've started this evening, we're turning to Leviticus, we've started our reading a few verses before the start of the book we're looking at.
- Because just like the book of Exodus, the first word in Leviticus is the word and. These first few books, they're a single history of God's dealings with the world and God's dealings with his people.
- One book flows into the next. The divisions between the books aren't arbitrary. There's significance to them. But the narrative runs from one to the next. And so just like a TV show starts by saying previously on and gives you the recap of what's gone before.
- [4 : 32] Well, so here we're not going to understand the narrative of Leviticus if we don't know what's gone before. And specifically, these last verses of Exodus set up a crisis.
- Maybe you didn't see it as such as Robert read it there, but there is a crisis in these last verses. Now remember, all is going well at the end of Exodus, isn't it? God's people have done as instructed.
- They built the tabernacle exactly as the Lord commanded Moses. We're told over and over again in the narrative of the construction of the tabernacle, they did as they were told. And in fact, most of the detail of the construction is recorded twice to show us this is what they were told to do, this is what they did, look, it's the same.
- The two match up. And then God shows his satisfaction with what they've done. Verse 34 of chapter 40, There's no debate, is there?
- Clearly, God is happy with what has been done. This is an appropriate place for his glory to descend. He's pleased for this cloud of his glory, the cloud of glory that previously rested on the mountaintop.
- [5 : 42] Now he is pleased for it to descend and to be among his people. This tabernacle, God's portable dwelling on earth, it fulfills its purpose.
- He's there. But then read the very next verse. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.
- See, this tent, this structure, is supposed to be two things. It's supposed to be, on the one hand, the tabernacle, the dwelling place of God on earth.
- Big tick in that box. God's glory has descended. It is God's dwelling place. But it's also supposed to be the tent of meeting. It's supposed to be the place where God and his people can come and can encounter one another.
- And verse 35 says, Moses could not enter the tent of meeting. God's glory is too intense. The perfect holiness of Almighty God is too much for Moses to endure.
- [6 : 47] And of course, if Moses can't enter, Moses, who by this point in the Exodus narrative, it is abundantly clear Moses is God's appointed mediator for that time and season. If Moses can't enter, well, no one can.
- There's no hope for anyone else if Moses can't get in. Now, the last couple of verses, they talk about Israel continuing their travels. So, you know, there's some degree of resolution in Exodus.
- We know there's going to be a solution. But the book still ends with this unresolved tension, this hanging question. Will this actually be a tent of meeting?

Or will it just be God's dwelling? Will God's people actually be able to live in his presence? Is it safe? Is it safe to have God's glory in the midst of your camp?

That's the question. I'm going to pause at this point and watch a quick video that I think is going to help us get our head around the question a bit more and start to think through how Leviticus addresses this issue.

[7 : 51] And then we'll come back and think through some more together. So here's the video. Avoiding it because it's weird. So let's fix that.

Now, remember the story of the Bible began with humans in God's presence, but they were banished because of their rebellion. However, God wants to be in relationship with us. So he chooses one family that he will use to restore the world back into his presence.

And so God's presence comes to dwell in a tent right in the middle of Israel. And that's great. But it creates a problem because it's so intense that Moses can't go in and other priests who enter inappropriately, they die.

Well, wait, if God's presence is good, how is it all of a sudden dangerous for people? So think of it this way. God's presence is like the sun. It's pure power and goodness. And when something mortal and corruptible gets close to such pure power, it's destroyed.

And so the word holiness is used in Leviticus to describe God's pure and powerful presence, which, like the sun, is both good and dangerous. So the point of Leviticus is to show how corrupt Israelites can live near God's goodness without being destroyed.

[9 : 03] Now, in the book, there are three ways for how this is all going to work out. And these are going to seem strange to you, but just hang in there with us. The first one is rituals. The second is this idea of the priesthood.

And the third is a bunch of purity laws. Now, the book is broken up into seven sections, and each solution is explored in two sections of the book. The rituals are here.

The priests are here. And the purity laws go here. Now, the first solution, rituals, involves a lot of animal sacrifices. And so Leviticus begins with detailed instructions for how to make these sacrifices.

Some are ways of saying thank you to God, and others are simply ways of saying I'm sorry. And here, at the end of the book, there are some more rituals. These are about observing sacred days and festivals.

They're all celebrations that retell some part of the story of how God rescued Israel and set them apart from the nations. The second solution to the holiness problem has to do with priests.

[10 : 02] You see, being directly in God's presence is really dangerous. So he appoints priests as special representatives who can go into his presence on behalf of others. So in this section, we have a story about how the priests are ordained into the priesthood.

And then this other section explains the set of higher standards that the priests have to live by because they work so closely to God's presence. The third solution in the book is all about purity laws.

And this is by far the hardest thing to understand. For example, in this section, we're really concerned with knowing whether you're clean or unclean. Unclean. Or another way of saying that is being pure and impure.

Here's what we need to know to understand this. When you're in a pure state, you can be near God's presence. When you're in an impure state, you can't. And so it was really important for Israelites to know what state they're in at any given moment.

So the first thing we have is a list of pure and impure animals. Yeah, this list of animals is divided up by where they live. So on the land, in the sea, in the air.

[11 : 04] And the text is just not clear about why certain animals are impure or why touching or eating them makes you impure. What is clear, however, is that avoiding these creatures will set Israel apart and it will remind them that God's own holiness should affect every part of their lives, including what they eat.

After the food laws, we get a lot of random rules about things like skin disease, touching dead bodies, what to do with bodily fluids. But they're not random. All of these are things that the Israelites associated with life and death, which are sacred things because God is the author of life.

Okay, but simply coming into contact with these things makes you impure? They do, but we have to keep in mind that it's not wrong or sinful to be ritually impure.

You just wait a few days, take a bath, offer sacrifice, and you're pure again. What is inappropriate is entering into God's presence when you're in an impure state. Now, there's more purity laws over here in this section.

Yeah, these focus on Israel's moral behavior. So these are laws about social justice, healthy relationships, having sexual integrity. Living by these laws will make Israel into a morally pure people who can live near God's presence.

[12 : 17] Those are the three solutions. Now, you've probably noticed that they surround the very center of this book, and it's here that we find a really important ritual called the Day of Atonement.

Yeah, so Israel's a big tribe now, and odds are there's a lot of sin happening that goes unnoticed that people are not dealing with. And so one time a year, the priests would take two goats, and one of those goats is killed, and its blood is carried right into God's presence where it symbolically covers or atones for Israel's sin.

Yeah, that's kind of weird. Well, the meaning of the sacrifice, it's explained in the next chapter, where God says that the blood of a creature is its life. And so this goat's life is offered as a substitute.

It's receiving God's punishment for Israel's sin so that the people don't have to. That leaves the second goat. Yeah, the priest puts his hands on it, and then he confesses all the sins of Israel.

It's like he's placing the sins on the goat. And then that goat gets cast out forever into the wilderness. It's called the scapegoat. Yeah, I've heard that word before. Yeah, it's a very powerful image of how God is graciously removing Israel's sin.

[13 : 26] But let's be honest. Sacrifices in general seem so barbaric. We have to remember that in the ancient world, sacrifices were the main way of buying favor from the gods.

But the problem was that those same gods, they're unpredictable, they're fickle, you never know if they're going to ignore you or they're going to turn on you. And so it's in this cultural setting that we see Israel's God as totally different.

He does get angry about human corruption, but it is never arbitrary. And he loves people. So he provides this clear way for Israel to know with confidence that they are forgiven and that despite their corruption, they are safe to live near his presence.

And so that makes the book of Leviticus actually a revolutionary statement in its day. So that's Leviticus. But Israel's still at Mount Sinai in the middle of the wilderness.

They need a place to live. Yes, the land God promised Abraham. And so the journey to that land is what the next book of the Bible is all about. Hi, this is Tim. And this is John.

[14 : 29] We believe the Bible is telling one overall story from beginning to end. And so we're... I'd forgotten there was that a bit at the end. I should have chopped that off.

We don't need that. That wittering. Okay, folks. So Leviticus. This is where we're going to be spending the next few weeks, months. I'm not sure exactly how long we're going to be on this one.

But here's where we're heading. A couple of things I want to pull out from what they were saying in the video that are particularly helpful in terms of getting our head around the book as a whole, at least as I understand it from my studies thus far.

So first of all, let's think about this overall theme. Maybe you've heard it said before that the book of Leviticus is all about how to be holy. You know, the well-known refrain from the book, Be holy because I am holy, says God.

Clearly, holiness is a major theme in the book. God's holiness underlies much of what's going on, much of the different laws and instructions that we are given.

[15 : 34] And there's plenty of calls there for his people to be holy. But what I think they're rightly bringing out in the video is that our holiness is not the objective.

Holiness isn't actually the goal. Holiness is the means to the end. The objective of the book of Leviticus, the purpose, in fact, the objective of the whole of the Bible story from Genesis chapter 3 onwards, the objective is fellowship, restoration of closeness with God, relationship with Him, the abundant joy that comes from life with God in the house of God.

Holiness is the means to fellowship. Maybe you remember way back one of our first Connect group series, God's Big Picture. It talks about God's people in God's place under God's rule and blessing.

That's the aim of what the Bible sets out for us. That's what the whole of history is moving towards, in the new heavens and the new earth. God's people in God's place under His rule and blessing.

And that is what Leviticus presents for us, the opportunity to be God's people, close to Him, under His blessing. And so we ask, how can people dwell in the presence of a holy God?

[16 : 57] How can we have fellowship with a holy God? And Leviticus presents this sort of threefold solution, if you like, this multifaceted picture of how we can have this fellowship, the ritual, the priests, and the purity laws.

And as you would expect, as we work our way through the book of Leviticus, one of the things that we'll see is how Jesus offers an even fuller, even better answer than the one that we're given in Leviticus.

And what we'll find as we go through Leviticus, is that we're going to keep dipping forwards into the book of Hebrews. I was reading a blog preparing to preach on Leviticus, a blog that kind of offers a list of suggested commentaries, you know, which are the most helpful books to read to understand Leviticus.

Number one on the list of commentaries on the book of Leviticus, the book of Hebrews. How do you understand what God says in Leviticus? Go and read Hebrews. And I hope and pray that we're going to see how the New Testament interprets the Old Testament, how we're presented with this fuller, better revelation, God's last word, the fulfillment of all of the rituals that are set out here, with the true great high priest, and the one human being who lived a perfectly pure life.

As part of why we're not doing an exhaustive verse-by-verse journey through Hebrews, but also part of why I'm hoping these two series are going to dovetail together beautifully, and so we start the two more or less at the same time.

[18 : 29] So that's the first thing, the overall theme, the objective, fellowship with a holy God. Second thing to draw out is this sense that the whole book pivots around the Day of Atonement.

Chapter 16, these two goats, the one slaughtered for the sin offering, and the blood taken behind the curtain into the most holy place, and the other goat sent out into the wilderness to symbolically carry away the sins.

And you see how the mirrored structure, the two different sections of the book, focuses attention there in the center. We've talked before, haven't we, about these chiasms that bring attention into the center, into the pivots.

And in fact, we can go further than this. There's good reason to say that the whole structure of the Pentateuch, these first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy, the whole structure of these five books focuses in on Leviticus.

In fact, focuses on this pivotal event at the center of Leviticus, this annual ritual, the Day of Atonement. In terms of the literary form of the books, and in terms of the themes, this is the center.

[19 : 40] This is where our attention is meant to be focused. And obviously, we'll think more about that as we get there. But for now, it is worth bearing in mind that this process of atonement, this process of making things right, this process of covering over sin, of dealing with a sinful people, this process of the sacrificial shedding of blood, we need to remember that this is here at the center.

The rest is informed by the relationship to that. One other small thing I want to pick up from the video just before we moved on. Remember towards the end, they were talking about sacrifice in the context of other gods understood at the time.

This attempt to buy favor from the gods. That's what you're doing with sacrifice. And they're right to say in the video that the other people at the time, that's what they thought they were doing. You bring your sacrifice to try and buy favor.

And they draw in the video a very helpful comparison to the fact that Yahweh, the one true God, he doesn't share the unpredictable nature of those other gods. God chooses to reveal himself, to declare his will, to show himself at many times and in various ways.

But don't mishear what the video is saying. Don't think that the Israelites believed they were buying favor from God with their sacrifices. Or at least if they did think that they were mistaken to do so.

[21 : 03] Because God did not tell them to think in such terms. The sacrifices that are set out for us in Leviticus are not about buying favor from a God who needs to be persuaded to show grace.

So why do the other people from the other nations sacrifice to their gods? Well, because sacrifice isn't a new idea when God sets out the pattern for it in Leviticus.

In fact, sacrificing to God, our creator, it goes back to Cain and Abel, doesn't it? Noah coming out of the ark. Abraham. They all knew that sacrifice was the thing to do.

It's kind of written into the fabric of creation in some sense. The other nations do it because it's kind of a shadow copy of what they should be doing.

So sacrifice predates the codification of the process in Leviticus. Sacrifice even precedes God choosing Israel to be this kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

[22 : 04] Sacrifice is a natural response to the creator God. So the sacrifices that are observed by the pagan nations, they're a sort of twisted version of what is at root a good impulse.

And that's also why Leviticus seems to set out all sorts of rules about the how of sacrifice. You know, what can you sacrifice and when do you need to do it? But it doesn't say much about why.

It doesn't say much about what those sacrifices actually achieve. Why? Well, in part because that's already known. God's setting out the proper procedure for an existing idea.

So, Leviticus. Step back for a moment. Come back again to the book of Exodus. We're not going to recap the whole book. We spent, I don't know how long it was doing it.

But we do want to remember this context that we're in as we come to Leviticus. Because the whole of the book of Leviticus takes place in one location. It's part of the narrative, you know, from creation through to Egypt and then into the promised land.

[23 : 10] It's part of that journey from Egypt to the promised land. But it's all in one place. It's a pause in the journey. They're camped at the foot of Mount Sinai.

They're here to receive revelation from God. And that revelation from God at Mount Sinai has already included the Ten Commandments. And already included some of the detailed laws.

And has already included the winds and the hows of the building of the tabernacle. But all of this revelation of how God wants his people to behave. All of the revelation at Mount Sinai.

These laws that we're looking at in Leviticus about sacrifice and purity and priests and holiness. The clean and the unclean animals. These rules about discharges and priests and all of this.

All of this. All of this God saying this is what you are to do. All of this comes against the backdrop of God saying this is what I have done. The God who says all these things has already brought them out of Egypt.

[24 : 07] Has already provided for them in the wilderness. Has already given them food to eat. Manna, quail, water from the rock. This is not an arbitrary imposition by a capricious deity.

This is in the context of grace. So God doesn't need to be persuaded by sacrifices to show favor. God has already done so.

God has already showed favor to his people. It comes in the context of a God who has rescued his people out of slavery in Egypt. The instructions come from the God who provided food and water for his people in the wasteland.

From the God who has demonstrated his love. From the God who has shown by his actions that he wants this redemption. This relationship. That he's not content with the alienation that resulted from the fall.

So all of this concern with holiness. Clean. Unclean. All of this comes from a God who wants a solution. Who longs to have his people dwell with him. Who says I will be your God and you will be my people.

[25 : 11] God's shown his desire. But showing that he wants it. That's not enough, is it? He's not done. Because there is still this issue. Moses cannot enter the tent of meeting.

But God's not saying, Okay, I've brought you this far. I got you out of Egypt. I've got you to this mountain. Now go figure the rest out yourselves. No, God's not done.

How does Leviticus begin? The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him. Again, there's a problem. And again, God presents, provides the solution.

The solution is going to take some time to be fully realized. There's nine chapters of prescriptions for sacrifice. And how priests are to be ordained. There's nine chapters to work through. But there's a resolution to Moses' inability to enter.

Leviticus chapter 9 verse 23. Moses and Aaron then went into the tent of meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people. And the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people.

[26 : 17] So there's going to be a solution to the fact that Moses could not go in. But even that is only half a solution. Because immediately following that, that long-awaited entrance into the tent, immediately following that, Aaron's own sons, Aaron the new high priest, his own sons, Nadab and Abihu, they're going to be killed for, quote, offering unauthorized fire before the Lord contrary to his commands.

And that sets up another crisis. And again, God offers the solution to this next crisis. Again and again, God provides the answer.

That solution is offered in kind of two stages across the next two major sections of the book. The first, the laws about clean and unclean, pure, impurior if you prefer. And that kind of culminates in the ritual of the Day of Atonement that provides for the cleansing of the tabernacle itself.

Because the tabernacle's defiled. There's dead bodies inside. Two people have just died in the tabernacle. It needs to be cleaned. It needs to be cleansed. It needs to be purified.

And never mind, alongside that, the kind of annual cleansing of the slow buildup of the general grubbiness of life. So that's chapters 11 through 16, the first solution to Nadab and Abihu.

[27 : 32] And then chapters 17 through 25 is kind of a second response to the same event. This time with laws that are then focused more around holy versus profane rather than the clean-unclean distinction of the last batch.

Don't worry, we're going to dive more into the distinctions between holy and unholy and profane and common and unclean and clean and pure. And we'll get into all of that another time. But for now, that's just kind of another angle from which to view the structure of the book.

That it's driven forward by these crises. By offering solutions to the presenting problems. The lack of access into God's presence. The pollution of the tabernacle.

How are these things to be solved? So however it helps you to see the structure of the book, I hope the overall idea of it is clear.

Leviticus is offering an answer to the question of Psalm 15. Psalm 15 that was almost certainly sung by pilgrims coming up to the temple each year. Lord, who may dwell in your sacred tent?

[28 : 39] Who may live on your holy mountain? How? How do you have fellowship with a holy God? And that question is still a live one today, isn't it?

How do we, how do you and I, how do the masses of Scotland, how do we approach a perfectly holy God? How do we live life before his face?

Well, hopefully the next few weeks and months will make an answer to that question increasingly clear as we go through and find fellowship with a holy God. Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you that you spoke. That unlike the gods of the nations around, you didn't leave your people guessing what would be pleasing to you.

But you revealed yourself to them. That you showed them what you desire. That you solved the problems that presented themselves. That you offered a way for them to live in your presence, to live before your face.

[29 : 43] And we thank you that you have offered us an even better solution, a fuller answer to that same problem. Lord, we long to be in fellowship with you.

We recognize that as a perfectly holy God, we cannot fit ourselves for your presence. And so we ask that you would continue to transform us more into the likeness of your own holy son, that we might rightly dwell before your face every day of our lives and on into eternity.

Amen.