

Leviticus Overview

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[0 : 0 0] Well, you're probably aware by now that we're starting a new series in Leviticus, and most people trying to read the whole Bible from beginning to end normally get stuck at Leviticus.

They may manage to get through chapter 1, but then the repetition of chapter 2, chapter 3, chapter 4, chapter 5, chapter 6, and finally they stop.

Either that or they skip ahead to Numbers, where there's just more juicy narratives to engage with. But some do get through it, but then they don't really understand what's going on.

They're just going through the motions, reading the same thing over and over again. So, knowing that we're going through Leviticus tonight, I'm not sure whether that fills you with dread or trepidation.

And perhaps you just wondered, why? Why would we choose to do Leviticus? Well, partly it's just the fact that as a church, we've been working through the Bible from Genesis.

[1 : 1 1] And if you've been here for 8 or 9 years at 5 o'clock, you know that we've been on this journey for that long. I think it was 5 years in Genesis, 3 years in Exodus, and then this is now the first of maybe 2 years in Leviticus.

Not 52 weeks of it, but parts of the year with sermon series. And we do that because we don't want to skip over the difficult bits, because we believe that all of God's Word is inspired, even here in Leviticus, and useful for us as Christians.

Now, Leviticus, at first, may not appear to be the case. It's strange, unfamiliar. You know, the sacrifices described in it are not things that we practice anymore.

Thankfully, you don't have to bring your goats and bulls to church. And, you know, some of the instructions in there just don't seem to make sense.

So, it is why, with that in mind, we're going to begin the series this week, not by doing chapter 1 of Leviticus, but doing an overview instead, just to orientate ourselves as to what the whole book is about.

[2 : 2 6] And then, next week, we'll dive into chapter 1. But my aim tonight is hopefully to persuade you that Leviticus is more relevant and important than you first thought.

And hopefully, as you see from the outline, you'll begin to see some of the key themes from the book, have a broad understanding of the outline or structure of the book, and see how it's still relevant for you today.

But let's begin with a reminder of where we are in Israel's history. Remember, in Genesis, that God had chosen Abraham and promised to bless him with many descendants and then to give to them a land of promise.

Now, by the time of Exodus, God's people were in Egypt, enslaved to Pharaoh. And so, they cried out to God, who remembered his covenant to them and rescued them from slavery.

And so, God himself said in Exodus chapter 19, which is on the slide, that he carried them on wings of eagles and brought them to himself. He said, out of all the nations, Israel was God's treasured, my treasured possession.

[3 : 39] Now, notice that God wasn't just calling them into the promised land, but he was calling them to himself as his people.

They are his treasured possession. And his ultimate goal was to dwell with them, living in intimate relationship with them. And we all understand that, don't we?

We want to be with those we love. That's why long-distance relationships don't really work. And farewells of loved ones... There are a few sniggers there.

I wonder... Farewells of loved ones at the airport are so hard, so painful. This week, my wife, Alyssa, she went for a short trip overseas, and I was bawling my eyes out in tears.

Well, maybe not literal tears, but I told her it was really sad that she wasn't going to be with us, even for that short couple of nights. Well, similarly, having chosen Israel as his people, God desires to dwell with them.

[4 : 52] Even as they journeyed through the wilderness and the Red Sea, we've already seen God being with them in the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night. If you've watched the movie by Charlton Heston, you see a picture of that, you know, the fire and all that.

And we've read a bit of that in Exodus, haven't we? Now, of course, God being God, it's not really true that God is just confined, is He, to that one specific location. He's present everywhere.

And yet the idea of God dwelling with His people is actually to signify His special relationship with them. These were the people He's chosen for them to know Him and to be known and to have a special relationship.

That's what it meant for God to dwell with them. And later on in Exodus, God provides a blueprint, doesn't He, of the tabernacle which they could build as a symbol of God's dwelling place.

And so we read, Vanessa did, at the end of Exodus that the cloud covered the tent of meeting. That's a sign of His presence. The glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

[6 : 08] 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. That's God leading them by His presence, isn't it? So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day and the fire was in the cloud by night in the sight of all the Israelites doing all their travels.

God's presence, the cloud and the fire, was visible. It was a tangible evidence of God's presence with them.

Now God's aim was to dwell with His people from the very start. But there was already a problem, wasn't there? God is holy, and humans are sinful.

And so that's why even here, we read that Moses was unable to enter into the tent of meeting, into God's presence. And if this was so for Moses, then, you know, God's prophet, then how much more so for just the people in general?

[7 : 21] And already in Exodus, those of us who have been following along over the last year or so, we've already seen an inkling of this, haven't we? So if you remember at Mount Sinai, as Moses went up to meet God, the people were told to keep themselves away from the base of the mountain.

Not just them, but their animals as well, lest they die. And so what we're seeing here is the gulf that exists between God and humans. For God to dwell with His people is almost impossible.

It's akin to putting paper with fire. Try as you might, the paper just gets burnt, doesn't it? To nothing. And you might think, you know, why can't God just stop this?

I mean, He's God, isn't He? Surely He can do that. But that's like expecting fire to stop being like fire, isn't it? It can't be done. God's very nature is to be holy and pure.

He can't not be, or He wouldn't be God. Now, often we would think that human sin, that's just, you know, failing to do a list or follow a list of do's and don'ts, like the Ten Commandments or the rules about certain vices and sexual morality.

[8 : 39] And sometimes we feel, well, that's, you know, there's no meaning in all of this. It's all arbitrary. And it's only wrong because God says so. But actually, as we will come to see in Leviticus, God's law arises from His very nature.

And that's why to violate them is sinful, because we're violating His character. We're going against who He is. And His character is actually seen in the way He's created our world.

So if you go all the way back to Genesis 1 in the creation story, we see order. He's created the sky, the land, and the sea. And then He's created creatures with characteristics that fill those three spheres or spaces in an appropriate way.

So birds in the air, well, they have the wings. Fish in the sea, they have gills, they can live underwater, and animals on land. They're all made in such a way so as to thrive in those environments.

And likewise, humans were created male and female so that we can obey God's command to multiply and fill the earth. And sex within marriage is ordered with that intention in mind.

[9 : 58] Order is also seen in how God then appoints humans to rule over the rest of creation. Creation in submission to humans, then humans in submission to God.

Order. Of course, Adam and Eve, well, they sinned by overturning that order, didn't they? They rejected God's rule over them. And as time goes on, all of humanity starts to worship rather than worship the Creator, begin to worship creation and the creatures in it, just as Paul says in Romans 1.

And so even in Exodus, we see the Israelites, what did they do? They created a golden calf, didn't they? A creature. And worshipped it and said, this is the God that brought us out of Egypt.

How offensive do you think that would be to God who was the one who brought them out of Egypt? So, as we come into Leviticus over the next weeks and months, this is a key theme that we will see in the book.

What is clean and unclean, what is right and wrong, reflects God's order in creation. And hence, chapter 18 to 20, the laws around sexual immorality are a reflection of this principle.

[11 : 14] What we ought to pick up then as we read Leviticus is this gulf, isn't it, that exists between a holy God and a people who are sinful.

And if God didn't care, then, well, you know, that would have been the end of the story. But God is not like that, is He? That's not His character. Holy though He is, He loves those He's chosen.

And so, what we also see in Leviticus is how God provides a way, a way of reconciliation. And the way this works is another key theme in the book.

God provides a way for His people, though they are rebellious, to be reconciled with Him and therefore able to dwell with Him. They go from being a sinful and rebellious people to a holy nation, as He talks about in Exodus 19.

His treasured possession, living in the land of promise. But as we shall see in Leviticus, the way that's provided is elaborate and costly.

[12 : 20] It's centered around primarily a system of sacrifices which is administered by the priest at the Tamaraku. So if you flip over the page at the outline, the first seven chapters actually describe the different types of sacrifices, each of which have a slightly different purpose and rationale depending on the situation.

Then in chapter 8 and 9, God appoints priests from Aaron's family to administer the sacrifices. And we will see how they're consecrated, anointed, and made holy for these tasks.

What we have then is really quite an elaborate and costly system. Just think about it. All these offerings come from the flock and the produce of the land.

And, you know, if you think about how many people there, that's a lot of animals, isn't there? And just think, if they didn't have to bring this to the altar for sacrifice, imagine what they could really do with all these animals.

There would be so many more lamb roasts, wouldn't there? be it at home, and barbecues, and stuff. And yet, here they were, required to bring them to God for sacrifice at the altar.

[13 : 34] It all seems such a waste, doesn't it? Until you realize that it actually reflects just how seriously God considers sin. The reason why it's so expensive is because sin is so serious.

Now, one other aspect of reconciliation we'll see in Leviticus is to realize how it occurs in two steps. So, first, what you'll become familiar with is the word atonement.

It'll appear regularly in the book. And the idea is that of turning away God's anger or wrath. It's when our sins are forgiven and a record of wrong is erased.

And so, you go from, as it were, having a negative record against God or God against you to zero. But the second step in this reconciliation is to bring a person into relationship with God.

Go from zero to positive. And here's where the sinner is not just forgiven, they become part of God's treasured possession. valued, precious.

[14 : 46] And again, we've seen a bit of this in Exodus because when Israel as a people, God's people as a whole, when they were taken out of slavery, they were going from negative to zero, weren't they?

And then they went into the promised land where the promises of rich blessings await the positive. And remember that as they left Egypt, they had to celebrate the Passover because their sins had to be forgiven.

they had to be cleansed as well. So in Leviticus, you will see that things that are unclean are first made clean, cleansed, and then made holy afterwards.

It's a bit like, you know, if you're trying to, the way I compare it and think about it, it's a bit like personal hygiene. If you're dirty and smelly, the right way to do things, and you young guys just take note of this, the right thing to do is to first take a bath and clean yourself with soap, and then afterwards, if you want to smell good, you spray perfume or your cologne, right?

You can't go from dirty to smelling wonderful just by spraying perfume. Now, I've tried that shortcut once or twice, but my wife, Alyssa, assures me that it doesn't work, all right?

[16 : 05] And so, it is with reconciliation as well. God must first deal with the sin by way of atonement before we enter into a positive and loving relationship with God. And these two steps are actually important because a lot of times, people are afraid to talk about the sin.

You know, we say, oh, God loves you. He wants to enter into a relationship with you. But then we don't talk about the sin bit. But actually, that's important because if you want to go from the negative to the positive, you first need to have what Leviticus calls atonement.

And that means dealing with sin. And so, when you tell people about Jesus, when you tell people about how to come into a relationship with God, please don't neglect to bring up the topic of being cleansed from their sin.

Now, finally, we will see in Leviticus as well that reconciliation is not just vertical between God and His people, but also there is a horizontal aspect as well.

To be a holy people requires them to relate to one another in a way that's holy. So again and again, God will say to them, be holy as a people because I, the Lord your God, am holy.

[17 : 19] The horizontal has to reflect the vertical. So, let me now just go through the outline as a whole. We've covered the first couple of things, but you will see that, and again, this is just my breakdown.

I've sort of stolen bits and pieces from various places and borrowed from others, so it's not definitive. There are variations, but in my mind, I've divided Leviticus into two broad sections.

So, chapter 1 to 17 deal with how we live in God's holy presence. So, that's, if you like, the vertical dimension that I talked about. Then, chapter 18 to 27, we have the horizontal aspects, how to live as God's people.

It's not to say that one only deals exclusively with vertical and second deals with horizontal, but I think the predominant focus is that way.

And so, if you break it down even further, we'll see that, you know, the sacrifices we've talked about, chapter 1 to 7. Then we have the priest in chapter 8 and 9. And then in chapter 10, we have an object lesson in what holiness means, when Aaron's son play with unholy fire.

[18 : 32] Then chapter 11 to 15 is about clean versus unclean, and we'll delve into that to see that relationship that it has with holiness. That's probably where we're going to stop it for the year, and then we'll come back to the series again next year, where we begin in chapter 16, which is about the Day of Atonement.

And if you like, this is God's provision of an annual deep clean, if you like, of the sacrificial system itself, the tone for the sacrificial system.

And after that, we then have to complete that first section, chapter 17, which is a section about the importance of the blood of the animals because they were key to the sacrifices.

Then we move to the second section, part 2, living rightly with one another. So I said it before, chapter 18 to 20, it's about sexual relations and other types of conduct.

21 and 22 are the priests and instructions about how they are to live so that they are kept holy for their work at the tabernacle. Chapter 23 is about celebrating as God's people.

[19 : 40] So we have festivals. So remember, Leviticus is not just about atonement, but also about celebration, the positive aspect of living as God's holy people. And then chapter 24, we have, 24 to 27, I think we have sort of a few miscellaneous sections, but 24 is about keeping God's name holy, and then chapter 25 to 27 is more about how to live in God's land as His holy people once they get there.

So rules about the year of Sabbath and the Jubilee, rest, release of debt, and then consequences. If you obey or if you disobey, this is what life in the land would look like.

And then finally, rounding up the last chapter is just a chapter on vows and redemption. So that's the outline very quickly, but we'll work through it over the next couple of years in short nine-week sessions.

Not verse by verse every week. But I want to close by just saying that if you're not yet convinced that Leviticus is still relevant for you in a Christian or otherwise in the 21st century, then let me give you three explicit things to consider.

So that's the third point on the outline. First, I think studying Leviticus allows you a deeper appreciation of God's character. Now, of course, this is true of the Bible generally, but when we get to Leviticus, the laws and the sacrificial system that God instituted, I think, helps us to understand what God's holiness looks like.

[21 : 20] Now, the thing is that the God of Leviticus is still the same God today. He has not changed. His holiness and His call for us to be holy is still the same as it was with the Israelites.

What may have changed today is how we apply it. So, for example, we don't need to follow the food laws anymore, but it's still important to see how God's character is reflected in those laws and therefore to work out then what principles still apply for us today.

Secondly, Leviticus is still relevant because just as God's holy character hasn't changed, neither has our human condition. Now, we may sometimes be tempted to think that, you know, given our advancement in technology, you know, how we can, I don't know, do all sorts of things now and the progress in democracy that we experience, that we're just so much better people than these primitive Israelites.

But I want to encourage you to think that when we meditate on Leviticus, we actually see how, you know, we're still really much like them, aren't we? You know, sinfulness and fallen nature.

And God's view of sin hasn't changed. He's just as holy, remember I said. And we're still just as sinful. And so, without Jesus, the gulf separating us from God is still as big as ever and just as impossible to bridge.

[22 : 57] And I say that it's only when we realize just how wide this chasm is that we then truly understand how wonderful Jesus is. And that's the one improvement since the time of Leviticus.

Because whereas the Levitical system that God gave was a stop-gap measure, we now have a lasting and perfect solution in His Son, Jesus. And in Jesus, we have something more precious and enduring because it didn't just cost the lives of thousands and thousands of animals, it cost God the life of His one and only perfect and divine Son.

And so, if you think all these animals, how costly they were, well, how much more actually the cost to God of His Son.

And the thing is, that was a price that He paid, not us. and so, what we'll see as we look through Leviticus is that imperfect, though this system of sacrifice was, the genius of it was that God so designed it that it pointed the way to Jesus.

Each and every aspect of what we look at in Leviticus foreshadows what Jesus would be and what He would do when He comes. Hence, as we read Leviticus, look for the clues of Jesus.

[24 : 29] It's everywhere. As the writer of Hebrews said in chapter 9, which Nathan read, you know, he was describing the tabernacle and the priests, beginning in verse 9, he said this, this is an illustration, this sacrificial for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.

They were only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings, external, outside, external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

But, when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, He went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is not part of this creation.

He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves, but He entered the most holy place once for all by His own blood. and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean, sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.

If that happened outwardly, how much more then will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences inside from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God.

[25 : 47] So friends, if you're a Christian and you want to know Jesus better, then meditating on Leviticus will enrich your view of Him. And if you're not yet a Christian, understanding Leviticus would give you a deeper understanding of why Jesus is God's answer to all the questions that you're looking for in life.

So every week, as we look closely at each part of Leviticus, I want to encourage you to see that even though it may be alien, it's really pointing us to Jesus.

Leviticus is still very much part of God's living Word and the Spirit still speaks to us today through it. So if you haven't started already, let me encourage you to just start reading through it and then as we come together each week, allow God to speak to us through it so that we can rejoice, we can obey it and apply it in light of Christ.

Let's pray. Father, thank you for providing a way for us to dwell with you, that despite this gulf, you've bridged the gap between your holiness and our sin through the blood of your Son, Jesus.

Thank you that we are your treasured possession. Help us to live holy lives just as you are holy. In Jesus' precious name we pray. Amen.