



Leviticus

Transcript

Introduction

00:00-00:59

The book of Leviticus. It's the third book of the Bible, and it's set right after the exodus of the Israelites from their slavery, when God brought them to the foot of Mount Sinai and invited Israel into a covenant relationship. Now, they had quickly rebelled and broke that covenant. And God had wanted for his glorious presence to come and live right in the midst of Israel in the form of this tabernacle, but Israel's sin has damaged the relationship. So at the end of the previous book, Exodus, Moses, as Israel's representative, could not even enter God's presence in the tent.

The book of Leviticus opens by reminding us of this fundamental problem. It says, "The Lord called to Moses from the tent." So the question is: How can Israel, in their sin and selfishness, be reconciled to this holy God? That's what this book is all about—how God is graciously providing a way for sinful, corrupt people to live in his holy presence.

Theme and Design

00:59-02:13

Now, let's pause for a second and explore this really important idea that God is holy. It's fundamental to understanding this book. The word "holy" means simply to be set apart or unique. And in the Bible, God is set apart from all other things because of his unique role as the creator of all, as the author of life itself. And so if God is holy, then the space around God is also holy. It's full of his goodness and his life, and purity and justice. So if Israel, who is unjust and sinful, wants to live in God's holy presence, they too need to become holy. Their sin has to be dealt with. Thus, the book of Leviticus.

Now, the book has a really amazing symmetrical design. It explores the three main ways that God helps Israel to live in his presence. The outer sections are

descriptions of the rituals Israel was to practice in God's holy presence. The next, inner sections focus on the role of Israel's priests as mediators between God and Israel. And inside of that are two matching sections that focus on Israel's purity. And then right here, at the center of the book, there is a key ritual, the Day of Atonement, that brings the whole book together. The book concludes with a short section where Moses calls on Israel to be faithful to this covenant.

Rituals: Chapters 1-7 and 23-25

02:14-03:26

Let's dive into the book. The first section explores the five main types of ritual sacrifices that Israel was to perform. Two of these were ways that an Israelite could say thank you to God by offering back to God the symbolic tokens of what God has first given them. Three other sacrifices were different ways of saying sorry to God.

So here, an Israelite would offer up the lifeblood of an animal while confessing that their sin has created more evil and death in God's good world. But instead of destroying this person, God, of course, wants to forgive them. And so this animal symbolically dies in their place and atones, which means it covers for their sin. And so, through these rituals, the Israelites were constantly being reminded of God's grace, but also of his justice and of the seriousness of their evil and its consequences.

The second set of rituals lays out the seven annual feasts of Israel. And each of these retold a different part of the story about how God redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and brought them through the wilderness on their way to the promised land. And by celebrating these feasts regularly, Israel would remember who they were and who God was to them.

Priests: Chapters 8-10 and 21-22

03:27-04:28

Now the sections about Israel's priests. You have Aaron and his sons first ordained to enter into God's presence on behalf of Israel. And then in this matching section, we find the qualifications for being a priest. The priests were called to the highest level of moral integrity and ritual holiness because they represented the people before God, but then also represented God to the people.

Now, we find out why the priests' holiness matters so much back here in this first section. Right after the family of Aaron was ordained, two of his sons waltz right into God's presence and flagrantly violate the rules, and so they are consumed by God's holiness on the spot. It's a haunting reminder of the paradox of living in

God's holy presence because it's pure goodness, but it becomes dangerous to those who rebel and insult God's holiness. And so it is important that Israel's priests become holy, and also that all of the people of Israel become holy, which is what the next inner sections are all about.

Purity: Chapters 11-15 and 18-20

04:28-06:39

Chapters 11-15 are about the ritual purity required of all the Israelites, and chapters 18-20 are about the moral purity of the people. Here's what is underneath all of this purity and impurity language: Because God is holy, and he's set apart, the Israelites need to be in a state of holiness themselves when they enter into his presence. This was called being clean or pure. God's presence was off limits to anybody who was not in a holy state, and this was called being unclean or impure.

Now, an Israelite could become impure in just a few ways: by contact with reproductive body fluids, by having a skin disease, by touching mold or fungus, or by touching a dead body. Now, for the Israelites, all of these were associated with mortality, with the loss of life, which gets us to the core symbol of all these ideas. You become impure when you're contaminated by touching death, so to speak. And death is the opposite of God's holiness because God's essence is life.

Now, this is really key: Simply being impure was not sinful or wrong. Touching these kinds of things was a normal part of everyday life, and impurity was a temporary state. It just lasted a week or two, and then it's over. What was wrong or sinful was to waltz into God's presence carrying these symbols of death and impurity on my body. Don't do that.

Now, the last way of becoming impure was by eating certain animals, and the kosher food laws are found right here in this section. Now, there have been lots of theories about why certain animals were considered impure and off limits—to promote hygiene or to avoid cultural taboos—the text just isn't explicit. But the basic point of all of these chapters is really clear. All together, these work as an elaborate set of cultural symbols that reminds Israel that God's holiness was to affect all areas of their lives.

This corresponding section over here is about Israel's moral purity. The Israelites were called to live differently than the Canaanites. They were to care for the poor instead of overlooking them. They were to have a high level of sexual integrity, and they were to promote justice throughout their entire land.

Atonement and Faithfulness: Chapters 16-17

6:39-7:21

Now, here at the center of the book, we find a long description of one of Israel's annual feasts, the Day of Atonement. Odds are that not every Israelite's sin and rebellion would be covered through the individual sacrifices, and so once a year, the high priest would take two goats. One of these would become a purification offering and atone for the sins of the people, and the other was called the scapegoat. The priest would confess the sins of Israel and symbolically place them on this goat, and then it would be cast out into the wilderness. Again, this is a very powerful image of God's desire to remove sin and its consequences from his people, so that God can live with them in peace.

Conclusion: Chapters 26-27

7:21-8:16

The book concludes with Moses calling Israel to be faithful to all of the terms of the covenant. And he describes the blessings of peace and abundance that will result if Israel obeys all of these laws. He also warns them that if they're unfaithful and dishonor God's holiness, it will result in disaster and, ultimately, exile from the land promised to Abraham.

Now, if you want to see how Leviticus fits into the big storyline, it's helpful to look at the first sentence of the next book of the Bible, Numbers. It begins, "The Lord spoke to Moses in the tent," so we can see that Moses is now able to enter God's presence on behalf of Israel. The book of Leviticus—it worked!

So despite Israel's failure, God has provided a way for their sin to be covered, so that God can live with sinful people in peace. And that's what the book of Leviticus is all about.