



Leviticus: Living in God's Presence

Script References

Introduction

00:00–00:34

Jon: The book of Leviticus. We know you've been 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.¹ 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.²

1. Genesis 1-3

2. Genesis 12

Tim: And so God's presence comes to dwell in a tent right in the middle of Israel.³

3. Exodus 40:1-38

Jon: And that's great!

Tim: But it creates a problem. Because it's so intense that Moses can't go in, and other priests who enter inappropriately, they die.⁴

4. Exodus 40:35

God's Holiness

00:35–01:22

Jon: Wait. If God's presence is good, how is it all of a sudden dangerous for people?

Tim: 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.

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.

Jon: The first one is rituals, the second is this idea of the priesthood, and the third is a bunch of purity laws.

Rituals

01:23–02:01

Tim: 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.

Jon: Now, the first solution, rituals, involves a lot of animal sacrifices. And so Leviticus begins with detailed instructions for how to make these sacrifices.⁵ Some are ways of saying thank you to God, and others are simply ways of saying, “I’m sorry.”

5. Leviticus 1-7

Tim: And here at the end of the book,⁶ 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.

6. Leviticus 23-27

The Priesthood

02:02–02:28

Jon: The second solution to the holiness problem has to do with priests. 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.

Tim: And so in this section,⁷ we have a story about how the priests are ordained into the priesthood. And then the other section⁸ explains this set of higher standards the priests have to live by because they work so closely to God’s presence.

7. Leviticus 8-10

8. Leviticus 21-22

Purity Laws

02:29–04:21

Jon: 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 are “clean” or “unclean.”

Tim: Or another way of saying that is being “pure” and “impure.” Here’s what we need to know to understand this. When you are in a pure state, you can be near God’s presence. When you are 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.

Jon: So the first thing we have is a list of pure and impure animals.⁹

9. Leviticus 11

Tim: Yeah. This list of animals is divided up by where they live, so on the land, in the sea, in the air. 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.

Jon: 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.¹⁰

10. Leviticus 12-15

Tim: 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.

Jon: Okay, but simply coming into contact with these things makes you impure?

Tim: 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 a sacrifice, and you're pure again. What is inappropriate is entering into God's presence when you're in an impure state.

Jon: Now, there's more purity laws over here in this section.¹¹

11. Leviticus 18-20

Tim: Yeah. These focus on Israel's moral behaviour. 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

12. Leviticus 4:24

The Day of Atonement

04:22–05:29

Jon: Those are the three solutions. Now, you've probably noticed that they surround the very center of this book.¹³ And it's here that we find a really important ritual called the Day of Atonement.

13. Leviticus 16-17

Tim: Yeah. So Israel's a big tribe now, and odds are there's a lot of sin happening that goes unnoticed, that people aren't dealing with. 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.

Jon: Yeah. That's kind of weird.

Tim: Well, the meaning of the sacrifice is 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.

Jon: That leaves the second goat.

Tim: 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.

Jon: Yeah. I've heard that word before.

Tim: Yeah. It's a very powerful image of how God is graciously removing Israel's sin.

Jon: But let's be honest, sacrifices in general seem so barbaric.

Tim: 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 are unpredictable. They're fickle—you never know if they're going to ignore you. Are they going to turn on you? And so it is 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.

Jon: So that's Leviticus, but Israel is still at Mount Sinai in the middle of the wilderness. They need a place to live.

Tim: Yes, the land God promised to Abraham. And so the journey to that land is what the next book of the Bible is all about.