

Leviticus – A Savior in the Shadows

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I've never met anyone that said, "I sat down and read the Book of Leviticus last night, and it was fascinating."

No. The truth is that most people, not even church-going people, have read the entire Book of Leviticus.

It's not entirely uninteresting, but if you have never read the Bible, you need to have read Genesis and Exodus for Leviticus to make any sense.

While the Old Testament is mostly written in Hebrew, the word "Leviticus" is a Latin word derived from a Greek word that refers to the priestly tribe of Levi.

To be a priest, you had to be a descendant of Levi, one of the sons of Jacob.

Priests were essential to the worship of the Israelites.

Leviticus has been called a "handbook for priests."

Reading this book is like reading an ancient religious handbook of rules followed by the priests and the Jewish people. Since these rules have little to do with how WE live, we don't find the reading all that helpful for us.

Also, we don't have priests in our church, so that's a strange word to us. "Priest" is not a Baptist or even a Protestant word.

However, the word is common in both the Old and New Testaments. Priests played an essential role in helping people connect with God.

Throughout the Bible, priests had special access to God. The way the religious system was designed, priests stood between the people and God, usually trying to reconcile people to God.

From the first book of the Bible, we learn that fellowship between humanity and God was broken when man and woman rebelled against God.

God began to work to reconcile humanity to himself. We see this work continuing in Leviticus with the help of the priests.

There are instructions for people to have their sins forgiven in a variety of ways through sacrificial offerings to God.

Depending on what kind of sin you committed, there were five different kinds of offerings one could bring to the priests to be reconciled to God: a burnt offering, a grain offering, a fellowship offering, a sin offering, and a guilt offering.

The author wrote about these types of offerings with instructions regarding how they should be offered and how the priest should do his job so people could have their sins forgiven.

It was made clear to the people that their sin had cut off their fellowship with God. To reconnect with God, they needed to have their sins forgiven.

The book of Leviticus communicates the vast differences between God, who is holy, and humanity, which is not.

The Hebrew word for holy is “qodesh,” which means “sacredness, or separateness.” God is holy, sacred, and set apart from His creation.

(www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/what-is-the-biblical-definition-of-holy/)

The word “holy” occurs 431 times in the Old Testament, and over 150 of them are in Leviticus. (www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com)

The author wants us to know that we not holy like God. He is a separate being from us. God’s character is entirely different.

We see God’s holiness symbolized in a dramatic way when the Tent of Meeting or Tabernacle is constructed, the place where God was worshipped.

The Hebrew word for tabernacle means “dwelling place.” The Hebrews believed that God lived there, that His Spirit resided there.

Not only did they think that the temple contained God, they thought it was the exclusive place where God resided.

The Tent of Meeting or Tabernacle was a mobile place of worship.

The people were nomadic, so they needed their place of worship to be moveable.

It made their religion conventional. They could pack God up and move Him where ever they went. If you can pack God up and move Him whenever you wish, after a while, you begin to feel a bit superior to a god who depends on you to move Him wherever you go.

We have also made the mistake of thinking that God only resides at the church building. But our buildings don’t move.

Too many of us have made weekly trips to the church building to connect with God for so long, that we have forgotten that we can connect with God anywhere at any time.

Too many people have lived as if God resided in the church building because when they left the church building, they left God there and didn't seem to think about God again until the next time they went back, and for some people, that's only at Christmas, and Easter, and Mother's Day for a few others.

But maybe Covid-19 has reminded us that God resides somewhere other than at the church house. If he doesn't, then God's been very lonely these past few months.

Maybe we are being reminded that if God does reside at our house and more than that, for the believer, God resides in our hearts. The temple that God most wants to inhabit is the hearts of every man and woman, teenager, boy, and girl.

When the Hebrews worshipped God, they went to the tabernacle.

Let me show you a photo of what the tabernacle might have looked like.



The tabernacle had an outer courtyard with walls of linen curtains. The altar of burnt offering and the bronze laver that the priests purified themselves in sat in the courtyard. (www.gotquestions.org/tabernacle-of-Moses.html)

The tabernacle was in the back of the courtyard. It had five pillars and was divided into two rooms. One room was the Holy Place where the table of showbread, the golden lampstand, and

the altar of incense sat. The other room was the Holy of Holies, where the Ark of the Covenant was placed. (Ibid)

The Ark of the Covenant contained the Ten Commandments, Aaron's rod, and a jar of manna.

A curtain separated the Holy of Holies and the Holy Place so no one could see what took place inside. (Ibid)

No one was allowed inside the Holy of Holies except the High Priest.

He went in there once a year, on Yom Kippur. The people believed that if a person saw God, he would die, so it was thought to be risky to go into the same room where the High Priest offered a sacrifice.

On the Day of Atonement, the high priest offered a sacrifice for his sins and those of his household. Then he sacrificed a goat for the sins of the people.

He took the goat's blood and sprinkled it on the mercy seat of the Ark of the Covenant and asked God to forgive the sins of the nation.

The Bible says, "In this way, he (made) atonement for the Most Holy Place because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins (had) been." (16:16-17)

He did the same for the Tent of the Meeting.

These ancient rituals with the killing of animals and the spilling of blood seem barbaric to us. We are so far removed from killing our own animals for food consumption that a lot of people are repulsed by reading ancient words like these.

We must read them in the context of their time and try to understand the power of the symbolism.

What was that symbolism?

We need to go back to the Book of Genesis. We are reminded that sin equals death. Sin destroys. Sin separates. We cannot undersell the tragic consequences of our wrongdoing.

If these passages are repulsive, that may be the point. God wants us to know that sin is offensive to Him because it is the very antithesis of his holy nature.

In addition to animals that were sacrificed, the priest took a goat and offered it to God in a different way.

This goat was presented alive before the Lord. The high priest laid his hands on the goat and confessed all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and all these were symbolically put on the goat's head. Then the goat was sent away into the desert (16:20-22).

From this practice, we get the term “scapegoat.”

This symbolized that God was sending their sins away in forgiveness. Their sins were to be forgotten, never to be thought of again. The goat took their sins upon itself and took them far away.

The people could then stand before the Lord, cleansed of all their sins.

Of course, churches don't have animal sacrifices anymore. Not unless you count all those chickens we have consumed over the years at dinner on the grounds and preacher's being feed after church on Sundays. Even those days have passed us by.

It's not just that we have a deeper respect for animal rights and or that worship would be a bloody mess. It has a lot to do with our understanding of God.

We understand from our reading of the Bible that this kind of thing became unnecessary to be in right standing with God a long time ago.

When Jesus began his ministry and his cousin John the Baptist saw him coming down to the Jordan River, he said to the people, “Behold, the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.” (John 1:29)

From the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, it was prophesied by John the Baptist that Jesus was going to be a sacrificial lamb who would take away the sins of the world.

In Leviticus, when a lamb was chosen for sacrifice, it had to be without blemish.

In order for Jesus to be recognized by God to be a sacrifice for our sins, Jesus had to be without sin.

Some say that when Jesus was on the cross, he became sin to God, as the sins of the world were placed upon him.

Which might be why Jesus cried out, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”

⁴⁷When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He is calling Elijah.” ⁴⁸One of them quickly ran and brought a sponge. He filled it with vinegar, put it on a reed, and held it up for Jesus to drink.

⁴⁹But the others said, “Leave Him alone. Let us see if Elijah comes to save Him.”

⁵⁰When Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, He yielded up His spirit. ⁵¹At that moment the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. (Matthew 27:45-51)

Please do not miss the significance of this moment.

Can you imagine when people began talking about these events, and they discovered that the veil in the temple was torn in two at the same time as Jesus died? It must have made goosebumps come up on their arms.

Don't you see what God did? This was not a coincidence. God ripped the 30-foot veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies, as if to say, "You don't need an earthly priest to come to me anymore. There is no barrier between us. The door is open. Because of Jesus, you can come directly to me."

Jesus is our high priest. Jesus is the way to the Father. Remember, Jesus said, "No one comes to the Father except by me."

Hebrews 4:16 says that we can "approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need." Hebrews 4:14-16 (NIV).

Whatever you need to speak to Jesus about this morning, you can bow your head right now and say whatever you want to say to God because Jesus intercedes for you.

You can go to God through Jesus. Even though we are sinners, God hears our prayer because of Jesus. Jesus understands. Just as Jesus extended mercy and grace to the thief dying beside him, Jesus wants to extend that mercy and grace to all of us.

This morning, if you come to the Lord in repentance, God hears your prayer and forgives your sin. If you come to the Lord asking for wisdom, direction God hears your prayer. If you come in thanksgiving or if you are asking for a need you or someone else has, God hears your prayer.

You should never be swayed by anyone who claims to have any special knowledge or a special connection to God.

You have as much access to God through the Holy Spirit as anyone.

We all have equal access to God through the Holy Spirit, not only to be reconciled to God but also to be ambassadors for the Lord.

Not only did the Israelites continually turn away from God, but they also regularly turned away from the purpose of the priestly role they were called to perform.

As followers of Jesus, we have a priestly role to play. Not only should we pray for our own needs, but we should petition God regarding the needs of others.

The Apostle Paul wrote the church of Corinth, saying that we are all "Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us." He said that we should work on behalf of Christ to reconcile people to God. (2 Cor 5:20).

Many Christians still want to lay the responsibility to tell others about Jesus on the clergy. I wish I had \$100 every time someone in the church complained because the preacher didn't visit enough, as if we are the only ones with the responsibility to share the gospel.

The Word of God teaches that every Christian is a minister of the gospel.

This morning, I want you to recognize your priestly role.

If you are a disciple of Jesus, you are His ambassador. The question is, "What kind of ambassador are you for the Lord?"

You have a job to help people understand that they are alienated from God. To the extent that you do that determines the strength of the church and often whether others come to know Jesus.

When the church leaves that job only to the preachers, the church is in trouble.

If you don't pray for your friends, if you don't love your enemies, if you don't take your role as an ambassador for Jesus seriously, many will die without knowing him as Savior.

The Israelites didn't take their priestly role seriously. They eventually lost their nation, their land, and their temple.

Eventually, Jesus, the Messiah came. Aren't you glad?

Now we can know Jesus, the Great High Priest, who gave us direct access to the Father.

Through Jesus, we can stand before God and be forgiven of the wrongs we have committed. With that access, we can be empowered to minister in his name.

If you don't know God today, you can go directly to God through Jesus and establish an eternal relationship with him.

If you have done that, how are you doing as His ambassador?

"In season one, episode eight of the Netflix series, *The Crown*, a drama following the life of Queen Elizabeth II, the Queen travels to Ceylon on a diplomatic tour. She appoints her sister, Princess Margaret, to be her representative for minor royal engagements. (www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2018/february/we-are-ambassadors-for-christ-not-for-ourselves.html)

Princess Margaret, who has long been unhappy with her sister's lack of flair as a queen, takes the opportunity to "bring color and personality to the Monarchy." (Ibid)

She speaks her own mind, jokes with the press, and belittles other dignitaries. In this scene, the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, has come to rebuke the Princess, and relieve her of her duties as a representative. He explains to her that she was not appointed to represent herself. (Ibid)

Here's a condensed conversation from the scene:

Prime Minister Churchill: Your Royal Highness, when you appear in public, performing official duties, you are not you.

Princess Margaret: Of course I'm me.

Prime Minister Churchill: The Crown. That's what they've come to see, not you. (Ibid)

The Lord has created us as unique people who express ourselves in our own unique ways, with our own opinions, and personalities.

Yet, as Christians, we are called to represent and reflect the mind of Christ. We are commanded to conform our lives to his commandments and as we do are to become his representatives.

So when we express ourselves, our opinions, our attitudes, we must ask, "Am I representing Jesus in my speech and my actions?"

As the band sings our last song this morning, it is a time for each of us to think about how well we are representing Jesus in the various areas of our lives.

It's time to remember that Jesus became the scapegoat for the sins of the world, your sins, and mine were placed upon him on Calvary.

If you haven't thanked him and accepted that gift for your life, would you pray to receive it today?

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