

## LIFE IN LEVITICUS

An outline of the Book of Leviticus

These notes accompany the Allander Evangelical Church Zoom Bible Studies in Leviticus which followed the studies on Genesis and Exodus as part of looking at the Pentateuch. The notes themselves were written following a similar series on the Book of Leviticus delivered at the Oak Hall / HUB Bible School in Belgrade, Serbia, a few years ago. While they do not incorporate some of the illustrative details and contemporary references made during the Allander series, they do capture the essence of the studies and are therefore used by way of summary here.

### LIVE LIKE THIS

#### **An Outline of the Book of Leviticus**

#### **Based on Teaching at HUB Bible School, Belgrade**

The Book of Leviticus is a key book of the Old Testament. It appears as the third book of the Pentateuch (the 5 books of Moses). It is the first one that Jewish children are expected to learn. Its *content* and emphasis are right at the heart of the Jewish religion. Its *context* is one where the children of Israel had found themselves prisoners in Egypt; but God rescued them from there by the Passover and led them through the Red Sea into the wilderness. This was a new experience for them. In it all God had to speak to them through different agents and means.

In this book of Leviticus God speaks to them about their life as the people of God. It outlines their approach to God, their forgiveness by God, and the practical outworking of being the people of God. It is concerned with their religion and behaviour.

The whole book is based on the Tabernacle and how that place of worship was to play an important part in their life as a holy nation. The emphasis is on holiness, both in terms of approaching God and also in living out the life of God among nations who were anything but holy.

The book may be divided into clear sections. These are determined by the use of the statement, "*The Lord spoke to Moses*" introducing a number of commands around a major topic. In these sections the Lord speaks to Moses so that he may speak it to other people, sometimes Aaron and sometimes to the rest of the nation. The life that they are expected to live is new so that it is only by divine instruction that they can know what to do and how to do it. So, using this statement (*The Lord spoke to Moses*) as our guide and having regard to the content of these smaller collections, the book may be divided into a number of major sections. These are

- A Offerings Chapters 1 - 7
- B The Priests Chapters 8 - 10
- C Clean and Unclean Things (11 – 15)
- D The Day of Atonement (16)

- E Practical Outworking (17 – 27)
- i Correct offering (17)
  - ii Holy Behaviour for the people (18 – 20)
  - iii Proper behaviour for the priests (21, 22)
  - iv Expressing worship through the feasts (23, 24)
  - v Serving others through Jubilee (25)
  - vi Obedience and Commitment (26, 27)

## A THE OFFERINGS Chapters 1 - 7

The book opens with a description of five offerings by which the people were enabled to approach a holy God. These were necessary because the people were considered to be 'contaminated' by having lived among ungodly nations and not having had a direct approach to God up until now. The glorious purpose God had for them in the beginning of Genesis had turned bad because of the Fall of Adam and Eve. In the book of Exodus, God redeemed them from captivity in Egypt through the Passover. Significantly, when God commissioned Moses for this task in the desert at the burning bush, He said: "*When you have brought the children of Israel out of Egypt you will worship God on this mountain*". Leviticus relates to "*this mountain*".

Eventually, when they reached that mountain (Sinai) God gave Moses the Law, setting out the standards they were to live by and also the pattern for a new feature in their experience – the Tabernacle – a place where God would dwell in their midst; and a means by which they would be able to approach God.

These offerings, outlined in this section, are an integral part of that approach. There were five offerings in all, which may be grouped in two sets. The first were voluntary: "*when you bring an offering*".

- The **Burnt Offering** was to be brought using animals from the flock or from the herd, (or even birds) which were to be sacrificed and their blood sprinkled on the furniture in the tabernacle by the priests.
- The **Grain Offering** was taken from the harvest of the field and again presented to God in different ways, (e.g. baked, boiled or on a griddle). It was to be mixed with oil and incense but not have yeast. Salt was essential.
- The **Peace (or Fellowship, or Goodwill) Offering** was also to be taken from the flock or the herd with a variety of animals mentioned according to people's circumstances and abilities. Some of this offering was to be taken by the priests, some given to the Lord and some consumed on the altar.

Each of these three offerings was voluntary. They happened because people wanted to bring an offering to God according to the detailed instructions that they were given. It was a spontaneous action of praise, giving to God something that they brought at a cost. And, as such a voluntary action, it was described as "*an aroma, a sweet smelling savour, rising up to God*".

The remaining two offerings were not voluntary: they were mandatory. The offerings themselves were similar, taking bulls and goats or other animals, but the reasons for offering were different. They were for “*when anyone sins*” whether intended or not. There were two of these:

- The **Sin Offering** was for sins committed, whether by the anointed priest, the whole Israelite community, or by a leader. Animals were to be sacrificed by the priests on their behalf and the blood sprinkled on the altar and the Atonement Cover (Mercy Seat).
- The **Guilt – or Trespass - Offering** was necessary when anyone sinned unawares and damaged other people and God in the process. Again animals were to be sacrificed and confession made so that forgiveness could be obtained.

These offerings were to be administered by the priests following very precisely ordered procedures. Each aspect of this procedure had a special significance. An animal or element was taken, the people identified with it, and on their behalf it was ceremonially slaughtered and its blood – often mixed with oil and accompanied by incense, and burned - was sprinkled in the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies as proof that the offering / sacrifice had been made.. These offerings represent the prescribed approach to God.

They have their New Testament counterparts in that Jesus came and offered Himself as the living sacrifice to God to pay for all of the sins of the whole world. Hebrews 9 and 10 state this very clearly. It is something that brings great comfort and satisfaction to believers at the present time. What happened in Leviticus for the children of Israel is clearly a forerunner of what God would eventually do through Jesus for all humanity.

## B      PRIESTS      Chapters 8 - 10

Just as Jesus was the only One who could offer the eternal Sacrifice on Calvary, so these offerings were to be administered by the priests on behalf of the people.

The concept of the priests as people set aside specifically for the work of God goes back to the history of the Patriarchs. Instead of surrendering the firstborn of each family, God decreed that He would accept one of the tribes of Israel - the tribe of Levi - to be those responsible for the priesthood. In this tradition Aaron, the brother of Moses, became the High Priest and his sons were priests with him. It was their task to be the mediators between the people and God.

For that, they needed to be ordained by God to fulfil such a task. They needed to be “qualified” for that role; they had to be in a proper condition themselves before being able to minister to others. These three chapters outline that preparation.

First of all, Moses and Aaron and his sons were ordained. They would come into the holy place, wash and dress themselves, and then take animals to sacrifice for their own sinfulness, making sure that they were in a proper condition to appear before God. Having done that they then came out and sacrificed for the people, taking animals which would bear away the people’s sins; and by sprinkling the blood they provided the proof that that death had taken place. When they then came out of the Tabernacle they blessed the people.

In this we see the principle of ministry. The servants' condition is of paramount importance for they must attend to themselves before seeking to meet the needs of others. The purpose of service is to bless other people and to bring them benefit.

In the New Testament this is described as being servants or stewards of the things of God. It is expressed in Paul's words when he said, *"I have delivered to you what I received from the Lord"*. And Peter said to the lame man, *"Silver and gold have I none, but what I do have I give you. In the name of Jesus of Nazareth rise up and walk"*. Paul describes the condition of the servant as someone who is *"poor, yet making many rich"*.

The work of the servant is to convey and to transmit God's treasures to God's people without necessarily benefiting themselves and even sometimes suffering in the process.

In this section that meant that the priests had to be disciplined so there are instructions here about them abstaining from drink, looking after their appearance and making sure that they were worthy servants of God in this role.

But some were unworthy. Two of Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, were guilty of offering *"strange fire"* to the Lord. What this was is not really known but it clearly was unacceptable to God and because of that they were punished. The approach to God must not only be done properly but also by those who are worthy.

#### C CLEAN AND UNCLEAR Chapters 11 - 15

This next section speaks of that which is clean and unclean. The examples given are taken from natural life such as animals, those things which accompany childbirth, skin diseases, mildew and bodily discharges. All of these are part of the natural functioning of the human body but their significance goes back to the earlier history of mankind.

God made man in His own image and set him in a perfect environment in Eden. But when sin entered, that body was corrupted and there are features to it that now belong to that realm of corruption and sinfulness. It is part of nature. These are the features that are considered unclean, both with regard to animals and also to human behaviours. They are not deliberate acts of wrong but are part of a corrupt natural environment. They need to be cleansed.

We can apply that to our situation. It is clear that sin is ours by nature. It is not something that we have decided to do but something which is automatic in our behaviour. Paul cried out: *"O wretched man that I am"*. And David said, *"In sin did my mother conceive me"*. Nevertheless God has made provision for that sinfulness to be dealt with by the great Sacrifice of His Son on the Cross of Calvary on our behalf. John could say, *"Behold the Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world"*.

#### D THE DAY OF ATONEMENT Chapter 16

Here in Leviticus there is one process of offering and sacrifice which stands out above all the others. It is what was to take place on the Day of Atonement. Here in an elaborate process, the High Priest takes a bull and a ram for himself, one for a burnt offering and one for a sin offering. He also takes from the people two goats for a sin offering and a ram for a burnt offering.

On their behalf he takes these into the Tabernacle, into the very presence of God to seek forgiveness.

First of all he offers the bull for himself, slaughters it and then takes the blood to sprinkle it seven times on the Mercy Seat in the Holiest of All. Then he comes out and sprinkles the blood on the altar of sacrifice. Having done that, he comes and takes one of the two goats given by the people and sacrifices that in a similar manner.

He then takes the second goat and lays both hands on it before releasing it into the desert there to become the scapegoat, or the goat of Azazel.

Then, he offers up both rams as burnt offering for himself and for the people. He then went into the temple washed and changed and came out.

This was the Day of Atonement, a day to be remembered annually as the time to approach God for forgiveness in this special way. It was to be observed on the 10th day of the seventh month.

Both of these actions indicate what happens when our sin is dealt with. When we apply this to the sacrifice of Jesus, we accept His death for our sins. We also recognise that He also became the scapegoat, suffering "*outside the camp*" on our behalf.

This Day of Atonement was an event by which atonement was effected in two ways. On the one hand sin was forgiven; it was paid for by the sacrifice. Secondly, it brought man and God together in an "at-one-ment".

That is what Jesus has done for us. By going to Calvary He Himself paid for our sin, not only the price of sin but also to appease the wrath of an angry God and in that way satisfied God's requirement that sin is dealt with. By it He also reconciled man to God, bringing two separate parts together so that, "*being justified by faith we might have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*".

The result of that is: transformed lives; so the next section takes us into a major part of practical outworking.

## E PRACTICAL OUTWORKING Chapters 17 – 27

This is a long section which we will subdivide into several smaller ones for ease of treatment and to highlight significance.

### i Correct worship

It appears that, in spite of the detailed outlining of the correct procedure for the Day of Atonement, there were those who still continued with improper worship. They would offer away from the Tabernacle and even offer to alien gods. That was condemned. It was emphasized that worship was only permitted at the Tabernacle and officiated by the appointed priests. Anything else was not allowed.

Furthermore, they were not to eat blood nor anything that had died or been torn. Any approach to God and any offering had to be according to the appropriate procedure.

### ii Holy Behaviour for the People Chapters 18 – 20

This section is prefaced by the exhortation to be careful NOT to adopt the customs and practices of either Egypt, from where they had come, nor of Canaan, where they were going to. Their mode of living was to reflect the people of God, not the nations.

It appears that the nations were obsessed with errant sexual behaviour and indulged themselves in a whole range of inappropriate relationships: with close relatives, with animals, and with the same sex. All of these are forbidden in Chapter 18 and punishment promised in Chapter 20. This was not to be the behaviour of God's redeemed people.

In contrast, Chapter 19 emphasises the need to be holy. "*Be holy, for I am holy*". Their behaviour was to reflect God.

Holiness implies purity as well as cleanliness. It is special, devoted, and positively distinctive. It displays characteristics that are very different from anything that does not emanate from God himself. It was part of the testimony, corresponding to Paul's "*more excellent way*" in 1 Corinthians 12

Among the features mentioned are: respect for parents, keeping the Sabbath, sacrificing properly, caring for others by leaving gleanings in the field. On the prohibitive side there were commands not to: steal, swear, curse, deceive, gossip or endanger a brother, take revenge, or disfigure themselves in any way. Interestingly, they were to leave a newly planted tree for 5 years before using its fruit and they were to use honest scales. This was righteous behaviour.

All that has an application for the Christian. The New Testament has many references to proper behaviour. The Lord Jesus said that His followers should "*let their light shine before men*" because they were to be the '*salt of the earth*' and a '*light to be set on a hill*'. In the epistles, Paul and the other apostles commanded many such behaviours. For example, the Ephesians were told not to continue with their old ways; the Colossians were to seek those things which are above. (More references are: Rom 12: 9-21; 1 Cor. 5: 1-2, 9-13, 6: 9-11; 2 Cor. 5: 17, 6: 14 – 7: 1; Gal. 5: 16-26; Eph. 2: 1-10; 4: 17-29, 5: 3-20; Phil. 2: 12-16, 3: 12-21; Col. 1: 11-14, 3: 1-17; 1 Thess. 1: 8-10, 4: 1-8; Titus 2: 1-14; 2 Tim. 2: 14-26; Heb. 13: 1-6; 1 Peter 1: 13-16, 2: 11-17; 2 Peter 1: 3-8; 1 John 3: 1-3.)

### iii Proper behaviour for priests Chapters 21, 22

If ordinary followers were to be holy, then that applied more so to the priests who had a divine vocation and responsibility.

In carrying out their duties they were to be ceremonially clean except for unavoidable domestic situations. Any marriage arrangement was to be above reproach and, being anointed priests, they were not to defile or disfigure themselves. Any defective offspring should not become involved with priestly duties.

They were to treat sacred offerings with respect, keep the requirements of the law and make sure the offerings were 'kosher'.

That emphasis is also found in the New Testament where Paul, and Peter, emphasise the high standards for church leadership and service in the kingdom of God. One outstanding example of that is the list of qualifications decided on when choosing the first deacons to attend to tables in Acts 6. (Other relevant references are: Acts 5: 1-6; 6: 1-6; Rom. 12: 1-3; 1 Cor. 4: 1-5; 9: 12-19; 2 Cor. 4: 7-15; 1 Tim 3: 1-7, 4: 8- 13; 2 Tim 2: 1-7; Titus 1: 5-9.)

#### iv Celebrating Together – the Feasts; Chapters 23, 24

While in the previous sections we have looked on the condition of individual participants, whether people or priests, this section now draws attention to corporate activity. In this chapter the emphasis is on *assembling* together at appointed times for specific purposes.

To do that they need to take time. That is achieved by observing the principle of the Sabbath – avoiding the demands on their time through *doing regular work* and deliberately giving their time – and energy – to corporate worship.

(It is interesting to note that the concept of the Sabbath is quite unusual in that it does not relate to a natural unit of timing. A day, month, or year follow a cycle of nature; but the Sabbath – 7 days – is not in that sense ‘natural’ but is based on the seventh day of creation. As such it is commanded in the OT as a deliberate setting aside and observation of a day to remember. It appears as one of the Ten Commandments; it features frequently in this chapter.)

Several feasts are to be observed over a seven month period in their year, beginning with

- **The Feast of Passover.** Referring back to the experience of being released from Egypt by this provision of God. This was the first feast to take place reminding them of that wonderful experience of God’s “*when I see the blood, I will pass over you*”. This was to be on the 14th day of the first month, followed on the next day by
- **The Feast of Unleavened Bread.** This took 8 days, beginning with a Sabbath and seven days of offerings and ending with a ‘*solemn assembly*’. On entry to the land they were to observe
- **The Feast of Firstfruits.** Taking the first products of their planting at harvest the priest was to wave a sheaf before the Lord and follow it with a burnt offering of a lamb, with grain mixed with oil and a drink offering of wine. They were not to eat bread or roasted grain. It was a thanksgiving to God: a ‘*pleasing aroma*’ in recognition of His prospering them. After that they were to count off seven full weeks for the
- **Feast of Weeks** when offering ‘new grain’ in the form of ‘two loaves’ baked with yeast as a wave offering of firstfruits. Along with this they were to present seven male lambs, a bull and two rams for a burnt offering. The lambs were to be waved before the Lord as a sacred offering. On that same day they were to call a solemn assembly and to leave gleanings in the field for the poor.
- **The Sabbath or Feast of Trumpets** was to be observed on the first day of the 7th month as the beginning of a second phase of sacred time. Once again they were to refrain from ‘regular work’, have a day of rest and call a sacred assembly so that they could present an offering by fire.
- **The Day of Atonement** had already been commanded as a yearly observance. Here it takes place on the prescribed date of the tenth day of the seventh month. On this ‘sabbath of rest’ they were to come from wherever they were to the Tabernacle for this solemn occasion. It was then followed by
- **The Feast of Tabernacles** on the 15th day of that seventh month. This entailed seven days of presenting offerings to the Lord and assembling on the eighth day. But, on this occasion they were to bring palm fronds and choice fruit from the trees to make into ‘booths’, or tents, in which they were to stay for the seven days reminding them of the time they were pilgrims in the wilderness guided and provided for by their God.

These feasts represent God's calendar for His people. Each year they were to observe these events.

It can also be said that there were three distinct characteristics of these feasts, apart from the significance of each one and its referent. These features help us to appreciate the significance of such feasts to us in our day as corporately we worship God and take part in the process of, "*Let the redeemed of the Lord say so*".

1. Each feast referred back to a specific experience in their history. It was not a celebration without a clear reason for its being commemorated. It was an expression arising from their experience. That should characterise our corporate (and individual) worship and expression: it should relate directly to what God has done for us. That applies to singing, breaking of bread, baptism, whatever expression we are engaged in. It must arise from and express an experience of grace applied.
2. The materials for these expression were local and natural: it was what they had access to. While gold and precious stones were needed for the Tabernacle, here they only had access to grain, animals and trees. In a similar way our expression should in that sense be 'natural', using what we are and what is native to us. Paul reminds the Romans that their members, which previously had been instruments for sin, should now be the means for righteousness. It is the same voice which cursed in the past that now sings praises to God; the same feet that went astray that now walk in the ways of God. Our praise and worship should reflect our personalities – quiet or loud – and be sincere. It is what Jesus referred to when He said that we should "*worship in spirit and in truth*". The source is always the same but the medium and form may differ.
3. Yet that 'form' contained an embodiment of the message and the experience. The waved sheaf was a picture of what was being given thanks for; the 'booths' illustrated what had taken place. Similarly, any form of expression should contain an explanation of, and an insight into, the experience that generated it. In any expression of Christian praise, worship or witness, there should be a seed of truth which enables the observer to gain that same experience too. No expression, be it worship or witness, is an end in itself: it is a testimony, something that conveys a message that others can benefit from. In nature, the fruit is both the outcome from the growth process and the producer of a seed for a new generation.

Chapter 24 presents two important ingredients in this expression: oil and bread. The one inspires and the other feeds – two important aspects of spiritual expression fulfilling God's purpose for it. This chapter also warns of potential blasphemy.

#### v Serving Others through Jubilee Chapter 25

If the practical outworking covers personal holiness and corporate worship it also embodies social action. Jesus summarised the Law by saying that man should

This is an aspect which attends to the needs of the neighbour. It is based on the Sabbath principle and an arrangement to cancel debts, release those bound by agreements and to offer a fresh start by limiting the binding effects of property and contracts on the subjects of the land. Seven Sabbaths years led to the Year of Jubilee when release and redemption was possible on a grand scale.

It is part of the lesson of Leviticus that the benefit of worship is welfare. Expression towards God is a priority but it also should be accompanied by expression of good and service to others reflecting the generous Grace of God.

#### vi Choice and Commitment- Chapters 26 and 27

This practical section concludes with two aspects which are vital if theory is to be turned into practice and 'hearers' become 'doers'. There is a choice: obedience will lead to blessing and actualisation; but disobedience will only bring down God's judgement. Whether the truths outlined in Leviticus will be realised depend on the act of the will as well as the mental assent. It reminds us of the Lord's Prayer with its model of praying, "*Thy kingdom come, Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven*".

Once that choice is made then it is a matter of dedication – the subject of chapter 27. It reminds us of Joshua's challenge, "*Choose you this day whom you will serve*". And his inspiring answer, "*As for me, and my house, we will serve the Lord*".

#### F SUMMARY

It has been suggested that the Book of Leviticus is modelled on the Tabernacle. That structure helps to appreciate the book and its message.

Pivoting around Chapter 16 and the Day of Atonement the earlier part describes the approach to God through offerings covering uncleanness and sin and effectively taken into the Holy Place to obtain forgiveness and new life. In that same way, Hebrews reminds us of the work of Jesus, our Great High Priest entering into heaven itself with His own blood in a better and more effective sacrifice.

As a result of that forgiveness and regeneration there is a practical outworking: in personal holiness, in corporate expression and in social responsibility all fired by choice and dedication – a living example of God's presence in the midst; living a holy life through a contemporary Leviticus.

hj June 2021