

Approaching a Holy God Leviticus 1:1-7:38

Introduction

Occasion: Today, we're going to start a sermon series in the book of Leviticus (you heard me right). You know, the book that tells you which grasshoppers you can eat, what fabrics you can wear, and to send a goat into the wilderness with your sins (literally where we get the term "scapegoat").

- For the modern Christian, it can seem like a strange and irrelevant book. Many of my favorite, godly, and prolific preachers who have been preaching for decades have a conspicuous absence of Leviticus sermons in the online repertoire (e.g., Greear, Keller, Piper).
- Maybe you just started to **read the Bible through in a year** (Whitney! It's doable with desire, discipline, and dependence¹). A lot of people get to Leviticus and realize they don't know what these twenty-seven chapters are about and they tap out. Leviticus becomes the stumbling block that trips them up! I hope that maybe, after this series, you'll at least have the framework to understand and enjoy the beauty of this too-often neglected book.

Why Leviticus?: "All scripture is breathed out by God"² and Leviticus is most certainly Scripture. It was the Scripture of Jesus when he quotes "love your neighbor as yourself"³ as a commandment alongside the ten commandments⁴ or as the second great commandment on which "depend all the Law and the prophets." Paul includes the same passage as a summary of the law in Romans and Galatians.⁵ For James, it is the "royal law."⁶ Peter quotes Leviticus 19 in his admonition to be holy.⁷ The writer of Hebrews shows how the pattern of priesthood and atonement in Leviticus points to Jesus!⁸

- Leviticus is not only **cited** as Scripture; it is **also useful** as Scripture because it teaches about God and his work in the world.

Context: "A text without a context is a pretext for a proof text" (Carson), meaning, without the proper framework we easily try to make the Bible say what we want rather than letting it speak for itself.

- There are various **levels of context** with any passage. The **immediate context** tells you the meaning of a word, phrase, or sentence based on the verses directly surrounding it. The **book context** helps you see how a story, parable, or scene functions in the flow of

¹ Dependence on God and others (i.e., accountability).

² 2 Tim 3:16

³ Lev 19:18

⁴ Matt 19:19, Mk 12:31, Lk 10:27

⁵ Rom 13:9, Gal 5:13

⁶ Jas 2:8

⁷ 1 Pet 1:15-16; Lev 11:44-45, 19:2

⁸ The entire conversation of the purpose of the law in Romans and Galatians centers around a right interpretation of the many laws in Leviticus.

the entire book. However, the **canonical context** connects that book to the larger narrative of the Bible.

- Leviticus is part of the larger collection of the Torah or Pentateuch, which is a five-part book (Gen, Exodus, Lev, Num, Deut).
- Leviticus literally picks up where Exodus leaves off. They **build** the Tabernacle in **Exodus** and **Leviticus** shows them **how to use it**. Think of it like getting a brand-new car in Exodus—it's shiny, exciting, and full of potential. But then Leviticus comes along with the owner's manual, explaining how to drive it, maintain it, and keep it running. Yank Leviticus out of context, and it feels like flipping through a boring instruction manual for a car you don't even own.

Story of the Pentateuch: Law: Even the term for the first five books in Hebrew (*Torah*), is often translated as "law."

- Over time some came to view these books not as the story of God's salvation of and promise for his people (i.e., prophetic narrative) but as a law code. **Rabbis** later identified **613 commandments** (*mitzvot*). These Rabbis are actually the ideological descendants of the NT **Pharisees**. After the destruction of the temple, their *interpretation* laid the foundation for modern Judaism. **Pharisees > Rabbis > Judaism**.
 - These oral traditions, opinions, and interpretations were formulated and collated in the centuries following Jesus and ultimately codified in Rabbinic writings.⁹
- These books certainly *contain* commandments, but at their core they are a story.
 - The creator God put humanity in his perfect garden temple to worship and serve him.
 - Through their sinful rebellion, they were separated from God and kicked out of fellowship with him in paradise.
 - Rather than destroy them, he promised to send a Savior to deal with their sin, overcome their alienation, and save them.
- This promise and how it will come about is the *subtext* of the story of the Israelites. God chooses a people through whom to send his redemption to the world.
 - Before there is ever a law given, he **graciously** saves them from slavery in Egypt.
 - He leads them by his manifest glory (cloud by day and fire by night) to his holy **mountain** to worship him.
 - He desires to dwell with them, but their sin not only persists but intensifies (e.g., golden calf, etc.). So God gives them rules and regulations, laws and commandments to **guide** them into righteous behavior, **expose** their sinful limitations, and **protect** them from evil.

⁹ *Mishnah* (ca. 3rd c.). That wasn't fully clear, so rabbinical analyses and commentary on the Mishnah were collected in the Gemara. The Mishnah and Gemara comprise the Talmud (Babylonian 500 CE; Palestinian 400 CE).

Holy God: Imagine the Pentateuch as a mountain, with Genesis and Exodus on one side and Number and Deuteronomy on the other. At the peak is Leviticus. When you look at Leviticus, chapter 16, the **Day of Atonement** stands at the center as the high holy day, the day when the people's sins are paid for each year (cf. Heb 9-10).

Draw Near: At the end of Exodus, God gave instructions, and the people built a Tabernacle, a **dwelling place**, to receive God's presence and meet him.

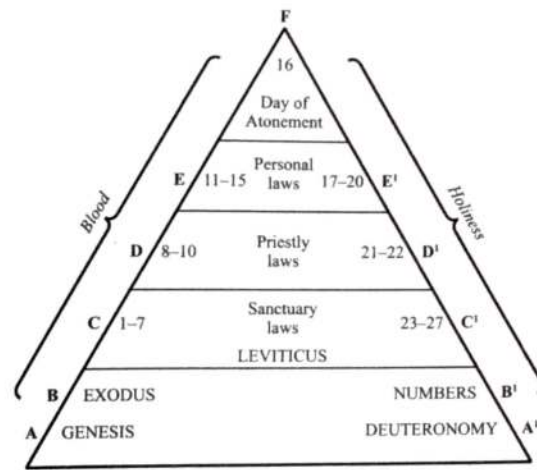
- But you can't just waltz into the presence of God. You don't waltz into the presence of God nonchalantly any more than you take a casual stroll on the surface of the sun. The sun's power is awe-inspiring and life-giving, but not safe. Even from 93 million miles away, the sun turns me into a lobster in 10 minutes. Imagine being up close! Now imagine the creator of that sun—the one who spoke it into existence. If the sun itself is that powerful, how much greater, more overwhelming, and utterly consuming must the glory of its Maker be?
- At the end of Exodus, even *Moses* cannot enter the Tabernacle: ³⁵ And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the LORD filled the Tabernacle (Exodus 40:35).
- **We were created to dwell in the house of God.** His garden, his tabernacle, but our sin prevents us.¹⁰ God must reveal the way and make the way.

How do we draw near? How do we deal with our sin so that we can dwell with the Lord?

- God makes a way for sinners to draw near through sacrifice.
- We start seeing hints of how to draw near as we travel up the “mountain” of Leviticus to the peak (ch. 16, Day of Atonement). The first seven chapters introduce five different kinds of “offerings” or “sacrifices” and how the priests are to handle them.
- We'll see **unique** aspects of each offering and **similarities** among them that help us understand **how to draw near to God**.
- The Book of Leviticus (Λευιτικόν, “pertaining to Levites” in Greek) is called *Vayikra* in Hebrew (וַיִּקְרָא “And He called”), reflecting its opening words of God's intimate call.
 - Don't miss it! **God makes a way for us to draw near to him!**

1. Specific Offerings

LEVITICUS WITHIN THE PENTATEUCH



¹⁰ “Leviticus begins with Israel, God's second firstborn soon (or second Adam), standing outside the cherubim-guarded entry of Eden. If Moses the mediator may not enter, then how will it be possible for the tabernacle to become a tent of meeting between God and all Israel?” (Morales).

¹ The LORD called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, ² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the LORD, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock.”¹¹

- The word offering (*qorban*) is from the same Hebrew root that means to draw near. An offering is something that is literally “brought near [to God.” So 1:2 says something like: “When any one of you offers an offering to the LORD, you shall offer your offering of livestock from the herd or the flock.” So, when anyone brings near an offering, they are bringing near a thing meant to draw them near to the LORD.
- Offerings and sacrifices are already common in the Torah. Cain and Abel, Noah, Joseph, Moses, and Jethro all famously worship God with burnt offerings and sacrifices.
- These seven chapters are not intended to give a comprehensive explanation of the sacrificial system but to give direction on the method, means, and meaning of sacrifices at the Tabernacle.¹²
- As we encounter various festivals later in the text that *prescribe* a certain offering, we’ll know what they’re talking about.¹³

#1: Burnt Offering - Ascension (1:1-17, 6:8-13)

“And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the LORD” (1:9b).¹⁴

- This is the most costly offering because all of it is consumed. There is none leftover to be eaten for food. It is *all* given to God.
- When we come to God, we leave nothing back (whole life submission). We don’t hold onto an insurance plan. He deserves it all and gets it all. “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Rom 12:1).
- The sacrifice, interestingly, is not *destroyed* but *transformed* (Newton’s First Law of Thermodynamics, law of conservation of energy: energy cannot be created or destroyed, only transformed from one form to another). God transforms the bloody death of an animal into a pleasing aroma.
- The term “burnt offering”¹⁵ means “that which ascends or goes up” because the smoke that rises carries the sacrifice to God, it takes our worship to his heavenly abode. It thus becomes a picture later in the Bible of praise and thanksgiving.
- **He turns costly sacrifice into beautiful worship.**

#2: Grain Offering - Tribute (2:1-16, 6:14-23)

¹¹ ויקרא אל-משה וידבר יהוה אליו מאהל מועד לאמר:

דבר אל-בני ישראל ואמרת אליהם אדם כי יקריב מקם קרבן ליהוה מן-הבהמה מן-הבקר ומן-הצאן תקריבו את-קרבנכם:

¹² After the Temple’s destruction, sacrifices were replaced by prayer and study. Maimonides saw the sacrificial system as human concession; Sailhamer, built-in obsolescence. The ongoing applicability of the Levitical system is still debated.

¹³ When a woman is told to bring a sin offering (Lev 12), you now “get it.”

¹⁴ The priests must keep this fire burning at all times so as to allow for continued worship of God. Dereliction of duty would prevent the people from coming to God: “Fire shall be kept burning on the altar continually; it shall not go out” (6:13).

¹⁵ עלה (*olah*)

- The term “grain offering”¹⁶ is often used in the Old Testament to describe a gift or tribute given to a King as an act of submission and loyalty.
- This is the only **bloodless** offering. It is made of fine flour, oil, and frankincense. It reflects the fruit of human labor given back to God in dependence and thanksgiving and reminds us how we flourish under God’s provision and covenant care because he is the source of all blessing.

¹¹ “No grain offering that you bring to the LORD shall be made with leaven, for you shall burn no leaven nor any honey as a food offering to the LORD...¹³ You shall season all your grain offerings with salt. You shall not let the salt of the covenant with your God be missing from your grain offering; with all your offerings you shall offer salt” (2:11, 13).

- **Prohibited:** Leaven and honey symbolize corruption. When they fled Egypt, they did it so quickly the bread didn’t have time to rise, and this becomes a picture of leaving the sin of Egypt in Egypt and living an “unleavened” (unleavened) (unleavened) before God.¹⁷
- **Commanded:** Salt (some of us wouldn’t eat food without *salt*, yet we’ll give God *flavorless* offerings). We’ll give up the bland things we don’t want but hold onto the precious things we refuse to surrender.¹⁸ Salt is the eternal covenant of God preserved.

#3: Peace Offering - Communion (3:1-17, 7:11-15)

- The peace (*shelem*; שְׁלֵמָה)¹⁹ offering is unique because not *all* the animal is burned, only the best parts (i.e., the fat). It actually says, “All fat is the LORD’S” (3:16). Amen! Some of us just have more to give to the Lord 😊. Part of the offering meal is eaten by the worshipper: ¹⁵ And the flesh of the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving shall be eaten on the day of his offering. He shall not leave any of it until the morning (7:15).
- After the sacrifice, there is peace and reconciliation between God and man, so that they enjoy a **fellowship meal**.
- Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Rom 5:1-2).

*These first three sacrifices fit into a category of “ideal worship” because each is voluntary. Only these three are described as “a sweet aroma.” The next two (*sin* and *guilt* offerings) deal with atonement, purification, and reparation (i.e., expiratory), emphasizing payment for sin and removal of guilt.

#4: Sin Offering - Purification (4:1-5:13, 6:24-30)

- Focus on atonement for sin and cleansing from impurity. It is meant to restore holiness.
- The repeated phrases is exemplified in 4:26: So the priest shall make atonement for him for his sin, and he shall be forgiven (4:26; cf. 4:35, 31b; 5:6, 10, 13). Drinking glass (holy) defiled by another use (water color paint).

¹⁶ מִנְחָה (*minchah*)

¹⁷ 1 Cor 5:6-8

¹⁸ Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God (Heb 13:15-16).

¹⁹ Interestingly, the LXX translates “peace offering” as θυσία σωτηρίου (“sacrifice of salvation”).

- As Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word (Eph 5:25-26)

#5: Guilt Offering - Reparation (5:14-6:7, 7:1-10)

- There's some overlap between the sin and guilt offerings (hence the later English editors weren't sure where to put the chapter break).²⁰
- If the **sin** offering concerns unintentional defilement, the **guilt** offering concerns offenses that harm God or others and require compensation or payback (e.g., the difference between accidentally touching something unclean and stealing from someone). *Both* are sins, but one requires restitution (e.g., speeding unintentionally vs. embezzling money).
- We all are sinners and need atonement (because *any* sin separates us from a perfectly holy God), but not all sin is the same. There are degrees to sin (e.g., you'd rather be lied to than assaulted or burgled than murdered). This is all over the Bible.
 - Jesus tells Pilate, "The one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin," indicating that some sins are more severe than others (Jn 19:11).
 - The parable of the servants indicates that those who sin with knowledge will receive greater punishment than those who sin in ignorance (Luke 12:47-48)
 - Proverbs lists sins God hates, with some described as particularly abhorrent (e.g., "hands that shed innocent blood") (Prov 6:16-19).

We see the seriousness of this "guilt offering" type of sin.

- ¹ The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² "If anyone sins and commits a breach of faith against the LORD by deceiving his neighbor in a matter of deposit or security, or through robbery, or if he has oppressed his neighbor ³ or has found something lost and lied about it, swearing falsely—in any of all the things that people do and sin thereby— ⁴ if he has sinned and has realized his guilt and will restore what he took by robbery or what he got by oppression or the deposit that was committed to him or the lost thing that he found ⁵ or anything about which he has sworn falsely, he shall restore it in full and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to him to whom it belongs on the day he realizes his guilt. ⁶ And he shall bring to the priest as his compensation to the LORD a ram without blemish out of the flock, or its equivalent, for a guilt offering. ⁷ And the priest shall make atonement for him before the LORD, and he shall be forgiven for any of the things that one may do and thereby become guilty." (Lev 6:1-7)
 - It is a breach of faith against the LORD (6:2).
 - Requires restitution and compensation of 20% he shall restore it in full and shall add a fifth to it, and give it to him to whom it belongs (6:5).
 - This is the only of these offerings that *requires* a ram (6:6). Which would be more costly than a female animal or smaller animals (e.g., pigeons or bread).
 - While a sacrifice of **equivalent value** may be given, it cannot be lesser..
 - The costly nature of the ram foreshadows the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who John the Baptist calls "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29). **Atonement for sin requires a costly and unblemished substitute.**

2. General Observations

²⁰ BHS gets it right.

#1 - Substitution

- In the burnt offering, peace offering, sin offering, and guilt offering (all those that involve animals), there is a moment of transfer where the worshipper usually his hand on the offering.
 - ⁴ He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him (1:4 cf. 3:2, 4:4, 5:16)
- The animal acts as a substitute for the worshiper's sin and guilt. The guilt of the sinner is transferred to the animal who bears the consequences of sin on their behalf.
 - The worshipper is saying, I deserve to die under the judgment of God.
 - Notice that the animal must be "without blemish" (v. 3), because the innocent one must die for the guilty.

#2 - Entrance

- ² And he shall lay his hand on the head of his offering and kill it at the entrance of the tent of meeting (3:2 cf. 1:3, 2:2, 4:4, 5:15-19).
- These sacrifices occur at this location because the threshold of the tent of meeting is where God's holiness intersects with humanity. We cannot enter God's presence without a sacrifice; we need a mediator to carry us in.
- **We are not entitled to God's presence; we are gifted it through the atoning blood of the sacrifice.** "Without atonement, no sinner may approach a holy God" (Sach). the sacrificial system demonstrates that access to God's presence is not a right but a **gift** that comes through atonement—a costly, messy process (Morales).

#3 - Bloody

- If you read through these seven chapters it is unavoidable what a noisy, smelly, and bloody mess it would be.
 - E.g., And Aaron's sons the priests shall throw the blood against the sides of the altar (Lev 3:2, peace offering).
 - E.g., ⁵ And the anointed priest shall take some of the blood of the bull and bring it into the tent of meeting, ⁶ and the priest shall dip his finger in the blood and sprinkle part of the blood seven times before the LORD in front of the veil of the sanctuary. ⁷ And the priest shall put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of fragrant incense before the LORD that is in the tent of meeting, and all the rest of the blood of the bull he shall pour out at the base of the altar of burnt offering that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting (Lev 4:5-7, sin offering).
- What would it smell like? Sound like? Look like? Rivers of blood flowed at the base of the altar, the beautiful and expensive garments of the priests covered in blood. The sound and smell of death everywhere (Muslim "Feast of Sacrifice," *Eid Al Adha*, Wolof, W. Africa, *Tabaski*; Abraham and "Ishmael," cf. Isaac, Muslim fan fic; gutters filled with blood; meat hanging in the market; flies everywhere).
 - Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins (Heb 9:22).
 - For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 6:23).

- Either you pay for your sin, or Jesus does (someone has to). The beauty of the gospel is that your sins are not ignored; rather, they are paid for and forgiven by Jesus's sacrifice.

3. Clarifying Example

- Look at how these sacrifices work together in the real world.
- ²² Then Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them, and he came down from offering the **sin offering** and the **burnt offering** and the **peace offerings**. ²³ And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people (9:22-23).
- There's an **atonement** order of operations. Sin is paid for (substitution), worship is offered (consecration), then fellowship is enjoyed (reconciliation).
- "For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit" (1 Pet 3:18).
 - The death of Christ allows us to draw near to God. **Atonement** (literarily "at-one-ment").

Conclusion:

Once-For-All: For the Israelites, the pursuit of God's presence was a never-ending treadmill (day after day, year after year; diet vs. lifestyle). ¹¹ And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God (Heb 10:11-12). Christ, our great High Priest, carries us before the throne of God and offers the perfect, permanent sacrifice of his very life for our sins.

- ¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith (Heb 10:19-22).

Invitation:

- **Unsaved?:** Apart from Christ, you are still in your sin. You are still under condemnation. Your destiny is death and eternal separation from God. In Christ, it is finished. Your debt is paid. Your sins are atoned. Come to Christ. Place your faith in him. Receive his forgiveness. Receive his righteousness. **Draw near to God.**
- **Saved?:** Gladly and boldly enter the presence of God with joyful thanksgiving, humble dependence, and grateful worship. **Jesus has made a way.**