

## LEVITICUS PART TWO

### Chapters 11-27

#### Chapters 11-15: Laws on ritual purity

This section of Leviticus deals with certain practices that could make one impure or ritually unclean and thus unfit to approach the sanctuary for the worship of God. Once again, our challenge will be to get some glimpse of why these laws were important to the leaders of Israel.

Leviticus does not give any rationale as to *why* certain practices made one ritually unclean. For the Israelites, it was very important to be in a state of ritual purity or cleanness when presenting oneself to God. It showed respect for their all-holy God.

In ancient Israel, it was very easy to get “dirty” as one went about the business of daily life. So the point was not that one had to always be ritually clean, but it behooved one to be so when entering a holy place to worship God and to offer sacrifice. Coming into the presence of God ritually unclean was an insult to the all-holy God. Leviticus 11-15 looks at the four types of uncleanness:

- Animals (Chapter 11)
- Childbirth (Chapter 12)
- Contagious diseases (Chapters 13-14)
- Sexual impurities (Chapter 15)

#### Chapter 11: Clean and unclean animals

Only animals that were considered clean could be eaten. Unclean animals were not fit for consumption. It is not clear how the distinction was made between clean and unclean animals. It could have been based on taste, i.e. what tasted good and did not make one sick was deemed clean, and vice versa. The reason was probably religious—a way for the Israelites to set themselves apart from their pagan neighbors who had no restrictions in their way of living.

*“What were practical considerations for one people became directives based on religious beliefs for another and were handed on as traditions to succeeding generations”* (Wayne Turner).

#### Chapter 12: Uncleanness connected with childbirth

This chapter begins with the statement that “...when a woman conceives a child and gives birth to a boy, she shall be unclean for seven days, with the same

*uncleanness as at her menstrual period”* (v 2). No reason is given why a woman was considered impure for a longer period after the birth of a girl (14 days).

Regarding this practice, the *Jerome Biblical Commentary* notes: “...this state of uncleanness arose neither from the act of conception nor from the delivery as such, but rather from the loss of blood connected with the latter. The woman’s vitality linked with her blood was diminished by childbirth, and by that token she was objectively separated from God, the source of life, until her former integrity was restored” (p.75). *Until the mother was purified, she was not allowed to touch anything sacred nor enter the sanctuary (12:4). After a period of time, the woman’s ritual integrity was restored through a sacrificial offering. The oblation of the Virgin Mary on the occasion of her purification was a pair of turtledoves, the offering of the poor (Lk 2:22-24).”*

**Pause:** For the ancient Israelite, conception and childbirth was a spiritual experience which connected them to the mystery of God. If you are the parent of a child, to what extent was having a child a spiritual experience?

#### Chapters 13-14: Contagious diseases

Contagious skin diseases, particularly leprosy, could make one unclean. Since the priests were responsible for the health of the camp, it was their duty to decide who should be expelled or readmitted to the camp. Purification measures were available for those found with a contagious disease.

In his *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, John Collins writes: “*Impurity laws preserve vestiges of old taboos, based on fear of the unknown. They have more to do with primal fears about life and death, the loss of human control over the body, than with ethical principles in the modern sense*” (p.147).

#### Chapter 15: Personal and sexual uncleanness

These verses sound rather strange as they seem to communicate the message that there is something bad or unclean about sex between a husband and wife. The JBC states: “*Not only was there a certain aura of mystery surrounding the faculty of generation, but also a loss of vitality, a diminution of the life*

principle, was indicated in the loss of seed by the man or blood by the woman” (p.76).

In her book *Israel’s Story Part One*, Diane Bergant writes: “Furthermore, bodily fluids belonged within the body, except waste that was regularly eliminated. Any untimely or unseemly emission of bodily fluids or oozing through the skin made that person unclean (Lev 13:1-3). Because of the sacredness of blood, the shedding of it, whether through violence or as menstrual flow, made a person unclean. What fit the ordained pattern was considered clean, what did not fit was deemed unclean. Only what was clean was “holy” enough to be involved in religious ceremonies” (p.31).

### Chapter 16: Day of Atonement

The Day of Atonement, also known as Yom (Day) Kippur (Atonement), was and continues to be the most sacred festival of the year in the worship life of Israel.

This day was set aside annually to seek forgiveness from God for the sins of the past year. It was the only day of the year when Aaron (or the reigning high priest) entered the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary that housed the Ark, containing the two tablets upon which the covenant terms were inscribed. All sin and ritual uncleanness were removed on this day.

Verses 4-28 describes in detail how Aaron the High Priest should dress for the Day of Atonement and how the ritual should be carried out. The ritual involved the sacrifice of a young bull and two goats. The high priest (Aaron) cast lots over the goats and designated one for the Lord and one for Azazel. Azazel may have been a demon who lived in the desert.

**The scapegoat** (vv 20-28). “Laying his hand on its head, he shall confess over it all the sinful faults and transgressions of the Israelites, and so put them on the goats head. He shall then have it led into the desert by an attendant” (v 21).

The action of the priest was symbolic and its effectiveness depended on the belief of all involved. If the ritual was preformed correctly and the people were truly repentant, their sin and all forms of ritual uncleanness were removed.

**Pause:** How do you seek to reconcile with God after you have failed him in some way?

### Chapters 17-26: Holiness Code

Introducing the Holiness Code, Lawrence Boadt writes: “The ‘holiness code’ gets its name from the stress it places on God as holy and the need for the Levites (the priestly tribe) to imitate God’s holiness and to keep themselves separate from merely profane behavior unworthy of their special calling. It includes rules on sex, marriage, touching blood, violating moral commandments, and upholding justice, and above all on keeping of feast days and celebrations for God” (*Reading the Old Testament*, pp.189-190).

The Holiness Code can be divided into two parts: chapters 17-20 contain laws for living just and holy lives by all members of the community. Chapters 21-25 deal mostly with priestly matters of public worship.

The long list of laws might seem endless as you read them, but remember that they (and the laws written in Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy) comprise the nation’s entire collection of laws. Compared to modern law books, these are remarkably short and easy to understand. It is interesting to note that the laws are not arranged or grouped together in any systematic way, e.g., the command to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Lv 19, 18) is followed by the instruction not to plant your field with two kinds of seed (Lev 19, 19); the law forbidding turning your daughter into a prostitute is followed by the command to observe the Sabbath; the admonition not to consult with mediums is followed by the advice to stand up when an elderly person enters the room (Lv 19, 30-32).

These laws comprise an ideal code, and it is likely that some of them were never really put into practice.

The laws established Israel as a nation apart, different from all their neighbors. Israel protected the rights of the weak and the poor. Punishment was not allowed to be excessive, but had to be proportionate to the crime (“an eye for an eye”). Sexuality was to be treated as sacred and not allowed to degenerate into immorality. What went on inside a person was as important as what went on outside, that is, one’s heart had to be pure as well as one’s actions. The poor could get justice just as readily as the rich, and even foreigners were assured fair treatment. Property rights never took precedence over human rights. Included in this system of laws was the belief that the followers of a compassionate God who “led them out of Egypt” must be known, in turn, for their own compassion and justice.

**Pause:** In your mind, what kind of practices should separate us as disciples of Jesus and children of God?

### Chapter 17: Sacredness of blood

All sacrifices must be carried out in the main sanctuary. There must be great respect shown for blood, which symbolized the gift of life. Blood was not for human consumption but to be given back to God. Drinking blood was a common practice amongst pagans. Israel must be different and must not follow this pagan practice.

In John 6, when Jesus spoke about drinking his blood, we can imagine how outrageous that command may have sounded to the disciples' ears in light of the strong prohibition of this act. No wonder some said they could follow him no longer (Jn 6:66).

### Chapter 18: Sanctity of Sex

There were many sexual practices that were common amongst pagans but detestable to the Lord (e.g., incest, adultery, homosexual relations, sex with animals). Those unclean practices were to be avoided by the Israelites.

The Israelites were constantly reminded that they were to be different from the pagans around them. *"The Lord said to Moses: "Speak to the Israelites and tell them; I, the Lord, am your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you once lived, nor shall you do in the Canaan where I am bringing you; do not conform to their customs"* (vv 1-3).

### Chapter 19: Holiness of life will be reflected in the way we treat others, including the poor and the stranger

This is one of the more beautiful chapters of Leviticus, in which we find several verses that speak of the way we should live our lives in relationship to other people.

**Pause:** Jesus says that we will be judged according to our response to those in need. Yet many Christians, it seems, do not see working for justice as essential to true discipleship. What do you think about this issue?

### Chapter 20: Penalties for various sins

God did not want the Israelites, whom he called to holiness, to indulge in unholy acts which the pagans practiced. There were penalties and punishments in place for those who committed sinful acts.

Included in the list of sins are the pagan practice of sacrificing children to their gods to win their favor (vv 1-5), involvement with the occult (v 6), and sins of the flesh (vv 9-21). Verse 23 reiterates that the Israelites must not conform to the customs and ways of other nations but must follow God's decrees as they are God's chosen people.

### Chapters 21-22: Rules for the priests and public worship

Chapters 21-22 deal mainly with priestly matters and public worship.

Chapter 21:16-23 concerns the handicapped. In those days, it was believed that people with physical disability were not looked upon favorably by God and thus not allowed to lead others in offering sacrifice. Today, of course, we know different.

Chapter 22:19-25 stresses that animals with defects were not acceptable as sacrifices because they did not represent God's best. Ideally, when it comes to worship of the Lord, we should give our best efforts, not half-hearted attention.

**Pause:** What are some important attitudes that we should bring to our worship of God?

### Chapter 23: Israel's Liturgical Year

We are familiar with our Liturgical or Church Year with its two main seasons: the Advent/Christmas season and the Lent/Easter season followed by the thirty-four Sundays of ordinary time. In Israel's liturgical year, there are seven feasts. God said to Moses: "Speak to the Israelites and tell them: 'The following are the festivals of the Lord, my feast days, which you shall celebrate with a sacred assembly'" (v 2). Originally there were three main celebrations: Passover, Pentecost and Booths. Later editions of Leviticus added four other feasts: the Sabbath, First Fruits, New Year's Day, and the Day of Atonement.

*Sabbath* (v 3) refers to the seventh day of the week when the community rested from work and worshiped God in a special way.

*Passover* (vv 14-15) celebrated Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The Feast of Unleavened Bread (vv 6-8) was later joined to the feast of the Passover. Unleavened Bread represents the Israelite's flight from Egypt in a hurry that they did not have time to bake bread.

*Pentecost* (vv 16-21), also known as the *Feast of Weeks*, was celebrated fifty days after the feast of Passover. Pentecost was a thanksgiving feast marking the end of the grain harvest. Later it was associated with the giving of the law.

*First fruits* (vv 10-14). The first fruits of the harvest were brought to the priest who "waved" them before the Lord in acknowledgment that the harvest came from him.

*New Year's Day* (vv 23-25), also called Trumpets, celebrated the beginning and blessing of the new civil year (also see Num 29:1-6).

*Day of Atonement* (vv 26-32). See comments in chapter 16 above.

*Feast of Booths* (vv 34-36), also called *Tabernacles*, celebrated the ingathering of grapes and olives, a thanksgiving feast for the harvest. Booths also memorialized the Exodus, when the people lived in booths or tents.

**Pause:** Which season of our liturgical year appeals to you the most? Why?

## **Chapter 24: The sanctuary lamp, the showbread and the law of retaliation**

The *sanctuary lamp* (vv 1-4) burning in the Tent or Dwelling Place was a constant reminder of God's presence with his people, much like the sanctuary lamp next to the tabernacle in Catholic churches.

The *showbread* (vv 5-9) represented the people. This offering must always be fresh, another reminder that the Lord deserved only the best.

Verses 10-16 relate a story about a man stoned to death for blaspheming God's name. Such drastic action brought to people's attention the awesome sacredness of God's name.

The "law of retaliation" states that "the punishment should fit the crime." In his Sermon on the Mount,

Jesus referred to these laws and raised them to a new level (Mt. 6:38-40).

## **Chapter 25: Holy Years**

On the seventh day, God rested and "saw that it was good." The Israelites were commanded to not only rest on the weekly Sabbath, but to also give the land a Sabbath every seventh year. After seven land sabbaticals, they were to celebrate a Jubilee year. Each of these celebrations reminded them of the One who created the world and daily sustained it. During the land Sabbath, planting, pruning and harvesting stopped.

**Jubilee Year (vv. 8-55).** A Jubilee year was declared every fifty years. It was seen as a "year of grace," when debts were forgiven, prisoners were freed, land returned to its original owners. A Jubilee Year was an opportunity for people to act graciously towards each other just like God acted towards them. There is no proof that the Jubilee idea was actually practiced. The underlying idea was important: people had the land and its resources on loan from God. This must never be forgotten and periodically acknowledged.

Verses 35-43 express God's expectations on how the blessed people had a responsibility to care for the poor.

**Slaves.** We may wonder why the Bible tolerates an evil institution like slavery. There is no easy answer to this question. All we can say is that slavery was part and parcel of the culture in which the Bible developed. Even Paul tolerated it, telling slaves to obey their masters (Eph 6:5), but he also called on slave owners to treat their slaves in a humane way. In the above mentioned verses, it is noted that the priestly author called on owners of slaves to treat them humanely. Eventually, it was the church listening to scripture that helped her to see that slavery was an affront to human dignity.

**Pause:** In the spirit of the Jubilee Year, should developed nations forgive the financial debts of underdeveloped nations? Should the church have some days of general absolution, forgiving all sins?

## Chapter 26: Blessing for obedience and curses for disobedience

This chapter is a conclusion not only to the Holiness Code section (17-25) but also to the whole book of Leviticus. The regulations for approaching God in worship and obeying him in society had been spelled out and Israel must now choose to obey or disobey the Lord's decrees. The rewards for obedience are spelled out in verses 1-13 and the curses or punishments in verses 14-39. The chapter ends with God telling Moses that despite the disobedience of the people, he would not completely forget them. *"I will remember my covenant with Jacob, my covenant with Isaac, and my covenant with Abraham, and of the land too, I will be mindful"* (v 42).

## Chapter 27: Laws governing release from vows

Scholars regard this final chapter of Leviticus as an Appendix to the book, added at a later date.

In its introduction to this chapter, the *Life Application Study Bible* states:

*The Israelites were required to give or dedicate certain things to the Lord and to his service: the first portion of their harvest, firstborn animals, their firstborn sons, a tithe of their increase. Many wished to go beyond this and dedicate themselves or another family member, additional animals, a house, or a field to God. In these cases, it was possible to donate money instead of the actual person, animal, or property. Some people made rash or unrealistic vows. To urge them to think about it first, a 20% penalty was put on those times purchased back by money. This chapter explains how valuations were to be made and what to do if a donor later wished to buy back what had been donated to God"* (p. 197).

Anyone or anything "doomed" to God lost the right to be redeemed and must be put to death (v 28). This verse has been interpreted by some as referring to the idolatrous Canaanites, who were doomed to destruction by divine authority. Others think that this drastic law was put in place in order to discourage people from rashly vowing their slaves or other dependents as offerings to God.

**Pause:** Have you ever made a vow or promise to the Lord that you later regretted---or perhaps did not regret?

As we conclude our study of Leviticus, has your attitude towards this book changed in any way? If so, in what way? What one message are you taking with you from Leviticus?

## RESOURCES

- Collegeville Commentary on Leviticus, Wayne Turner
- Jerome Biblical Commentary
- Interpretation Series (see volume on Leviticus)