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A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

An Overview

It is not clear how soon Leviticus was written after the events it records. Moses is identified in Leviticus itself as the one who received the laws from God contained in its pages, and Moses is elsewhere described as writing down various collections of the laws God gave at Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:4,7; Deuteronomy 31:9,24). For these reasons, Moses has traditionally been recognized as the primary author of the entire Pentateuch, including Leviticus. That would mean Leviticus was originally written during Moses' lifetime, in the fifteenth or thirteenth century BC.

Leviticus reveals the heart of Old Testament law. Portions of the law teach the holiness God requires of his people. Other portions teach the forgiveness God offers to restore sinners to holiness. The major focus of Leviticus is atonement (God's provision for forgiveness). Many find Leviticus difficult to understand since it is written in the language of ancient ritual, with rules about festivals, sacrifices, ritual washings, and the like.

As we begin our study of Leviticus, bear in mind that ritual is theology that is acted out. Rituals are prescribed actions whereby the Old Testament people of God expressed and passed on what they believed about sin and atonement. Their method of expressing faith (i.e., ritual) is unfamiliar to many modern readers; but as we explore the Levitical rites in this study, the truths confessed by Old Testament believers will become more familiar to New Testament Christians.

Reading Leviticus is like rummaging through an old chest in the attic. Though confronted with many strange items from a bygone era, the images we'll encounter present faces of ancestors with a striking resemblance to our own. These rituals of Leviticus are unfamiliar relics of a bygone era, but in them we discern the early outlines of the same gospel we cherish as Christians.

Placing It in the Larger Story

Leviticus is the third of the five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). Exodus brought the people out of Egypt to Mount Sinai where the tabernacle was constructed. Numbers will take the people from Mount Sinai to the border of the Promised Land. Nestled in between those two books, Leviticus takes place during the course of one month at the foot of Mount Sinai (Exodus 40:17; Numbers 1:1). It was the first month of the tabernacle's operation, when the people learned lessons on communion with God, who dwelt in their midst. Leviticus' rich descriptions of sacrifices, moral holiness, and ritual purity provided ancient Israel with a gripping vision for living at one with God.

The New Testament teaches that Jesus came to fulfill the atonement taught in the Old Testament law (Matthew 5:17). That means the rituals of the law should no longer be practiced (Hebrews 8:13; 10:1), but it also means that we can gain insight into Christ's work by studying those rituals

(Luke 24:27). The Old Testament law (including Leviticus) is like the blueprints of a building: once the building is finished, its blueprints are no longer needed, but they are still useful for understanding the finished product. When we study these “blueprints” of atonement, we explore the riches of what Christ came to fulfill.

Book of Leviticus Outline

- Sacrifices (1:1–7:38)
- Priesthood: Its Appointment (8:1–10:20)
- Laws of Clean and Unclean (11:1–15:33)
- Day of Atonement (16:1–34)
- Laws of Holy and Unholy (17:1–20:27)
- Priesthood: Its Continuation (21:1–24)
- Sacrifice Festivals (22:1–25:55)
- Blessings, Discipline, and Responses (26:1–27:34)

Glossary of Terms

Pentateuch: The Greek word *Pentateuch* (“five books”) refers to the first five books of the Bible, collectively to *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy*. To a Jew, these five books are also known collectively as *Torah, or The Torah*. Traditionally, it is understood that the *Pentateuch* was written by Moses, except for the last chapter of *Deuteronomy*, chapter 34, which describes Moses’ death and burial and also describes the handing over of Jewish leadership to Joshua.

Law: When spelled with an initial capital letter, “*Law*” (upper case) refers to the first five books of the Bible. They contain numerous commands of God to His people, including the *Ten Commandments* and instructions regarding worship, sacrifice, and life in Israel. The *New Testament* often uses “*the law*” (lower case) to refer to the entire body of precepts set forth in the books of the *Law*.

Atonement: The reconciliation of a person with God, often associated with the offering of a sacrifice. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus Christ made atonement for the sins of believers. His death satisfied God’s just wrath against sinful humanity, just as Old Testament sacrifices symbolized substitutionary death as payment for sin.

Sin: Any violation of or failure to adhere to the commands of God, or the desire to do so.

Gospel: A common translation for a Greek word meaning “good news,” that is, the Good News of Jesus Christ and the salvation He made possible by his crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. “*Gospel*” with an initial capital letter refers to each of the biblical accounts of Jesus’ life on earth (*Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John*).

