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A STUDY OF THE WHOLE BIBLE

THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

PERFECTION OF PRIESTS AND SACRIFICES (21:1–22:33)

The Big Picture

Every generation of God's people must be taught the promise of a perfect priest who offers a perfect sacrifice for the congregation's atonement.

The Place of the Passage

The laws about the priesthood in this passage are carefully designed to make the tabernacle's message clear to worshiping Israelites. Here we revisit the topic of the priesthood, this time encountering laws ensuring the continuation of the message of hope for a perfect priesthood in every generation after Aaron.

Gospel Connections

PERFECT SACRIFICE. Old Testament believers, most of whom were farmers, would have appreciated the value of a perfect specimen of livestock as described in Leviticus 22:22–25. Such perfection, combined with its proven viability after surviving at minimum its first full week of life (vv. 26–27), indicates that the animal in view had no reason in itself to die. It would have been a choice specimen of great value, full of life and reason to live. Only such a sacrifice, with no reason in itself to die, could serve as the substitute for the sins of the offerer. The requirement of a perfect sacrifice taught the Old Testament worshiper to trust in God's promise of a sinless Mediator to complete the required atonement (Isa. 53:1–5; 1 Pet. 1:13–20).

PERFECT SACRIFICER. During the Intertestamental period, some Jews thought God would send a single messiah to fulfill all the roles required of him. Others thought God would send more than one messiah, each to fulfill the different tasks required. Ultimately, Jesus undertook all the duties of our atonement himself. Remarkably, Jesus became our perfect Prophet and also the perfect Word proclaimed; he became our perfect King and also our perfect Servant; he undertook the duties of the perfect Priest promised in Leviticus 21, as well as the perfect Sacrifice promised in Leviticus 22. The work of Christ is mind-boggling in its scope and elegance. Everything it took an elaborate tabernacle system and fully-staffed priesthood, palace, and prophetic circle to accomplish was finally realized in a single person: Jesus Christ.

Whole-Bible Connections

SLAVERY. The Old Testament view on slaves has been a source of controversy throughout history, and this passage is one of a handful in Old Testament law that speaks about slaves. Some scholars believe the Mosaic law contained contradictory standards on slavery. Verses like Leviticus 22:11 (and 25:39–46) have often been understood to permit slave ownership in

Old Testament Israel, while passages like Exodus 21:16 strictly forbade slavery and slave ownership. The apparent contradiction disappears, however, when we recognize that the kind of slavery approved in Old Testament Israel was debt slavery—bondage to work off debts—and not chattel slavery (owning humans like animals). Furthermore, those attached to the household to work off debts were to be treated like members of the family. For example, Leviticus 22:11 says that debt slaves in priestly families could eat sacrifice leftovers with the priest's family, while hired servants could not. The only distinction between a debt slave and a member of the family was that the debt slave worked on the family estate for a limited period of years, did not receive pay for that work, and did not have an inheritance in the household. Regardless of the size of the debt, a maximum of seven years' labor was permitted. Although biblical laws like Leviticus 22:11 have often been interpreted to support chattel slavery, a careful study of the relevant passages does not support that conclusion. Although Israel had a system of debt slavery so that households that defaulted on loans could work off their debts, Old Testament law introduced provisions to ensure that such labor would not deteriorate into chattel slavery—like the slavery Israel had experienced while in Egypt and was never to impose on anyone else.

Theological Connections

JOYFUL SERVICE. Undoubtedly, it would have been difficult for priests to leave the burial of loved ones to other family members. The restrictions in Leviticus 21:1–4, 10–12 do not prohibit a priest from grieving the loss of extended family, but the priest must leave the ritually defiling process of burial to others. These restrictions were put in place not to make things difficult for the priests but rather to uphold the portrait of a joyful, life-ministering priesthood. The beautiful attire of the high priest (Exodus 28:1–43), his melodic movements in performing his sanctuary duties (Exodus 28:33–35), and his abstention from all marks and practices of grieving (Leviticus 21:1–5, 10–12) portray a vibrant and joyful priesthood. Contrary to the common stereotype that priests were stern figures, the priesthood Christ undertakes is one filled with joy: “For the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross” (Hebrews 12:2).

PERFECTION. The nation of Israel was organized in “social rings,” with those suffering from the most deathlike physical disease (leprosy) residing on the outskirts of the camp, those experiencing the day-by-day imperfections of life dwelling in the camp itself, those unmarred by impurity or physical defect being able to serve in the tabernacle courts, and the individual high priest alone entering the holy place as one in perfect physical form. All of these—reaching all the way to those dwelling on the outskirts of the camp—were part of Israel and members of the community of the atonement. The increasing perfection visibly portrayed by this system as one moved closer to God's presence was not a message of exclusion for the afflicted, but a portrait of promise regarding what all God's people could anticipate one day in his presence. The 12-fold lists of physical perfections ascribed to the priest and to the sacrifice in Leviticus 21–22 communicate this idea of complete perfection.

Glossary of Terms

MEDIATOR: One who intercedes between parties to resolve a conflict or achieve a goal. Jesus is the Mediator between God and rebellious humanity.

INTERTESTAMENTAL: Pertaining to the time between the end of OT history and the beginning of NT history. Roughly 430–5 BC.

MESSIAH: Transliteration of a Hebrew word meaning “anointed one,” the equivalent of the Greek word Christ. Originally applied to anyone specially designated for a particular role, such as king or priest. Jesus himself affirmed that he was the Messiah sent from God (Matthew 16:16–17).

Passage Background

This passage contains instruction in the following arrangement:

1. Laws on priestly perfection (21:1–24)
2. Laws on priestly consumption of sacrificial foods (22:1–16)
 - a. Laws on sacrifice perfection (22:1–33)

Discussion Questions

Priestly Perfection (21:1–24)

Part of the picture of atonement put on display in the tabernacle was the physical wholeness of the priest (see Lev. 21:16–24). Why do you suppose that was the case?

Priestly Consumption of Sacrifice Foods (22:1–16)

Chapter 22 has two parts: qualification of the priest to eat the sacrifices' remainders (vv. 1–9) and qualification for others to share in the sacrifices' leftovers at the priest's table (vv. 10–16). What are these two sets of regulations designed to teach?

Sacrifice Perfection (22:17–33)

A freewill offering is one brought spontaneously. A vow offering is one brought in fulfillment of a prior promise. What does the more lenient allowance for a freewill offering in verse 23 imply?