

# The Pentateuch: LEVITICUS

## INTRODUCTION

The Book of Leviticus is a profound Old Testament text that delves into the intricacies of holiness and the sacrificial system defining Israel's relationship with God. Written by Moses during Israel's time at Mount Sinai (1440-1400 BC), it served as a divine guide for living as a holy nation, marked by laws of worship, purity, and ethical conduct. Far from being a collection of outdated rituals, Leviticus revealed God's holiness and His desire for His people to reflect His character.

Leviticus functions as a manual for worship and sanctified living, highlighting God's incomparable holiness, the call for Israel to be holy, and the sacrificial system that bridged the gap between a holy God and His people. Key themes include ritual sacrifices (1-7), the priesthood (8-10), ritual purity (11-15), the Day of Atonement (16), and moral laws (17-27). The distinction between "clean" and "unclean" was central, illustrating how holiness pervaded all aspects of life and pointing to the need for purification to restore fellowship with God. These laws served as reminders of God's sanctity and ultimately foreshadowed Christ, who fulfilled them and made believers clean through His sacrifice (Hebrews 10:1-10). In Leviticus, we see the meticulous details of the sacrifices and rituals that point directly to Christ's atoning work on the cross, making Him the ultimate High Priest and the final, perfect offering for sin.

This book teaches us about the gravity of sin, the cost of atonement, and the holiness that God requires, which we see perfectly manifested in Jesus. Though Christians are no longer required to follow the Law today (*and we don't need priests to go to God on our behalf*), Leviticus calls us to live in a manner worthy of this high calling, emphasizing that our sanctification is both a response to and a reflection of God's holiness. Thus, Leviticus not only helps us grasp the depth of our need for Christ's sacrifice but also encourages us to pursue a life of holiness in response to the grace we have received.

## IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING:

Have you ever tried to assemble a piece of furniture without reading the instructions, only to end up with parts left over and a wobbly chair? This is a bit like what we see in Leviticus. The book provides detailed instructions for the Israelites on how to live holy lives and properly worship God. Just as skipping the instructions can lead to a faulty assembly, ignoring God's detailed guidelines in Leviticus can lead to misunderstandings and a life that doesn't align with His holiness. The precision and care in following these instructions remind us that approaching God's holiness and living a life set apart requires attention to His commands and respect for His divine order.

Imagine a bridge between humanity and God, symbolizing the path from impurity to holiness. Leviticus acts as this bridge, guiding the Israelites through various rituals and laws that cleanse them from defilement and enable them to approach God with reverence. This book emphasizes the steps necessary for Israel to maintain a relationship with a holy God, much like a detailed map leading to a sacred destination.

## BOOK ORGANIZATION:

LEVITICUS: Holiness

Laws on Sacrifices (Chapters 1-7)

Institution of the Priesthood (Chapters 8-10)

Laws on Purity (Chapters 11-15)

Day of Atonement (Chapter 16)

Holiness Code (Chapters 17-27)

## JESUS IN THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

Leviticus foreshadows the ultimate sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the perfect high priest, and spotless Lamb of God. The sacrificial system established in Leviticus points directly to Jesus' atonement. The repeated offerings for sin highlight the insufficiency of animal sacrifices and the need for a perfect, once-for-all sacrifice. Jesus fulfills the Day of Atonement, as

He is both the high priest who intercedes for us and the sacrificial lamb who takes away the sins of the world (Hebrews 9:11-14).

The "holiness code" in Leviticus also points to Jesus, who embodies perfect holiness and calls His followers to live holy lives (1 Peter 1:15-16). The rituals of purification and the emphasis on clean and unclean reflect our need for spiritual cleansing, which Jesus provides through His blood (1 John 1:7). At the end of Leviticus, the Lord commands The Year of Jubilee, with its themes of liberation and restoration, we find its ultimate fulfillment in the freedom and redemption offered by Christ (Luke 4:18-19).

## **BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND WHEN STUDYING THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS**

### **OBSERVATION**

- **Literary Devices to Look for:**
  - **Repetition:** Repetition is used extensively to emphasize key themes and commandments. Phrases like "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying..." (Lev. 1, 19, 21...) and "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44, 19:2, 21:8...) are repeated to stress their importance.
  - **Symbolism:** Symbolism is crucial in Leviticus (Lev. 2:13, 16:30, 24:2), as many of the laws and rituals carry deeper theological meanings. Clean and unclean animals symbolize purity and impurity (Lev. 11), while the sacrificial system symbolizes atonement and reconciliation with God. Each element of the rituals has a symbolic significance that points to larger biblical truths.
  - **Parallelism:** Phrases or sentences of a similar meaning placed side by side, balancing each other. This device is used extensively in the legal sections of Leviticus. Parallel structures in the presentation of laws and instructions help to organize the material and reinforce key points.
  - **Chiasmus:** Chiasmus is a literary device where concepts are presented and then repeated in reverse order. Leviticus sometimes uses this structure to highlight central ideas within a passage (Lev. 24:17-20).

### **INTERPRETATION**

- **Literary Context:** Leviticus is a detailed legal and ceremonial code written by Moses as part of the Pentateuch. As a genre, law in the biblical context serves to provide instructions for worship, purity, and communal living. In Leviticus, Moses employs various literary devices such as typology, symbolism, and repetition to emphasize key themes and messages. For example, the repeated command to "be holy, for I am holy" underscores the importance of holiness in the life of God's people (Leviticus 19:2).
- **Narrative Context:** Moses is the author of Leviticus, addressing his instructions to the Israelites as they journey through the wilderness. The intended audience is the specific community of Israel and all future believers, as God's instructions have universal application. The overarching message of Leviticus is the necessity of holiness and proper worship in the presence of a holy God. Moses wants readers to respond by adhering to God's detailed laws and living lives set apart for Him (Leviticus 11:44-45).
- **Historical Context:** At the time Leviticus was written, the Israelites were at Mount Sinai, having recently been delivered from Egypt. God was establishing His covenant with them, providing detailed laws to guide their worship and daily living. The book reflects God's desire for His people to be holy and distinct from surrounding nations (Leviticus 18:3-4).
- **Cultural Context:** In the ancient Near Eastern world, various customs, practices, and attitudes influenced daily life. Leviticus addresses these cultural realities, providing laws that would set Israel apart from other nations. The instructions for sacrifices, purity, and social conduct were designed to maintain holiness and promote communal harmony (Leviticus 20:22-26).

### **APPLICATION**

- **Resist the urge to rush to the application, "doing something," or moving on from each day's reading. Before you move on, spend some time sitting in silence with the Lord. Enjoy his company.**
- **Read in Light of Christ:** In Leviticus, Jesus is the fulfillment of the sacrificial system, and the entire book revolves around living a life that reflects God's holiness and provision for atonement. Every law and instruction can be interpreted in light of Jesus' ultimate sacrifice and priestly role. How does the typology of the sacrifices and priesthood in Leviticus influence your understanding and application of holiness in your life?

- Is There a Command to Obey? Yes, throughout Leviticus, there are numerous commands given by God. For example, in Leviticus 19:18, God commands believers to “love your neighbor as yourself.” This command emphasizes the imperative for believers to maintain holiness and love in their interactions. What practical steps can you take to obey the command in Leviticus 19:18 to “love your neighbor as yourself” in your daily life?
- Is There a Sin to Repent From? Leviticus portrays various instances of attitudes and behaviors that believers are called to avoid. For example, God warns against idolatry and unclean practices, urging believers to maintain purity (Leviticus 18:3-4). Reflecting on Leviticus 18:3-4, in what ways can you identify and repent from practices that lead you away from holiness?
- Is There a Promise to Cling To? In Leviticus, there are numerous promises given by God to His people. One significant promise is God’s presence among His people when they live in obedience (Leviticus 26:11-12). How does the promise of God’s presence in Leviticus 26:11-12 provide comfort and strength to you in your pursuit of holiness?
- Is There an Example to Follow? Or One to Avoid? Leviticus provides numerous examples of positive behavior for believers to emulate. For instance, the priests’ dedication to their sacred duties serves as a powerful model for believers (Leviticus 8-10). Conversely, God warns against behaviors that defile His sanctuary and people (Leviticus 20:22-26). How can you emulate the priests’ dedication to holiness as described in Leviticus 8-10, in your own life and worship?

## PRAYER

- Pray for Holiness (Leviticus 11:44-45): Reflecting on God’s command to be holy, how can you cultivate holiness in your daily life? Pray for the Holy Spirit to grant you the desire and ability to live a life that reflects God’s holiness.
- Pray for Obedience (Leviticus 18:4-5): Consider the importance of following God’s laws as described by Moses. How can you demonstrate obedience in your actions and decisions? Pray for the Lord to help you adhere to His commands, serving Him faithfully.
- Pray through Atonement (Leviticus 16:30): Reflecting on the Day of Atonement and its significance, how can you appreciate and accept Jesus’ sacrifice for your sins? Pray for a deeper understanding of atonement and the cleansing power of Jesus’ blood over your life.

## WHAT HAS CHURCH HISTORY SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS:

"Hence it follows that these symbols were useful only as they were exercises unto faith and repentance, so that the sinner might learn to fear God’s wrath, and to seek pardon in Christ." – John Calvin<sup>1</sup>, 1563

"The book of Leviticus, and all the other typical books, are valuable as gospel-teaching to us, because there is always in them most clearly the law of God. The law is the needle, and you cannot draw the silken thread of the gospel through a man’s heart, unless you first send the needle of the law through the centre thereof, to make way for it. If men do not understand the law, they will not feel that they are sinners; and if they are not consciously sinners, they will never value the sin-offering." – Charles Spurgeon<sup>2</sup>, 1875

"In one sense then the whole ceremonial law in Leviticus is obsolete for the Christian. We are interested in the sacrifice of Christ, not in animal sacrifice. But in another sense the Levitical rituals are still of immense relevance. It was in terms of these sacrifices that Jesus himself and the early church understood his atoning death. Leviticus provided the theological models for their understanding. If we wish to walk in our Lord’s steps and think his thoughts after him, we must attempt to understand the sacrificial system of Leviticus." – Gordon J. Wenham<sup>3</sup>, 1979

<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham, Calvin Translation Society Edition (Edinburgh: 1852).

<sup>2</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, “A Plain Man’s Sermon,” preached October 17, 1875, in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit: Sermons Preached and Revised by C.H. Spurgeon*, Vol. 21 (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1875), p. 576.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 28.

"Leviticus tells New Testament Christians how to appreciate holiness and appropriate it into their everyday lives. The word *holy* is used 91 times in Leviticus...the lessons in Leviticus aren't limited to the Jews in ancient Israel. The spiritual principles in this book apply to Christians in the church today. The key verses of Leviticus 'Be holy, for I am holy' (Lev. 11: 44-45) – are applied to the New Testament church in 1 Peter 1:15-16; and the Book of Leviticus itself is quoted or referred to over 100 times in the New Testament." – Warren Wiersbe<sup>4</sup>, 1994



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<sup>4</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Holy (Leviticus): Becoming "Set Apart" for God* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 1994), p. 15.