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Bi-160 (A) – Old Testament Survey Covington Theological Seminary 9/18/08 Leviticus

Continuing in the Pentateuch, we come to the book known to the Hebrews as *Vay-yikra*, a title taken again from the opening words of the book, “*And the LORD called...*” The title, Leviticus, comes again from the Septuagint, where the book was called *Leuitikon*, which means “that which pertains to the Levites”.

Leviticus is a book that is oft overlooked by Christians because the ceremonial and civil laws that make up its subject seem antiquated and obscure to modernity. However, the fact that we are largely unfamiliar with Leviticus does not mean that is unimportant in Biblical revelation, or irrelevant to Christianity.

“To speak of Leviticus as ‘dull reading’ misses the point of the book completely. How could we expect a book like Leviticus, which is occupied throughout with regulations, to provide exciting reading? Obviously, it is not meant just to be read, but to be *studied*. It yields little of its treasure to a mere reading; but a reasonable concentration transforms it into one of the most intriguing articles in the Scriptures.”ⁱ

-J. Sidlow Baxter

The significance of Leviticus is not found in the continuation of the practices and procedures that are laid out within it, but in the message those laws reveal.

“The theme of the book of Leviticus as a whole is, ‘God’s great demand for holiness and his provision for it’... The keyword here is Holiness. Atonement is mentioned 45 times. Holiness (or holy) is mentioned 87 times. Blood is also found 87 times.”ⁱⁱ

-C.W. Slemming

At the close of Exodus, God’s presence entered the Tabernacle, and He began to dwell among His people. In order for them to have a relationship and fellowship with Him, the edicts of Leviticus were necessary. Leviticus establishes the holy requirements for fellowship with God.

As the book of Leviticus is studied, two main truths arise regarding fellowship with God.

I. FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD IS ENTERED THROUGH SACRIFICE

The first seventeen chapters of Leviticus largely deal with the offerings (and there instructions) that were central to the origin and maintenance of a relationship between God and His people.

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“These offerings abound in spiritual significances; but their supreme value lies in their typical unfolding of the supreme sacrifice on Calvary.”ⁱⁱⁱ

-J. Sidlow Baxter

Whenever the sacrificial system of ancient Israel is studied, it should point us to man’s ultimate need – a sacrifice, and God’s ultimate provision – the Savior. Man cannot approach God without substitution, atonement, and sacrifice. This was the message God unfolded to His people in Leviticus.

As the truth of entering into fellowship with God through sacrifice is unfolded, first of all:

A. The offerings are revealed

In chapters 1-7, five offerings are revealed by God to His people. Through these offerings a relationship with God could be established. The offerings are:

1. The Burnt Offering
2. The Meal (meat) Offering
3. The Peace Offering
4. The Sin Offering
5. The Trespass Offering

There were laws and rules that accompanied each of these offerings. It is important to note that of these five offerings, three were voluntary, and two were mandatory, or required of all people in Israel on a regular basis.

A detailed study of each offering is necessary to understand their full import and the typological truth that each contains. A basic overview of each offering reveals its purpose:

The Burnt Offering (1:3-17; 6:8-13): Voluntarily devoting all their very being and possessions to God, through purifying fire

The Meal Offering (2:1-16; 6:14-23): Thanking God and offering their lives for His service

The Peace Offering (3:1-17; 7:11-34): Participating in the blessings of fellowship with God

The Sin Offering (4:1-5:13; 6:24-30): Being forgiven because they were sinners

The Trespass Offering (5:14-6:7; 7:1-10): Being forgiven for the [individual] sins they committed^{iv}

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By revealing these varied and specific offerings, God taught His people that no individual can relate to Him apart from the substitution and atonement of a sacrifice.

“Perhaps this whole process shocks you. But Leviticus and every other book of the Bible clearly teach that we deserve death for our actions. Our righteousness has failed us, and we too need a sacrificial substitute.”^v

-Mark Dever

In Leviticus, as God establishes the need of sacrifice to enter into a relationship with Him, we find not only the offerings are revealed, but also:

B. The offerings are regulated

Beginning in chapter eight, God begins to elaborate on the sacrificial system by regulating every aspect of its operation. The sacrifices and offerings that paved the way to God were not human inventions, or the works of man, but rather the revelation and commands of God.

The priests that served in the Tabernacle, and oversaw the offerings were given specific instructions as to their duties (ch. 8-10). In chapters 11-16, the people of Israel were given instructions about purity and cleanliness and its necessity for participating in the sacrificial system.

Clean foods – 11

Clean bodies – 12-13:46

Clean clothes – 13:47-59

Clean houses – 14:33-57

Clean contacts – 15

Clean nation - 16^{vi}

Lastly, regulations were given regarding the altar. In the 17th chapter, God uses very explicit and clear language regarding the one place in which sacrifices were to be made. No doubt, God’s severe and specific instructions regarding the altar remind us that there is only one place in which God can meet in reconciliation with men – the cross of Jesus Christ, which the altar portrays and typifies.

In Leviticus we find that fellowship with God is entered through sacrifice. Also, we find that:

II. FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD IS ENJOYED THROUGH SEPARATION

In the remainder of Leviticus (ch. 18-27) God clearly outlines the uniqueness and separation that were to define His chosen people. Every aspect of their lives was to be obviously and purposefully set apart and holy unto God.

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Sacrifice opens the door to God; separation maintains the conversation through that open door. The laws and regulations of the second half of Leviticus are numerous and wide-ranging. They deal with the individual as well as the nation as a whole.

As God laid out the life-laws that were to govern His chosen people, we learn that:

A. Israel's people were to be separate

Those who belonged to God were to conduct themselves in strict accordance with the mandates of God. These mandates were more than measures of control; they were reflections of God's holiness, and His desire to reproduce that holiness in the lives of the individual people that constituted Israel.

"There must be no false worship and idolatry, child sacrifice, or sorcery. In chapter 18, many sexual sins are forbidden. He calls the Israelites to exercise a transparent concern for honest weights, the poor, the blind and the deaf, the elderly, and fairness in law, especially toward the foreigners among them. There are some wonderful instructions in this section of Leviticus. Consider chapter 19: 'Do not curse the deaf' (19:14a)."^{vii}

-Mark Dever

In chapters 18-20, the laws for the individual lives of the Israelites are given. Then in chapters 21-22, the individual lives of the priests are instructed. Certain practices are prohibited for them, as well as certain sacrifices.

Overall, the message seems to be that God is concerned with the holiness of the individual. Separation in the life of individuals is what builds separation in the life of the nation.

Separation was not only required for the people of Israel, but Leviticus also reveals that:

B. Israel's practices were to be separate

In chapter 23, God began to lay out some important days and functions for Israel as whole. These national feasts and celebrations were required as communal symbols of Israel's relationship to their God.

"What we have, then, in this twenty-third chapter, is a list of the 'set seasons' which God appointed for Israel to observe; and it would have been better if, in our Authorized Version, they had been called by that name rather than by the word 'feast,' seeing that the three which *are* actually feasts are here *included* among the 'set seasons,' or *mo'adim*."^{viii}

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These “set seasons”, which included both feasts and special religious observances are:

1. The Feast of Passover
2. The Feast of Pentecost
3. The Blowing of Trumpets
4. The Day of Atonement
5. The Feast of Tabernacles (booths)

Without delving into the significance of each, it is clear that these practices pointed to Israel’s national separation and relationship to God.

From chapters 25-27, Leviticus deals with Israel’s treatment of the land they were to inhabit. The opening verses of chapter 25 prescribes two “Sabbaths”, or rests that were to be given to the land. These had practical value, but they too were delineations in the behavior of God’s people that displayed their separate relationship to Him.

Leviticus clearly paints the exacting, demanding, impeccable holiness of God. His grace and mercy in no way compromise His justice and integrity. Leviticus should therefore leave us longing for Christ! His sacrifice on our behalf both meets the demands of God’s Law, and calls us to live separate in response to the relationship it has opened for us.

*What can wash away my sins?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!*

*O, precious is the flow,
That makes me white as snow,
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!*

ⁱ Baxter, J. Sidlow, Explore the Book, (Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 1966), p. 113

ⁱⁱ Slemming, C.W., The Bible Digest – Vol. 1, (The Bible Testimony Fellowship, London, 1960), p. 56

ⁱⁱⁱ Baxter, J. Sidlow, p. 123-124

^{iv} Jensen, Irving L., Jensen’s Survey of the Old Testament, (Moody Press, Chicago, 1978), p. 105-106

^v Dever, Mark, The Message of the Old Testament, (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 2006), p. 124

^{vi} Baxter, J. Sidlow, p. 128

^{vii} Dever, Mark, p. 117

^{viii} Baxter, J. Sidlow, p. 136