

## CHAPTER 5: Exodus 19 thru 40 and Leviticus

Moses now ascends Mount Sinai to meet with God. There God gives Moses a message for His people: **“And now, if you will diligently listen to Me and keep My covenant, then you will be My special possession out of all the nations, for all the earth is mine, and you will be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you will speak to the Israelites.”** (Exodus 19:5-6)

So Moses goes back down the mountain and he tells the people what God said. And what is their response? And all the people answered together, **“All that the Lord has commanded we will do!”** So Moses brought the words of the people back to the Lord. (Exodus 19:8) Moses acts as intermediary between the people and God.

Three days later God’s holy presence appears on top of Mount Sinai ... **There was thunder and lightning and a dense cloud on the mountain, and the sound of a very loud horn; all the people who were in the camp trembled.** (Exodus 19:16) The people are gripped with fear by the awesome holiness of God. They fall on their faces, their bodies trembling. They are so afraid they think they are all going to die! Even though they are at a safe distance from the mountain they can feel the ground beneath them shaking.

**Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their place at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was completely covered with smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire, and its smoke went up like the smoke of a great furnace, and the whole mountain shook violently.** (Exodus 19:17-18) God’s awesome, holy presence produces great fear among His people. There is nobody like God!

Again Moses ascends to the top of the mountain as the people’s representative. There God gives His Law to Moses to pass on to His covenant people. God begins with the basic terms of the covenant, the Ten Commandments. Here we can see the very heart of God.

The first four commandments deal with the Israelites relationship to God. **“I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water below. You shall not bow down to them or serve them... You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain...**

**Remember the Sabbath day to set it apart as holy... For in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth... and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and set it apart as holy.”** (Exodus 20:2-11)

The last six commandments are all about how the people relate to each other. **“Honor your father and your mother, that you may live a long time in the land the Lord your God is giving to you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor. You shall not covet your neighbor’s house. You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife... nor anything that belongs to your neighbor.”** (Exodus 20:12-17)

After the Ten Commandments, God gives a series of instructions that expound further on the Ten Commandments. These are known simply as “The Law.” The Law is a basic set of rules that will help the Israelite people live and function well together. The Law reveals what God expects of His covenant people. It addresses all areas of their lives – their worship, moral behavior, social responsibilities, personal property, and grievances, and so forth. The intent of the Law is to shape Israel into a nation of justice and generosity that will set them apart from all other nations. Moses writes all of these laws down and brings them back down the mountain to the people.

God once again emphasizes the recurring promise that He will give the Israelites the land of Canaan. **“Little by little I will drive [your enemies] out before you, until you become fruitful and inherit the land. I will set your boundaries from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines (Mediterranean), and from the desert to the River, for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you will drive them out before you.”** (Exodus 23:30-31) God adds that the Israelites must drive out the inhabitants of the land completely. They cannot make any treaties or agreements with them and they certainly must not worship their gods.

Moses writes down all the words of the Lord and then tells the people everything God commanded. **The people readily agree to obey God’s words... All the people answered together, “We are willing to do all the words that the Lord has said...We are willing to do and obey all that the Lord has spoken.”** (Exodus 24:3, 7)

And on that day the covenant of the Law between God and Israel is ratified.

A whole new chapter in Israel’s history has begun. God now develops His special relationship with His covenant nation further. He tells Moses that He wants His holy presence to dwell in the midst of Israel. This is quite significant. Ever since Adam and Eve rebelled in the garden, direct access to God’s presence has been severely hindered. But God wants to make His presence accessible once again through a covenant relationship with this particular group of people.

Once again Moses heads up Mount Sinai. For 40 days – nearly a month a half – Moses remains on the mountain. During that time God gives Moses detailed architectural blueprints for a sacred portable tent known as the Tabernacle. It will become the place where the people of Israel will worship God. This is where God's presence will dwell with His people. God gives Moses instructions about the duties of the priests, the garments the priests are to wear, the furnishings in the Tabernacle, the sacrifices, offerings and Sabbath Day observance.

Just when things seem to be going well, something goes terribly wrong!!

Moses is up on the mountain getting the instructions for the Tabernacle. Meanwhile down below in the camp the people of Israel are growing impatient – “where is Moses?” **When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said to him, “Get up, make us gods that will go before us. As for this fellow Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.”** (Exodus 32:1) As you recall, Aaron is Moses's brother. The people come to Aaron because he is the one Moses had put in charge while he was gone.

The people again show what short memories they have. They claim that Moses is the one who brought them up out of the land of Egypt. But God had said to them, **“I, the Lord, am your God, who brought you from the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery.”** (Exodus 20:2) Can't they even remember what God did for them at the Red Sea? And they have already forgotten God's first commandment – **“You shall have no other gods before Me.”** (Exodus 20:3) So not only do they have bad memories, they have a real spiritual problem! Well, how does Aaron respond to the people's crazy request?

**So Aaron said to them, “Break off the gold earrings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.”** (Exodus 32:2) And so that's what the people do. They bring all their gold to Aaron. **He accepted the gold from them, fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made a molten calf. Then they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”** (Exodus 32:4)

Creating the golden calf violates God's second commandment – **“You shall not make for yourself a carved image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is on the earth beneath or that is in the water below.”** (Exodus 20:4) Incredibly it is Aaron himself who builds an altar and who leads the people in worshipping the carved image that he had made.

This whole thing is insanity! It is being done with God's holy presence right there on top of the mountain! God's people openly and blatantly violate the very covenant

they had just made with God! Of course God is NOT taken by surprise. He is fully aware of what the people are up to.

The scene shifts to the top of Mount Sinai where God and Moses are...

**Then the Lord said to Moses, “I have seen this people. Look what a stiff-necked people they are!”** (Exodus 32:9) God is very angry and He has had enough. **So now, leave Me alone so that My anger can burn against them and I can destroy them, and I will make from you a great nation.”** (Exodus 32:10) God is prepared to destroy the whole bunch of them and start over again with Moses. God certainly is capable of doing that isn't He? And there is a precedent for it. He once destroyed the entire earth with a flood!

But throughout this story we have heard this recurring theme – the promise that God made to Abraham. A great nation will come through his family. So then, wiping out the Israelite people (Abraham's descendants) would be counterproductive in accomplishing this. And Moses understands this. He intercedes before God on behalf of the Israelites. He makes three important arguments in his appeal. First, he reminds God that He Himself had delivered this same group of people out of Egypt. Second, he points out how God's enemies would view God should He destroy His own people.

But it is Moses' third argument that is the most important... **“Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel Your servants, to whom You swore by Yourself and told them, ‘I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have spoken about I will give to your descendants, and they will inherit it forever.’”** (Exodus 32:13) Moses appeals to God on the basis of WHO God is. Moses does not make an appeal based on God's justice or even His love, but rather on His character – God keeps His promises and He finishes what He begins.

Moses's intercession works. God relents and does not destroy the people.

So now we see Moses quickly making his way down the mountain with two stone tablets written and engraved by God Himself. Clearly Moses is not pleased with the people's evil activity.

**When [Moses] approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moses became extremely angry. He threw the tablets from his hands and broke them in pieces at the bottom of the mountain. He took the calf they had made and burned it in the fire, ground it to powder, poured it out on the water, and made the Israelites drink it.** (Exodus 32:19-20)

Then Moses confronts Aaron and the people about what they have done and they offer up a lame excuse. Moses then draws a line in the sand, so to speak. **Moses stood**

**at the entrance of the camp and said, “Whoever is for the Lord, come to me.” All the Levites gathered around him.** (Exodus 32:26) Moses then instructs the Levites to put to death those who have not repented and are still worshipping the golden calf. **The Levites did what Moses ordered, and that day about three thousand men of the people died.** (Exodus 32:28) It is an awful day in Israel’s history! Because of the Levites’ obedience, Moses ordains them for the service of the Lord and bestows upon them a blessing.

The next day Moses implores the Lord to forgive the people of their great sin. But sin has consequences. **Then the Lord sent a plague on the people, because they made the calf...** (Exodus 32:35)

While God forgives the nation as a whole, things have changed. **The Lord said to Moses, “Go up from here, you and the people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, to the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants.’ I will send an angel before you, and I will drive out [all of your enemies]. Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go up among you, for you are a stiff-necked people, and I might destroy you on the way.”** (Exodus 33:1-3)

When the people hear this news, they mourn. They are truly repentant for what they have done. But even though the people are sorry for what they did, God basically tells Moses, “I am not going with you. Yes, Moses, I WILL keep My promises. I WILL give the people the land. But the relationship I have with this people has been severely damaged by their stubborn pride and idolatry.”

So Moses seeks the Lord in the tent of meeting. But Moses has moved the tent away from the Israelite people to a place well outside their camp. There Moses appeals to God on the people’s behalf. Basically Moses says, “Lord, You have to go with us! These are Your people. Your presence is what makes this nation distinct from all the others. It is not enough for us to just to have Your blessings. God, we need Your presence with us!”

**The Lord said to Moses, “I will do this thing also that you have requested, for you have found favor in My sight, and I know you by name.”** (Exodus 33:17)

And so it is, because of Moses, God renews His covenant with Israel. Once again Moses ascends the mountain. He cuts out two tablets of stone for God Himself to write His commandments. These will replace the ones that Moses had smashed earlier at the bottom of the mountain.

At the top of Mount Sinai God descends in a cloud and again He speaks to Moses. God describes His own character this way... **“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate**

**and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in loyal love and faithfulness, keeping loyal love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin. But He by no means leaves the guilty unpunished...**” (Exodus 34:6-7)

So we have this divine tension. On the one hand God is good and holy, full of mercy, faithful and He keeps His promises. He is “top line.” But on the other hand, because God IS holy, He must deal with sin and evil whenever it shows up, even among His own people who have mostly been “bottom line” to this point. So the question is, “How will God reconcile this conflict between His loving desire to dwell among His covenant people and the sinfulness of the people that separates them from their holy God? It is a problem.

**The Lord said to Moses, “Write down these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel.”** (Exodus 34:27) Like before when God gave His covenant the first time, Moses writes down all the words of the Lord. **So he was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights... [God] wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments. Now when Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand... Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to approach him.** (Exodus 34:28-29) After this whenever Moses is around the people he puts a veil over his face. But when he goes back to talk to God he removes it.

God directs Moses to proceed with building the Tabernacle. God has already given the blueprints for it. So this becomes a community-wide effort. All the skilled craftsmen from among the people contribute to its construction. Others donate the building materials – silver, gold, bronze, leather, wood, and fine linen. Everybody chips in.

As the book of Exodus ends the Tabernacle is completed. The tent of meeting is moved back into the camp and placed next to the Tabernacle. God’s presence descends in a cloud and His glory fills the Tabernacle. Things are really looking up. But then we are told this... **Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.** (Exodus 40:35) So overwhelming is the holy presence of God that not even Moses himself, who had been face to face with God, can enter it.

What is it that prevents the people from entering God’s presence? Their own sinfulness. This is the problem that gets addressed next in the book of Leviticus.

The book opens with these words: **Then the Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Meeting Tent.** (Leviticus 1:1) Notice that God is inside the tent while Moses, the representative of God’s people, remains outside of it. Israel’s sin has created a barrier between themselves and God.

A key theme to notice in Leviticus is God's holiness. **The Lord spoke to Moses: "Speak to the whole congregation of the Israelites and tell them, 'You must be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.'"** (Leviticus 19:1-2) That word "holy" means to be set apart or different. God is holy. He is set apart from all others. He alone is the Creator of all things. And because God is holy, everyone and everything around Him must also be holy. So then, if God's people want to have God's holy presence dwelling among them, THEY must become holy. This means that somehow, some way their sin must be dealt with. It cannot just be overlooked.

The book of Leviticus describes several different ritual sacrifices, or offerings, that Israel is to practice. The grain offering is a way of them giving back to God a portion of what He has blessed them with. It is basically a way to say "thank you" to God.

Then there are sin offerings. These are ways to basically say, "I'm sorry" to God. Fellowship with God must be restored because of sin. Here a sinner offers up the life blood of an animal and acknowledges their sin. This vividly shows the sinner the devastating result of their sin by the killing of this innocent animal. But it also demonstrates God's mercy. Instead of God taking the life of the guilty sinner, He forgives them. The sacrificial animal dies in their place, atoning for or covering the sin.

The book also lays out how to observe several annual Israelite feasts. Israel is to observe seven feasts: Passover, Unleavened Bread, First Fruits, Pentecost, Trumpets (Rosh Hashanah), Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) and Tabernacles or Booths (Succoth). Each of these feasts re-tells a different part of the story of how God delivered His people from their oppressive slavery in Egypt. Each one tells how God provided for them and brought them safely through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land. Through these feasts Israel is regularly reminded about who they are and, more importantly, who God is.

The Israelites will also have priests. This is the service of the Lord that Moses mentioned to the Levites in Exodus 32 to which they would be ordained. This includes Aaron and his sons (who are from the tribe of Levi). They will enter into God's presence on behalf of Israel. God's priests are called to the highest level of integrity. They must maintain standards of ritual purity because they represent the people before a holy God. They also represent God to His people. One of the duties of a priest is to be a teacher of the law. They are not to teach merely by their words, but by their lives.

One incredible story demonstrates why the priest's holiness matters so much. Not long after Aaron's family is ordained to the priesthood, two of his sons casually enter into God's presence. They flagrantly disregard God's rules. They have decided that they are going to do things their way instead of God's way...

**Then Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, each took his fire pan and put fire in it, set incense on it, and presented strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them to do. So fire went out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them so that they died before the Lord. Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke; 'Among the ones close to Me I will show Myself holy, and in the presence of all the people I will be honored.'" So Aaron kept silent.** (Leviticus 10:1-3) This incident is something the people will not soon forget. It serves as a reminder of the danger of living in the presence of a holy God. On the one hand, it can bring pure joy and goodness. But on the other hand it can be harmful to one's health if they dare go against God. So it is imperative that the priests and for that matter ALL the people maintain a state of holiness.

The idea of maintaining a state of holiness is referred to in Leviticus as being "clean." God's presence is off limits to anyone who is not holy, or who is "unclean." Obviously a person's sinful behavior renders them unclean. But it is more than just about behavior. An Israelite can become unclean in a variety of other ways – coming in contact with certain body fluids, skin diseases, touching mold or fungus or a dead body. Many of these things are unavoidable. They are a part of everyday living. So being unclean is a temporary state. It lasts for a short time and then it is over. What IS sinful is to knowingly and casually enter into God's presence as an unclean individual. One's unclean condition must be dealt with properly, according to God's laws.

Another way of becoming unclean is by eating certain foods. Some animals are considered to be off limits. The various food laws address this. We can see that God is concerned about the food His people eat. God never explains the reason why certain foods are clean while others unclean, but then God doesn't have to explain Himself to anyone.

All of these various practices taken together remind Israel that God's holiness impacts ALL areas of their lives. God's covenant people are called to live differently than the people groups around them. They are to be a people who care about the poor in their community. They are to maintain a high level of integrity. They are to treat people fairly. God's laws are intended to promote a society filled with morality and goodness.

One of Israel's most important observances – one of the seven that was mentioned earlier – is the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16). On a certain day every year the high priest takes two goats. One goat is killed. It becomes a purification offering to atone for the sins of the people. The high priest enters into the Most Holy Place, the Holy of Holies, and sprinkles the blood of the sacrificed goat on the mercy seat. The other goat is released. It is called the scapegoat. The priest confesses the sins of the people, symbolically placing those sins on the scapegoat. The goat is then released out into the



wilderness. These are powerful symbols that show God's desire to remove sin and its results from His people so that He can dwell with them in peace and prosperity.

Leviticus concludes with Moses calling on the nation of Israel to be faithful to all the terms of God's covenant. Blessings of peace and abundance will result if they will only follow God's laws. However, disobedience to His laws will produce devastating results.

By looking at the first sentence of the next book, Numbers, we can see how Leviticus fits into biblical story. **Now the Lord spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting...** (Numbers 1:1) Did you catch that? Moses is now communicating with God on the nation's behalf in the presence of God. Moses is IN the tent. He is no longer outside of it like we saw at the end of Exodus.

Despite Israel's dismal failure, God has provided a way to deal with their sins. For now all appears to be on the right track. God is dwelling with His people in peace. Things are really looking up!