LEVITICUS 1 thru 10: You Shall Be Holy, Part 1

*[Begin by asking the class what their favorite book of the Bible is. Favorite O.T. book? Well, what about Leviticus? Isn’t this one of your favorite books?]*

[show the Leviticus cover slide]

When I mentioned last month that we were going to be in Levit, one class member said, “Ewww!!” Hey, that’s OK. It was an honest expression of how many of us feel when it comes to Levit. The truth is that Levit is not one of those books of the Bible that we get too excited about. But there’s a practical reason why we should study it. I’m not going to tell you what that reason is. We’re going to look at the book of Levit over these next 3 Sundays and then at the end of our study I’m going to ask you to give me one good reason for studying Levit. You know, Levit is in the canon of scripture for a reason. It’s not a book we study very often. Much of it is hard for us to understand and at first reading seems impractical. I promise you that I will do my best to make this study as interesting as possible and together we’ll glean truths from it that we need for today. They’re there.

In Luke Ch 24, soon after Jesus was resurrected, we’re told that Jesus joined 2 of His disciples as they were walking on the road to Emmaus. The 2 men were carrying on a conversation with each other and they didn’t recognize Jesus. They were discussing all of the recent events that had happened (to Jesus) and they were speculating about what had happened to Him after He had been placed in the tomb. And Jesus just let them talk. Finally Jesus responded to them…

READ Luke 24:25-27 *[point out that “Moses” is referring to the first 5 books of the Bible which includes Leviticus]*

So there is something even in in Levit that we need to see about Jesus, something that pictures what Jesus did for us and why He did it. And we’ll look at this in our study. We’ll view Levit thru the lens of the N.T.

Let me begin with a basic introduction to this book. Levit was written by Moses. The title “Leviticus” comes from the title given to this book in the Latin Vulgate version of the Greek OT. It means, “matters of the Levites.” Of course we learned in Exodus that the tribe of Levi had been set apart as the priestly tribe for service to the Lord. And while Levit certainly addresses issues of the Levites’ religious responsibilities, much more significantly it instructs them how they are to assist the people in worship and it informs God’s covenant people as a whole how to live holy lives, how to please God. Does any of Levit apply to us N.T. believers? Well, before you answer that question, consider this – the writers of the N.T. quote from the Book of Levit over 15 times. Jesus Himself quotes from Levit 6 times. What this tells me is that there’s something significant in Levit that we need to see.

Chronologically Levit begins immediately after Exodus ends. When we left off with Exodus last week, God’s covenant nation, Israel, was camped out at the base of Mount Sinai with the presence of God dwelling among them in the newly-constructed tabernacle. The people have been at Sinai now for almost a year and they will remain there for another month or so before they continue their journey to the Promised Land. It’s during this final month at Sinai that God gives Moses the words (God is still speaking thru Moses) which he writes down and which are preserved for us here in this book.

The theme of Levit is holiness, specifically God’s holiness. Notice the sacrificial lamb. We’re going to talk about sacrifices, the requirement of a blood atonement for sin, and how all this relates to the holiness of God. I’ve entitled this study, “You shall be holy.” This is a quote from Lev 19:1-2… READ.

The first 10 chapters of Levit deal with God’s holiness and how to approach a holy God. That will be our focus this morning. Chapters 11-27 deal with the personal holiness of God’s people, the way of holiness. They are told that they should be holy for a reason – because the Lord their God is holy.

As N.T. believers we understand that any person’s relationship with God begins with their justification. We are first justified by grace thru faith, by God’s grace thru our faith in Jesus Christ – who He is and what He accomplished for us in His life, death and resurrection. We’re justified, saved, redeemed, regenerated. READ 1 Peter 3:18

But our relationship with God doesn’t end with our justification, does it? Following justification is sanctification (the lifelong process whereby we mature in our faith and become more like Christ). Now that we’ve been saved we’re expected, as followers of Christ, as God’s children, to be different from the world, not influenced by all the evil around us, not controlled by sin or our fleshly desires. And to make this possible we’ve been given the Holy Spirit who lives in us. We’re instructed by Christ and the apostles to live right, to pursue holiness. READ 1 Peter 1:13-15

And then Peter quotes from Leviticus (11:44)… READ 1 Peter 1:16

So although much has changed for us N.T. believers from O.T. times (for example, we are no longer under the Law, we don’t have to perform sacrifices and go thru a priest), clearly some things have not changed. God Himself has not changed. God still expects His people to be holy. Yes, we’re under a different covenant, “a better covenant” as Hebrews 8:6 tells us. But by progressive revelation God has revealed to us N.T. believers something new, something better, that those O.T. believers didn’t know about, or did not fully comprehend. One of the things that has not changed is that holy behavior is still expected of God’s people.

So as we delve into Levit now, one of the questions we need to be asking ourselves is “What does this teach me about God’s character, specifically, about His holiness?”

God desires to have fellowship with His people. He made that clear to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob throughout Genesis. He made that clear to Moses and the people in Exodus. And that is a clear message to us thru the various N.T. writers as well. The question facing God’s covenant people back in Moses’ day was this: “How can an unholy man, one who possesses a fallen nature, have fellowship with a perfectly holy God?” Well first of all, his sin must be dealt with somehow. Second, there must be a mediator, a go-between, a peacemaker, between holy God and sinful man.

Levit Ch 1 thru 7 tell us that sin is to be dealt with thru sacrifices. The people get to God, first, by way of sacrifice. Fellowship with God must be restored because of sin. This is done thru either burnt, sin offering or guilt offerings. Once fellowship has been restored then it continues in an act of worship thru the grain offerings or peace offerings. So part of getting to God is accomplished thru sacrifices.

As N.T. believers we understand that Jesus Christ has fulfilled this requirement for us. READ Hebrews 9:12-14

So in Leviticus, atonement, the cleansing from sin comes thru the shedding of blood, the blood from an animal sacrifice. But here the writer of Hebrews explains that Christ, operating as our great High Priest, sacrificed His own life, voluntarily laid down His life, crucified on the cross. The imagery that is being used here is that Jesus then takes His own blood and with it He secures our eternal salvation. Under the O.T. Law God required the people to bring perfect animals for the various sacrifices. This pointed to Christ, the unblemished, perfect Lamb of God. As John the Baptist proclaimed when Jesus arrived on the scene: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:30) Because Jesus was sinless, His sacrifice for us on the cross is infinitely more valuable than any animal sacrifice.

Levit Ch 8 thru 10 address the need for a mediator between God and man. So the people in Moses’ day got to God not only by way of sacrifices but also thru the Levitical priesthood. The priests acted as man’s rep before God. In other words they served as mediators, as go-betweens. In order to represent God’s covenant people they had to be one of them. And God had appointed Aaron’s sons and the entire tribe of Levi, the Levites, to serve as priests, as mediators.

Again we N.T. believers see that Jesus Christ fulfills this role for us. We no longer need to go thru a priest to access God. READ Hebrews 9:15.

So, Jesus is the only Mediator who can restore peace between God and sinners. As 1 Timothy 2:5 says, “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

The Bible teaches us that Jesus is fully God and fully man. When He took on human flesh, Jesus became one of us. He can now relate to us. He sympathizes with us. READ Hebrews 4:15

And Jesus has direct access to the Father right now. Jesus is our Mediator. Thru Him we have access to the throne of God! READ Hebrews 7:24-25.

So let’s get into Leviticus. The first thing to talk about is offerings, specifically offerings for sins. Romans 3:23 says, “For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” Under the old covenant, offerings are needed to restore fellowship with God because of man’s sin. Ch 1 deals with burnt offerings.

READ Leviticus 1:3-5

Burnt offerings are sacrifices for the atonement of sins. The animal sacrificed as a burnt offering was to be a male without blemish. The worshiper had to personally kill the animal. This is a vivid and dramatic reminder of the consequences of sin. Romans 6:23 says, “For the wages of sin is death…” God’s holy justice requires payment for sin, which is death. God takes sin very seriously. However, in His divine mercy God allows a substitute, in this case an animal, to die in the place of the one who sinned.

READ Leviticus 1:13

The burnt offering is completely consumed by fire, which is why it’s called a burnt offering (because it all gets burned up). This is a picture of sins being completely consumed - gone. None of the meat from the burnt offering is to be eaten by the worshiper or by the priests. So right from the beginning Levit teaches that there can be no approach to God apart from the shedding of blood. Burnt offerings symbolize atonement, the purging of sin and, as the offering is burned, it sends up the fragrant smoke in true worship to God – “a pleasing aroma to the Lord.”

There were both private and public offerings. You had the private offerings of the people but you also had a daily public burnt offering, morning and evening. READ Leviticus 6:9,12-13 (cf Num 28)

The main purpose for this on-going offering – constant reminder of our sinfulness and a constant reminder of God’s grace as He forgives and the assurance of hope we have to the end (Heb 6).

There are two other offerings for sin that are mentioned. These are the sin offering and the guilt offering, Chapters 4-5. They are similar to the burnt offering but in both cases the offering is not completely consumed by fire. Only the priests, not the worshiper, are allowed to eat a portion of the sin and guilt offerings. The difference between the guilt and sin offerings is that with the guilt offering the worshiper is required to restore, to make some sort of restitution for what they had done. So these were for sins done against other people as well as God. With the sin offering there was no such restitution required. So sin offerings were sins against God only. Sin and guilt offerings were done to cleanse from sins which were committed “unintentionally.” In other words, these were for sins committed out of human weakness, ignorance, forgetfulness, passion, but not necessarily out of a spirit of blatant rebellion.

READ Leviticus 5:17-19

So then, the one who sins “unintentionally” is still guilty before the Lord. In other words, ignorance is no excuse. Such a sin still requires the death of an animal as payment and it requires restitution on the part of the sinner where possible. And such sin needs forgiven and v 18 is a wonderful reminder that it will be forgiven once sacrifice has been made.

The last 2 types of sacrifices mentioned in the first 7 chapters of Levit have nothing to do with sin or the restoring of fellowship. Rather, they deal with maintaining fellowship with God. These sacrifices are grain offerings, Ch 2, and peace offerings, Ch 3. Grain offerings are sometimes referred to as meal or meat offerings. These offerings involve grain, flour, or bread with olive oil and salt but never any yeast. The grain offering represents a blameless life. The purity of its ingredients are emphasized. 1 Jn 2:6 says we are to walk in the same manner as Jesus walked. And we know from Heb 7:26 that Jesus was blameless. The worshiper prepares the food and then brings it to the priest. The priest takes the offering and burns a handful of it and then eats the rest. Grain offerings are valuable gifts that involve the worshiper’s personal time and expense. This sacrifice costs them something and is done as an act of worship.

Peace offerings are sometimes called fellowship offerings. This is the only one of the offerings wherein the worshiper gets to eat a portion of the sacrifice. Peace offerings speak of communion with God based on the blood of atonement. The worshiper brings an animal without blemish, male or female and offers it with thanksgiving to God. As N.T. believers we have peace with God thru the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross – Col 1:19-20: “For in [Jesus] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.”

Every one of the offerings brought involves giving the very best to God. Not just from one’s excess or the leftovers. Worshipers bring animals without blemish. Their sacrifices are costly. And the offerings are done either to restore fellowship with God that has been broken or to maintain fellowship. All these sacrifices were meant to be acts of worship before a holy God.

One way to get to God is thru sacrifices. The other way to God is thru a mediator, a priest. Ch 8-10 deal with this. Chapter 8 talks about how Aaron and his sons are consecrated, are set apart for their service to the Lord. These are the leaders of the priests. In Chapter 9 Aaron and his sons begin to perform the various offerings that we just discussed. These are carried out by God’s design and are to be performed in a certain way. The result is described at the end of Ch 9…

READ Leviticus 9:22-24

So, doing things God’s way, obedience, results in a blessing – in this case the people see that the glory of the Lord appear and they fall down and worship Him. The fire of the Lord comes down and consumes the burnt offering. So with Ch 9 you have the inauguration of the priesthood and they get off to a good start.

But then comes Ch 10 and here we see what happens when the priests don’t do things God’s way…

READ Leviticus 10:1-3

Nadab and Abihu decided they were going to do things their way instead of God’s way. They transgress God’s command and the result is the fiery judgment of God fall upon them. Just like in Ch 9 when the fire of the Lord comes down and consumes the offering now we see fire coming down and consuming Aaron’s sons. And Moses instructed Aaron and his surviving 2 sons Eleazar and Ithamar not to mourn for Nadab and Abihu. Why? Because God’s judgment is righteous. It is to be praised and not mourned. God is as glorious in judgment as He is in blessing.

At the end of Ch 10 Moses admonishes Aaron and Eleazar and Ithamar for not eating the portion of the sin offering that was for them. And he asks them, “Why did you not eat the sin offering at the holy place? (v 17). Aaron’s reply, which satisfied Moses was basically, “Given that Nadab and Abihu had taken part in this sin offering, then been killed, this would have rendered it unacceptable to the Lord and therefore unclean. We saw this offering as unpleasing to the Lord so we did not partake.” And Moses was OK with that explanation.

This is a good example of what’s in our hearts being more important than our religious activity. In Amos 5:22 God addresses this. God’s people have sinned, their hearts are not right and therefore he says, “Even though you offer up to Me burnt offerings and your grain offerings, I will not accept them; and I will not even look at the peace offerings of your fatlings.” 1 Samuel 15:22 Samuel tells King Saul, “Has the Lord as much delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold to obey is better than sacrifice and to heed than the fat of rams.”

So what can we take away today? God desires fellowship with His people, with us. Our sin needs to be dealt with – Jesus was the perfect sacrifice for our sins on the cross making a way for our justification, our salvation. But God desires that we be holy and so our sins need to be dealt with as a condition of our fellowship with God. So we can go to Jesus as our great High Priest, our mediator and confess our sins before Him and ask forgiveness and we will be forgiven. Sin is a serious matter and we will daily, regularly be dealing with our owns sins before God. God wants us to have pure hearts and minds and only then He will be pleased with our worship. So we can learn a lot from Levit, right?