

SESSION #9

LEVITICUS

When people read through the Old Testament and get bogged down, it is usually in this next book, Leviticus. In Genesis and Exodus there were lots of interesting stories, but when you get to Leviticus it's quite different. It's a tough book but a wonderful one nonetheless.

Tim Stafford, a friend of mine, combined with Philip Yancey to write the notes for the "NIV Student Bible". Tim took on the task of writing the introductions to the OT books. I love the way he did the intro for the book of Leviticus. He suggested that Leviticus is like a training manual for nuclear power plant workers. And when you know something of what goes on in this book, this is a great way to describe the content of Leviticus. The Israelites are coming close to the 'radioactive God' as it were and you've got to be very careful when you get near to such a holy presence.

The name Leviticus refers to the Levites, a group of men within the nation of Israel who served as assistants to the priests. They did much of the serving and much of the singing. So this book is named after them.

The key to the book is in chapter 1 and verse 1: "*The Lord called to Moses, and spoke to him from the tabernacle of meeting...*" From where? From where did God speak to the people of Israel in the book of *Exodus*? It was out of the fire and thunder and lightning on Mt. Sinai – a scary scenario!

But when you flip over the page into Leviticus you see God speaking to Moses from the tent of meeting, from the door of that little tabernacle. He is now right down in the midst of His people in relationship with them, a relationship of fellowship. And that begins to set the tone for what we will find in the Book of Leviticus.

For the theme is an awesome one: *You shall be holy*. It's a book about sanctification, holiness. And God wants to prepare the nation for the very high service of mediating God's redemption to all the nations. Not just consuming all the goodies which God

wants to give to them, His own special people, but much more than that – to be the conduit of God’s goodies to the nations. To be the showcase people revealing who the Holy God is, what it is like to know a holy God and to live in fellowship with Him. That was their high calling.

And they would not be able to fulfill that high calling unless they were holy like He is holy. So the key verse is 19:2, “*Be holy, for I am holy, says the Lord.*”

The problem that is highlighted by this theme, of course, is God’s holiness versus man’s sinfulness. How could you ever put the two together? It’s the universal basic problem of mankind. Leviticus emphasizes that redemption is available, there is a way across this divide between God’s holiness and man’s sinfulness. Restoration is possible, redemption is available, and the great tension between these two extremes is resolved here in Leviticus in the first 9 chapters.

STRUCTURE

There are two main sections to this book, as there was with Exodus: the basis of fellowship, and the obligations of fellowship.

The **basis** of fellowship with God is none other and can be none other than sacrifice. That is going to be a consistent theme all the way from Genesis through the book of Revelation. And the first 17 chapters of Leviticus will tell us very clearly that this is the way to God. He is a holy God.

The only way to get to Him is by means of sacrifice, a sacrifice that can satisfy His holy justice. So this first part of the book of Leviticus will focus on the sacrificial systems and the offerings and so on that the people of Israel will perform in order to *maintain* the relationship which was already *obtained* for them at Passover when they came out of Egypt.

The laws laid out in this first section of Leviticus deal with ceremonial and physical defilement. Holiness demands sanitation. The main concern here has to do with the body, with people’s cleansing.

The **obligations** of fellowship have to do with sanctification. And we have 10 chapters dealing now not with the *way* to God but the *walk* He demands. The previous chapters declare: *“I am holy, says God”*. Then these last chapters focus on the response: *“you shall be holy”*.

And so this part of the book of Leviticus tells us a lot about their holy days, their feast times throughout the calendar year emphasizing that God’s people are separated unto the Lord and separated from evil. The laws in this section have to do with moral and spiritual defilement because holiness demands sanctification. The concern is not the body, but the soul; people’s clean living.

Leviticus then becomes for us an OT illustration of a familiar NT truth. 1 John 1:7 says, *“But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light”*... then what happens? – *“we have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanses us from all sin.”* His blood will cleanse us, but the blood cleanses us only if we walk in the light. This is a daily kind of cleansing. Being holy on a daily basis comes as we walk in the light, letting God shine His light into the dark parts of our lives and pointing out to us what is wrong.

And when He points something out that’s wrong then in NT theology we confess that. That is, we agree with God: *“You’re right! That is wrong. That is sin. I confess it. Now cleanse me and renew my walk with You again.”*

So the cleansing and the walking result in a fellowship both vertically and horizontally. Leviticus has a lot to tell us about how that works, not just for God’s OT people, but in principles for God’s NT people like you and I too.

This is the middle book of the five books of Moses, and as such it’s message is right at the heart of the Pentateuch. It’s right at the heart of God’s message, the Gospel. God’s provision for man’s deepest need. Man’s deepest need is, *“how in the world can I as a sinner ever get to know a holy God?”* And God says, *“Here’s how. The way is sacrifice. The innocent sacrifice of a substitutionary substitute for you.”* That’s the way.

And then a daily cleansing, sanctification. So God deals with *our* basic needs as He does with His OT people here in the book of Leviticus.

Our next session will take us through the fourth book in the Pentateuch, Numbers.
