

INTRODUCTION TO LEVITICUS — JESUS AND US

Hello, this is Beth Worley and this is the Introduction to the KYB study, Leviticus, Jesus and us -Themes of Leviticus.

When you think of Leviticus — if you ever think of Leviticus at all — what springs to mind? Lots of strange laws? Blood, and animal sacrifices? Perhaps odd food laws?

As we look back at Leviticus from this side of the cross, all those Old Testament laws, especially in Leviticus, might seem like such a burden to us. Imagine having to do *all that!* We're so used to the freedom we have in Christ that we often take our privileged position for granted.

When I first started looking closely at Leviticus, I came across commentator after commentator who said that the laws in Leviticus were *good news* for the ancient Israelites, God's old covenant people. Good news? How on earth could all those laws be good news?

But the more I understood Leviticus, the more I understood this was right. Why? How?

Let's rewind a little. Just over a year before God gave his people these laws, the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. They followed the LORD, Yahweh, but they were captives in a foreign land. Then God performed an amazing miracle of rescue: the exodus. The LORD freed the Israelites and they set off for the land he had promised their forefathers: Canaan.

But there were two problems.

First, God had promised to live among his people and be their God. God is absolutely holy — morally pure, loving, good, righteous, just — set apart from everything in his purity. But his people were not. How could this holy God live among sinful people? How could his people — sinful people — draw close to him?

God actually *wanted* his people to draw close to him. But in themselves, they could *never* be good enough or holy enough. So how could they worship him?

For people who wanted to draw close to God, these laws (Leviticus) provided the way. God himself set up these laws:

so that his people could draw near to him

and so that they could be forgiven and restored!

These laws were God **reaching out** to his people, letting them know he *wanted* a relationship with them, and telling them *how* — laying it all out for them.

And assuring them — over and over — that it was possible for their sin to be paid for; it was possible for them to be forgiven; it was possible for them to draw close to their Holy God; it was possible for them to honour him and even celebrate in his presence!

This *was* good news for these ancient people!

The second issue: the Israelites were recently-freed slaves; tribal groups, clans and families, but God wanted them to be his nation — Israel. This nation (the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) was supposed to reflect something of God's holiness to the surrounding nations — be his representatives. So how were they supposed to treat each other? What should their community look like?

These laws spell out how the Israelites were to live together — with fairness, love and respect. They weren't to make slaves of their fellow Israelites, take someone else's wife or husband, cheat each other, take advantage of them, or become rich at someone else's expense.

They were to be pure in their relationships with each other. E.g. The law set out who they could not marry.

As they lived together as God's people, these laws were *good news* because they protected vulnerable people and provided for the poor.

So all these laws *were* good news.

Of course for us, in comparison, Jesus and what he offers is *fantastic news! So much greater!* The law was good, but in Jesus we have something immeasurably superior!

So how are these laws relevant to us?

They looked forward to Jesus in important ways, especially through the sacrifices, the priesthood and the Day of Atonement.

We often say, 'Jesus died for us'. But what do we actually mean? These laws help us to appreciate this.

Old Testament sacrifices help us to understand Jesus' sacrifice. Worshippers had to put their hand on an animal's head, then sacrificed it. They symbolically transferred their sin to the animal, and it paid the price for that sin. Life for life. Just think: could you put your hand on an animal's head, kill it — and **not** realise that our sin *costs*?

The solution for sin was drastic: noisy, smelly and confronting. It cost the worshippers personally and financially. In effect, the worshipper said, 'I deserve to die; please accept this animal in my place.'

When we come to God in confession, we effectively say, 'I deserve judgement. Thank you for accepting Jesus in my place.'

Through the animal sacrifices, people's sin was paid for (atoned for) — so they could be forgiven and restored to closeness with God. Through Jesus' sacrifice, believers' sin was paid for (atoned for) — so we can be forgiven and restored in our relationship with God.

But ... the old sacrifices had to be offered over and over. Jesus' sacrifice was offered once, for all time. No other sacrifices are needed.

So what do we mean when we say Jesus died for us? We acknowledge we are worthy of God's judgement and that our sin costs. We trust in the fact that Jesus took our place — life for life — and paid the high price so we can be forgiven and restored.

So, the Old Testament sacrifices in Leviticus point to Jesus.

What about the Old Testament priests? The priests represented the people before God, and God to the people. The priests actually presented the offerings on the people's behalf. Priests had to be specially set apart (consecrated, holy) to approach God's holy presence.

This was even more true of the high priest, Aaron. He was dressed in elaborate garments to give him dignity (not before God) but before the people, because he represented God to them.

Back in Exodus, God had chosen Aaron and his sons to be priests. Leviticus describes the ceremony when the priests were consecrated and formally installed in their role and actually able to take up this ministry.

This ordination ceremony was impressive! It painted a vivid picture for God's people, like a big visual aid. All the washing and sprinkling with blood; the fancy robes; and a ceremony that climaxed in fire from the LORD ... All this showed that the priests were to be holy and honoured.

But if we just read Leviticus, we might miss an important detail about Aaron.

Let's rewind briefly again. When the Israelites escaped from Egypt, they came to the foot of Mt Sinai. It was there that God gave them instructions on how to set up the tabernacle (the portable worship place). It was there that God gave Moses the 10 commandments and other laws. And it was there that Aaron led the Israelites in idolatry, dancing around the golden calf.

Not long after, while Israel was still camped at Mt Sinai, God gave them the laws in Leviticus.

Aaron had led Israel in gross idolatry. Now (in Leviticus), only a couple of months later, still at Mt Sinai, Aaron was being installed as Israel's high priest. How could that be?

In a word: grace! A forgiven sinner would represent the people to God. A forgiven sinner would represent God to his people. How humbling for Aaron! No wonder he needed such a special consecration to be high priest! But what a vivid reminder for Aaron and the ancient Israelites of God's grace!

The New Testament teaches us that Jesus is our great high priest — far superior to the other priests and even the high priest. Unlike Aaron, Jesus was without sin. And Jesus will never die, so he can intercede for us forever.

The Old Testament priesthood points to Jesus.

Day of Atonement

The third main way that Leviticus looks forward to Jesus is through the Day of Atonement.

This was the most solemn day of celebration for Israel. It meant a complete fresh start for Israel each year. People were forgiven for all their sins (the ones they knew about, and those they didn't).

Even the tabernacle itself needed cleansing. It was located in the middle of the Israelite camp. Sinful people came and went in the tabernacle, offering the sacrifices God wanted them to make. But their uncleanness 'rubbed off' on the tabernacle. So, on the Day of Atonement, the tabernacle was cleansed, too.

This day was like a re-set: all sin and uncleanness were dealt with. Every year, Israel got a fresh start.

On the Day of Atonement — once a year — Aaron the high priest took off his fancy robes, made various sacrifices and entered the Most Holy Place where God's special presence dwelt. There he atoned for *all* Israel's sin and uncleanness. But he had to have smoke from incense to protect him so that he wouldn't die in the holy presence of the LORD. And Aaron had to do this *every* year.

The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is our great high priest who fulfilled the Day of Atonement — and far better than any other high priest ever could. Jesus entered the heavenly Most Holy Place with his own blood (not animal blood) and atoned for sin, once for all time. The Day of Atonement sacrifices actually *reminded* people of their sin. But Jesus' sacrifice has brought a *lasting solution* for sin and cleansed our *consciences*.

The Day of Atonement also points to Jesus.

Each of those aspects (sacrifices, priesthood, Day of Atonement) is covered by one unit in this KYB study. The other two units are about holiness.

Holiness is the other big issue in Leviticus. One unit looks at what it meant for Israel to be holy; the other unit looks at how some of the principles behind the laws in Leviticus are still relevant to us today.

We often think there are two categories: holy and unholy, or clean and unclean. There was more to it than that. There were categories of holy and common; holy was God and set apart for God; 'common' was all the ordinary things of life. And these common things in turn, could be clean or unclean.

That meant that there were actually three main categories: holy, clean and unclean (which are also called defiled).

Only God is holy *in himself* — set apart from everyone and everything else; morally pure. Anything that came close to God had to be holy, too — like the priests, utensils and objects used in the tabernacle.

The second category - clean - clean things were 'fit for worship' (that's what 'clean' means – fit for worship). This included certain animals which could be used for sacrifices or food. And people had to be clean in order to worship God.

But the category we struggle with the most I think, is what was called 'unclean'. Unclean things were 'unfit for worship'. Certain animals, like pigs, were unclean: not suitable as sacrifices or for food for the ancient Israelites.

At times, people became unclean. Sin certainly made people unclean. But a whole range of *normal* human activities and situations could also make someone unclean. If, say, a relative died and you had to get them ready for burial and you touched the body, you became unclean. Of course you had to bury them — there is nothing *sinful* about that. After a woman gave birth, she was unclean for a set time. Children are a blessing from the LORD. There's nothing sinful about giving birth. But the woman was still unclean until she waited a certain amount of time, and brought the appropriate offering.

So, unclean did **not** mean 'dirty' or even 'sinful'. It meant 'unfit for worship'. The person could only approach God after a set time, or by bringing a particular offering. Sometimes the person had to do other things to become clean (like ritual washing).

The priests' ordination ceremony moved them from the category of 'clean' to 'holy'. But for ordinary Israelites — people like you and me — the best they could *ever hope for* was to be clean (and able to worship).

But think what we have through Jesus; through Him, Christians are made holy. We are given righteousness from God — something the ancient Israelites could never have. But this is possible for us today because Jesus died for us. When we trust in Jesus, God sees us as holy and righteous. No longer just 'clean' — but far more: holy and righteous!

Some of the laws in Leviticus (especially the food laws) can seem a bit weird to us. Bible scholars have suggested lots of different reasons God might have had for calling some animals clean and other animals unclean and unfit for the Israelites to eat.

You might have heard of some of these theories that try to explain this. People think perhaps it's because some unclean animals were scavengers, or ate blood; or eating certain animals were thought to be bad for your health. The problem with these theories is that not one theory explains all the rules or all the animals.

The simple fact is that God called some animals unclean, and he wanted the Israelites to obey him and not eat those animals.

All these laws were part of the conditions of the covenant made between the LORD and ancient Israel in Moses' time. But Christians are under the *new covenant!* Jesus declared all foods clean (Mark 7:18–19). He also touched dead bodies and people with leprosy — who were unclean. Jesus broke the boundaries of clean and unclean.

Chapters 17–27 of Leviticus are known as 'the holiness code'. There are all sorts of laws, from who you could marry to how to harvest your crops.

Even if we wanted to, most of us couldn't keep all of these laws. For example, we don't have fields of grain to harvest. But there are principles behind these ancient laws that show us God's concern for fairness, for providing for vulnerable people, for sexual purity. These laws taught the ancient Israelites that God was concerned with *every area of their lives*. Nothing was off-limits. They were to honour God by living his way in every aspect of their life. Same for us.

All along, God had *one* plan of salvation in two stages: the old and the new. As God was building his nation, it *mattered* how that nation lived. It was through this nation that God would bring a line of kings that would ultimately end in the King of kings: Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only one who would keep these laws perfectly and he fulfilled their requirements. We don't need to.

What can we learn from this study of Jesus, Leviticus and us? Let's pray.

Our great God and loving Father, we thank you for your word and especially this part of your word even though it might be hard for us to understand sometimes. Lord help us to understand. Help us to see your great plan of salvation being worked out through these laws and the ancient Israelites. Help us to see how Jesus fulfilled this. Lord we pray that we may have a clearer vision of Jesus through our study of Leviticus. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.