

THE DAILY QUIET TIME REFLECTIONS SERIES

HOLINESS

Reflections on the Book of Leviticus

EXPANDED EDITION

Eugene Han

*Drawn from more than a decade of shared Quiet Time reflections at
dailyqt.org, and from Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in
Dallas*

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The introduction draws on the introductory notes of Dr. Thomas L. Constable, used with gratitude for his lay-accessible scholarship on the text of Scripture.

This Expanded Edition draws on reflections shared over many years by the community of readers at dailyqt.org. The author is grateful to every member of that community whose questions, insights, and encouragement helped shape these pages.

This book reflects the personal study, reflection, and interpretation of its author and is offered for devotional and educational purposes. It is not a substitute for pastoral counsel or formal theological instruction. Where matters of biblical interpretation remain disputed among careful readers of Scripture, the author has noted this and presented his own considered view alongside other views held by faithful Christians, rather than claiming final or exclusive authority on the question.

An earlier edition of this study appeared in the combined volume *Consecrated and Tested: Reflections on Leviticus and Numbers*. This Expanded Edition returns *Holiness* to a volume of its own, as it first appeared.

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Preface to the Expanded Edition

A Fuller Conversation

The first edition of this book grew out of a daily practice: reading a few chapters of Scripture each morning, writing down what we noticed, and sharing it with a community of readers at dailyqt.org. Over more than a decade, that community has left thousands of reflections on these same passages: questions, objections, stories, corrections, and moments of genuine discovery. The first edition drew on only a small part of that conversation. This Expanded Edition draws on all of it.

The result is a longer book, and we hope a better one. Every chapter has been rewritten to take in reflections from the wider community, along with further study of the passages they raised. Where the first edition moved quickly past a difficult text, this edition slows down. Where it stated one view on a disputed question, this edition still states the view we hold, but it also presents the other views faithful Christians hold, as fairly as we can. Each chapter now closes with six discussion questions rather than three or four.

Leviticus raises more than its share of hard questions, and many of them came up again and again in the conversation behind this book. Why did God give such detailed laws about food, skin disease, mold, and bodily discharges? Does the Law of Moses bind Christians today, and if not, what do we do with it? Why did Nadab and Abihu die for offering unauthorized fire?

What does "eye for eye" really mean? How should we read the laws about slavery, or the long list of curses in chapter 26? We have not tried to make these questions disappear. We have tried to take them seriously, to say plainly what we believe the text teaches, and to be honest where the text leaves us with difficulty.

Personal stories from the original reflections have been kept where they serve the text, but names and identifying details have been removed. Commentary on current events that would quickly go out of date has been left out. Throughout, the book speaks in a single voice, but that voice owes a great deal to many readers.

One thing has not changed. This book is still meant to be read alongside an open Bible, one day at a time, and not in place of one. If these pages send you back to Leviticus with fresh eyes, and from there to the Savior this book anticipates at every turn, they will have done what they were written to do.

How to Use This Book

Reading, Reflecting, Together

This book was not written to be read in a single sitting. It was written to be read one day at a time, the way it was first written, a chapter at a time over the course of several weeks, alongside an open Bible rather than in place of one. The believers in Berea were commended not simply for their eagerness to hear the Word but for their habit of examining "the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true" (Acts 17:11). That daily habit, sustained over years rather than compressed into a season, is the aim of this book and of the Quiet Time practice that produced it.

To help establish that rhythm, we have included, as an appendix at the back of this book, the same daily Bible reading plan we have used at dailyqt.org for well over a decade. It walks through the whole of Scripture in a year, a few chapters at a time, and it does not need to be started in January; you are free to begin on whatever date suits you and simply follow the sequence from there. Each of the ten chapters in this book lines up with exactly one day on that plan, from Leviticus 1–4 on the first day to Leviticus 26–27 on the tenth, so that this book and your own Bible can move through the book of Leviticus together, one day at a time.

Whether you are reading on your own or working through this book with a group, such as one of our Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas, we would suggest the following simple rhythm for each day, or for each session if you are meeting weekly:

1. Begin and end in prayer. Ask God, before you open either Bible or book, to teach you something true about Himself that day, and thank Him, when you close both, for whatever He has shown you, even if it is smaller or slower than you expected.

2. Read the assigned Scripture. Using the reading plan in the appendix, read the day's passage directly from your own Bible before turning to our reflections on it. There is no substitute for reading the text itself first, in whatever translation you trust, and letting it raise its own questions before we offer ours.

3. Read the corresponding chapter in this book. Each chapter walks through that day's passage in the order Scripture presents it, drawing out its major movements and, where it seemed useful, the historical background behind them. Treat it as a conversation about the text you just read, not a replacement for it.

4. Answer the discussion questions. Every chapter closes with six questions, enough to fill a forty-five- to sixty-minute group discussion, though they work just as well as slower journaling prompts for a reader working through the book alone. Some ask you to notice something in the text; most ask you to notice something in yourself. A group short on time may simply choose two or three.

If you are part of a group, we would encourage you to read both the day's Scripture and the corresponding chapter individually during the week, and then use your time together for the fourth step: praying together and working through the discussion questions. That is, after all, how the material in this book first took shape, not in a study or a library, but among ordinary readers asking each other what a passage meant and

why it mattered, week after week, for years. We hope it will do the same for you.

Introduction

Holiness

If we were to confess that Leviticus has, over the years, become more enjoyable to read than Exodus, you probably would not believe it. But it is true. What once felt like monotonous repetition, unfamiliar ritual, and an uncomfortable amount of blood and slaughter has, with time, become one of the richest books in all of Scripture to sit with slowly. A little familiarity with the book of Hebrews goes a long way toward explaining why.

Exodus ended with a tent finished, a cloud descending, and glory filling every corner of a structure that a band of former slaves had built with trembling precision. Leviticus opens in that same tent, before that same glory, with the LORD calling to Moses from within it. This is worth pausing over. God does not wait for Israel to prove itself worthy of His presence before speaking. He has already moved in. Even the Hebrew title of the book, simply "And He called," taken from the book's first word, signals that nothing new has begun here. There is no break between the tabernacle's completion and God's first words from inside it; Leviticus continues a conversation already underway.

Our English title comes instead from the ancient Greek translators, who named the book for its concern with the Levitical priesthood. That is a fitting title as far as it goes, but it can mislead us slightly if we let it. Read the book itself, and it becomes clear that most of its regulations are addressed not to priests but to ordinary Israelites: the farmer, the shepherd, the mother, the merchant. It tells each of them what to bring to the altar, when to appear, and what to expect the priest to do on

their behalf. This was a book for the whole congregation, not a private manual for a professional class.

The deeper subject of the book, then, is not the priesthood as an institution but holiness as a reality, meant to be lived out by every Israelite. The words "holy" and "holiness" appear more often in these twenty-seven chapters than in any other book of the Bible, culminating in the refrain that becomes the heartbeat of the whole book: "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy" (Leviticus 19:2; see also 11:44–45; 20:7). Peter later quotes that line to describe the calling of every Christian (1 Peter 1:15–16). Nearly everything else in Leviticus, from the sacrifices and the priestly ordination to the dietary laws, the purification rites, the Day of Atonement, the sexual and social commands, the festivals, and the sabbatical and jubilee years, exists to answer a single question in a thousand different situations: what does it mean, concretely, for an unholy people to live in the presence of a holy God?

It may help to say a word about why this book has such a difficult reputation, and why it is worth pressing through anyway. Leviticus has been called, only half-jokingly, the place where well-meaning readers who set out to read straight through the Bible lose their bearings and quietly give up. And yet, in ancient Jewish tradition, it was often the very first book taught to children, on the reasoning that the pure should begin by studying what is pure. Both reputations are true, and both are worth keeping in mind.

We would encourage every reader to press through the details rather than skim past them: to notice, for instance, the careful distinctions between the burnt offering, the grain offering, the fellowship offering, the sin offering, and the guilt

offering, and to sit with the sobering fact that disregarding God's instructions could mean death (Leviticus 10:1–3). Try, as you read, to picture the scene: animal after animal killed and cut apart, blood on the altar and on the priest's garments, day after day, year after year. This was never meant to be read as dry legislation. It was meant to teach Israel, and to teach us, how seriously God takes sin and how much it costs to deal with it honestly. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22).

One clarification is worth making early, because it shapes how we read every chapter that follows. Many Christians have found it helpful to sort the Law of Moses into three categories, moral, ceremonial, and civil, and to hold that believers remain bound by the moral law while the ceremonial and civil laws were fulfilled in Christ. That framework has a long and respected history, and those who use it largely agree with us about how Christians should live. But our own conviction is that Scripture speaks of the Law of Moses as a single, unified covenant, and that the whole covenant, not only its ceremonial portions, was fulfilled and set aside by the cross (Hebrews 8:13; Romans 7:6; Galatians 3:23–25; Colossians 2:14). Unlike God's covenant with Abraham or the New Covenant in Christ, both of which are unconditional and eternal, the Mosaic covenant was conditional and temporary from the outset. The apostles settled this question when Gentile believers began entering the church and some insisted they first be brought under the Law (Acts 15:10–11). Christians today live under what Paul calls "Christ's law" (1 Corinthians 9:21), in which the moral substance of the old covenant is carried forward and restated by Jesus and His apostles.

None of this makes Leviticus irrelevant to us. Quite the opposite. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful" (2 Timothy 3:16), and it is precisely in understanding what Leviticus required, and at what cost, that we come to appreciate what Christ has actually done for us. But it does mean we should resist the temptation to treat any single regulation in this book as a direct command binding on Christians today, or to pick out the regulations we like while passing over the ones beside them.

Three things stand out across these chapters, and it may help to know what to watch for. The first is the sheer cost of approach. The sacrificial system that opens the book is not a vague religious gesture. It is exact, bloody, and repetitive, designed to press home the seriousness of sin every time an Israelite drew near to worship. Sin, as Leviticus depicts it, is an unlikeness to God, a wrong done to God Himself even when the immediate victim is a neighbor, and a source of real distance from God. That is why an ordinary Israelite could not simply walk into the tabernacle, but needed priests, a curtain, and blood between himself and the LORD. The death of Nadab and Abihu partway through the book, for offering "unauthorized fire" that God had not commanded, is not an isolated tragedy but a thesis statement: God will be treated as holy by those who come near Him.

The second is the relentless attention to what is clean and unclean, holy and common. Modern readers often stall in these chapters, wondering what the treatment of mold or bodily discharges could possibly have to do with them. We will try to take the text on its own terms rather than searching for hidden meanings it never claims. The point, again and again, is simpler and more sobering: God's people were to be visibly, tangibly set

apart from the nations around them, because the God who dwelt among them was set apart from every false god the nations worshiped. It is also worth noticing a difference between how the old covenant defines uncleanness and how the new covenant does. Leviticus focuses on outward things: what touches the body, what enters the mouth, what the skin looks like. Jesus relocates the question inward: "Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.... For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come" (Mark 7:15, 21). The call to holiness remains; what changes is where the line is chiefly drawn.

The third is the surprising tenderness beneath all this exactness, bound up with what atonement accomplished. Three things were required. There had to be a substitute, an innocent life standing in place of the guilty. There had to be a transfer, pictured every time a worshiper laid a hand on the animal's head. And there had to be a death, since Scripture everywhere insists that sin's wage is nothing less. The animal sacrifices provided a real but temporary covering, pointing forward to a debt only Christ's blood would finally settle: "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4), yet "we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). The Day of Atonement, at the center of the book, gave the whole nation one day each year when its accumulated guilt was dealt with, one goat's blood brought before God and the other goat carrying Israel's sin away into the wilderness. And the sabbatical and jubilee laws near the end reveal a God who built rest, debt release, and the restoration of land into the very structure of His

people's economy. Mercy is woven into law, and the poor are never left out.

It is worth holding Exodus and Leviticus side by side for a moment. Exodus offers pardon; Leviticus offers purity. In Exodus, God approaches His people; in Leviticus, His people are taught how to approach God. In Exodus, God speaks from the mountain; in Leviticus, He speaks from within the tabernacle, already dwelling among them. And lest all this detail leave the impression of a God concerned only with ritual precision, remember that one of the two commandments Jesus named as the summary of the entire Law and the Prophets comes directly from this book: "Love your neighbor as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). Whatever else Leviticus is about, it was never about ceremony for its own sake.

This Expanded Edition follows the same pattern as the first: ten chapters, one for each daily reading, drawing on more than a decade of Quiet Time reflections shared by the whole dailyqt.org community and on Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas, where much of this material was first taught and discussed aloud. Leviticus is not an easy book, and many readers never finish it. We offer this study as a companion for the journey, not explaining away its difficulty, but trusting that the God who filled the tabernacle with His glory has, on every page, something worth discovering about what it costs, and what it means, for Him to dwell among an unholy people still.

Chapter One

Leviticus 1–4

Many readers who set out to read the Bible from beginning to end make it through Genesis and Exodus with real enthusiasm and then stall somewhere in the opening chapters of Leviticus. It is not hard to see why. After the drama of the exodus and the thunder of Sinai, we come to page after page of instructions about bulls, rams, goats, doves, fine flour, fat, kidneys, and blood. It can feel as though the story has stopped. But the story has not stopped at all. At the end of Exodus, the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle so completely that even Moses could not enter (Exodus 40:34–35). Leviticus opens with the very next thing that happens: "The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting" (Leviticus 1:1). God has come to dwell among His people. Now He tells them how sinful people may live in the presence of a holy God.

The book takes its name from the tribe of Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, from whom Israel's priests and temple servants came. We should not make too much of the name itself; it was not part of the original text but was attached later to identify the book, and in Hebrew the book is simply called by its first word, "And he called." Still, much of Leviticus concerns the priests and their work. Later we learn that God took the Levites for Himself in place of the firstborn sons of Israel, whom He had spared in the tenth plague: "I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine, for all the firstborn are mine" (Numbers 3:12–13). There were not enough Levites to match every firstborn son, so the remainder had to be redeemed with

money (Numbers 3:46–48). Even the priesthood was a standing reminder of the night God passed over His people.

It helps, before diving into the details, to see the shape of the whole book. Many scholars have noticed that Leviticus is carefully arranged around a center. The laws of sacrifice (chapters 1–7) and the ordination of the priests (chapters 8–10) lead into the laws of clean and unclean (chapters 11–15), and all of this builds toward chapter 16, the Day of Atonement. After that center, the book turns to holiness in everyday life, in worship, in the calendar, and in the land (chapters 17–27). The effect of that arrangement is to place atonement at the very heart of Israel's life with God. And the book's great theme is summed up in its most repeated command: "be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44–45; see also 19:2; 20:26). Peter applies those exact words to Christians: "But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:15–16). Leviticus is not a random collection of rules. It is a carefully built picture of how a holy God makes a way to dwell among His people, and Hebrews treats it as one of the keys to understanding the work of Christ.

The first chapters describe five kinds of offerings: the burnt offering (chapter 1), the grain offering (chapter 2), the fellowship offering (chapter 3), the sin offering (chapter 4), and the guilt offering (chapter 5). The very first instruction about the very first offering contains a gesture that is easy to read past as ceremonial detail: "You are to lay your hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on your behalf to make atonement for you" (Leviticus 1:4).

Stop and picture that moment. The worshiper did not simply hand over an animal to a priest. He brought it himself, pressed

his own hand on its head, and did so before it was killed. It was an act of identification, performed in public and in daylight, by the person bringing the offering. This animal was standing in his place. Its death was being accepted in place of his. That is the idea at the heart of Leviticus, and it is explained most fully in chapter 16: substitutionary atonement, an innocent life given in place of a guilty one so that the guilty might draw near to God.

Hebrews tells us that these sacrifices were "only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves" (Hebrews 10:1). They could never fully and permanently take away sin. In fact, their very repetition proved it: "Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:2–4). As you read about the various offerings, keep in mind that they were designed to make the cost of sin visible. The blood, the smell of burning flesh, the death of an animal the worshiper had raised or paid for—all of it was meant to be remembered. And so was the return trip. A worshiper who had truly been cleansed once for all would have stopped needing to come back. But Israel had to come back, again and again, until the sacrifice to which all these pointed was offered: "For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (Hebrews 10:14).

Among all the offerings, the burnt offering was special in several ways. First, it was the only offering completely consumed on the altar. Apart from the hide, which went to the priest (Leviticus 7:8), the whole animal was burned. In the other

offerings, only the fat portions were given to God, and the rest was eaten by the priests or by the worshiper and his family. The burnt offering held nothing back. Second, its fire was never to go out: "The fire must be kept burning on the altar continuously; it must not go out" (Leviticus 6:13). Third, it has a long history. After the flood, Noah built an altar and sacrificed burnt offerings of every clean animal and bird, and "The LORD smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: 'Never again will I curse the ground because of humans'" (Genesis 8:21). And fourth, it was the offering God asked of Abraham on Mount Moriah: "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you" (Genesis 22:2). Abraham's answer to his son's question still echoes through the whole sacrificial system: "God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son" (Genesis 22:8).

The phrase that recurs through these chapters is "an aroma pleasing to the LORD" (Leviticus 1:9, 13, 17). The Lord gave exact instructions for how each offering was to be made—what kind of animal, how it was to be prepared, and by whom—and it was when those instructions were followed that the offering became a pleasing aroma to Him. Paul picks up this very language to describe what Christ did for us: He "loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:2). The whole burnt offering, consumed entirely for God, is a fitting picture of the One who held nothing back.

But the history of Israel's sacrifices is not all fragrance. Later we will see what a mockery some of Judah's kings made of the temple and its worship. King Ahaz shut the doors of the temple and set up altars to other gods on every street corner of

Jerusalem (2 Chronicles 28:24–25). His grandson Manasseh went further still, rebuilding pagan altars, practicing sorcery and divination, and even sacrificing his own sons in the fire (2 Chronicles 33:3–6). Scripture regards him as the worst of Judah's kings. And yet listen to how his story ends. When the Assyrians took him captive, bound with bronze shackles, "In his distress he sought the favor of the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed to him, the LORD was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD is God" (2 Chronicles 33:12–13).

What a gracious, forgiving God we have! If a king guilty of child sacrifice and of filling Jerusalem with innocent blood could still be restored when he humbled himself, it is hard to imagine any sin beyond the reach of God's mercy toward a truly humbled heart. The Lord never took delight in sacrifices for their own sake. He delights in the humble heart of the one who offers them. Lord, examine our hearts, and change them, so that our lives might be a pleasing aroma to You.

The grain offering in chapter 2 is worth a moment's attention too. It was the one offering made without blood, consisting of fine flour, olive oil, and incense, sometimes baked into cakes or wafers. A handful was burned on the altar as a "memorial portion," and the rest went to the priests: "The rest of the grain offering belongs to Aaron and his sons; it is a most holy part of the food offerings presented to the LORD" (Leviticus 2:3).

Why is the grain offering called "most holy" when some other offerings are not? Older commentators offered a helpful

explanation. The label "most holy" was applied to offerings from which portions not burned on the altar were to be eaten by the priests alone, in a holy place. Ordinary Israelites, and even Levites who were not priests, were forbidden to eat them. The same label is applied to the sin offering (Leviticus 6:25, 29) and the guilt offering (Leviticus 7:1, 6), which were likewise partly eaten by the priests, and those portions had to be eaten in the sanctuary area, in the courtyard of the tent of meeting (Leviticus 6:16, 26). The whole burnt offering, which was every bit as holy, did not need the label, because burning it entirely already ruled out any possibility of its being put to ordinary use. The designation protected what belonged to God from being treated as common, and the priests were entrusted with guarding that line.

The grain offering also had to be salted: "Season all your grain offerings with salt. Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings; add salt to all your offerings" (Leviticus 2:13). Salt preserves, and in the ancient world it was associated with the making of lasting agreements. Every offering carried a reminder that it was presented within a covenant that God intended to endure. Because it was made from the fruit of the field and the labor of the worshiper's hands, the grain offering represented the offering of daily bread and daily work to God. Many Christians have seen in it a picture of Christ, "the bread of life" (John 6:35), whose whole life was an offering pleasing to God, and a picture of believers who are urged "to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship" (Romans 12:1). Our ordinary work, our daily bread, and the labor of our hands can all be offered to Him.

It is easy for Christians reading these chapters to feel relieved that we are no longer bound to such rituals. There was a different offering for different situations, and the regulations were detailed and demanding. We were given the Law, in part, so that we could see how impossible it is to live by it. And it would have been possible for an Israelite to treat the whole arrangement as though the cost were not personal: sin, go to the priest, make the offering, and consider the matter closed. Too often that is what it became. Christ came to make it personal, so that we would see how devastating sin is and how far its consequences reach, and so that instead of empty ritual we could be restored to a real relationship with God.

But we should be careful how we frame that contrast. The critique of empty ritual is not a Christian discovery about Judaism. It is an Israelite critique made from within, repeatedly and in the strongest terms. Through Isaiah, God said, "The multitude of your sacrifices—what are they to me?... I have more than enough of burnt offerings.... Stop bringing meaningless offerings!" and called His people instead to "seek justice. Defend the oppressed" (Isaiah 1:11, 13, 17). Micah asked whether the Lord would be pleased with thousands of rams and answered, "He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). And David wrote, "You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise" (Psalm 51:16–17). The prophets saw this centuries before Hebrews was written. The contrast Scripture draws is not between an external Old Testament religion and an internal

New Testament one. Both Testaments condemn external worship without a changed heart, and both assume that worship involves real cost.

And the offerings were not cheap. An unblemished bull or ram represented substantial wealth. At the same time, Leviticus made graduated provision for those who could not afford one: "Anyone who cannot afford a lamb is to bring two doves or two young pigeons to the LORD" (Leviticus 5:7), and anyone who could not afford even the birds could bring a small measure of fine flour (Leviticus 5:11). No one was too poor to be forgiven. When Mary and Joseph presented the infant Jesus at the temple, they offered "a pair of doves or two young pigeons" (Luke 2:24), the offering of the poor. The Son of God entered the world in the household that could afford only the smallest sacrifice.

Chapter 4 introduces the sin offering, and its structure is worth noticing. It opens with a general principle: "When anyone sins unintentionally and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD's commands" (Leviticus 4:2). Then it lays out the procedure for four different people: the anointed priest (4:3–12), the whole community of Israel (4:13–21), a leader (4:22–26), and an ordinary member of the community (4:27–35). Each section ends with the same promise: "In this way the priest will make atonement for them, and they will be forgiven" (Leviticus 4:20, 26, 31, 35).

Two things stand out. First, no one is exempt. The high priest himself, the whole nation, the tribal leader, and the ordinary Israelite all stood in need of atonement. No status placed anyone beyond the need for forgiveness. The differences in the offerings—a bull for the priest and the community, a male goat for a leader, a female goat or lamb for an ordinary person—also

show that wrongdoing has different effects depending on who commits it. When those entrusted with representative responsibility sin, the damage spreads further. That is a sobering word for anyone who leads in the church or the home.

Second, every one of these regulations concerns *unintentional* sin. In our century we often do not think of accidental wrongs as wrongs at all. "I didn't mean to" feels like the end of the discussion. But the Bible considers all wrongs, whether accidental or deliberate, known or unknown, well-intentioned or otherwise, to be sin, and it attaches real guilt to them. Leviticus 4 repeatedly speaks of people who sin without realizing it and then "become aware" of their guilt (Leviticus 4:13–14, 22–23, 27–28). Lack of awareness does not guarantee that no harm or violation has occurred. Once a wrong becomes known, the person is called to respond rather than to defend his innocence on the basis of his intentions. That teaches us to be teachable. We may need correction about things we thought were perfectly acceptable.

What, then, of deliberate sin? Here the Law draws an important line. There was no sacrifice for defiant, high-handed rebellion against God: "But anyone who sins defiantly, whether native-born or foreigner, blasphemes the LORD and must be cut off from the people of Israel. Because they have despised the LORD's word and broken his commands, they must surely be cut off" (Numbers 15:30–31). Nor was there any sacrifice for the capital crimes the Law names, such as murder and adultery (Leviticus 20:10; 24:17). Confession did not change the sentence: "Do not accept a ransom for the life of a murderer, who deserves to die. They are to be put to death" (Numbers 35:31). Achan confessed his theft of the devoted things at

Jericho fully and truthfully, and he was still put to death (Joshua 7:20–25). Such sins fell under either God's just punishment or His sovereign grace.

We should be precise, though, because Leviticus does provide for one kind of knowing wrong. A person who deceived a neighbor about a deposit, robbed or extorted him, kept lost property, or swore falsely about any of these could bring a guilt offering once he "realized his guilt" and repaid what he owed in full, plus a fifth (Leviticus 6:1–7; see Numbers 5:6–7). Those were not accidents. But they were wrongs that could be repaired by restitution, and the offender came forward on his own, confessed, and made them right. Confession was required, but it was not what qualified a sin for sacrifice. The kind of sin decided that. Where the harm could be undone, the Law made a way back. Where a life had been taken or a marriage violated, it made none. The Law took sin far more seriously than we tend to, and it never offered a sacrifice as a loophole for a heart set on defiance or as a remedy for the gravest crimes.

This is why David's story is so striking. His adultery with Bathsheba and his plot to have her husband Uriah killed were not unintentional sins, and the Law attached the death penalty to both. There was no sacrifice he could bring. And yet, when David confessed, "I have sinned against the LORD," Nathan replied, "The LORD has taken away your sin. You are not going to die" (2 Samuel 12:13). God sovereignly chose to forgive his sin and preserve his life. David understood that he could not perform enough sacrifices to atone for what he had done, and so his only appeal was to throw himself on God's mercy: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your

sight; so you are right in your verdict and justified when you judge" (Psalm 51:3–4).

We should add two things so that this great story is not misused. First, David's forgiveness did not erase the harm he had done. Uriah was still dead, Bathsheba still grieved, and the consequences in David's household were long and painful (2 Samuel 12:10–14). Forgiveness does not mean consequences disappear, and a broken spirit shows itself in truthful acknowledgment of the harm, not in spiritualizing it away. Second, Psalm 51's rejection of sacrifice as a substitute for contrition is not a rejection of the worship God had instituted. The same psalm ends by looking forward to the day when God will again "delight in the sacrifices of the righteous" (Psalm 51:19). A humbled heart and God's appointed means of atonement belong together.

David's appeal is our only appeal as well. All of us deserve God's judgment, whether for the wrongs we did not know we were committing or for those we chose with our eyes open. We humble ourselves, acknowledge our sin, and submit to His verdict, trusting His provision. Jesus described our natural condition with painful accuracy: "This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (John 3:19). That is the attitude of every human heart left to itself. And yet some do come into the light. How? "But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God" (John 3:21). Our own conviction is that every true believer can make the same confession: if I have come to the light, it is not my doing, but God's.

The fitting response to these chapters, then, joins humility, confession, and confidence in God's provision. We neither excuse harm because it was unintended nor assume that a deliberate failure puts us beyond the reach of repentance. And we need not live trapped in an anxious search for every undiscovered fault. The provision for atonement existed to make restoration possible, not to make people afraid. That hope is fulfilled decisively in Christ, the Lamb who was not only laid on the altar but who laid down His own life, so that we might live honestly before God, taking sin seriously without letting fear have the final word.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Leviticus begins with God speaking "from the tent of meeting," right after His glory filled the tabernacle. How does reading Leviticus as God's instructions for living in His presence change the way you approach this book?
2. The worshiper laid his own hand on the animal's head before it died in his place. What does this gesture teach you about what it means that Christ died in your place?
3. The burnt offering was wholly consumed, held nothing back, and was "an aroma pleasing to the LORD." What would it look like for your life to be a "living sacrifice" in the same spirit?
4. The prophets condemned sacrifices offered without justice, mercy, or humility. Where might your own worship be in danger of becoming a ritual that costs you nothing personally?

5. Leviticus provided offerings even for those who could afford only two birds or a handful of flour. What does this tell you about God's heart toward the poor and toward those who feel they have little to offer?
6. Leviticus treats even unintentional sin as real sin, yet provides atonement for it. How do you respond when you discover you have wronged someone without meaning to? How can you be teachable without becoming anxious?

Chapter Two

Leviticus 5–7

The opening chapters of Leviticus introduced the offerings one by one. In chapters 5 through 7 the focus shifts from the offerings themselves to the problem they were meant to answer: guilt. Chapter 5 begins not with dramatic crimes but with ordinary failures that most of us would hardly notice. A person hears a public call for witnesses and keeps quiet about what he knows: "If anyone sins because they do not speak up when they hear a public charge to testify regarding something they have seen or learned about, they will be held responsible" (Leviticus 5:1). Another touches something unclean without realizing it. Another "thoughtlessly takes an oath to do anything, whether good or evil" (Leviticus 5:4), and then forgets about it. Silence when truth is needed, contamination we did not notice, careless words we never followed through on: these are the everyday ways people fall short without ever setting out to do wrong.

And then comes the instruction that governs all of them: "when anyone becomes aware that they are guilty in any of these matters, they must confess in what way they have sinned" (Leviticus 5:5). Confession was not optional, and it was not vague. The worshiper had to name *in what way* he had sinned. Only then did he bring his offering, and only then did the promise follow: "the priest will make atonement for them for the sin they have committed, and they will be forgiven" (Leviticus 5:10). The pattern is simple, and it has never changed: awareness, honest confession, God's provision, forgiveness.

Before looking at the guilt offering itself, it helps to think about what guilt actually is, because the word covers two different things that we easily confuse. There is the guilt that results from actually breaking a law or a moral standard. If I have done wrong, I am guilty of it, whether or not I feel anything about it. And there is the experience of guilt, the pain of conscience that God has built into us. Rightly tuned, conscience is a gift, the inner alarm that tells us something is wrong. Hebrews speaks of the mature as those "who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil" (Hebrews 5:14).

These two can combine in four ways. A person may be neither guilty nor feel guilty, which is where we would all like to live. A person may feel guilty without being guilty, perhaps because he misunderstands what God requires or because his conscience has been trained by human rules rather than by Scripture. Someone raised to believe that some harmless custom is sinful may feel real distress over something God never forbade. A person may be guilty without feeling guilty, and this is the most dangerous condition of all. Proverbs describes it with a vivid picture: "This is the way of an adulterous woman: She eats and wipes her mouth and says, 'I've done nothing wrong'" (Proverbs 30:20). And finally a person may be guilty and feel it. That is not a comfortable place to be, but it is a hopeful one, because it is where repentance begins.

We should also remember that the verdicts of human communities do not always match the truth. When Stephen was brought before the Sanhedrin, false witnesses testified against him, the council condemned him, and he was stoned. By that court's reckoning he was guilty of blasphemy. Yet before God he

was faithful, and he died praying for his killers. Meanwhile the witnesses "laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul" (Acts 7:58), who approved of the killing and felt no guilt at all. Saul was innocent in the eyes of the council and guilty before God. Human condemnation does not establish guilt before God, and human approval does not establish innocence. Churches need to remember that as well. A community can create an atmosphere of accusation that feels authoritative while misrepresenting both the facts and the Lord in whose name it speaks.

Now to the guilt offering itself. The passages that describe it fall into a clear pattern. The guilt offering was required for violating the Lord's holy things (Leviticus 5:14–16), for sins committed without knowing it (5:17–19), and for wronging a neighbor through deceit, robbery, or extortion (6:1–7). The detailed regulations for the priests come later (7:1–6). What set this offering apart from the sin offering was restitution. The offender brought a ram, but he also repaid what he owed and added a fifth: "They must make restitution for what they have failed to do in regard to the holy things, pay an additional fifth of its value and give all this to the priest. The priest will make atonement for them with the ram as a guilt offering, and they will be forgiven" (Leviticus 5:16). In Leviticus sin and guilt are woven together so closely that it is hard to tell where one theme ends and the other begins. The Bible, unlike our culture, will not let us separate what we have done from what we owe.

Remarkably, even the Philistines understood that much. When they captured the ark of the covenant, their god Dagon kept falling on his face before it and their people were struck with tumors. Their priests and diviners advised returning the

ark, and they said, "do not send it back to him without a gift; by all means send a guilt offering to him" (1 Samuel 6:3). They made gold models of tumors and rats and sent them with the ark. It was a pagan improvisation, and it would not have satisfied the Law. But even people with no knowledge of Leviticus sensed that if you have wronged the holy God, something is owed.

What were "the LORD's holy things"? In Israel they included the offerings themselves and the portions set apart for the priests, the tithes and firstfruits, the sanctuary and its furnishings, and anything dedicated to God. An Israelite who ate a priestly portion by mistake, or failed to give what belonged to the Lord, had committed sacrilege even if he had not meant to. Leviticus 19 gives an example: meat from a fellowship offering left until the third day was to be burned, and anyone who ate it had "desecrated what is holy to the LORD" (Leviticus 19:8).

It is natural for Christians to ask what the equivalent might be for us. Here we should be careful to say that Leviticus 5 was describing a specific offense, so anything we say about our own lives is an application rather than a definition. But the New Testament does treat certain things as holy in a way that echoes this law. The name of the Lord is holy; Jesus taught us to pray, "hallowed be your name" (Matthew 6:9). The gospel is holy, so much so that Paul pronounced a curse on anyone, even an angel, who would preach a different one (Galatians 1:8). Our bodies are holy: "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies" (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

And the Lord's Supper is holy. Paul himself draws the connection with Israel's sacrifices: "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?... Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar?" (1 Corinthians 10:16, 18). Christians differ on how Christ is present in the Supper, and we need not settle that question here to agree that the table is not common. Paul warns that "whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" and tells each of us to "examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup" (1 Corinthians 11:27–28).

What does "an unworthy manner" mean? Some understand it chiefly as coming to the table with unconfessed sin. Others point out that the word describes the *manner* of eating rather than the worthiness of the person, and that none of us is personally worthy apart from grace. The surrounding context helps us. In Corinth, some were eating and drinking their fill while poorer believers went hungry and were humiliated (1 Corinthians 11:20–22). To "discern the body" therefore includes recognizing Christ's body in the people gathered at the table. Our own view is that the warning concerns treating the Supper as common, whether by irreverence toward what it proclaims or by contempt for the brothers and sisters with whom we share it. But that does not make self-examination unnecessary. Paul commands it, and honest self-examination will always turn up something to confess. The table is not for the sinless. It is for sinners who take their sin and their Savior seriously.

The second category of the guilt offering is perhaps the most searching passage in these chapters: "If anyone sins and does what is forbidden in any of the LORD's commands, even though they do not know it, they are guilty and will be held responsible" (Leviticus 5:17). The offering follows, and then the verdict is repeated for emphasis: "It is a guilt offering; they have been guilty of wrongdoing against the LORD" (Leviticus 5:19).

A sin can be unknown in two ways. We may not know that an action violates God's command, or circumstances may hide the true nature of what we are doing. Genesis gives us an example of the second kind. When Isaac passed Rebekah off as his sister, the Philistine king Abimelek discovered the truth and was horrified: "What is this you have done to us? One of the men might well have slept with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us" (Genesis 26:10). The man who might have taken Rebekah would have been deceived, but he would still have been guilty of taking another man's wife. Abimelek did not debate whether the situation excused it. The wrong would have been real.

Joshua 9 gives another example, one that combines unknown sin with the Lord's holy things. The Gibeonites, who lived nearby, disguised themselves with worn-out sandals and moldy bread and pretended to have come from a distant land. Joshua and the leaders asked some probing questions, but "The Israelites sampled their provisions but did not inquire of the LORD" (Joshua 9:14). They made a treaty and swore to it in the Lord's name. When the deception came to light, Israel honored the oath, because the Lord's name had been invoked. But the leaders had still failed, and the consequences of that failure

lasted for generations. They did not know, but they should have asked.

Will any of us ever know the Scriptures so thoroughly, or follow the Spirit so perfectly, that we never commit an unknown sin? Surely not. David prayed, "But who can discern their own errors? Forgive my hidden faults" (Psalm 19:12). Anyone who imagines he has reached a place where he no longer sins has a shallow view of the human heart and too small a view of God's holiness. But notice that the Law's recognition of unknown sin did not lead to despair. It led to a provision. God made room in the sacrificial system for His people's ignorance, for their inability to understand everything and for that uneasy sense of falling short without being able to say exactly how. This is grace. There is an offering even for the sins we cannot name.

Still, the principle of Leviticus 5:17 is sobering: lack of knowledge does not remove guilt. That was true in the Old Testament, in the New, and it is true today. Paul writes that all people have enough knowledge of God to be accountable to Him, even if they lack what they need to be saved: "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse" (Romans 1:20). Ignorance is not innocence.

Scripture also teaches, though, that knowledge affects accountability. Jesus said that the servant who knew his master's will and ignored it "will be beaten with many blows," while the one who did not know "will be beaten with few blows," and He added, "From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded" (Luke 12:47–48). Paul told the Athenians, "In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands

all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). Both truths belong together. Ignorance does not make us innocent, and greater light brings greater responsibility.

Consider Paul's own people. They had a clearer knowledge of God than any other nation, and yet they were ignorant of the most important thing of all, God's way of salvation in His Son. Paul prayed for them with deep longing: "For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness" (Romans 10:2-3). Many rejected Jesus at least partly because of misinformation. They assumed He came from Galilee, not realizing He had been born in Bethlehem. "How can the Messiah come from Galilee?" some asked. "Does not Scripture say that the Messiah will come from David's descendants and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?" (John 7:41-42). When Nicodemus urged the leaders to give Jesus a fair hearing, they dismissed him: "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee" (John 7:52). They were confident, they were wrong, and they never looked into it.

So let us not imagine that we will escape accountability because we were unaware of the truth, or because a pastor or teacher taught us wrongly. Each of us will give an account for ourselves. That is why knowing God's Word cannot be left to pastors, teachers, and professional ministers. Every believer is called to read it, study it, and test what he hears against it.

It is striking to set Leviticus 5 beside the words Jesus spoke from the cross: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). The Lord prayed for those who

crucified Him in the very language of unintentional sin, the category for which the sacrificial system had always provided atonement. But what of those who *did* know? Jesus told Pilate, "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above. Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin" (John 19:11). Guilt comes in degrees, and knowing, deliberate betrayal is the gravest of all.

As we saw in the last chapter, the Law provided no sacrifice for defiant, high-handed sin, and no sacrifice for the gravest crimes it named. And if we are honest, every one of us has sinned knowingly and willfully, not once but many times. Where, then, is our hope? Hebrews answers by quoting Psalm 40: "Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me'" (Hebrews 10:5). The sacrifices God had commanded were set aside so that His deeper will could be done: "And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). What the Law could not do, God did: "For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering" (Romans 8:3). Christ's single sacrifice does not merely extend the old system's reach. It closes the very gap the old system was never built to close.

How, then, should we understand the forgiveness promised again and again in these chapters? Faithful Christians describe it in somewhat different ways. Some emphasize that the sacrifices were genuine means of grace within the covenant: God promised that the worshiper "will be forgiven," and He meant it. Others emphasize that the sacrifices restored fellowship within the covenant community but could never

secure a person's standing before God, since "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" (Hebrews 10:4). Our own understanding leans toward the second view. The laws, sacrifices, and commands of obedience in both Testaments were given for right fellowship with God in this life, never as the basis of right standing before Him. That has always come by grace alone, received through faith. But both views agree on the essential point. Whatever forgiveness Israel received through the sacrifices rested ultimately on what Christ would do. Paul says that God "in his forbearance... had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished" (Romans 3:25), looking ahead to the cross. And Paul draws his argument for justification by faith from David himself: "Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord will never count against them" (Romans 4:7-8).

This has a very practical bearing on how we deal with sin as Christians. Christ is our one and forever sacrifice, and "where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary" (Hebrews 10:18). Our standing before God was settled when we trusted in Him. Yet we still struggle with our sinful nature on this side of heaven, and when we sin we are still called to confess, not to be saved again, but to walk in restored fellowship with the Father. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). The Israelite confessed "in what way" he had sinned and brought his offering. We confess our sins and come to the One who has already been offered, and who now lives to intercede for us.

The third category of the guilt offering brings us down to the most concrete level of all. "If anyone sins and is unfaithful to the

LORD by deceiving a neighbor about something entrusted to them or left in their care or about something stolen, or if they cheat their neighbor, or if they find lost property and lie about it, or if they swear falsely about any such sin that people may commit," they are to return what they took, "make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the owner on the day they present their guilt offering" (Leviticus 6:2-3, 5).

Notice two things. First, cheating a neighbor is called being "unfaithful to the LORD." Every wrong against another person is also a wrong against God, who made that person and hears his cry. Second, the restitution comes first, "on the day" of the offering, and it goes to the person who was wronged. The sacrifice did not replace the repayment. The injured neighbor's loss mattered, and no amount of religious activity could make up for leaving it unrepaired.

Jesus taught exactly the same order: "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift" (Matthew 5:23-24). Worship offered by someone who has refused to make things right with a person he has wronged is not what God is looking for. And when Zacchaeus met Jesus, his repentance went straight to his accounts: "if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount" (Luke 19:8). He went well beyond the Law's added fifth. That is what a changed heart does.

We need to be clear, though, about what restitution does and does not do for the Christian. It is not a payment that completes an inadequate atonement. Christ's sacrifice is sufficient, and nothing we do adds to it. Restitution is the fruit of repentance

and a matter of love for our neighbor. When repair is possible, we should make it. When full repair is impossible, that inability does not place a repentant believer beyond mercy. And receiving God's forgiveness does not automatically cancel our obligations to those we have harmed, or entitle us to their immediate trust.

How, then, should we handle guilt biblically? Leviticus offers more help here than we might expect. For real guilt, whether against God or a neighbor, known or unknown, the combination of restitution and the guilt offering settled the debt completely. Picture the Israelite who comes to the priest with his neighbor's property returned, the added fifth paid, and a ram from his flock. When the priest has made atonement, what more is there to do? Nothing. The debt is paid. For us, Christ is that guilt offering. Isaiah prophesied of the suffering Servant that "the LORD makes his life an offering for sin," and the word Isaiah uses is the very word Leviticus uses for the guilt offering. "By his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities" (Isaiah 53:10-11).

One reason many Christians carry guilt for years is that they have never truly believed the debt has been paid. A Bible teacher once told of working as a lifeguard when he was a teenager. He did not take the job seriously, and one day he was sitting at the side of the pool chatting with friends instead of watching from his chair. A man ran along the edge of the pool, and the young lifeguard blew his whistle at him for running, only to watch the man dive in and pull a small boy from the water, his face blue. By God's mercy the boy revived and suffered no lasting harm. The lifeguard repented immediately and was a conscientious guard from then on. Decades later he could not recall the day

without reliving it vividly. But he concluded that it would be pointless to condemn himself every time the memory returned. He had sinned, incurred guilt, and repented, and Christ had paid his debt.

That story teaches something important. Remembering a wrong is not the same as remaining condemned by it. A vivid memory does not prove that Christ's forgiveness has failed, or that we are refusing to believe it. The goal is a conscience that can remember truthfully without treating the past as a debt still owed. "If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything" (1 John 3:20). Christ's blood cleanses our consciences "so that we may serve the living God" (Hebrews 9:14), not so that we may go on serving our guilt.

We should be honest, too, that guilt can be distorted in both directions. Some religious groups have used guilt as a tool for controlling people, expanding it far beyond anything Scripture teaches. Others try to shrink guilt until nothing counts as wrong except harming someone else's immediate interests. Both are unhealthy. A conscience that is overactive can crush a person; a conscience that is deadened can destroy him and those around him. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). And when feelings of guilt persist long after honest confession, we should not assume that the person simply lacks faith. Sometimes the wise help of a pastor, a counselor, or a physician is part of how God brings relief, and such help need not be a rival to spiritual care.

Putting these chapters together, we can draw out a few practical steps. Our conscience must be trained by the Word, so

that it alerts us when we fall short and stays quiet when we have not. We should expect that not all our sin will be known to us, and take comfort that the Lord has provided for that too. Confession is always better than denial, and we can confess even sins we cannot fully name. When restitution is possible, we should make it, and when it is offered to us, we should accept it. And when we have confessed and repaired what we can, we should learn the lesson and leave the guilt behind. Carrying it around as though Christ's offering were not enough is not humility. It is unbelief.

The last section of these chapters, from 6:8 through 7:38, returns to the offerings, this time giving instructions to Aaron and his sons about how to handle each one. It is easy to skim, but it contains some beautiful details. The fellowship offering, for example, could be brought "as an expression of thankfulness" (Leviticus 7:12). Its meat was eaten by the worshiper and his family, and the thanksgiving offering had to be eaten the same day: "they must leave none of it till morning" (Leviticus 7:15). An offering brought to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering could be eaten over two days, but nothing could be left to the third (Leviticus 7:16–18). This was a meal in God's presence, shared with the priests, and the rules kept it from becoming ordinary leftovers. Gratitude was to be celebrated promptly and generously, not stored away. Anyone who ate it while ceremonially unclean "must be cut off from their people" (Leviticus 7:20). Joy in God's presence was real, but it was holy joy.

These chapters also repeat two prohibitions that run throughout the Law: "Do not eat any of the fat of cattle, sheep or goats" (Leviticus 7:23), and "wherever you live, you must not eat

the blood of any bird or animal. Anyone who eats blood must be cut off from their people" (Leviticus 7:26–27). Why fat and blood? Some have suggested that Israel's neighbors used them in their own rituals, and that the prohibition set Israel apart. That may have been part of it. But Leviticus gives its own reasons, and they are theological. The fat belonged to God: "All the fat is the LORD's" (Leviticus 3:16). And the blood was reserved for atonement: "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life" (Leviticus 17:11). These were not unclean things to be avoided. They were holy things set apart for God's use. The prohibition goes back even before Sinai, to God's word to Noah: "you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it" (Genesis 9:4).

Some have applied these verses to modern medical blood transfusions and concluded that Christians must refuse them. We believe that reading misunderstands the text. The prohibition concerns eating the blood of animals, in a context of sacrifice and of pagan practices surrounding blood. A life-saving medical procedure is a very different thing, and it is not a category the original command had in view. Most Christians have also noted that when the early church asked Gentile believers to abstain from blood (Acts 15:29), the concern was preserving table fellowship between Jewish and Gentile believers. More broadly, Paul warned against letting anyone judge us "by what you eat or drink," since such things "are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Colossians 2:16–17). Those who hold the stricter view deserve compassion, especially when facing agonizing medical decisions. But the heart of these verses is not

a medical rule. It is the truth that life belongs to God, and that atonement comes through a life given.

That truth points us once more to the cross. The blood that Israel was forbidden to eat was the blood God had given "to make atonement for one's life." And on the night He was betrayed, Jesus took a cup and told His disciples to drink, because it was His blood of the covenant, poured out for the forgiveness of sins (Matthew 26:27-28). The Levitical priests could never eat what contained the blood of the offering. Believers share in the life of the One whose blood has made atonement once for all. Every offering in these chapters, the sin offering, the guilt offering, the fellowship meal, finds its fulfillment in Him.

So we come back to where Leviticus 5 began: awareness, confession, God's provision, and forgiveness. We are guilty of violating the Lord's holy things. We are guilty of sins we do not even know about. We have wronged our neighbors. And the Lord has made His own Son an offering for our guilt. We must acknowledge our guilt and receive the offering He made. Then, having confessed, made right what we can, and trusted His sufficiency, we are free to love, to serve, and to accept accountability without trying to pay God again for a debt Christ has already paid.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Leviticus 5 begins with ordinary failures: keeping silent when we should speak, contamination we did not notice, careless promises we forgot. Which of these "everyday" sins are easiest for you to overlook, and why?

2. The chapter distinguishes between being guilty and feeling guilty. Have you ever felt guilty for something that was not wrong, or felt nothing about something that was? How can Scripture help train your conscience to tell the difference?
3. The guilt offering required restitution to the person wronged, plus a fifth, before the offering was made. Is there someone you have wronged whom God may be calling you to make things right with? What would restitution look like in your situation?
4. Leviticus 5:17 says that sin committed without knowing it still brings guilt, yet God provided an offering for it. How does this truth both humble you and comfort you?
5. Many rejected Jesus because they assumed He came from Galilee and never looked into it. What responsibility do you have to know God's Word for yourself, rather than relying entirely on what others tell you?
6. Is there a past sin that still troubles you even though you have confessed it? What would it mean for you to believe that Christ, your guilt offering, has fully paid that debt?

Chapter Three

Leviticus 8–10

The first seven chapters of Leviticus told Israel how to bring offerings. Chapters 8 through 10 turn from instruction to action. The tabernacle has been built, and now the men who will serve in it are consecrated. For the first time the priests of Israel stand before the altar and do what God has commanded. These three chapters contain one of the most glorious scenes in the Old Testament and, only a few verses later, one of the most frightening. Both show us the same God.

Chapter 8 describes the ordination of Aaron and his sons, carrying out the instructions God had given earlier (Exodus 29). Moses gathered the whole community at the entrance to the tent of meeting, so that the ordination happened in full public view. He washed Aaron and his sons with water. He dressed Aaron in the garments of the high priest: the tunic, the sash, the robe, the ephod, the breastpiece with the Urim and Thummim, and the turban with its gold plate. He anointed the tabernacle and everything in it with oil, and then poured anointing oil on Aaron's head. Then came the offerings: a bull for a sin offering, a ram for a burnt offering, and a second ram, the ram of ordination.

The phrase that recurs throughout the chapter is "as the LORD commanded Moses." It appears again and again, and the chapter ends with a summary that is almost a sigh of relief: "So Aaron and his sons did everything the LORD commanded through Moses" (Leviticus 8:36). This is not tedious repetition. It is the point. The priests did not invent their own way of approaching God. They received it.

The most striking moment of the ordination comes with the second ram: "Moses slaughtered the ram and took some of its blood and put it on the lobe of Aaron's right ear, on the thumb of his right hand and on the big toe of his right foot" (Leviticus 8:23). He did the same for Aaron's sons. Many readers have seen in this gesture a picture of total consecration. The ear that would listen to God's word, the hand that would do God's work, and the foot that would walk in God's ways were all marked with the blood of sacrifice. Leviticus does not explain the symbolism, so we should hold that interpretation humbly. But it fits the whole thrust of the book. The priest belonged to God from head to foot, and he belonged to God only because blood had been shed for him.

We should not miss who was being consecrated here. Aaron was the man who had made the golden calf, who had told the people, "These are your gods, Israel" (Exodus 32:4), and who had made excuses when Moses confronted him (Exodus 32:21–24). He was not ordained because his record was clean. He was washed, clothed, and anointed by grace, and the first offering made at his ordination was a sin offering for himself. That is why the ordination took so long. For seven days Aaron and his sons were not to leave the entrance to the tent of meeting: "You must stay at the entrance to the tent of meeting day and night for seven days and do what the LORD requires, so you will not die" (Leviticus 8:35). The men who would stand between God and the people first had to be made fit to stand there themselves.

Hebrews draws out exactly this contrast between Aaron and Christ. Every earthly high priest had to offer sacrifices for his own sins before he could offer them for the people. Jesus did not: "Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy,

blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself" (Hebrews 7:26–27). Aaron needed the blood of a bull. Christ needed no sacrifice for Himself, because He was the sacrifice.

And yet there is a sense in which the ordination of Aaron describes us too. Peter tells believers, "you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9). John praises the One who "has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father" (Revelation 1:5–6). Like Aaron, we did not qualify ourselves. We were washed, clothed in righteousness not our own, and set apart by blood. And like Aaron, we are called to serve with ears, hands, and feet that belong to God.

Chapter 9 moves to the eighth day, when the seven days of ordination were complete and the priests began their ministry. Moses told Aaron and the people what was at stake: "This is what the LORD has commanded you to do, so that the glory of the LORD may appear to you" (Leviticus 9:6). Aaron offered first for himself and then for the people: a sin offering, a burnt offering, a grain offering, and a fellowship offering. Then "Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them" (Leviticus 9:22).

What followed is one of the great moments of Israel's worship: "Moses and Aaron then went into the tent of meeting. When they came out, they blessed the people; and the glory of

the LORD appeared to all the people. Fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the fat portions on the altar. And when all the people saw it, they shouted for joy and fell facedown" (Leviticus 9:23-24).

Notice the order. The priests did everything as God commanded, and then God showed His glory. The fire from His presence was His answer, His visible acceptance of the offering. And the people's response joined two things we often keep apart. They shouted for joy, and they fell on their faces. Joy and reverence belong together in true worship. A worship that has only the shout and not the bowed face has forgotten who God is. A worship that has only the bowed face and never the shout has forgotten what He has done.

Then, without any transition, chapter 10 begins: "Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the LORD, contrary to his command. So fire came out from the presence of the LORD and consumed them, and they died before the LORD" (Leviticus 10:1-2).

The same fire that had come from the Lord's presence to accept the offering now came from His presence to consume the offerers. In the space of a few verses we move from the height of glory to catastrophe. The first fire produced reverent joy; the second must have produced terror. Yet both revealed the same thing. Whether in accepting worship or in judging it, the Lord showed Himself holy.

What exactly did Nadab and Abihu do wrong? The text is spare. They offered "unauthorized fire," something "contrary to his command." Interpreters have proposed various specifics. Perhaps they took coals from somewhere other than the altar,

when God later specified that the incense fire must come from it (Leviticus 16:12). Perhaps they entered where they were not permitted, or at a time they were not authorized to act, or offered incense that was not the prescribed blend (Exodus 30:9). Some have noticed that the very next instruction God gives forbids priests to drink wine when they enter the tent of meeting (Leviticus 10:8–9), and have wondered whether the two brothers were drunk. Leviticus declines to say. What it tells us is what matters: they did what God had not commanded. After a chapter in which everything was done "as the LORD commanded," two priests did something else.

We are not told their motives either. They may have been careless or presumptuous. They may simply have been swept up in the drama of the day and wanted to add something of their own. A later incident offers a sobering comparison. When David brought the ark to Jerusalem on a new cart, the oxen stumbled, and "Uzzah reached out and took hold of the ark of God.... The LORD's anger burned against Uzzah because of his irreverent act; therefore God struck him down, and he died there beside the ark of God" (2 Samuel 6:6–7). Uzzah may have reacted without thinking. But the ark was never supposed to be on a cart at all; God had commanded that it be carried on poles by the Levites. David later acknowledged, "We did not inquire of him about how to do it in the prescribed way" (1 Chronicles 15:13). Good intentions do not replace obedience when God has spoken.

The New Testament has its own sobering parallel. In the earliest days of the church, Ananias and Sapphira lied to the apostles about their gift, pretending to give everything while keeping back part of the price, and both fell dead (Acts 5:1–10). "Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about

these events" (Acts 5:11). In each case, at a formative moment in the life of God's people, God made an example that would stand for all time: He must be treated as holy.

We should be careful not to overstate what these stories teach. They do not mean that every mistake in worship or every lapse of judgment will bring immediate death. If that were so, none of us would survive a single Sunday. Most sins are not judged at once, and God's patience is one of the great themes of Scripture. But these moments at the beginning pull back the curtain and show us what sin in the presence of a holy God actually deserves. They remind us that God's patience is mercy, not indifference. And they remind us that, as we saw in the last chapter, ignorance does not make us innocent. Whether Nadab and Abihu knew what they were doing or not, God would show Himself holy.

Moses explained the judgment in a single sentence: "This is what the LORD spoke of when he said: 'Among those who approach me I will be proved holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored'" (Leviticus 10:3). The principle is that closeness brings responsibility. Those who stand nearest to God, who lead His people in worship, are held to the strictest account. The priests' conduct defined for the whole nation the line between holy and common, and everyone was watching. James says something similar to those who would teach in the church: "we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1).

And then comes the most moving line in the chapter: "Aaron remained silent" (Leviticus 10:3). What could he say? In a single moment he had lost two of his four sons, on the very day of his greatest honor. He did not protest, and he did not accuse God. But neither did he speak words of praise. He was simply silent.

There is a time in grief when silence is the only honest response, and Scripture does not rebuke Aaron for it.

What follows is hard to read. Moses called two of Aaron's cousins to carry the bodies out of the camp, still in their priestly tunics. Then he told Aaron and his surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, that they must not show the ordinary signs of mourning: "Do not let your hair become unkempt and do not tear your clothes, or you will die and the LORD will be angry with the whole community. But your relatives, all the Israelites, may mourn for those the LORD destroyed by fire" (Leviticus 10:6). Because the anointing oil was on them and they were in the middle of their service, they had to stay at their post. The grief was real, but others would have to carry it for them that day. It is a picture of what it can cost to serve a holy God, and also a reminder that the whole community was invited to share the family's sorrow. The prohibition was not a statement that God does not care about grief. It was a statement about the priests' particular calling at that particular moment.

Then, for the only time in Leviticus, the Lord spoke directly to Aaron alone. What He said is striking in its timing: "You and your sons are not to drink wine or other fermented drink whenever you go into the tent of meeting, or you will die. This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, so that you can distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean, and so you can teach the Israelites all the decrees the LORD has given them through Moses" (Leviticus 10:9–11).

The purpose of the command is stated positively. The priests needed clear minds for two tasks: to distinguish between the holy and the common, and to teach. Discernment and

instruction were at the heart of their calling, and anything that clouded their judgment endangered both.

Proverbs gives the same counsel to kings: "It is not for kings, Lemuel—it is not for kings to drink wine, not for rulers to crave beer, lest they drink and forget what has been decreed, and deprive all the oppressed of their rights" (Proverbs 31:4–5). Priesthood and kingship were both anointed offices in Israel, one with authority in matters of worship and the other in matters of civil justice. Both required clear judgment. So both priests and kings were warned against what impairs it.

Is this counsel only for priests and kings? We believe it speaks to every believer. Christians hold different convictions about whether to drink alcohol at all, and Scripture's clear condemnation is of drunkenness rather than of every use of wine. But whatever our convictions on that question, the principle behind Leviticus 10 applies to all of us: whatever dulls our discernment makes us less able to distinguish the holy from the common. And discernment may be one of the greatest needs among believers today.

Paul's charge to Timothy makes this point. He warned that "the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths" (2 Timothy 4:3–4). His answer was a call to clear-headedness: "But you, keep your head in all situations" (2 Timothy 4:5). And his remedy was the Word. Timothy was to be "a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). He was to preach it faithfully, in season and out of season (2

Timothy 4:2). And he could rely on it completely, because "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:16–17).

The same contrast between wine and clear-minded devotion appears in one of Paul's best-known commands: "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:18–19). Drunkenness brings folly, waste, and loss of control; being filled with the Spirit brings the opposite. Wine impairs discernment. The Spirit sharpens it.

But what does it mean to be filled with the Spirit? Paul never gives a precise definition, and Christians have understood it in different ways. Some emphasize a distinct experience of the Spirit's power; others emphasize a moment-by-moment yielding to His control. Our own understanding draws heavily on a parallel passage in Colossians, where Paul describes the same outcome with different words: "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts" (Colossians 3:16). In Ephesians the source is being filled with the Spirit; in Colossians it is the message of Christ dwelling richly. The results are the same: teaching, singing, gratitude, and mutual encouragement. Many commentators have noticed this parallel and concluded that the Spirit-filled life and the Word-saturated life are the same reality seen from two angles. The Spirit who inspired the Scriptures fills us as His Word dwells in us.

Christians also differ on what "psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit" includes. Some believe all three terms refer to the kinds of songs found in the book of Psalms, and we find that view persuasive, since the Greek translation of the Psalms uses all three words in its headings. Many others understand the phrase to include other Christ-centered songs as well, pointing to what appear to be early Christian hymns in the New Testament itself (Philippians 2:6–11) and the songs of Revelation. Either way, the point is that the Spirit-filled church is a church that sings God's truth to one another.

This means that Paul, even when he speaks of the Spirit's filling, has not changed his mind about the believer's sufficient resource for every good work. It is still the Word of God. A community that seeks to be filled with the Spirit should expect to be driven deeper into Scripture, not away from it. We should therefore be wary of any teaching, however exciting, that pulls attention away from God's Word toward promises of material prosperity, a steady diet of ecstatic experiences, or claims of new revelation that stand alongside Scripture as though it were insufficient. Discernment grows from diligent reading, study, and meditation on the Word. That is how we, like the priests, learn to distinguish between the holy and the common.

The chapter closes with a puzzling exchange. Moses discovered that the goat of the sin offering, which should have been eaten by the priests in the sanctuary area, had been burned up instead. He was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar: "Why didn't you eat the sin offering in the sanctuary area? It is most holy; it was given to you to take away the guilt of the community by making atonement for them before the LORD" (Leviticus 10:17). Aaron answered on their behalf: "Today they sacrificed their sin

offering and their burnt offering before the LORD, but such things as this have happened to me. Would the LORD have been pleased if I had eaten the sin offering today?" (Leviticus 10:19). And the chapter ends: "When Moses heard this, he was satisfied" (Leviticus 10:20).

What did Aaron mean? There are two main views, and both have been held by faithful interpreters.

The more common view is that Aaron was grieving. He would carry out every other duty God required, even without the outward signs of mourning, but he could not bring himself to eat a sacred meal on the day his sons had died. On this reading, God, who made us to weep, understood a father's heart, and Moses recognized that. The lesson is that God is not coldly strict about the letter of the law when a broken heart is involved.

Another view, held by some respected older commentators, is that Aaron's hesitation came from a sense of unworthiness rather than grief. They point out that the sin offering was not a festive meal but a solemn one. Eating it was part of bearing the guilt of the community, and that would have been appropriate even in mourning. What held Aaron back, they suggest, was the fear that the judgment on his sons had exposed sin still clinging to his own household, so that he and his remaining sons were not fit that day to eat so holy a meal. Aaron's own question points in that direction: "Would the LORD have been pleased?" The concern is not his feelings but God's honor, the very principle Moses had stated earlier: "Among those who approach me I will be proved holy." Aaron and his remaining sons had no more experience than Nadab and Abihu. They could easily have made a similar mistake. On this reading, they had caught a painful glimpse of God's holiness and did not dare to presume.

We lean toward the second view, because it arises from the context of the chapter itself, which is concerned from beginning to end with treating God as holy. The lesson on this reading is that even in our strongest feelings, we should take care to honor the Lord. Paul calls us to work out our salvation "with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12), and Jesus said, "Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37).

But we should hold this carefully. The two concerns may not be entirely separate. Aaron explicitly connects his answer to "such things as this" that had happened to him, so his grief is part of the picture, and his question about what would please the Lord gives it a theological focus. The text does not give us a full account of his inner reasoning. We should also not assume that Aaron's surviving sons secretly shared in their brothers' offense; the narrative does not say so. And Philippians 2:12 must be read with the next verse: "for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Philippians 2:13). Holy fear rests on God's grace, not on anxious self-scrutiny.

There is a lesson here about how we read Scripture as well. We should not choose the interpretation that is most emotionally satisfying to us, nor assume that the more severe reading is automatically the more faithful one. We should seek the reading that best fits the words and the context, and hold it with humility where the text leaves details unstated. And we should notice what Moses did. He began with a firm objection based on God's command, but he listened to Aaron's explanation, and when he heard it, he was satisfied. That is a

model for anyone who leads or teaches. Faithfulness to God's Word can be firm without being unable to hear.

The tragedy of Nadab and Abihu has an echo later in Israel's history. Generations afterward, another high priest had two sons who did evil before the Lord. "Eli's sons were scoundrels; they had no regard for the LORD" (1 Samuel 2:12). They took the best of the sacrifices for themselves by force and treated the worship of God as a way to serve their appetites: "This sin of the young men was very great in the LORD's sight, for they were treating the LORD's offering with contempt" (1 Samuel 2:17). Unlike Nadab and Abihu, they were not struck down at once. But God sent a prophet to warn Eli that his house would be cut off from the priesthood, and both sons died on the same day, in the battle in which the ark itself was captured by the Philistines (1 Samuel 4:11).

The line of the high priesthood had passed through Aaron's surviving sons. Eleazar succeeded Aaron, but by the time of Eli, the high priesthood was held by a descendant of Ithamar instead (see 1 Chronicles 24:3). Scripture does not tell us how or why that shift took place. After several generations, the prophecy against Eli's house was fulfilled when Solomon removed Abiathar, Eli's descendant, "fulfilling the word the LORD had spoken at Shiloh about the house of Eli" (1 Kings 2:27), and appointed Zadok, a descendant of Eleazar, in his place.

In the same prophecy, God made a promise: "I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who will do according to what is in my heart and mind. I will firmly establish his priestly house, and they will minister before my anointed one always" (1 Samuel 2:35). Israel's priesthood, like its kingship, had its faithful and its unfaithful servants. Even Aaron had made the golden calf,

and two of his sons died for disregarding God's instructions. Who would be the faithful priest?

The most immediate fulfillment appears to be Zadok, whose line replaced Eli's and remained faithful through the monarchy. Ezekiel later singled out "the Levitical priests, who are descendants of Zadok and who guarded my sanctuary when the Israelites went astray from me" (Ezekiel 44:15). But the promise reaches further than Zadok. Many prophecies in the Old Testament work this way, with a genuine historical fulfillment that does not exhaust their full meaning. The faithful priest who would do all that is in God's heart and mind is ultimately Jesus Christ, who is both High Priest and the Anointed King. Hebrews says He became "a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God," so that "he might make atonement for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2:17). And unlike Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, or Eli's sons, He never offered anything God had not commanded. He offered Himself: "He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12).

So where do these chapters leave us? They leave us with a God who is glorious and holy, whose fire both accepts and consumes. They leave us with a priesthood made fit to serve only by blood and by grace, and a warning about what happens when those who draw near to God treat Him as common. And they leave us with a longing for a better priest, one who needs no sacrifice for Himself and who will never fail.

That priest has come, and through Him we have been brought near. The New Testament does not say that the holiness of Leviticus 10 has been softened. It says we now draw near

through a better sacrifice. "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire'" (Hebrews 12:28–29). The call to holiness rests on redemption: we were redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:19). Because we have been brought near at such a cost, we worship as the Israelites did on the eighth day, with shouts of joy and with our faces to the ground.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The ordination of the priests is marked by the repeated phrase "as the LORD commanded Moses." In what areas of your worship or Christian life are you most tempted to substitute your own ideas for what God has said?
2. Blood was placed on the priest's right ear, thumb, and big toe. If your hearing, your work, and your walk were all consecrated to God, what would change this week?
3. On the eighth day the people "shouted for joy and fell facedown." Does your own worship tend to lean more toward joy or toward reverence? How might you grow in the one that comes less naturally?
4. The same fire that accepted the offering consumed Nadab and Abihu. How do you hold together God's love and His holiness? Why is it dangerous to lose sight of either one?
5. Priests were forbidden to drink wine in the tent of meeting so they could distinguish between the holy and the common and teach God's decrees. What things in your life dull your

spiritual discernment, and how does time in God's Word sharpen it?

6. Moses listened to Aaron's explanation and was satisfied. When you disagree with someone about how to obey God, how can you remain faithful to His Word while still being willing to hear and understand?

Chapter Four

Leviticus 11–13

With chapter 11, Leviticus enters a section that many readers find the strangest in the whole Bible. The priests had just been told to "distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean" (Leviticus 10:10), and now God begins to teach them what that means in daily life. Chapters 11 through 15 deal with clean and unclean animals, childbirth, skin diseases, mold in garments and houses, and bodily discharges. It is easy to wonder what any of this has to do with us. But if we read patiently, and resist the temptation either to skip these chapters or to make them say more than they say, they have a great deal to teach us about the holiness of God and about how to read His Word.

Chapter 11 lays out which animals Israel could eat and which they could not. Among land animals, "You may eat any animal that has a divided hoof and that chews the cud" (Leviticus 11:3). Cattle, sheep, and goats qualified. The camel, the hyrax, the rabbit, and the pig did not, because each met only one of the two conditions. Among creatures of the water, those with fins and scales were clean, and the rest were not. A list of birds was forbidden, most of them birds of prey or scavengers. Most flying insects were unclean, but certain kinds were permitted: "Of these you may eat any kind of locust, katydid, cricket or grasshopper" (Leviticus 11:22). And contact with the carcasses of unclean animals made a person unclean until evening.

Why these particular distinctions? The question is an old one, and people have given many answers. One popular explanation is that the food laws were about health: God was

protecting Israel from diseases carried by pork or shellfish, long before anyone understood germs. That explanation has been preached with great confidence from well-known pulpits. But it has a serious problem. The Bible never gives health as a reason for the food laws. Not once. And the list itself does not fit a health rationale very well. Locusts are permitted; the rabbit is not. Pork is not uniquely dangerous compared with other meats when properly prepared, and many clean animals can carry disease as readily as unclean ones. Jewish teachers themselves have long insisted that these laws should not be understood primarily as sanitary regulations. Health benefits may exist here and there, and we need not deny them, but most attempts to build a health case pick out a few convenient examples and pass over the rest. As an explanation of the whole system, it does not hold up.

Others have suggested that the food laws were meant to teach moral discipline, training Israel in self-control by requiring them to say no to certain foods every day. Still others have proposed that the categories reflect the order of creation: creatures that fit the expected pattern of their domain were clean, and those that seemed to cross categories were not. Fish have fins and scales; a sea creature without them seemed out of place. Land animals that met only one of the two criteria were anomalies. Some have noticed that the permitted animals tend to have restricted diets while many forbidden ones, like the pig or the scavenging birds, will eat almost anything. And many have observed that some of the forbidden animals were associated with the religious practices of Israel's neighbors.

Any of these may contain some truth. But we should be honest about what they are: inferences about the reasons, not

statements from the text. Where Scripture is silent, we should avoid being dogmatic.

What Scripture does give us is a clear statement of purpose. The chapter ends this way: "I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves along the ground. I am the LORD, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy" (Leviticus 11:44–45). And later in Leviticus, God connects the food laws directly to Israel's separation from the nations: "You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds.... You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own" (Leviticus 20:25–26).

That is the explanation we find most convincing, because it is the one the text itself gives. The food laws were a daily, visible reminder that Israel belonged to God and was set apart from the nations around them. Every meal, every trip to the market, every shared table was an occasion to remember: we are His, and we are different.

The word "holy" basically means "set apart." The same family of words gives us "saint," a set-apart one, and "consecrate," to set apart for God. To be holy is to be set apart to God, which also means being set apart from something. When Isaiah saw the Lord on His throne and heard the seraphim calling "Holy, holy, holy," his first response was a cry of ruin: "Woe to me!... I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty" (Isaiah 6:5). He immediately sensed the moral gulf between the holy God and himself.

We have little trouble understanding that kind of holiness. But what do animals have to do with it? Perhaps as much as eating a piece of fruit had to do with sin and death for the whole human race. The fruit in the garden was not poisonous. What made eating it deadly was that God had forbidden it. In the same way, holiness in Leviticus 11 is not found in the animals themselves. It is found in God's presence and in His word. Whatever God claims for Himself is holy; whatever He commands is holy.

This helps explain something that might otherwise seem confusing. When God forbade certain animals, holiness meant refraining from them. When He later permitted those same animals, what people ate no longer affected their holiness at all. The animals had not changed. God's declaration had. What matters, then, is not the particular command in itself but the God who gives it. He may change a command given for a particular time and purpose, but His holiness does not change.

Consider holy ground. When God spoke to Moses from the burning bush, He said, "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). The very dirt was holy, not because of anything in the dirt but because God was present there and declared it so. If you could find that spot today, the ground would be ordinary again.

Or consider what happened at Kadesh Barnea, which we will read about in Numbers. God commanded Israel to go up and take the land, promising to be with them. The people refused, grumbling in their tents and talking about returning to Egypt. So God gave them a new command: turn back toward the desert and wander there until that generation had died. Then the people changed their minds and decided to go up and fight after

all. Moses warned them, "Why are you disobeying the LORD's command? This will not succeed! Do not go up, because the LORD is not with you" (Numbers 14:41–42). They went anyway and were routed. Were they obeying God by finally doing what He had first commanded? No. Moses later described it as rebellion: "You rebelled against the LORD's command and in your arrogance you marched up into the hill country" (Deuteronomy 1:43). They ignored God's present word in favor of a word He had withdrawn, because they cared more about avoiding the desert than about obeying Him.

Our conviction, then, is that nothing is holy or good in itself apart from God. His commands are holy and good because He is holy and good and because He gives them. "You are good, and what you do is good" (Psalm 119:68). His commands are trustworthy because He is trustworthy.

Many faithful Christians would want to add an important qualification here, and it deserves a fair hearing. They agree that ceremonial and covenant-specific commands like the food laws could be given for a time and then set aside. But they distinguish these from God's moral commands, which they see as flowing directly from His unchanging character. God commands truthfulness because He Himself "does not lie" (Titus 1:2). He commands faithfulness because He is faithful, and "he cannot disown himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). On this view, God could never command cruelty or falsehood, not because some standard stands above Him, but because such a command would contradict who He is. Both views agree on the essential point: God alone defines what is holy and good, and we have no standard outside of Him by which to judge His commands.

This has a very practical consequence. We should never presume to decide what is holy or unholy, good or evil, apart from what God has said, including what He has said to us now, under the new covenant. That means we must study His Word carefully, because not every part of it applies to everyone in the same way for all time. We must learn to distinguish what is particular from what is universal, what is conditional from what is unconditional, and what is temporary from what is enduring. Failing to do that is not a small interpretive error. It is presumption, and it reflects a failure to understand God's holiness.

The food laws are a clear example of a command that was temporary. Jesus Himself taught that what goes into a person "doesn't go into their heart but into their stomach, and then out of the body," and Mark adds the comment, "In saying this, Jesus declared all foods clean" (Mark 7:19). What defiles a person, Jesus said, is what comes out of the heart (Mark 7:20–21). Later, Peter saw a vision of a sheet let down from heaven, full of animals clean and unclean, and heard a voice tell him to kill and eat. When he protested, the voice replied, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean" (Acts 10:15).

But notice what that vision was really about. Peter was about to be summoned to the house of Cornelius, a Gentile. When he arrived, he explained, "God has shown me that I should not call anyone impure or unclean" (Acts 10:28), and a few verses later, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34). The food laws had marked the boundary between Israel and the nations. When God removed that boundary, He did it to bring the Gentiles into His people. Paul says Christ "has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the

dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations" (Ephesians 2:14–15).

This confirms the reading we have taken of Leviticus 11. The food laws were never about nutrition. If they had been, Jesus would hardly have set them aside, and Paul would hardly have told believers not to let anyone judge them "by what you eat or drink" (Colossians 2:16). They were about separation, and in Christ the separation between Jew and Gentile has been overcome. Now, "everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4–5).

And yet the call behind the food laws has not been abolished. Peter quotes the very words of Leviticus 11 to Christians: "Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). Leviticus applies them to what Israel ate; Peter applies them to how believers live, "Do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance" (1 Peter 1:14). The premise is the same: God's people must be holy because God is holy. What has changed is how that holiness is expressed. We are no longer set apart by what is on our plates, but we are still called to be distinct from the world in our character and conduct. Scripture's final picture of this calling comes in Revelation. Babylon, the great city that embodies godlessness, immorality, and greed, is described as "a haunt for every impure spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable animal" (Revelation 18:2). And a voice from heaven calls, "'Come out of her, my people,' so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues" (Revelation 18:4). The language of clean and unclean has become the language of moral separation from a godless world.

These chapters also teach us something important about how to read Scripture. Because Leviticus 11 does not explain why particular animals are clean or unclean, some preachers and teachers have felt free to supply the meaning themselves. Chewing the cud becomes a picture of meditating on God's Word, turning it over and over. The divided hoof becomes a picture of a walk that is separated from the world. Fins and scales become pictures of spiritual stability and protection. As long as it sounds plausible and edifying, the method goes unquestioned.

But God warned Israel, "Do not add to what I command you and do not subtract from it, but keep the commands of the LORD your God that I give you" (Deuteronomy 4:2; see also 12:32). Do we not risk exactly that when we assign meanings that Scripture itself never gives?

We believe meditating on God's Word is vitally important. We would love to teach it at every opportunity. But we would not teach it from Leviticus 11, because there is not a hint in the context that God had any such thing in mind. If He had, He could have said so. Why draw it from an unclear text when Scripture teaches it plainly elsewhere? "Blessed is the one... whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night" (Psalm 1:1-2). That test is harder than it sounds. Allegorical readings are most tempting precisely when the conclusion is one we already believe on other grounds. The truth of the conclusion does not make the method sound.

Paul's phrase "Do not go beyond what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6) captures the right instinct. We should be fair to its context: Paul was confronting pride and rivalry among the Corinthians, who were exalting one teacher over another, so the

verse is not a complete manual of interpretation. But the principle it expresses applies well here. The Word of God is sufficient as it stands, and it does not need our embellishments. When we come to a difficult passage, we should begin by asking what it actually says and what it did in Israel's covenant life. We should notice repeated words, observe who acts and what changes, and compare later uses of the same language in Scripture. Mark 7, Acts 10, and Hebrews then help us see how Christ's work changes the setting. That approach is slower than inventing a hidden meaning for every animal, but it is far more rewarding, and it keeps us from replacing God's concerns with our own imagination. The same caution applies to the commentaries and resources we trust. Even a helpful teacher's proposed explanation is not the same as the text itself.

Chapter 12 turns from animals to childbirth, and it is one of the passages that most puzzles modern readers. "A woman who becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son will be ceremonially unclean for seven days.... On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised. Then the woman must wait thirty-three days to be purified from her bleeding" (Leviticus 12:2-4). For a daughter, the periods were doubled: fourteen days, then sixty-six. At the end, the mother brought a lamb for a burnt offering and a dove or pigeon for a sin offering, "But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons" (Leviticus 12:8).

Why was the period doubled for a daughter? Scripture never says. Many explanations have been offered, but all of them are speculative, and it is better to admit that we do not know than to pretend a confident answer exists. What we can say is that the difference does not mean that daughters were less valued by

God. Nothing in the text says so, and the offering required at the end was the same for both.

Nor does the uncleanness of childbirth mean that bearing a child was sinful. Children are a blessing from the Lord, "a heritage from the LORD" (Psalm 127:3), and the command to "be fruitful and increase in number" (Genesis 1:28) was given before the fall. This points us to one of the most important distinctions in all these chapters: ritual uncleanness is not the same as moral guilt. Leviticus treats many ordinary features of bodily life, such as childbirth, bodily discharges, contact with the dead, and certain skin conditions, as making a person unclean. Being unclean in these ways did not mean the person had done anything wicked. It meant he or she could not approach the sanctuary or share in holy things until the prescribed time had passed and the proper offerings had been made. The system concerned access to God's presence and restoration to full participation in the worshiping community. The "sin offering" at the end of the mother's purification is better understood as a purification offering, cleansing her so that she could return to worship, than as a punishment for having sinned. If we lose that distinction, we will wrongly treat people affected by these conditions as morally inferior. Jesus later made the same point in His own way when He insisted that defilement before God comes from the heart (Mark 7:20–23).

At the same time, many have seen in these laws a sober reminder that life in a fallen world is marked by death. Blood and bodily fluids are associated with life, and their loss, like the corruption of skin or the presence of a corpse, is a reminder that our bodies are subject to decay. Those who approached the

living God were reminded again and again that death has no place in His presence.

Chapter 12 also casts light on a familiar scene in the Gospels. Luke tells us, "When the time came for the purification rites required by the Law of Moses, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord" (Luke 2:22). Jesus had been circumcised on the eighth day, just as Leviticus 12:3 required (Luke 2:21). Mary's purification would have been complete forty days after His birth. So when Simeon took the baby in his arms and Anna gave thanks for Him (Luke 2:25–38), Jesus was about forty days old. And, as we noted in the first chapter, Mary and Joseph offered "a pair of doves or two young pigeons" (Luke 2:24), the offering Leviticus 12:8 allowed for those who could not afford a lamb. Long before His public ministry began, the Son of God was born into a family of modest means, under the Law, fulfilling it from His first weeks of life (Galatians 4:4). The more we read the Old Testament, including passages like this one, the more the New Testament opens up to us.

Chapter 13 deals with skin diseases, which many older translations simply call "leprosy." The Hebrew term covered a range of visible conditions, and it is not the same as the disease known today by that name. The same word is even applied to mold or mildew in garments (Leviticus 13:47–59) and, in the next chapter, in the walls of houses. So we should not read these regulations as a modern medical manual, nor build confident explanations on the assumption that they describe a single disease we know. The priest's role was not to treat or cure. It was to examine, sometimes over a period of days, and declare whether the person was clean or unclean.

The chapter's closing instruction for those with a defiling disease is heartbreaking to read: "Anyone with such a defiling disease must wear torn clothes, let their hair be unkempt, cover the lower part of their face and cry out, 'Unclean! Unclean!' As long as they have the disease they remain unclean. They must live alone; they must live outside the camp" (Leviticus 13:45–46). Torn clothes and unkempt hair were the signs of mourning. The person with this condition lived as one in mourning, cut off from family, community, and worship, and had to warn others away.

Now read that passage and then turn to the Gospels. "A man with leprosy came to him and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.'... He reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cleansed" (Mark 1:40–42). Under the Law, touching this man would have made Jesus unclean. Instead, His touch made the man clean. Uncleaness did not flow from the leper to Jesus; cleanness flowed from Jesus to the leper. And then Jesus sent him to show himself to the priest and offer the sacrifices Moses commanded (Mark 1:44), honoring the very law that the healing had fulfilled.

On another occasion, ten men with leprosy stood at a distance, just as Leviticus 13 required, and called out to Jesus for mercy. He told them to go and show themselves to the priests, and as they went, they were cleansed. "One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan. Jesus asked, 'Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine? Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?'" (Luke 17:15–18).

How many of us are truly thankful for what Christ has done? If the ten lepers are any indication, perhaps one in ten. Nine went off to enjoy their cleansing and never came back to the One who gave it. Only one, and a foreigner at that, understood that the gift should lead him back to the Giver.

And Christ has done for us something far greater than cleansing skin. Hebrews draws the contrast: "The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!" (Hebrews 9:13–14). The purity laws of Leviticus dealt with the outside. Christ deals with the heart.

There is one more echo of Leviticus 13 in the New Testament, and it is perhaps the most moving of all. The person with a defiling disease had to "live outside the camp." Hebrews tells us that "Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore" (Hebrews 13:12–13). The Holy One took the place of the unclean. He went outside the camp, bearing the shame of the outcast, so that those who had been outside might be brought in. And He calls us to follow Him there, to be willing to bear His disgrace in a world that does not honor Him.

So these chapters, which seem at first so remote, bring us close to the heart of the gospel. They teach us that God is holy and that His people must be set apart for Him. They teach us to read His Word carefully, receiving what it says without adding to it. They teach us that ritual uncleanness is not the same as

moral guilt, and that God cares about access to His presence for those whom life has left unclean. And they point us to Jesus, who touched the unclean and made them clean, and who went outside the camp so that we might be brought near.

Thank You, Lord, not only for what You have done for us, but for who You are.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Leviticus says the purpose of the food laws was holiness and separation from the nations, not health. How does the text's own stated purpose change the way you understand these laws?
2. Holiness in Leviticus 11 depended on God's command, not on anything in the animals themselves. What does the example of Israel at Kadesh Barnea teach about obeying God's present word rather than a word He has withdrawn?
3. Christians are no longer set apart by what they eat, but Peter still calls us to "be holy, because I am holy." In what specific ways should your life be visibly distinct from the world around you?
4. Why is it tempting to find hidden meanings in details of Scripture that the text itself does not explain? How can you guard against "going beyond what is written" in your own study and teaching?
5. Ritual uncleanness in Leviticus did not mean moral guilt. How might this distinction shape the way you treat people who are sick, suffering, or on the margins of your community?

6. Jesus touched the man with leprosy, and only one of the ten healed lepers returned to thank Him. What has Christ done for you that you have been slow to thank Him for?

Chapter Five

Leviticus 14–15

Chapter 13 ended with a person living outside the camp, clothes torn, face covered, calling out "Unclean! Unclean!" If Leviticus had stopped there, it would be a bleak book. But chapter 14 opens with the way home. "These are the regulations for any diseased person at the time of their ceremonial cleansing, when they are brought to the priest: The priest is to go outside the camp and examine them" (Leviticus 14:2–3). The person could not come in until cleansed, so the priest went out. Before a single ritual begins, the text shows us a God who sends His servant to the one who has been cut off.

It is important to notice what the priest did and did not do. He did not heal the disease. Leviticus assumes that healing has already happened, by God's hand. The priest's role was to confirm it and then to restore the person, publicly and completely, to the life of the community and to worship. Healing and restoration are not the same thing. A person can recover from an illness and still be treated as an outsider. God's law made sure that the one who had been healed was also welcomed back.

The ritual that followed is one of the most unusual in the Bible. "The priest shall order that two live clean birds and some cedar wood, scarlet yarn and hyssop be brought for the person to be cleansed. Then the priest shall order that one of the birds be killed over fresh water in a clay pot" (Leviticus 14:4–5). The living bird, together with the cedar, the scarlet yarn, and the hyssop, was dipped in the blood of the bird that had been killed. The priest sprinkled the person seven times and pronounced

him clean, and then "he is to release the live bird in the open fields" (Leviticus 14:7).

Picture that moment from the point of view of the one being cleansed. After weeks or months or years outside the camp, he watches a bird die in his place, and then watches another bird, marked with that blood, fly away free. Leviticus does not explain the symbolism, and we should be careful not to press every detail. But the drama of it is hard to miss: a death, and then a release. Many Christians have seen in the two birds a picture of the death and resurrection of Christ, the one who died and the one who lives, and in the freed bird a picture of the sinner set free. Whether or not that was intended, it is certainly true that our cleansing comes through a death and our freedom through a life. And it is worth noticing that hyssop, the plant used to sprinkle the blood, is the very plant David named when he prayed, "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow" (Psalm 51:7).

The cleansing was not finished with the birds. The person washed his clothes, shaved off all his hair, and bathed. After seven more days outside his tent, he shaved and bathed again, and on the eighth day he brought offerings to the tent of meeting: a guilt offering, a sin offering, a burnt offering, and a grain offering. Then came the most striking detail of all: "The priest is to take some of the blood of the guilt offering and put it on the lobe of the right ear of the one to be cleansed, on the thumb of their right hand and on the big toe of their right foot" (Leviticus 14:14). Oil was then applied in the same places.

We have seen this before. It is exactly what Moses did at the ordination of Aaron and his sons (Leviticus 8:23–24). The person who had been the most excluded member of the

community, living alone outside the camp, was restored with the same ritual used to consecrate the high priest. The outcast was not merely allowed back in; he was marked as belonging to God from head to foot. That is a beautiful picture of grace. Those whom God cleanses, He does not bring back as second-class citizens.

And as always in Leviticus, the poor were not left out: "If, however, they are poor and cannot afford these, they must take one male lamb as a guilt offering... together with a tenth of an ephah of the finest flour... and two doves or two young pigeons, such as they can afford" (Leviticus 14:21–22). No one was too poor to be restored.

When Jesus healed a man with leprosy and sent him to "show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing" (Mark 1:44), this was the ritual He was sending him to. The healing Jesus gave was complete, and He wanted the restoration to be complete too. The man needed not only clean skin but a welcome home.

The second half of chapter 14 turns to houses, and it contains a sentence that is easy to read past: "When you enter the land of Canaan, which I am giving you as your possession, and I put a spreading mold in a house in that land..." (Leviticus 14:34). Did you notice who puts the mold there? God says, "I put." The Lord who gives the land is also the Lord who allows, and even sends, the mold. And then He gives detailed instructions for dealing with it: the priest examines the house, the affected stones are removed, the walls scraped, and if the mold returns, the house is torn down. If it does not return, the house is purified with the same ritual of two birds.

It is possible that God sent some of the skin diseases in the same way, as He allowed Satan to afflict Job with boils. Isn't it interesting that God would bring uncleanness and then give the specifications for cleansing it? We see something similar in Israel's wilderness years. When the people hungered and thirsted and grew weary of manna, it was God who led them into those circumstances. Moses later explained why: "Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna... to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD" (Deuteronomy 8:2-3).

Why does God bring such things? Sometimes, Scripture tells us, to test His people and to reveal what is in their hearts. But we must be careful here, because it is a short step from "God can use hardship" to "this hardship is God's punishment on you." Scripture repeatedly denies that step. Job was not suffering for his sin; God Himself called him blameless, and the whole book shows that his friends were wrong to assume otherwise. When Jesus' disciples asked whose sin had caused a man to be born blind, Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned... but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him" (John 9:3). When people asked about eighteen who died when a tower fell in Siloam, Jesus said, "do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no!" (Luke 13:4-5).

We should add one more caution. In Job and in the wilderness, Scripture itself tells us what God was doing. We do

not have that kind of explanation for most of the hardships in our own lives or in the lives of others. Job's friends had a theology that was not absurd; their error was applying it confidently to a situation they could not see into. It is true that God is sovereign over mold in the walls and disease in the body. It is not given to us to announce what a particular illness or trial means in someone else's life. What we can say is that nothing touches God's people apart from His hand, and that He is able to use even what afflicts us to humble us, test us, and teach us to live on every word that comes from His mouth.

Chapter 15 deals with bodily discharges, both the ordinary kind and the unusual. Some were the result of illness; others were a normal part of life, such as a woman's monthly period or the marital relations of husband and wife. All of them made a person ceremonially unclean for a time, and anything they touched or lay on could become unclean too. For modern readers, this is perhaps the most uncomfortable chapter in Leviticus. Why would God legislate about such private matters at all?

The chapter itself answers that question in its final verses, which are the key to the whole section: "You must keep the Israelites separate from things that make them unclean, so they will not die in their uncleanness for defiling my dwelling place, which is among them" (Leviticus 15:31). The purpose of all these regulations was to protect the sanctuary. God had come to live among His people. His dwelling was in the middle of the camp, and nothing unclean could come into His presence. The laws of clean and unclean were not about making people feel dirty. They were about making it possible for sinful people to live near a holy God without being destroyed.

Notice also what these laws assume. The conditions described in chapter 15 are ordinary and largely unavoidable. They happen to everyone. That means the system expected uncleanness to recur again and again, and it provided a path back every time. Nothing in chapter 15 left a person permanently outside. Some conditions required only washing and waiting until evening; others required a waiting period and a simple offering of two birds. These chapters are usually read as a catalog of exclusions, but they are really a catalog of provisions. Every condition named comes with a way home. The Lord was not being arbitrary. His purpose was that everyone who became unclean could be cleansed and come to the tabernacle again.

And again we must remember that ritual uncleanness is not the same as sin. A woman who had her period, a couple who had been together as husband and wife, a person who had cared for a dying parent, none of them had done anything wrong. The category concerned fitness to approach the sanctuary, not moral guilt. Much of our confusion about these chapters comes from reading the one as if it were the other.

One detail in chapter 15 deserves special attention: "When a man has sexual relations with a woman and there is an emission of semen, both of them must bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening" (Leviticus 15:18). Sexual relations within marriage were good; God had blessed them from the beginning, and the Song of Songs celebrates married love without embarrassment. Yet the Law made them a cause of temporary uncleanness, which meant that a couple could not come to the tabernacle on the same day. We saw the same principle at Sinai,

when Moses told the people to prepare to meet God: "Be ready for the third day. Abstain from sexual relations" (Exodus 19:15).

Why? The most likely reason is that God was setting Israel apart from the religions around them, which commonly combined the worship of their gods with sexual rituals. Fertility cults throughout the ancient world practiced sacred prostitution, believing that human sexual union could encourage the gods to bless the crops, the herds, and the womb. We catch a glimpse of how common this was in Genesis, when Judah, looking for the woman he had slept with by the roadside, asked the local men, "Where is the shrine prostitute who was beside the road at Enaim?" (Genesis 38:21). He assumed that was what she was. Israel's law did the opposite of the nations. It kept sexuality and worship completely separate. That was not prudishness about sex. It was a deliberate theological boundary: the true God is not worshiped the way the gods of the nations were.

Tragically, Israel did not keep that boundary. Centuries later, when King Josiah began to purge the land of idolatry after the Book of the Law was rediscovered in the temple, he found that the corruption had reached into the house of God itself. "He also tore down the quarters of the male shrine prostitutes that were in the temple of the LORD, the quarters where women did weaving for Asherah" (2 Kings 23:7). The very thing Leviticus 15 had guarded against had been set up inside the Lord's temple, perhaps because generations of Israel's leaders had not even bothered to read the Law.

Josiah's reforms earned him an extraordinary epitaph: "Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his

soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses" (2 Kings 23:25). Those words deliberately echo the command every Israelite child learned first: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Jesus called this the greatest commandment (Mark 12:29-30). When our lives on earth are over, what will be said of us? Will anyone be able to say that we turned to the Lord with all our heart, soul, and strength?

The regulations of chapter 15 also shed light on one of the most tender scenes in the Gospels. Leviticus says that a woman with a discharge of blood lasting beyond her normal period would be unclean as long as it continued, and that anyone who touched her bed or anything she sat on would be unclean too (Leviticus 15:25-27). Mark tells us about a woman "who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years" (Mark 5:25). For twelve years she had been ceremonially unclean, unable to come to worship, making unclean anyone who came into close contact with her. She had spent everything she had on doctors, and she only grew worse.

"When she heard about Jesus, she came up behind him in the crowd and touched his cloak, because she thought, 'If I just touch his clothes, I will be healed.' Immediately her bleeding stopped and she felt in her body that she was freed from her suffering" (Mark 5:27-29). Under the Law, her touch should have made Jesus unclean. Instead, His power made her clean. And Jesus did not let her slip away unnoticed. He stopped, found her, and spoke to her publicly: "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering" (Mark 5:34). Twelve years of isolation ended not only with a healing but with a word

of welcome, and she is the only person in the Gospels whom Jesus addresses as "Daughter." Immediately afterward He went to the house of Jairus and took the hand of a dead girl, the most defiling contact of all, and raised her to life (Mark 5:41–42). Jesus has power over every kind of uncleanness, including death itself.

Why should ordinary things like childbirth, illness, bodily discharges, and mold be associated with uncleanness at all? God does not give a specific reason for each case, and we should not claim more certainty than the text gives us. But we believe the best explanation lies in the fall. Before sin entered the world, everything was very good. Adam and Eve felt no shame and walked with God in the garden. There was no sickness, no decay, and no death. Nothing was impure except the one thing God had forbidden. We will not see that condition again until the New Jerusalem, of which Scripture says, "Nothing impure will ever enter it" (Revelation 21:27).

In the meantime, "the creation was subjected to frustration... in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God" (Romans 8:20–21). Blood and bodily fluids are associated with life, and their loss, like the decay of skin or the mold in a wall, reminds us that we live in a world marked by the curse. The laws of uncleanness were a constant, visible reminder that death and decay have no place in the presence of the living God.

But why would God require cleansing for conditions the individuals were not personally responsible for? Our answer is that, in a deeper sense, we are responsible. Paul writes that "sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and

in this way death came to all people, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Adam acted as our representative head, and in him the whole human race fell. David confessed this about himself: "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). We are born into this world already needing cleansing, and we need God's provision whether our uncleanness comes from our own choices or from the condition we inherited. Christians have understood the doctrine of original sin in somewhat different ways, but they have generally agreed that every human being enters the world in need of grace. And the good news is equally universal for those in Christ: "For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19).

Some have tried to explain the longer period of purification after the birth of a daughter, which we met in chapter 12, along similar lines. One suggestion is that it pointed back to the woman's role in the fall and the curse that fell on childbirth (Genesis 3:16; 1 Timothy 2:13–14). That is a thoughtful proposal, but it is a proposal, not something the text states. Leviticus itself does not tell us why, and Christians who read the passages about men and women in the church differently will weigh that suggestion differently too. We are on safest ground when we admit that this is one of the details God has not chosen to explain.

What we can say with certainty is that nothing in the Mosaic Law could actually remove uncleanness or sin. The birds, the water, the hyssop, and the offerings were a shadow. Only Christ could accomplish what they pictured. Jesus touched the leper

and made him clean; He stopped the twelve-year bleeding and cleansed the woman; He raised the dead. That is why the new covenant mattered so much. It accomplished what the old covenant never could, cleansing us fully from all uncleanness and all sin.

Leviticus 15:31 has one more application for us. God called Israel to keep themselves separate from what was unclean because His dwelling was among them. Paul takes up the same language and applies it to the church: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?... For we are the temple of the living God.... Therefore, 'Come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you'" (2 Corinthians 6:14, 16–17).

One of the clearest applications of this principle concerns marriage. Some Christians still think it is acceptable to date and marry an unbeliever, perhaps hoping to bring that person to faith. We do not believe it is. Paul told a widow that she was free to remarry, but "he must belong to the Lord" (1 Corinthians 7:39). God had given Israel the same command, and He gave the reason: "Do not intermarry with them... for they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods" (Deuteronomy 7:3–4). That is exactly what happened. Israel was not drawn upward by the nations around them; they were drawn down, until they combined the worship of the Lord with the worship of idols. Even Solomon, the wisest of kings, was not immune: "As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods" (1 Kings 11:4). It is far easier to be pulled down than to lift someone else up. And no one can control another person's

conversion. To disobey God's clear word in the hope of accomplishing what only the Spirit can do is to set our own desires above His wisdom.

We need to hold this conviction with care, though. Paul's call to separation does not mean withdrawal from unbelievers altogether; he explicitly says that if we avoided every immoral person in the world, "you would have to leave this world" (1 Corinthians 5:10). We are called to live among our neighbors, love them, and bear witness to Christ. The language of clean and unclean in 2 Corinthians 6 concerns allegiance and worship. It does not mean that unbelievers are less worthy of dignity or respect, since they too bear the image of God. We should never treat another person as a conversion project or as an obstacle to our fulfillment.

And the principle about entering a marriage must not be turned into a judgment on those already married to an unbeliever, perhaps because they came to faith after marrying. Paul tells such believers not to leave a spouse who is willing to stay, and he even says that "the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife" (1 Corinthians 7:14). Different circumstances receive different counsel. The believer in a mixed marriage is not living in disobedience, and that household is not beyond God's care.

Holiness is more than separation in the abstract. It is belonging to God and living in a way that fits His presence. God dwelt in the midst of Israel's camp, and the laws of these chapters made it possible for His people to live near Him. Now He dwells in His people by His Spirit. That is a greater privilege, and a greater responsibility, than Israel ever knew. Lord, help us

in our weakness to live for You, set apart from the ways of this world, so that we do not dishonor Your holy name.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

- 1.** The priest went outside the camp to examine the one who had been cut off, and the cleansed person was marked with blood and oil just as the high priest was at his ordination. What does this teach you about how God restores those who have been excluded?
- 2.** God says He puts mold in the houses of the land, and Deuteronomy says He led Israel into hunger to test them. How do you hold together God's sovereignty over hardship with Jesus' warning against assuming that suffering is a punishment for sin?
- 3.** Leviticus 15 describes ordinary, unavoidable conditions, and every one comes with a path back to worship. How does seeing these chapters as a list of provisions rather than exclusions change the way you read them?
- 4.** Josiah was remembered for turning to the Lord "with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength." What would it take for that to be said of you?
- 5.** The woman who had been bleeding for twelve years was healed and then publicly welcomed as "Daughter." Who in your church or community has been living on the margins, and how could you help them hear that welcome?
- 6.** Paul calls believers not to be "yoked together with unbelievers," yet also not to withdraw from the world. How can you hold firm convictions about marriage and allegiance

while treating those who do not share your faith with genuine love and respect?

Chapter Six

Leviticus 16–18

We have now reached the center of Leviticus. As we noted at the beginning, the book is built around this chapter. Everything before it, the offerings, the priesthood, the laws of clean and unclean, leads up to it, and everything after it flows out of it. Leviticus 16 describes the Day of Atonement, the most sacred day of Israel's year. It remains the holiest day on the Jewish calendar to this day, Yom Kippur, when even many who rarely attend a synagogue the rest of the year come to pray and fast, much as some Christians attend church only at Christmas and Easter.

The chapter opens by reminding us of what happened in chapter 10: "The LORD spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the LORD. The LORD said to Moses: 'Tell your brother Aaron that he is not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die. For I will appear in the cloud over the atonement cover'" (Leviticus 16:1–2). Nadab and Abihu had approached God on their own terms, and they died. Now God tells Aaron how he may approach, and when. The Most Holy Place was not open whenever the high priest chose. It was open one day a year, in one way only.

On that day, Aaron did not put on the glorious garments of gold, blue, purple, and scarlet that we read about in Exodus. "He is to put on the sacred linen tunic, with linen undergarments next to his body; he is to tie the linen sash around him and put on the linen turban" (Leviticus 16:4). Before entering God's

presence, he bathed and dressed in plain white linen. The most important man in Israel's worship entered the Most Holy Place in the simplest clothing, humbled before the God he served.

He began, as always, with himself. He offered a bull as a sin offering "to make atonement for himself and his household" (Leviticus 16:6). He took a censer full of burning coals from the altar and two handfuls of incense behind the curtain, and "the smoke of the incense will conceal the atonement cover above the tablets of the covenant law, so that he will not die" (Leviticus 16:13). Then he sprinkled the bull's blood on the atonement cover and in front of it seven times. Only after his own sin had been covered could he make atonement for the people.

Then came the ceremony for which the day is best known. Two male goats were brought before the Lord at the entrance to the tent of meeting, and Aaron cast lots for them, "one lot for the LORD and the other for the scapegoat" (Leviticus 16:8). The goat chosen for the Lord was slaughtered as a sin offering for the people, and its blood was brought behind the curtain and sprinkled on the atonement cover as the bull's had been. The high priest also made atonement for the Most Holy Place, the tent of meeting, and the altar, "because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been" (Leviticus 16:16). A year of the people's sin and uncleanness had defiled the very place where God dwelt, and it too had to be cleansed.

Then the second goat was brought forward. "He is to lay both hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the wickedness and rebellion of the Israelites—all their sins—and put them on the goat's head. He shall send the goat away into the wilderness in the care of someone appointed for the task.

The goat will carry on itself all their sins to a remote place; and the man shall release it in the wilderness" (Leviticus 16:21–22).

The meaning of the Hebrew word traditionally translated "scapegoat" is debated. Some take it as a description of the goat that "goes away"; others take it as a place name for a desolate region, or as the name of a wilderness spirit to whom Israel's sins were being sent back. Whatever the exact meaning, the central idea is clear enough: the sins of the people were placed on the goat and carried far away from the camp, never to return.

Why two goats? It is easy to collapse them into one, but the text insists on both, and it seems that one animal could not show everything that needed to be shown. The first goat showed the cost of sin: atonement requires a death, and blood must be brought into God's presence. The second showed the removal of sin: the guilt does not merely get paid for, it goes away, carried out beyond the camp by something else. Notably, the second goat was not killed at all. No hand was raised against it. It simply bore the sins away into the wilderness.

Theologians have often used two words to describe these two aspects of atonement. Propitiation refers to satisfying God's just wrath against sin; its object is God. Expiation refers to removing sin and its guilt; its object is the sin itself. The first goat, whose blood was sprinkled on the atonement cover, pictures propitiation. The second goat, carrying the people's sins into the wilderness, pictures expiation. Christians have sometimes debated which of these words best describes the atonement in Scripture, but the Day of Atonement suggests that we need both. Sin is an offense against a holy God that deserves His judgment, and sin is a defilement that must be taken away.

Christ accomplished both. He did what one goat could not do, and what millions of animal sacrifices over the centuries could never do. His blood satisfied God's justice: "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!" (Romans 5:9). "He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). And He took our sins away: "the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). Paul even uses the word for the atonement cover itself when he writes that "God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood" (Romans 3:25). The place in the Most Holy Place where the blood was sprinkled once a year has become a Person.

Imagine how the people waited outside the tent on that day, knowing that the high priest had gone behind the curtain into the presence of the holy God. Would he come out alive? Would the sacrifice be accepted? And when he emerged, and the goat was led out of the camp, how their hearts must have lifted. God's promise was spoken over them: "because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins" (Leviticus 16:30).

The Day of Atonement was also a day of humility for the people. "On the tenth day of the seventh month you must deny yourselves and not do any work" (Leviticus 16:29). No one worked except the high priest; the people fasted and humbled themselves. They contributed nothing to their own atonement. It was done for them, and all they could do was receive it with humbled hearts.

And yet the chapter ends with a sobering word: "This is to be a lasting ordinance for you: Atonement is to be made once a year for all the sins of the Israelites" (Leviticus 16:34). Once a year, every year. Next year the high priest would have to do it all again, and the year after that. Hebrews seizes on exactly this detail: "But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins" (Hebrews 10:3). If the Day of Atonement had truly and finally cleansed the people, it would not have needed repeating. Its very repetition was proof of its incompleteness.

Hebrews draws out the contrast point by point. "But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance" (Hebrews 9:7). Christ, by contrast, "did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence" (Hebrews 9:24). He did not need to offer for Himself first. He did not enter with the blood of animals but with His own. And He did not need to return year after year: "he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Hebrews 9:26).

When Jesus died, "The curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Mark 15:38). The curtain that Aaron could pass through only once a year, and only with blood and a cloud of incense, was torn open by God Himself. And so Hebrews invites us to do what no Israelite, not even the high priest, could do on any ordinary day: "Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house

of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings" (Hebrews 10:19–22).

We should not let the familiarity of that truth dull its wonder. Aaron approached the Most Holy Place trembling, knowing that two of his sons had died for approaching wrongly. We are invited to come boldly, any day, every day, not because God is less holy, but because our High Priest has made the way.

At the same time, the Day of Atonement reminds us that God's wrath against sin is real. Many people live their whole lives ignoring the fact that "the wrath of God is coming" (Colossians 3:6). For those who refuse the atonement God has provided, there is no other. The book of Revelation is, in large part, a book about that coming wrath. But for those in Christ, the day of wrath has already fallen on our Substitute. We cling to the atonement found in Him alone, and we look forward to the day when "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4).

As readers work through all these regulations, questions naturally arise. What if someone could not afford the sacrifices needed to atone for sin? Did the rich have better access to God than the poor? With so many laws, how could anyone remember them all? And were these laws meant for Israel only, with everyone else excused?

On the first question, the answer is clearly no. The Day of Atonement's sacrifices were offered for the whole nation by the high priest, and the individual offerings, as we have seen, made provision for those who could bring only birds or a little flour. The Law even held out the hope that there need be no poor at all: "However, there need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your

inheritance, he will richly bless you" (Deuteronomy 15:4). But God knew His people would not remain faithful, and so He added, "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land" (Deuteronomy 15:11). Poverty in Israel was not a sign that the poor were less favored by God. If anything, it was a sign that the community had failed to live as God intended, which made generosity all the more necessary.

Scripture describes God Himself again and again as the defender of the poor. He is "A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows" (Psalm 68:5). He rescues, provides for, and shelters the poor, and He promises blessing to those who care for them and judgment on those who oppress them: "Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done" (Proverbs 19:17). "Whoever oppresses the poor shows contempt for their Maker" (Proverbs 14:31). The rich never had better access to God than the poor.

On the second question, God's plan was that His law would be repeated constantly until it became deeply known. "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up" (Deuteronomy 6:6–7). The Law of Moses may seem long, but compare it with the tax code of any modern nation, which runs to thousands upon thousands of pages. By that standard, the Law was not beyond a faithful family's ability to learn.

On the third question, the Jews were certainly given a special privilege: "the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of

God" (Romans 3:2). The Law was given to Israel and to those who joined themselves to Israel. The nations had creation and conscience to testify to them about God; Paul says that even the Gentiles "show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness" (Romans 2:15). But neither Jews nor Gentiles could be justified by any law. "What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin" (Romans 3:9). In fact, "God has bound everyone over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all" (Romans 11:32). Paul does not mean that every person will be saved, but that God's mercy reaches people of every kind, Jew and Gentile alike, without distinction, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Chapter 17 is short, and it carries forward the theme of the Day of Atonement. It requires that every animal offered in sacrifice be brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting, rather than slaughtered wherever a person happened to be. The reason given is revealing: "They must no longer offer any of their sacrifices to the goat idols to whom they prostitute themselves" (Leviticus 17:7). Out in the open fields, away from the tabernacle, it was all too easy for sacrifice to drift into the worship of other gods. God gathered Israel's worship to one place, around one altar, where it could be kept pure. It is in this chapter, too, that we find the great statement we considered in Chapter Two: "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar" (Leviticus 17:11). The Day of Atonement was built on that principle. Life is given for life.

Chapter 18 begins a new section of the book. Having shown how atonement is made, Leviticus now turns to how an atoned-for people is to live. The chapter opens with a sweeping call to be different: "You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices" (Leviticus 18:3). Israel was to be distinct from both where they had come from and where they were going.

Then comes a verse that plays an important role later in Scripture: "Keep my decrees and laws, for the person who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 18:5). What does it mean that the one who obeys "will live by them"?

Two things need to be remembered when we read verses like this. First, the Law was not given to perfect the people of Israel. It was designed, among other things, to show them how sinful they were. "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin" (Romans 3:20). The Law required obedience that Israel, like all of us, could not render. Life was promised to those who kept it, but no one kept it, and so, as Paul says, "I found that the very commandment that was intended to bring life actually brought death" (Romans 7:10). Paul quotes Leviticus 18:5 itself to make this contrast: "The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, it says, 'The person who does these things will live by them'" (Galatians 3:12).

Second, that does not mean the Law was bad. Paul is just as clear: "the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good" (Romans 7:12). The problem is not in the Law but in us. The Law reveals sin the way a mirror reveals a smudge on our face. The mirror is not the failure. And we should notice that

Jesus also alluded to this verse when an expert in the law correctly summarized it as love for God and neighbor: "You have answered correctly... Do this and you will live" (Luke 10:28). The relationship between obedience and life in Scripture is richer than either "keep this and you will be saved" or "this was only ever designed to fail." God's commands truly describe the path of life. The tragedy is that no sinner walks it perfectly, and so the path of life must be opened for us by Another who did.

How did humanity come to this condition? As we saw in the last chapter, Paul traces it to Adam: "sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12). Christian traditions describe the mechanism in different ways. Some speak of inherited guilt, others of an inherited corruption or mortality, and some pair the doctrine with an emphasis on God's grace going before every human response. But they share the central point: no one enters the world morally neutral, and no one is in a position to be justified by performance.

This raises a related question that Christians have discussed for centuries. If our wills are bent by sin, how can we ever love God freely and keep His commands from the heart? Some emphasize that we are not robots, and that there is something fitting about an offering freely given. That is true. But we would add that our own will, left to itself, is not reliable enough to be the ground of our hope. Permanent commitment is hard for human nature, and our faithfulness wavers. God's faithfulness does not. The prophets promised a day when God Himself would change His people's hearts: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and

move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws" (Ezekiel 36:26–27).

Christians describe how that works in different ways. Some believe God's regenerating grace is given effectually to those He has chosen, bringing them to faith. Others believe God extends enabling grace to all, restoring a capacity that sin had lost, which people may accept or resist. That is a real disagreement, held in good faith on both sides for centuries. But both agree that the freedom to love God is not a native capacity we bring to Him. It is a gift He supplies. We find refuge not in our own resolve but in the God who loves us and changes our hearts, so that we praise Him freely.

The rest of chapter 18 sets out the boundaries of sexual conduct for God's people. It begins with a general principle, "No one is to approach any close relative to have sexual relations. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 18:6), and then names specific relationships within the family: parents, stepparents, siblings, grandchildren, aunts and uncles, in-laws. It goes on to forbid adultery, the sacrifice of children to Molek, sexual relations between men, and sexual relations with animals. The chapter ends with a vivid warning: the nations of Canaan had defiled themselves by these practices, "Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants.... And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you" (Leviticus 18:25, 28). God was not showing favoritism to Israel. The same standard that brought judgment on Canaan would bring judgment on His own people if they followed the same path, and eventually, it did.

How do these laws apply to Christians? We need to be careful here in two directions. These commands are part of the

Law of Moses, which is not directly binding on Christians as a covenant code. At the same time, the New Testament restates the Bible's sexual ethic clearly, calling believers to sexual purity, faithfulness within marriage between a man and a woman, and holiness in the body. "It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality" (1 Thessalonians 4:3). But it is too broad to say that every rule in Leviticus 18 is simply repeated in the New Testament. The prohibition on relations during a woman's monthly period (Leviticus 18:19), for example, belongs with the purity laws of chapter 15 and is not restated as a command for the church. Christian application requires attention to what Jesus and the apostles actually teach, not merely a blanket assumption either that everything carries over or that nothing does.

The same care applies to the penalties attached to these laws in chapter 20. The civil punishments given to Israel as a nation under God's covenant are not instructions for the church to carry out. When Paul confronted sexual sin in the church at Corinth, he called for church discipline, not civil punishment, and the goal of that discipline was repentance and restoration (1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 2:5–8).

And the New Testament never names sexual sin without also naming grace. After listing the sexually immoral, adulterers, men who have sex with men, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, slanderers, and swindlers, Paul adds, "And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Corinthians 6:11). No one in any of those categories is beyond the reach of the gospel. The boundaries remain, and so does the washing.

It is also worth noticing whom these laws protect. Many of the relationships named in Leviticus 18 involve people living under the same roof, where power is unequal and the vulnerable are most easily exploited. The laws draw bright lines around the family precisely because the family is where trust is greatest and abuse is most devastating. A biblical sexual ethic is not merely a list of prohibitions. It protects the vulnerable, honors marriage, and calls every member of the household to care for the others rather than use them. The New Testament fills out the positive side of that picture with the fruit of the Spirit, mutual honor, and faithful love.

So the Day of Atonement and the call to holiness belong together. First God cleanses His people; then He calls them to live as a cleansed people. That order never changes. We do not become holy in order to be atoned for. We are atoned for, and therefore we are called to be holy. The high priest went behind the curtain, the goat carried the sins away, and the people were declared clean. Then God said, in effect, "Now live like it." Our High Priest has gone into heaven itself with His own blood. Our sins have been removed as far as the east is from the west. Now, in the power of His Spirit, we are called to live like it.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Aaron could enter the Most Holy Place only once a year, in plain linen, with blood and a cloud of incense. Hebrews invites us to "draw near to God" with confidence through Christ. How does the contrast affect the way you approach God in prayer?
2. The first goat died, and the second carried the people's sins away into the wilderness. Why do you think both were

needed? Which aspect of Christ's work, satisfying God's justice or removing your sin, do you most need to remember today?

3. On the Day of Atonement, the people did no work and humbled themselves while the high priest made atonement for them. What does this teach you about the role of your own efforts in being made right with God?
4. The Law promised that there need be no poor among Israel, yet commanded generosity because there would always be poor. How does God's concern for the poor shape the way you use what He has given you?
5. Paul says the Law is "holy, righteous and good," yet it could not give life to those who broke it. How would you explain the purpose of God's law to someone who thinks Christians either must keep all of it or can ignore all of it?
6. Leviticus 18 draws firm boundaries around sexual conduct, and 1 Corinthians 6 names sexual sin alongside the words "But you were washed." How can the church hold both biblical boundaries and the full offer of grace without letting go of either?

Chapter Seven

Leviticus 19–21

If Leviticus 16 is the heart of the book, Leviticus 19 may be its most practical chapter. It opens with the command that sums up the whole of Leviticus: "Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: 'Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy'" (Leviticus 19:2). And then, instead of turning to altars and incense, it turns to fields and vineyards, wages and scales, the deaf and the blind, neighbors and foreigners. Holiness, it turns out, is not only something that happens in the tabernacle. It is something that happens on the farm, in the marketplace, and in the courtroom.

A single refrain runs through the chapter like a drumbeat: "I am the LORD," or "I am the LORD your God." It appears again and again, sometimes after every command or two. Israel was to be different from the nations, not simply because different behavior was more practical, but because of whose they were. God had brought them out of Egypt and set them apart as His own, and every action of their lives was meant to declare who He is.

Consider how this chapter shaped Israel's economic life. "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:9–10). The farmer was not to squeeze every last grain out of his land. Some of it belonged, by God's decree, to those who had no land of their own. We will see this law come to life in the book of Ruth, where a destitute

foreign widow glean in the field of Boaz and finds not only food but a future.

Then come commands about honesty and fair dealing: "Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another" (Leviticus 19:11). "Do not defraud or rob your neighbor. Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight" (Leviticus 19:13). "Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:14). "Do not pervert justice; do not show partiality to the poor or favoritism to the great, but judge your neighbor fairly" (Leviticus 19:15). And near the end of the chapter: "Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity. Use honest scales and honest weights" (Leviticus 19:35–36).

Put simply, the Lord gave Israel some basic rules for conducting business in the Promised Land. Leave something for the poor. Don't steal, cheat, or lie. Pay your workers on time. Don't take advantage of the weak. Judge fairly, without favoring either the rich or the poor. Treat everyone as you would want to be treated.

Now compare that with the ethic the world often teaches, whether openly or quietly. Get every cent out of every deal, with little concern for anyone else. Cut corners if the return is worth the risk. Make sure your workers know who is boss. Go after the weak first, because they don't know how to play the game. Get close to the people who can do the most for you. And if someone hits you, hit back harder.

The difference between these two lists is not only in the actions but in the motives behind them. The worldly ethic springs from concern for self. The biblical ethic springs from concern for God: "I am the LORD." Sometimes we have to work

backward from our actions to discover our motives. How do we treat the people who work for us, or the people we work for? How do we price what we sell? What do we do when no one would find out? Jesus taught that what comes out of a person reveals what is in the heart (Mark 7:21–23). Worldly ethics focus on self and the present world. Biblical ethics focus on God and His coming kingdom. Our business practices reveal which one we are really hoping in.

The command about wages deserves a second look. Why must a hired worker be paid the same day? Deuteronomy explains: "Pay them their wages each day before sunset, because they are poor and are counting on it" (Deuteronomy 24:15). A day laborer might have nothing to feed his family that night if his pay was held until tomorrow. These laws were written with the vulnerable in view. James applies the same concern to wealthy landowners in the church: "Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you" (James 5:4). Paul reminds Christian employers of their accountability: "provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven" (Colossians 4:1). The God who hears the cry of the unpaid worker has not changed.

And in the middle of all these practical commands stands one of the most famous verses in the Old Testament: "Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). Jesus named this as the second greatest commandment, after loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mark 12:31). Paul says that "the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'"

(Galatians 5:14). It is quoted in the New Testament more than almost any other verse from the Law of Moses.

The verse just before it is just as searching: "Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt" (Leviticus 19:17). Love does not mean silence. Sometimes loving our neighbor requires an honest word of correction. What love forbids is the grudge nursed in secret and the revenge waiting for its chance.

And lest anyone think "neighbor" meant only fellow Israelites, the chapter extends the same command to outsiders: "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:33–34). When an expert in the law later asked Jesus, "And who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered with the story of a Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37). The command to love our neighbor was never meant to have narrow borders.

As we read these chapters, we need to be careful about how we apply them. It is tempting, perhaps more in these chapters than anywhere else in Leviticus, to pull out the commands that confirm positions we already hold and pass over the ones sitting right beside them. Leviticus 19 contains the verse about tattoos that is sometimes quoted in modern debates. It also contains the commands to leave the edges of our fields for the poor, to pay workers the same day, to show no partiality in judgment, to honor the elderly (Leviticus 19:32), and to love the foreigner as ourselves. Selective citation is a real danger, and it is often the actual problem in these debates, whatever conclusion a reader finally reaches.

Our own conviction is that Christians are no longer under the Old Covenant, and so these laws are not directly binding on us as a code. We have died to the Law through Christ and now live under the new covenant, whose commands are found in the teaching of Jesus and the apostles, what Paul calls "Christ's law" (1 Corinthians 9:21). The general principle of Leviticus 19:2, "Be holy because I... am holy," is one the New Testament applies to Christians directly (1 Peter 1:16). But holiness as defined in the New Testament is not identical to holiness as defined in the Old. Israel was holy to God by following the Law of Moses; a believer is holy to God by following the law of Christ.

That does not mean we can pick and choose. If someone insists on placing himself under the Law of Moses, Paul warns that he takes on the whole of it, with its curse: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law" (Galatians 3:10). Either we apply the whole Law to ourselves, or we read it as Christians who have been set free from it in Christ. We would encourage the latter. Read these chapters, then, not as a list of rules to apply to yourself or others, but as a window into how God set His people apart from the peoples of Canaan, and into the unchanging character of the God who gave them.

There is, of course, considerable moral overlap between the two covenants. Commands against murder, adultery, theft, and lying appear in both, and the command to love our neighbor stands at the center of both. Neither Testament provides an exhaustive list of every possible sin. Both provide guidance for discernment, and Scripture as a whole is sufficient to equip believers "for every good work" (2 Timothy 3:17). Rules alone, however, do not produce righteousness. The law "is made not

for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels" (1 Timothy 1:9). Human regulations "have an appearance of wisdom... but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence" (Colossians 2:23). As Christians, our righteousness has been accomplished for us by Christ.

Christians have described the relationship between the covenants in different ways. Many have found it helpful to divide the Mosaic Law into moral, civil, and ceremonial categories, holding that the moral law continues to bind believers while the civil and ceremonial laws were fulfilled in Christ. Others, ourselves among them, are less confident that the Law divides so neatly, and prefer to say that the whole Law was fulfilled in Christ while its moral substance is carried forward and restated in the law of Christ. These are differences in framework among people who largely agree on how Christians should live. And whatever framework one uses, Leviticus 19:18 survives every version of the debate.

The verse most often pulled from this chapter is a good test case: "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:28). The verse just before it says, "Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard" (Leviticus 19:27). Almost no one who quotes verse 28 applies verse 27. And verse 28 itself links tattoos directly with cutting the body for the dead. Marking and cutting the body were religious practices among Israel's neighbors, associated with mourning rites, the honoring of the dead, and pagan worship. The context suggests that God was forbidding Israel to take part in those practices, not issuing a freestanding rule about body decoration for all time.

Christians still land in different places on the question. Some hold that the mourning-rite context limits the command's scope. Others believe the prohibition expresses a lasting principle regardless of motive. Many treat it as a matter of Christian liberty and conscience, where "Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind" (Romans 14:5). We believe the command belongs to the Mosaic Law and does not bind Christians as such. But that is not the end of the question. Paul gives believers a higher standard than mere permission: "'I have the right to do anything,' you say—but not everything is beneficial" (1 Corinthians 6:12; see also 10:23). Under a system of precise law, the main question is whether something is allowed. Under grace, we are called to ask a harder question: does this honor Christ and build up others? That is, in many ways, a more demanding standard than the Law's precision.

Leviticus 19 also forbids a cluster of occult practices: "Do not practice divination or seek omens" (Leviticus 19:26), and "Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 19:31). Deuteronomy 18:10–14 gives a fuller list. What all these practices share is an attempt to gain hidden knowledge or control events apart from God's revealed word. The diviner reads signs to learn what God has not said; the sorcerer tries to force outcomes that God has not given. God's people were to do neither. They were to let God be God, trusting His word and His timing rather than trying to manipulate their way to the future.

That principle has an application that may surprise us. We are rightly wary of fortune-tellers and mediums. But Christians can sometimes slip into a more respectable version of the same impulse, trying to secure certainty or force an outcome while

dress it in spiritual language. It is not uncommon to hear church leaders introduce a plan or a vision by saying, "The Lord told me," or "God revealed to me." Perhaps they mean something more modest, that they have a conviction that seems so sound and good that it must be from God. But if we truly believed a message came directly from God, we would be bound to obey it with life-altering seriousness. That is exactly why such claims must be tested. "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1). "Test them all; hold on to what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21).

Luke gives us a helpful model of careful speech. After Paul saw a vision of a man from Macedonia calling for help, Luke writes, "we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them" (Acts 16:10). The word "concluding" describes an inference. They put the vision together with their circumstances and reached a judgment. Similarly, the Jerusalem council wrote, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28), confident but framed as a considered judgment. Christians differ over how God guides believers today. Some expect personal promptings and words from the Spirit; others hold that Scripture is the only normative channel of revelation now. But all can agree that any claimed word must be tested by Scripture, and that the words "God told me" carry a weight that should not be spent carelessly. Jesus said that "everyone will have to give account on the day of judgment for every empty word they have spoken" (Matthew 12:36). Semantics matter. We should speak with precision.

Chapter 20 repeats many of the prohibitions of chapter 18, this time attaching penalties. It begins with the worship of Molek, whose name we have now met more than once. Molek

was a god associated especially with the Ammonites, Israel's neighbors east of the Jordan; Scripture calls him "Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites" (1 Kings 11:7). He was known above all for the sacrifice of children in fire. The Ammonites, along with the Moabites who worshiped a related god named Chemosh, descended from Lot, Abraham's nephew (Genesis 19:36–38). Tragically, Israel did not resist this worship. Solomon built a high place for Molek on a hill east of Jerusalem (1 Kings 11:7), and generations later Josiah had to desecrate the valley of Ben Hinnom "so no one could use it to sacrifice their son or daughter in the fire to Molek" (2 Kings 23:10). Jeremiah records God's horror at the practice: it was something "I never commanded—nor did it enter my mind" (Jeremiah 32:35).

In the law about Molek there is a detail that is easy to miss. God holds accountable not only the man who sacrifices his child but also those who look away: "If the members of the community close their eyes when that man sacrifices one of his children to Molek and if they fail to put him to death, I myself will set my face against him and his family and will cut them off from their people together with all who follow him" (Leviticus 20:4–5). The community that closed its eyes shared in the guilt.

We often assume that as long as we personally do the right thing, we are fine. But this verse asks whether we have closed our eyes to wrongs happening around us, silently approving them by our inaction. Paul says, "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them" (Ephesians 5:11). There are times when silence is not neutrality but complicity. Lord, open our eyes to what is detestable to You, whether within ourselves or within the society we live in.

Chapter 20 also tells us why God's judgment on the nations of Canaan would be so severe: "You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them" (Leviticus 20:23). When we later read of Israel's conquest of the land, many readers are troubled, and the question deserves careful attention when we reach Joshua. But this verse tells us something important now. The people of Canaan were not innocent victims. They had done "all these things," including the sexual practices of chapter 18 and the burning of children in fire.

And God's judgment did not come suddenly. Centuries earlier, God told Abram that his descendants would be enslaved in a foreign land for four hundred years before returning, "for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure" (Genesis 15:16). Before Abraham had a single descendant, God already had His eye on the Canaanites, and He waited more than four centuries, withholding judgment while their sin ripened. That is a span longer than the history of many modern nations. God's patience was not indifference, and His eventual judgment was not arbitrary. It was the final consequence of a moral trajectory He had watched and delayed for generations. The same God is patient with our world today, "not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). But His patience has an end.

Chapters 18 and 20 also offer a good lesson in how to read Scripture. The Reformers spoke of "the analogy of faith," the principle of comparing Scripture with Scripture and using clearer passages to shed light on less clear ones. In these chapters the Hebrew text repeatedly uses the expression "uncover the nakedness of" someone. More literal translations

keep that wording. The NIV usually renders it more directly as "have sexual relations with," and sometimes translates the same idiom two different ways in one verse: "Do not have sexual relations with your father's wife; that would dishonor your father" (Leviticus 18:8). The translators are reading the idiom in context, and every translation involves interpretation of this kind.

Interestingly, the same language appears in Genesis 9, where Ham "saw his father naked" (Genesis 9:22) after Noah had become drunk. Did Ham simply see his father's nakedness, or does the language, read in light of Leviticus, suggest a more serious violation? Scholars genuinely disagree. The NIV leaves Genesis 9 appropriately understated, and that may be wise, since Moses seems to have told the story with deliberate restraint. What is clear is that "nakedness" in Scripture generally carries a sense of shame and dishonor. Comparing how a phrase works across different passages, before drawing conclusions, is exactly the discipline careful readers need.

It also teaches us humility. Some readers find it helpful to read several translations side by side, and to consult cross-references to understand the choices translators have made. That is a good practice. Different translations reflect different judgments, and none of us should assume that we have everything right and everyone else has it wrong. That attitude has multiplied divisions in the church.

Chapter 21 turns to the priests, who were held to a higher standard of holiness because of their nearness to God. "They must be holy to their God and must not profane the name of their God" (Leviticus 21:6). They were restricted in mourning, allowed to make themselves unclean only for their closest

relatives, and the high priest not even for them (Leviticus 21:1–4, 10–12). They were also restricted in marriage: "They must not marry women defiled by prostitution or divorced from their husbands, because priests are holy to their God" (Leviticus 21:7).

That verse assumes that divorce already existed in Israel. Many readers are surprised by this, since they think of divorce as something Moses introduced. But divorce was not instituted by Moses or by God. It existed before the Law was given, and the Law regulated it rather than creating it (Deuteronomy 24:1–4). God permitted it, much as He permitted and regulated other practices, like polygamy, that never reflected His ideal. Jesus explained why: "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning" (Matthew 19:8). Malachi records God's strong condemnation of faithless divorce. Many older translations render it "I hate divorce"; the NIV reads it as a rebuke of "The man who hates and divorces his wife" and so "does violence to the one he should protect" (Malachi 2:16). Either way, God does not treat the breaking of marriage lightly. He regulated divorce to limit the damage done by hard hearts, not because He approved of it.

The chapter also says that a descendant of Aaron with a physical defect could not offer the food of his God at the altar (Leviticus 21:17–23). Modern readers find this especially hard. But notice what the text also says: "He may eat the most holy food of his God, as well as the holy food" (Leviticus 21:22). He was not excluded from the priestly family, nor from its provision, nor from God's care. The restriction concerned only the ministry at the altar, where everything, the priest as well as

the offering, was meant to present an unblemished picture of the holiness of God. That picture pointed forward to the one High Priest who is truly without defect, "holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners" (Hebrews 7:26). And in His kingdom, the pattern is gloriously reversed. When Jesus told the parable of the great banquet, the master said, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame" (Luke 14:21). Those who could not approach the altar are now the honored guests at the Lamb's table.

So these chapters show us that holiness reaches into every corner of life: into our fields and our wages, our scales and our courtrooms, our speech and our silences, our marriages and our worship. And they show us that holiness is never merely a matter of rules. It flows from a relationship: "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy." We belong to Him. Everything we do is meant to say so.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. Leviticus 19 places commands about harvesting, wages, honest scales, and caring for the deaf and blind right alongside commands about worship. What does this teach you about where holiness is supposed to show up in your life?
2. Compare the biblical business ethic of Leviticus 19 with the worldly ethic described in this chapter. Where do you see the worldly ethic creeping into your own work or finances? What motive lies behind it?

3. Why is it dangerous to quote selected commands from Leviticus while ignoring the ones beside them? How can Christians read these laws faithfully without either binding themselves to all of them or dismissing them entirely?
4. Paul says, "not everything is beneficial." When you face a choice that Scripture does not directly forbid, what questions should you ask beyond "Am I allowed?"
5. God held accountable the community that "closed its eyes" to child sacrifice. Are there wrongs around you that you have chosen not to see? What would it look like to open your eyes?
6. Luke wrote that they concluded God had called them, rather than claiming God had told them directly. How careful are you when you speak about God's guidance in your life? Why does it matter?

Chapter Eight

Leviticus 22–23

Many readers consider this part of Leviticus one of the most tedious stretches in the Bible. Chapter 22 continues the regulations for priests and offerings, and chapter 23 sets out Israel's calendar of sacred days. But if we slow down, these chapters show us the sovereignty and holiness of God, the grace that stands behind His commands, and a calendar that, as the New Testament reveals, was pointing all along to Jesus Christ.

Throughout the Law, we find repetition. Perhaps the reason is simple: what God considers important enough for us to know, He tends to repeat. One of the most frequent phrases in these chapters is "I am the LORD." Chapter 22 ends with it wrapped around the central command like bookends: "Keep my commands and follow them. I am the LORD. Do not profane my holy name, for I must be acknowledged as holy by the Israelites. I am the LORD, who made you holy and who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 22:31–33).

Why should Israel keep God's commands? Not because the commands always made sense to them, sounded fair, or felt easy, but because it was the Lord who gave them. He is the great "I AM," the sovereign God, the Creator of heaven and earth. In a sense, it is like a parent answering a child's endless questions. After many rounds of "Why?" that never seem fully satisfied, a parent finally says, "Because I said so." That is not an evasion; it is an appeal to the relationship. Much about the Law goes unexplained. Many of our questions are left unanswered. And God simply says, "because I am the LORD." That was meant to

be sufficient reason for Israel's wholehearted trust and obedience.

The same is true for us. Jesus commands us to love one another as He has loved us (John 13:34), to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19), and much more. We should obey not merely because these commands make sense to us, sound fair, or feel easy, but because the Lord Jesus, the Savior, the First and the Last, the Ruler of all creation, has commanded them. Jesus Himself grounded His hardest command in God's character rather than in its self-evident logic: "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:44–45). Loving enemies rarely feels sensible. We do it because it reflects who our Father is.

There is a real danger here for Christians. It is easy to anchor our convictions in whatever sounds logical, sensible, or right to us personally, and then to evaluate God's Word by that standard. But "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy" (James 4:12). Rather than testing God's Word by our discernment, we should test our discernment by His Word, subjecting our own convictions to what is actually written. That does not mean God's commands are arbitrary or unreasonable. It means our reasoning is not the final authority over them.

Nor does it mean that God's commands have only one purpose, or that they serve only spiritual ends. We saw earlier that the food laws were given chiefly to set Israel apart from the nations, not to protect their health. But that does not rule out real health benefits for those who obeyed them. The Sabbath

rest was given to commemorate God's rest at creation (Exodus 20:11) and His deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:15), and yet it also provided real, practical rest for people, animals, and land. A wise Creator's instructions will often serve many good purposes at once. The primary theological purpose of a command and its practical benefits are not in competition.

Another emphasis that runs through the Law is the requirement of careful and complete obedience. Chapter 22 warns the priests that they must handle the holy offerings properly: "The priests are to keep my requirements so that they do not become guilty and die for treating them with contempt. I am the LORD, who makes them holy" (Leviticus 22:9). If you search for the word "careful" from Exodus through Deuteronomy, you will find it again and again. Israel was to listen carefully to the Lord and do what is right in His eyes (Exodus 15:26). They were to be careful to follow His decrees so they could live safely in the land (Leviticus 25:18). "So be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left" (Deuteronomy 5:32). The sheer volume of these reminders is itself the point. Partial obedience was never the standard.

That emphasis can feel like a heavy burden until we notice what stands at the front of the whole arrangement. The Ten Commandments do not begin with a demand. They begin with a statement of what God has already done: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). The same pattern appears in Leviticus 22:33: "I am the LORD, who made you holy and who brought you out of Egypt to be your God." Obedience is a response to a rescue already accomplished, not a condition for being rescued. The

New Testament preserves exactly this order. Paul spends eleven chapters of Romans describing what God has done in Christ before he turns to how we should live: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy..." (Romans 12:1). Careful obedience is not a burden when it flows from gratitude.

Chapter 22 also requires that offerings be without defect: "Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf" (Leviticus 22:20). God deserved the best, not the leftovers. Centuries later, Malachi confronted a generation of priests who had grown casual about this: "When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you?" (Malachi 1:8). We would never give a respected official what we routinely give God: the last hour of an exhausted day, the leftover money after everything else is paid, the half-hearted attention of a distracted mind. The unblemished offering of Leviticus 22 pointed forward to Christ, the Lamb "without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:19). It also asks us whether we are giving God our best.

One more phrase in these chapters deserves our attention: "I am the LORD, who makes you holy." It appears repeatedly in the second half of Leviticus (Leviticus 20:8; 21:8; 22:9, 16, 32). God tells Israel to treat Him as holy because He is the one who makes them holy. And the Hebrew form of that phrase describes ongoing action. God did not simply sanctify Israel once, when He called them out of Egypt, and then leave the rest to them. He was continually at work in them to make them holy. And because only the Lord could make them holy, they needed to obey Him.

Paul says something remarkably similar: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed... continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Philippians 2:12–13). Notice again the present tense: God "works" in you, not merely "worked." He is actively, continually at work. And He works not only in our actions but in our very wills. He shapes both what we want and what we do, so that both fulfill His good purpose.

What does this mean for us? It means there is both a responsibility and an assurance. Since God has saved us, we are responsible to honor and obey Him, with "fear and trembling," because the One who saves us is also holy. At the same time, we have assurance, because the One who commands our obedience is also the One who produces the willing and the doing in us. That is why Paul could write, "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). And again: "May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.... The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (1 Thessalonians 5:23–24).

So we are saved by grace and sanctified by grace. We are saved through faith and sanctified through faith: "in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed—a righteousness that is by faith from first to last" (Romans 1:17). We can boast of neither our salvation nor our sanctification. All the glory belongs to God, whose grace accomplished the one and continues to accomplish the other in us.

Christians across traditions affirm both halves of Philippians 2:12–13, though they describe the relationship differently.

Some emphasize God's effectual working, which guarantees that those He has saved will persevere to the end. Others emphasize grace that enables and invites continued cooperation. We lean toward the first, but all agree that no one can boast, and that daily trust and obedience are the fruit and evidence of God's work within us. Here is how we know that God has worked and is working in us: we go on working out our salvation with fear and trembling. As we daily trust and obey God's Word, we are daily assured that He has saved us and is sanctifying us. If we disregard His Word, or trust in our own good works, we have no such assurance.

Chapter 23 turns from the priests to the calendar. "These are my appointed festivals, the appointed festivals of the LORD, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies" (Leviticus 23:2). The word translated "sacred assembly" carries the idea of a calling, a gathering in response to a summons. Israel's year was shaped by God's invitations. Time itself was sanctified.

The list begins with the weekly Sabbath: "There are six days when you may work, but the seventh day is a day of sabbath rest, a day of sacred assembly" (Leviticus 23:3). Then it moves through the year. In the spring came Passover, on the fourteenth day of the first month, followed immediately by the seven-day Festival of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:5–8). Then came the offering of firstfruits: "When you enter the land I am going to give you and you reap its harvest, bring to the priest a sheaf of the first grain you harvest. He is to wave the sheaf before the LORD so it will be accepted on your behalf; the priest is to wave it on the day after the Sabbath" (Leviticus 23:10–11). No one was to eat from the new harvest until the firstfruits had been

given to God (Leviticus 23:14). The first and best belonged to Him.

Then the Israelites were to count seven full weeks: "Count off fifty days up to the day after the seventh Sabbath, and then present an offering of new grain to the LORD" (Leviticus 23:16). This was the Festival of Weeks, which celebrated the wheat harvest. And right in the middle of the calendar, God repeated the gleaning law we saw in chapter 19: "When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Leave them for the poor and for the foreigner residing among you. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 23:22). Even Israel's celebrations were to remember the poor.

In the fall came the Festival of Trumpets on the first day of the seventh month, "a day of sabbath rest, a sacred assembly commemorated with trumpet blasts" (Leviticus 23:24). Ten days later came the Day of Atonement, which we studied in chapter 16. And five days after that came the Festival of Tabernacles, a week of joy when the harvest was complete. "Live in temporary shelters for seven days: All native-born Israelites are to live in such shelters so your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in temporary shelters when I brought them out of Egypt. I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 23:42–43). Every year, God's people camped out in booths made of branches to remember that they had once been wanderers whom God had sheltered in the wilderness. And they were commanded to "rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days" (Leviticus 23:40). Rejoicing was not optional!

Three of these festivals required a pilgrimage. "Three times a year all your men must appear before the LORD your God at

the place he will choose: at the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the Festival of Weeks and the Festival of Tabernacles" (Deuteronomy 16:16). No matter how far away an Israelite lived, these festivals required a trip to the place God would choose, which later became the temple in Jerusalem.

This explains one of the most important scenes in the New Testament. The Festival of Weeks was known in Greek as Pentecost, meaning "fiftieth," after the fifty days counted from the firstfruits. The Hebrew name is Shavuot. Many readers know about Pentecost in Acts 2, know about the Festival of Weeks in Leviticus, and may even know the word Shavuot, without ever realizing they are all the same festival.

"When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place" (Acts 2:1). The Holy Spirit came upon the disciples with a sound like a violent wind and tongues of fire, and they began speaking in other languages. Why was there a crowd to hear them? Because "there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven" (Acts 2:5). They had come for the festival, just as the Law required. Parthians, Medes, Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, Asia, Egypt, Rome, Crete, and Arabia all heard the wonders of God declared in their own languages.

That was not a random coincidence of who happened to be in town. It was the direct result of a pilgrimage the Law had mandated nearly fifteen centuries earlier, bringing Jews from across the known world back to Jerusalem for this very festival. God's timing in pouring out His Spirit at Pentecost meant that the audience for the gospel's first public proclamation had been assembled, by the design of the Law itself, from every nation under heaven. It was the ideal crowd for launching a gospel

meant to reach all nations. And many of them, it seems, carried the message home with them. The Festival of Weeks celebrated the firstfruits of the wheat harvest; on this Pentecost, "about three thousand were added to their number that day" (Acts 2:41), the firstfruits of a far greater harvest.

Jewish tradition also came to associate the Festival of Weeks with the giving of the Law at Sinai, since Israel arrived at Sinai in the third month after leaving Egypt (Exodus 19:1). Scripture does not make that connection explicitly, but many Christians have noticed a striking contrast if the tradition is correct. On the day the Law was given, Israel worshiped the golden calf, and "that day about three thousand of the people died" (Exodus 32:28). On the day the Spirit was given, about three thousand were saved. As Paul put it, "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:6).

The more we read the Old Testament, the more it helps us understand what is happening in the New.

In fact, the whole festival calendar seems to trace a pattern that the New Testament picks up. The spring festivals line up with events the New Testament dates precisely. Jesus was crucified at Passover, and Paul writes, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Corinthians 5:7). The Festival of Unleavened Bread followed, and Paul draws the application: "Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Corinthians 5:8). Jesus rose from the dead on "the day after the Sabbath," the very day the firstfruits sheaf was waved before the Lord, and Paul writes, "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). Just as

the first sheaf promised the full harvest to come, Christ's resurrection guarantees ours. And fifty days later, at Pentecost, the Spirit was poured out.

The apostles themselves used these festival terms deliberately to interpret Christ. That is not in dispute. What about the autumn festivals, Trumpets, Atonement, and Tabernacles? The New Testament does not narrate a corresponding fulfillment, and a long interpretive tradition has read them as pointing forward to events still to come. Many see the Festival of Trumpets anticipating the day when "the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God" (1 Thessalonians 4:16). Many see the Day of Atonement anticipating the day when Israel "will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him" (Zechariah 12:10), and a fountain will be opened to cleanse them from sin (Zechariah 13:1). And the prophets foresaw a day when the nations "will go up year after year to worship the King, the LORD Almighty, and to celebrate the Festival of Tabernacles" (Zechariah 14:16), a day when "God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them" (Revelation 21:3).

We find that pattern compelling, and it fits the way we read the prophetic Scriptures, with a real future restoration of Israel and a coming kingdom. But we should hold it as a suggestive pattern rather than a demonstrated one. Faithful interpreters differ on how much weight it can bear, and Scripture does not spell it out. What we can say with confidence is that every one of these festivals finds its meaning in Christ.

John's Gospel gives us one more glimpse of that. By Jesus' day, the Festival of Tabernacles included a ceremony in which the priests drew water each day and poured it out at the altar, remembering God's provision of water in the wilderness and praying for rain. "On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them'" (John 7:37–38). And John's prologue uses a word drawn from the tabernacle itself: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (John 1:14). The God who once sheltered Israel in booths in the wilderness came and pitched His tent among us.

Are Christians required to keep these festivals today? The New Testament answers clearly: "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ" (Colossians 2:16–17). A believer who chooses to observe a day in honor of the Lord is free to do so, and so is one who does not (Romans 14:5–6). But we should not treat these chapters as irrelevant. The shadow helps us see the shape of the reality. When we know the festivals, the cross, the empty tomb, and the day of Pentecost take on new depth.

And the festivals teach us something about how we order our own time. Israel's year was built around God's calling: weekly rest, seasons of remembering His deliverance, days of repentance, and weeks of rejoicing over His provision. Our calendars tend to be built around work, school, and entertainment. The Lord who gave Israel appointed times still

calls His people to gather, to rest, to remember, to repent, and to rejoice. The question is whether we will let His calling shape our weeks and years, or let everything else crowd it out.

Thank You, Lord, for teaching us day by day as we read Your Word, and for being the Lord who makes us holy.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. God repeatedly grounds His commands in the phrase "I am the LORD." Are there commands in Scripture you find hard to understand? What would it look like to obey them simply because of who God is?
2. The Ten Commandments begin with "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt." Why does it matter that obedience follows rescue rather than earning it? How does that change the way you think about obeying God?
3. God required offerings without defect, and Malachi rebuked those who gave Him their leftovers. Where are you tempted to give God what is left over rather than your best?
4. "It is God who works in you to will and to act." How does this truth give you both a sense of responsibility and a sense of assurance?
5. Pentecost drew Jews from every nation to Jerusalem because the Law required it, and God poured out His Spirit on that very day. What does this teach you about God's planning and timing?
6. Israel's calendar was built around God's calling to rest, remember, repent, and rejoice. What shapes your weekly

and yearly calendar? How could you make more room for those rhythms?

Chapter Nine

Leviticus 24–25

These two chapters move from the lamp in the tabernacle to the fields of the Promised Land, from a courtroom in the camp to the ownership of land and the freedom of people. They contain one of the most misunderstood verses in the Bible, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth," and one of the most hopeful institutions in the Law, the Year of Jubilee. They also contain a passage about slavery that raises hard questions, questions we should face honestly rather than avoid.

Chapter 24 opens quietly, in the Holy Place. "Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives for the light so that the lamps may be kept burning continually" (Leviticus 24:2). Twelve loaves of bread, one for each tribe, were to be set out before the Lord every Sabbath (Leviticus 24:5–9). The lamp that never went out and the bread that was always present were quiet reminders that Israel lived continually before God, and that God continually provided for them. Jesus would later call Himself both "the light of the world" (John 8:12) and "the bread of life" (John 6:35).

Then, abruptly, the chapter turns to a crisis. The son of an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father got into a fight in the camp and "blasphemed the Name with a curse" (Leviticus 24:11). The people did not know what to do, so they held him until the Lord's will was made clear. God's answer was severe: "anyone who blasphemes the name of the LORD is to be put to death" (Leviticus 24:16). And God made a point of saying that the same law applied to everyone: "You are to have the same law for the foreigner and the native-born. I am the LORD your God"

(Leviticus 24:22). The man's mixed ancestry neither excused him nor condemned him more harshly. Justice in Israel was not to depend on who you were.

In the middle of this episode stands the famous principle: "Anyone who injures their neighbor is to be injured in the same manner: fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury" (Leviticus 24:19–20). Scholars call this the law of retaliation, or by its Latin name, the *lex talionis*.

Was this a warrant for personal revenge? Many people assume so. "An eye for an eye" is regularly quoted to justify getting even, whether in cycles of violence between nations or in a child's question about whether she may hit her brother back. But in its original setting, the law did almost the opposite. It was a limit on retaliation, not a license for it.

Consider the world in which it was given. There were no police and no established court system. A personal injury could easily spark a blood feud that went on for generations, with each side escalating the violence. We see exactly that in Genesis, when Simeon and Levi avenged the violation of their sister Dinah by slaughtering every man in the city of Shechem (Genesis 34). Jacob never forgot it. On his deathbed he said of those two sons, "Cursed be their anger, so fierce, and their fury, so cruel!" (Genesis 49:7).

The law of retaliation addressed that problem in two ways. First, it took punishment out of the hands of the victim and placed it in the hands of the community's judges. Deuteronomy's version of the law is set in the context of a trial (Deuteronomy 19:15–21). Second, it required that the penalty fit the crime: no more, and no less. One eye for one eye, not a life for an eye. It

was a principle of proportional justice and a deterrent to crime. The irony is that a law designed to prevent personal revenge came to be used to justify it.

It is also worth noticing how this law compared with others in the ancient world. Older law codes contained similar principles, but they often applied different penalties depending on a person's social class. The penalty for injuring a nobleman might be very different from the penalty for injuring a commoner or a slave. Israel's law insisted on "the same law for the foreigner and the native-born" (Leviticus 24:22). The only recorded instance in Scripture of a maiming penalty being carried out is striking: when Israel captured the Canaanite king Adoni-Bezek and cut off his thumbs and big toes, he himself acknowledged, "Seventy kings with their thumbs and big toes cut off have picked up scraps under my table. Now God has paid me back for what I did to them" (Judges 1:7). Even he recognized the justice of it. Later Jewish interpreters came to understand the law as requiring monetary compensation equal to the injury rather than literal maiming, which fits the law's emphasis on proportion.

When Jesus addressed this law in the Sermon on the Mount, He began, "You have heard that it was said" (Matthew 5:38). He was engaging with the way the law was being interpreted and used in His day, when some treated it as a justification for personal retaliation. And His examples are revealing. They are not about murder or maiming. They are about insult, lawsuits, inconvenience, and requests for help. Jesus was not addressing what courts should do but how His disciples should respond when they are personally wronged.

"But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Matthew 5:39). A slap on the right cheek from a right-handed person would be a backhanded blow, a gesture of contempt more than of injury. Jewish law of the time treated it as a serious insult for which one could seek damages in court. Jesus says to turn the other cheek rather than retaliate or sue.

"And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well" (Matthew 5:40). The Law required that a poor man's cloak taken as a pledge be returned to him every night, because it might be all he had to sleep in (Exodus 22:26–27; Deuteronomy 24:12–13). Jesus says to give it up voluntarily.

"If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles" (Matthew 5:41). Roman soldiers had the right to compel civilians to carry their gear for a set distance, a practice deeply resented under occupation. Jesus says to go twice as far.

"Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you" (Matthew 5:42). Building on the Law's own commands to lend generously to the poor (Deuteronomy 15:7–10), Jesus calls His followers to "lend to them without expecting to get anything back" (Luke 6:35).

These are examples, not an exhaustive list. The principle is this: when we are wronged, we are not only to forgo retaliation but to respond with an unexpected blessing. Paul says the same: "Do not repay anyone evil for evil.... Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' says the Lord.... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:17, 19, 21).

Christians have applied Jesus' teaching in different ways. Some traditions understand it as a call to nonviolence in every circumstance. Most others understand it as governing our personal responses to insult and injury, while recognizing that God has given governing authorities a legitimate role in restraining evil. Paul, in the very next chapter, calls the governing authority "God's servant for your good" and describes rulers as "agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer" (Romans 13:4). We hold the latter view. But both readings agree on the central point: Christ's followers are not to seek personal revenge. We entrust justice to God and respond to wrongs in ways that reflect His grace. Jesus Himself showed us how: "When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23).

Chapter 25 turns to the land, and it introduces two remarkable institutions. The first is the sabbatical year. Just as people rested every seventh day, the land was to rest every seventh year: "But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the LORD. Do not sow your fields or prune your vineyards" (Leviticus 25:4). The people were to eat whatever grew on its own. Deuteronomy adds that debts were to be canceled in that year (Deuteronomy 15:1), and that at the Festival of Tabernacles in the sabbatical year, the whole Law was to be read aloud to all Israel (Deuteronomy 31:10–11).

A farmer would naturally worry about that. God anticipated the question: "You may ask, 'What will we eat in the seventh year if we do not plant or harvest our crops?' I will send you such a blessing in the sixth year that the land will yield enough for three years" (Leviticus 25:20–21). The sabbatical year was an

exercise in trust. It required Israel to believe that their provision came ultimately from God, not from their own labor. It was meant to be a blessing, a time of rest for people, animals, and land, a time when the poor had their debts released, and a time when the whole nation heard God's Word together.

But along with the command came a warning, spelled out in chapter 26. If Israel refused to obey, God would scatter them among the nations, and "Then the land will enjoy its sabbath years all the time that it lies desolate and you are in the country of your enemies; then the land will rest and enjoy its sabbaths" (Leviticus 26:34). If Israel would not give the land its rest voluntarily, God would give it rest by removing them.

That is exactly what happened. After entering the Promised Land, Israel did not keep the sabbatical years. Centuries later, when Babylon carried Judah into exile, the Chronicler explained what God was doing: "The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah" (2 Chronicles 36:21). Some have calculated that if Israel neglected the sabbatical year for about 490 years, the land would have been owed exactly seventy years of rest. Whether or not that particular calculation is precise, the Chronicler clearly connects the length of the exile to the neglected Sabbath years. The exile was not an arbitrary decision of Babylon's kings. It was a debt being paid, just as God had said.

How sad that Israel forgot the blessings God had promised for keeping the sabbatical years: rain in season, abundant harvests, peace in the land, and above all, God's presence dwelling among them (Leviticus 26:3–12). A gift became a burden in their eyes, and they lost both the gift and the land.

After the exile, Israel swung to the opposite extreme. By the time of Jesus, a vast body of regulations had grown up around the Sabbath, a protective hedge meant to keep anyone from even coming close to breaking God's law. The intention may have been good, but the result was that it became nearly impossible to do good on the Sabbath at all. It was into exactly that situation that Jesus declared, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath" (Luke 6:5), and asked the religious leaders, "which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?" (Luke 6:9). Then He healed a man with a shriveled hand. Sabbath rest without mercy, compassion, and love misses the point entirely.

The second great institution of chapter 25 is the Year of Jubilee. After seven sabbatical cycles, forty-nine years, came the fiftieth year: "Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan" (Leviticus 25:10). It began on the Day of Atonement with the blast of a ram's horn. Land that had been sold returned to its original family. Israelites who had sold themselves into servitude because of debt went free.

The principle behind the Jubilee is stated in one of the most important verses in the chapter: "The land must not be sold permanently, because the land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers" (Leviticus 25:23). Israel did not own the land in any final sense. God did. They were His tenants. That meant no family could lose its inheritance forever, and no one could accumulate land permanently at the expense of the poor. In effect, a sale of land was really a lease until the next Jubilee, and the price was set accordingly (Leviticus 25:14–16).

The Jubilee was God's safeguard against permanent poverty. Misfortune, poor decisions, illness, or crop failure might drive a family off its land, but they would not lose it forever. Every generation would have a fresh start. The chapter also provided for redemption before the Jubilee: "If one of your fellow Israelites becomes poor and sells some of their property, their nearest relative is to come and redeem what they have sold" (Leviticus 25:25). This kinsman-redeemer would buy back what had been lost. We will see this beautifully illustrated in the book of Ruth, where Boaz redeems the land of Naomi's family and takes Ruth as his wife.

The same chapter protected the poor in other ways. "If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and are unable to support themselves among you, help them as you would a foreigner and stranger, so they can continue to live among you. Do not take interest or any profit from them, but fear your God" (Leviticus 25:35–36). And if an Israelite became so poor that he had to sell himself, "do not make them work as slaves. They are to be treated as hired workers" (Leviticus 25:39–40), released at the Jubilee. The reason is given twice: "Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves.... Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God" (Leviticus 25:42–43). God had redeemed them from slavery; they belonged to Him; no Israelite could own another as property.

The Jubilee points forward to Christ. When Jesus began His public ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth, He read from Isaiah 61, a passage steeped in Jubilee language: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the

prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18–19). Then He said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). Jesus is our Kinsman-Redeemer, who took on our flesh "to redeem those under the law" (Galatians 4:5), and who restores to us the inheritance we lost. The trumpet of Jubilee sounded on the Day of Atonement, and our freedom comes through His atonement.

But chapter 25 also contains a passage that many readers find deeply troubling, and we should not pass over it. "Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves.... They will become your property. You can bequeath them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly" (Leviticus 25:44–46).

This is a serious question, and it deserves a serious answer. How could a God who delivered His people from slavery permit them to buy slaves themselves, and even pass them down to their children? In some communities, especially among those whose ancestors were enslaved, this question is raised often and with good reason, sometimes as an argument against the Bible itself.

We should begin by being honest about what the text says. Some have tried to soften it by claiming that all servitude in Israel was simply indentured service, like a hired worker's contract. For Israelites, that was essentially true: their servitude was debt-based, limited in time, and ended with release. But the language used for foreigners in verses 44–46 is stronger than that. They are called property. They could be passed to the owner's children. They could be held for life. Pretending

otherwise would not be honest, and a good deal of popular teaching on this passage does exactly that.

At the same time, several things should be noted. First, even foreign slaves were protected by laws that were remarkable in the ancient world. Kidnapping a person to sell as a slave was punishable by death (Exodus 21:16), which strikes at the heart of the slave trade as it existed in modern history. An owner who injured a slave by destroying an eye or a tooth had to set that slave free (Exodus 21:26–27). And while other ancient law codes generally required that fugitive slaves be returned, Israel's Law forbade it: "If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand them over to their master. Let them live among you wherever they like" (Deuteronomy 23:15–16). Slavery in ancient Israel was not the racially based, permanent chattel slavery of more recent centuries, sustained by kidnapping and backed by laws that returned fugitives to their owners.

Second, we should read this law as we read Israel's divorce laws. God permitted and regulated certain practices in a fallen world without ever presenting them as His ideal. The Law often worked within existing institutions, restraining their worst abuses, rather than abolishing them all at once. Christians continue to wrestle with how much the Law merely regulated an existing evil and how much it permitted, and that wrestling is appropriate.

Third, the whole direction of Scripture pushes against slavery. Israel's national identity was founded on the fact that they had been slaves whom God set free. The New Testament lists "slave traders" among the lawless and ungodly (1 Timothy 1:10). Paul told Philemon to receive his runaway slave Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear

brother" (Philemon 16). And he declared that in Christ "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free... for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Every human being is made in the image of God.

Christians eventually concluded that slavery is incompatible with Scripture's teaching about human beings made in God's image, and the movement to abolish slavery drew many of its arguments from the Bible. It is also true that slaveholders quoted these very chapters to defend the practice, at length and in print. Both of those facts belong in any honest handling of this passage. The responsible answer is neither that the text says nothing troubling nor that the church's rejection of slavery was a departure from Scripture. It was, rather, a deeper and truer reading of Scripture as a whole.

One more question naturally arises. If the Law is not binding on Christians, is it still binding on Jews who do not believe in Christ? And why is it sometimes considered inappropriate to raise that question? Scripture teaches that the Law was Israel's covenant, given to a particular people at a particular time in God's plan. Paul lists "the receiving of the law" among the privileges of Israel (Romans 9:4). But we believe, with the New Testament, that the Law has been fulfilled in Christ, and that it is no longer the covenant by which anyone, Jew or Gentile, relates to God. Salvation for both comes the same way, by grace through faith in Jesus the Messiah. We raise that conviction not with contempt but with love, just as Paul did when he wrote of his own people, "my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved" (Romans 10:1).

So these chapters show us a God of justice who limits vengeance, a God of provision who calls His people to trust Him,

and a God of redemption who proclaims liberty and restores what was lost. The land was His, and so were the people. And in Christ, the true Jubilee has come.

Thank You, Lord, that You are the Lord of the Sabbath, and that our true rest and provision are found in You.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. "Eye for eye" was designed to limit revenge, not to license it. When you have been wronged, what does your first impulse look like? How does Jesus' call to respond with an unexpected blessing challenge you?
2. The sabbatical year required Israel to trust God to provide when they stopped working. Where in your life do you find it hardest to stop and trust God's provision?
3. Israel's neglect of the sabbatical years was repaid with seventy years of exile. What does this teach you about how God views the gifts we refuse to receive?
4. "The land is mine and you reside in my land as foreigners and strangers." How would it change the way you handle your property and possessions if you truly believed they belonged to God?
5. Jesus announced "the year of the Lord's favor" at the start of His ministry. In what ways has He been your Kinsman-Redeemer, restoring what you had lost?
6. How would you respond to someone who says the Bible's laws about slavery prove that Scripture cannot be trusted? What would you want to say honestly, and what would you want to affirm?

Chapter Ten

Leviticus 26–27

Leviticus ends the way many ancient covenants ended, with a set of blessings and curses. Chapter 26 lays out what will happen if Israel keeps the covenant God has made with them at Sinai, and what will happen if they break it. Chapter 27 then closes the book with regulations about vows and dedications. Together they bring Leviticus to a sobering and yet deeply hopeful conclusion, for in the end, the book rests not on Israel's faithfulness but on God's.

Chapter 26 opens by repeating two foundational commands: "Do not make idols or set up an image or a sacred stone for yourselves.... Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 26:1–2). Then come the blessings. "If you follow my decrees and are careful to obey my commands, I will send you rain in its season, and the ground will yield its crops and the trees their fruit" (Leviticus 26:3–4). The harvest would be so abundant that the threshing would continue until the grape harvest, and the grape harvest until planting time. "I will grant peace in the land, and you will lie down and no one will make you afraid" (Leviticus 26:6). Israel's enemies would flee before them: "Five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand" (Leviticus 26:8). Their families would grow, and they would have to clear out last year's harvest to make room for the new.

And the greatest blessing of all comes last: "I will put my dwelling place among you, and I will not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would

no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk with heads held high" (Leviticus 26:11–13). Rain and harvests and peace were good gifts, but the heart of the blessing was God Himself, walking among His people as He once walked in the garden. The picture of former slaves walking with their heads held high is one of the loveliest images in the Law.

Then the chapter turns. "But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands, and if you reject my decrees and abhor my laws and fail to carry out all my commands and so violate my covenant..." (Leviticus 26:14–15). What follows is a long and terrible list. Sudden terror and disease. Enemies eating the harvest. Defeat in battle. Then, if Israel still refused to listen, drought: "I will break down your stubborn pride and make the sky above you like iron and the ground beneath you like bronze" (Leviticus 26:19). Then wild animals, then the sword and plague, then famine so severe that "ten women will be able to bake your bread in one oven" (Leviticus 26:26). Then the most horrifying words of all: "You will eat the flesh of your sons and the flesh of your daughters" (Leviticus 26:29). And finally, devastation of the cities, desolation of the land, and exile among the nations.

Notice how the curses are structured. They come in waves, and each wave is introduced by a phrase like "If after all this you will not listen to me" (Leviticus 26:18, 21, 23, 27). God does not unleash every judgment at once. Each stage is an opportunity to repent. Each escalation is a call to turn back before worse comes. The structure itself exposes the seriousness of a hardened heart, one that refuses to listen even as the consequences mount.

Four times God says He will punish Israel "seven times over" (Leviticus 26:18, 21, 24, 28). What does that mean? Seven in Hebrew thought is the number of completeness, and here it is not meant to be calculated arithmetically. It means punishment in full measure, fully appropriate to Israel's stubborn rebellion. Scripture uses the number this way elsewhere. Deuteronomy promises that Israel's enemies "will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven" (Deuteronomy 28:7), meaning they will be scattered completely. Isaiah says that after a devastating war, "seven women will take hold of one man" (Isaiah 4:1), meaning that men will be so scarce that women will be desperate to marry. And when Peter asked whether he should forgive his brother "Up to seven times," Jesus answered, "not seven times, but seventy-seven times" (Matthew 18:21–22), turning the number of completeness into a picture of limitless mercy.

The most chilling thing about this chapter is that it came true. Leviticus 26 is not merely a warning; it is a prophecy of Israel's history. As we read further into the Old Testament, we will see Israel suffer every one of these punishments. Even the most horrifying of them was fulfilled. During the Aramean siege of Samaria, a woman cried out to the king of Israel that she and another woman had agreed to eat their sons, one on one day and the other on the next, and that after she had given up her son, the other woman had hidden hers (2 Kings 6:26–29). Deuteronomy had warned of exactly this in specific detail (Deuteronomy 28:53–57), and Lamentations records it again during the fall of Jerusalem (Lamentations 4:10). These were not empty threats. And as we saw in the last chapter, the exile

came, and the land enjoyed the Sabbath years Israel had denied it.

Why didn't Israel take these warnings seriously? Just as they quickly forgot their promise to obey the Law, they seem to have trusted neither the promised blessings nor the promised punishments. They lived as though God's words were merely words. That is always the temptation for God's people. We hear the promises and warnings of Scripture so often that they lose their weight, until we are living as though God did not mean what He said.

There is a different danger, too, one that is common in our own day. Some teachers love to quote the blessings of Leviticus 26 to encourage Christians that God always wants to bless them with health, wealth, and success. Rain in its season, abundant harvests, victory over enemies, growing families: these promises are claimed as guarantees for believers today. But the same teachers rarely mention the curses, even though the curses take up far more of the chapter than the blessings. They seldom speak about obedience and disobedience at all. They treat the Bible like a buffet line, taking what they want and leaving the rest.

On the other side are those who teach that Christians must still keep the Law of Moses. At least they preach the obedience that leads to the blessings. But they too tend to pick and choose which parts of the Law must be obeyed, and they almost completely neglect the curses that come with disobedience.

What is the truth? Leviticus 26 addresses Israel under a particular covenant, in a particular land. Its conditions, its blessings, and its curses belong together, and removing one part from that setting changes the meaning of the whole. The

promises of rain and harvest and military victory were tied to Israel's life in Canaan under the Mosaic covenant. We cannot simply lift them out and apply them to Christians today without accounting for Christ and the teaching of the apostles.

And the New Testament tells us that covenant has been superseded. "But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.... By calling this covenant 'new,' he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear" (Hebrews 8:6, 13). The Old Covenant, with its commands, blessings, and curses, has been replaced by the New Covenant, inaugurated by the blood of Christ, in which the Holy Spirit enables every believer to live by faith expressed through love. "But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code" (Romans 7:6). "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love" (Galatians 5:6).

That does not mean obedience has become unnecessary. Under the new covenant, God says, "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts" (Hebrews 8:10). The Spirit does not free us from obedience; He enables it. Grace frees us from trying to justify ourselves, while calling us to a deeper and more willing response to God. It is neither a prosperity formula nor an excuse for indifference about how we live. And the New Testament does not promise believers an uninterrupted life of material comfort. Jesus said plainly, "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33), and Paul warned that "everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be

persecuted" (2 Timothy 3:12). What God has promised us is far greater than rain and harvests: "And this is what he promised us—eternal life" (1 John 2:25). "Blessed is the one who perseveres under trial because, having stood the test, that person will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).

The practical lesson is simple but important. Before we claim a promise from Scripture, we should read the whole passage. Who is being addressed? What conditions are stated? How does the rest of Scripture develop the covenant in view? Then we should let both the warnings and the mercy shape our response. Leviticus 26 teaches that disobedience is not harmless, and that God's faithfulness is not fragile.

That second truth is where the chapter ends, and we must not miss it. After the long list of curses, after the exile and the desolation, God speaks again: "But if they will confess their sins and the sins of their ancestors—their unfaithfulness and their hostility toward me... and when their uncircumcised hearts are humbled and they pay for their sin, I will remember my covenant with Jacob and my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land" (Leviticus 26:40–42).

And then: "Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or abhor them so as to destroy them completely, breaking my covenant with them. I am the LORD their God. But for their sake I will remember the covenant with their ancestors whom I brought out of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God. I am the LORD" (Leviticus 26:44–45).

Did you notice what happened there? Beyond the conditional and temporary provisions of the Mosaic covenant, with its blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, God points to a deeper covenant, the one He made with Abraham. The Mosaic covenant could be broken, and Israel broke it. But God's promise to Abraham was of a different kind. Even in the land of their enemies, even under the full weight of judgment, God would not destroy His people completely. He would remember.

And Israel's own history shows exactly this pattern. During the exile, Daniel prayed a great prayer of confession: "Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, we have sinned and done wrong" (Daniel 9:4-5). Nehemiah prayed the same way (Nehemiah 1:5-11). They were doing precisely what Leviticus 26:40 called for, confessing their sins and the sins of their ancestors, and appealing to God's covenant faithfulness. And God answered. The exile ended, and a remnant returned to the land.

Our own understanding is that God's covenant with Abraham was unconditional and eternal, and that it became the foundation for three other unconditional and eternal covenants. There is the land covenant, by which God promised to give Canaan to Abraham's descendants as an everlasting possession (Genesis 15:18-21; Deuteronomy 30:1-10). There is the Davidic covenant, by which God promised an eternal King from David's line whose kingdom would endure forever (2 Samuel 7:11-16). And there is the New Covenant, by which God promised to give His people a new and obedient heart: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be

their God, and they will be my people" (Jeremiah 31:33). We believe these promises to Israel have not been canceled, and that God will yet fulfill them. As Paul asked, "Did God reject his people? By no means!" (Romans 11:1), "for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29).

Christians understand the relationship between the biblical covenants in different ways, and it is fair to say so. The framework we have described, which distinguishes the unconditional covenants from the conditional Mosaic covenant and expects a future fulfillment of God's promises to national Israel, is associated especially with dispensational theology. Many Reformed and Presbyterian Christians hold to covenant theology, which sees one overarching covenant of grace administered in successive stages and fulfilled in Christ and His church. Others hold mediating views. Christians also differ on how the land promises will be fulfilled. These are real differences among believers who love the Scriptures. But all agree on the central comfort of Leviticus 26: God's faithfulness to His promises is the ground of His people's hope, even in the midst of discipline for sin.

Jesus Christ established the New Covenant through His blood. On the night He was betrayed, "he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you'" (Luke 22:20). "For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant" (Hebrews 9:15). Every curse of Leviticus 26 that Israel deserved, and every curse that we deserve, He bore on the cross.

So here is the hope of this chapter for us. Just as Israel had hope even while being judged for their sins, because of God's unconditional covenant with Abraham, so we have hope even in our struggle with sin, because of the unconditional New Covenant we enjoy in Christ. God disciplines those He loves (Hebrews 12:6). He does not abandon them. Our God faithfully keeps all His promises, the warnings and the blessings alike. Praise the Lord!

After such a climactic chapter, Leviticus 27 can seem like an anticlimax. It deals with vows: what happens when someone voluntarily dedicates a person, an animal, a house, or a field to the Lord. A person dedicated to the Lord could be redeemed by paying a set value to the sanctuary, with the amounts varying by age and sex, apparently according to the value of the person's labor. An animal, a house, or a field could be dedicated and, in most cases, redeemed by paying its value plus a fifth.

Why end the book this way? Perhaps because, after the blessings and curses of chapter 26, it is fitting to end with the voluntary response of a grateful heart. Nothing in chapter 27 was required. No one had to make a vow. But when someone in a moment of gratitude or need promised something to God, that promise mattered. "When you make a vow to God, do not delay to fulfill it. He has no pleasure in fools; fulfill your vow. It is better not to make a vow than to make one and not fulfill it" (Ecclesiastes 5:4–5). Scripture gives us examples of vows made wisely, like Hannah's, who promised her son to the Lord and kept her word (1 Samuel 1:11, 27–28), and of vows made rashly, like Jephthah's, whose careless promise ended in tragedy (Judges 11:30–40). Jesus taught His followers to be people

whose ordinary word can be trusted: "All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'" (Matthew 5:37).

Even here, grace appears once more. "If anyone making the vow is too poor to pay the specified amount, the person being dedicated is to be presented to the priest, who will set the value according to what the one making the vow can afford" (Leviticus 27:8). From the first chapter to the last, Leviticus never lets poverty keep anyone from God.

The chapter also speaks of the tithe: "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD" (Leviticus 27:30). Christians differ on whether the tithe is binding on believers today. Some see it as a continuing standard; others see it as part of the Mosaic covenant that has been fulfilled, while the New Testament calls believers to generous, cheerful, proportionate giving. Our own view is the latter. But either way, the principle behind it is clear: everything we have comes from God, and a portion of it offered back to Him acknowledges that it all belongs to Him. "Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

The final verse of Leviticus reminds us where all of this came from: "These are the commands the LORD gave Moses at Mount Sinai for the Israelites" (Leviticus 27:34). The book began with God calling to Moses from the tent of meeting, and it ends by reminding us that every word came from Him. We have walked through the offerings, the priesthood, the laws of clean and unclean, the Day of Atonement, the call to holiness in every part of life, and the calendar of God's appointed times. At every turn we have seen a holy God making a way for sinful people to live

in His presence. And at every turn we have seen shadows of the One who would come to fulfill it all: the perfect sacrifice, the faithful High Priest, the cleanser of lepers, the true Jubilee, the Mediator of a better covenant.

Our God faithfully keeps all His promises. Thank You, Lord, that Your faithfulness does not depend on ours, and that in Christ, we too can walk with our heads held high.

Reflection & Discussion Questions

1. The greatest blessing promised in Leviticus 26 is God's own presence: "I will walk among you and be your God." Do you value God's presence more than the other blessings you ask Him for? How can you tell?
2. The curses of Leviticus 26 come in waves, each one introduced by "If after all this you will not listen to me." What does this structure reveal about God's patience and His purpose in discipline?
3. Some teachers claim the blessings of Leviticus 26 as guarantees for Christians while ignoring the curses and the covenant context. Why is it important to read a promise within its whole passage before claiming it for yourself?
4. Israel's history fulfilled the warnings of this chapter in painful detail. Are there warnings in Scripture that you have heard so often that they have lost their weight for you?
5. Even in exile, God promised to remember His covenant with Abraham. How does God's faithfulness to His promises give you hope when you are struggling with sin or facing the consequences of your choices?

6. Leviticus ends with voluntary vows and the tithe, and warns that it is better not to vow than to vow and fail to keep it. What promises have you made to God or to others that you need to keep?

Conclusion

From Holiness to the Wilderness

We began Leviticus with a voice calling from inside a tent filled with glory, and we closed it with vows, valuations, and the tithe. It is an unglamorous ending, perhaps, but a fitting one. Leviticus was never meant to overwhelm us with drama. It was meant to answer, in deliberate detail, the question Exodus left hanging: now that a holy God dwells among an unholy people, how exactly are they to live? Between those two points lies one of the most demanding, most easily skipped, and most quietly profound books in all of Scripture.

Three threads ran through nearly every chapter, and it is worth naming them once more. The first was the cost of approach: sacrifices exact enough to draw blood at every turn, and an ordination so solemn that a single unauthorized act proved fatal. We did not try to soften the deaths of Nadab and Abihu into something more palatable. God will be treated as holy by those who draw near Him. That principle did not disappear with the cross. It was fulfilled by it, and that fulfillment is why we now approach God's throne of grace with confidence rather than dread.

The second was the attention to what was clean and unclean, holy and common. We resisted the temptation to hunt for hidden spiritual meanings behind every regulation about mold or discharge or diet. The point was simpler and more sobering: a people who belonged to a holy God were to be visibly different from the nations around them, in matters both sacred and startlingly ordinary. How they farmed, how they paid their workers, how they judged disputes, how they spoke of their

neighbors, and how they treated the poor and the foreigner in their midst all mattered to God. And we saw, again and again, that every exclusion in these chapters came with a way back. The one who had been cut off could come home.

The third was the tenderness running beneath the exactness. The Day of Atonement gave real, if temporary, relief from a whole nation's guilt. The sabbatical and jubilee laws built rest, release, and restoration into Israel's economic life. The priest went outside the camp to find the one who had been sent there. And beneath the conditional blessings and curses of chapter 26 lay an older, unconditional promise to Abraham that God refused to abandon even at Israel's lowest point, a promise that would be fulfilled in the New Covenant established by the blood of Christ.

Along the way, we also noticed how often Leviticus anticipates the Gospels. Jesus touched the leper the Law excluded, and sent him to the priest with the offering Moses commanded. He healed the woman whose bleeding had kept her from worship for twelve years, and called her "Daughter." He was crucified at Passover, rose on the day of firstfruits, and poured out His Spirit at the Festival of Weeks. He announced the year of the Lord's favor, the true Jubilee. And He entered, not a tent made with hands, but heaven itself, with His own blood, once for all.

Leviticus does not end the story. It ends with Israel still camped at Sinai, the tabernacle built and functioning, the sacrificial system in place, and the people of God equipped to live near His presence without being consumed by it. But a question hangs over that ending, and the next book exists to answer it: now that Israel knows how to live near a holy God,

will she trust Him enough to go where He leads? Numbers, the subject of the next volume in this series, gives the answer, and for the most part it is not an encouraging one. There will be grumbling in the wilderness, a generation that refuses to enter the land God promised, and forty years of wandering as the consequence of unbelief. If Leviticus has taught us anything, it is that holiness is costly and never merely theoretical. Now we will see what happens when a people who have just learned how to approach a holy God are asked, simply, to trust Him.

Appendix

Daily Bible Reading Plan

This is the same daily Bible reading plan we use at dailyqt.org, covering the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments alike, in three hundred sixty-five daily readings. It does not begin on January 1st, and neither must you; begin on whatever date suits you and simply follow the sequence from there. The ten readings that correspond to the chapters of this book, Leviticus 1–4 through Leviticus 26–27, fall a little over a month into the full sequence, but the complete year-long plan is reprinted here, as it is in every volume of this series, so that wherever you are in your reading you always have the whole plan close at hand. Check off each day's passage as you complete it, and feel no need to catch up all at once if you fall behind by a day or a week; simply pick up with the current day's reading. The goal was never a perfect record. It was a daily habit of opening God's Word, kept up faithfully enough, and long enough, that it becomes less a task to complete than simply the shape of an ordinary day.

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
1/10	Gen 1-3	1/11	Gen 4-7
1/12	Gen 8-11	1/13	Gen 12-15
1/14	Gen 16-18	1/15	Gen 19-21
1/16	Gen 22-24	1/17	Gen 25-26
1/18	Gen 27-29	1/19	Gen 30-31
1/20	Gen 32-34	1/21	Gen 35-37
1/22	Gen 38-40	1/23	Gen 41-42
1/24	Gen 43-45	1/25	Gen 46-47
1/26	Gen 48-50	1/27	Ex 1-3

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
1/28	Ex 4-6	1/29	Ex 7-9
1/30	Ex 10-12	1/31	Ex 13-15
2/1	Ex 16-18	2/2	Ex 19-21
2/3	Ex 22-24	2/4	Ex 25-27
2/5	Ex 28-29	2/6	Ex 30-32
2/7	Ex 33-35	2/8	Ex 36-38
2/9	Ex 39-40	2/10	Lev 1-4
2/11	Lev 5-7	2/12	Lev 8-10
2/13	Lev 11-13	2/14	Lev 14-15
2/15	Lev 16-18	2/16	Lev 19-21
2/17	Lev 22-23	2/18	Lev 24-25
2/19	Lev 26-27	2/20	Nu 1-2
2/21	Nu 3-4	2/22	Nu 5-6
2/23	Nu 7	2/24	Nu 8-10
2/25	Nu 11-13	2/26	Nu 14-15
2/27	Nu 16-17	2/28	Nu 18-20
3/1	Nu 21-22	3/2	Nu 23-25
3/3	Nu 26-27	3/4	Nu 28-30
3/5	Nu 31-32	3/6	Nu 33-34
3/7	Nu 35-36	3/8	Dt 1-2
3/9	Dt 3-4	3/10	Dt 5-7
3/11	Dt 8-10	3/12	Dt 11-13
3/13	Dt 14-16	3/14	Dt 17-20
3/15	Dt 21-23	3/16	Dt 24-27
3/17	Dt 28-29	3/18	Dt 30-31
3/19	Dt 32-34	3/20	Jos 1-4
3/21	Jos 5-8	3/22	Jos 9-11
3/23	Jos 12-15	3/24	Jos 16-18
3/25	Jos 19-21	3/26	Jos 22-24
3/27	Jdg 1-2	3/28	Jdg 3-5
3/29	Jdg 6-7	3/30	Jdg 8-9
3/31	Jdg 10-12	4/1	Jdg 13-15
4/2	Jdg 16-18	4/3	Jdg 19-21
4/4	Ruth	4/5	1 Sa 1-3
4/6	1 Sa 4-8	4/7	1 Sa 9-12
4/8	1 Sa 13-14	4/9	1 Sa 15-17
4/10	1 Sa 18-20	4/11	1 Sa 21-24

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
4/12	1 Sa 25-27	4/13	1 Sa 28-31
4/14	2 Sa 1-3	4/15	2 Sa 4-7
4/16	2 Sa 8-12	4/17	2 Sa 13-15
4/18	2 Sa 16-18	4/19	2 Sa 19-21
4/20	2 Sa 22-24	4/21	1 Ki 1-2
4/22	1 Ki 3-5	4/23	1 Ki 6-7
4/24	1 Ki 8-9	4/25	1 Ki 10-11
4/26	1 Ki 12-14	4/27	1 Ki 15-17
4/28	1 Ki 18-20	4/29	1 Ki 21-22
4/30	2 Ki 1-3	5/1	2 Ki 4-5
5/2	2 Ki 6-8	5/3	2 Ki 9-11
5/4	2 Ki 12-14	5/5	2 Ki 15-17
5/6	2 Ki 18-19	5/7	2 Ki 20-22
5/8	2 Ki 23-25	5/9	1 Ch 1-2
5/10	1 Ch 3-5	5/11	1 Ch 6
5/12	1 Ch 7-8	5/13	1 Ch 9-11
5/14	1 Ch 12-14	5/15	1 Ch 15-17
5/16	1 Ch 18-21	5/17	1 Ch 22-24
5/18	1 Ch 25-27	5/19	1 Ch 28-2 Ch 1
5/20	2 Ch 2-5	5/21	2 Ch 6-8
5/22	2 Ch 9-12	5/23	2 Ch 13-17
5/24	2 Ch 18-20	5/25	2 Ch 21-24
5/26	2 Ch 25-27	5/27	2 Ch 28-31
5/28	2 Ch 32-34	5/29	2 Ch 35-36
5/30	Ezr 1-3	5/31	Ezr 4-7
6/1	Ezr 8-10	6/2	Neh 1-3
6/3	Neh 4-6	6/4	Neh 7
6/5	Neh 8-9	6/6	Neh 10-11
6/7	Neh 12-13	6/8	Esth 1-5
6/9	Esth 6-10	6/10	Job 1-4
6/11	Job 5-7	6/12	Job 8-10
6/13	Job 11-13	6/14	Job 14-16
6/15	Job 17-20	6/16	Job 21-23
6/17	Job 24-28	6/18	Job 29-31
6/19	Job 32-34	6/20	Job 35-37
6/21	Job 38-39	6/22	Job 40-42
6/23	Ps 1-8	6/24	Ps 9-16

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
6/25	Ps 17-20	6/26	Ps 21-25
6/27	Ps 26-31	6/28	Ps 32-35
6/29	Ps 36-39	6/30	Ps 40-45
7/1	Ps 46-50	7/2	Ps 51-57
7/3	Ps 58-65	7/4	Ps 66-69
7/5	Ps 70-73	7/6	Ps 74-77
7/7	Ps 78-79	7/8	Ps 80-85
7/9	Ps 86-89	7/10	Ps 90-95
7/11	Ps 96-102	7/12	Ps 103-105
7/13	Ps 106-107	7/14	Ps 108-114
7/15	Ps 115-118	7/16	Ps 119:1-88
7/17	Ps 119:89-176	7/18	Ps 120-132
7/19	Ps 133-139	7/20	Ps 140-145
7/21	Ps 146-150	7/22	Prov 1-3
7/23	Prov 4-6	7/24	Prov 7-9
7/25	Prov 10-12	7/26	Prov 13-15
7/27	Prov 16-18	7/28	Prov 19-21
7/29	Prov 22-23	7/30	Prov 24-26
7/31	Prov 27-29	8/1	Prov 30-31
8/2	Ecc 1-4	8/3	Ecc 5-8
8/4	Ecc 9-12	8/5	Ss 1-8
8/6	Isa 1-4	8/7	Isa 5-8
8/8	Isa 9-12	8/9	Isa 13-17
8/10	Isa 18-22	8/11	Isa 23-27
8/12	Isa 28-30	8/13	Isa 31-35
8/14	Isa 36-41	8/15	Isa 42-44
8/16	Isa 45-48	8/17	Isa 49-53
8/18	Isa 54-58	8/19	Isa 59-63
8/20	Isa 64-66	8/21	Jer 1-3
8/22	Jer 4-6	8/23	Jer 7-9
8/24	Jer 10-13	8/25	Jer 14-17
8/26	Jer 18-22	8/27	Jer 23-25
8/28	Jer 26-29	8/29	Jer 30-31
8/30	Jer 32-34	8/31	Jer 35-37
9/1	Jer 38-41	9/2	Jer 42-45
9/3	Jer 46-48	9/4	Jer 49-50
9/5	Jer 51-52	9/6	Lam 1:1-3:36

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
9/7	Lam 3:37-5:22	9/8	Eze 1-4
9/9	Eze 5-8	9/10	Eze 9-12
9/11	Eze 13-15	9/12	Eze 16-17
9/13	Eze 18-20	9/14	Eze 21-22
9/15	Eze 23-24	9/16	Eze 25-27
9/17	Eze 28-30	9/18	Eze 31-33
9/19	Eze 34-36	9/20	Eze 37-39
9/21	Eze 40-42	9/22	Eze 43-45
9/23	Eze 46-48	9/24	Dan 1-3
9/25	Dan 4-6	9/26	Dan 7-9
9/27	Dan 10-12	9/28	Hos 1-7
9/29	Hos 8-14	9/30	Joel
10/1	Amos 1-5	10/2	Amos 6-9
10/3	Ob-Jonah	10/4	Micah
10/5	Nahum	10/6	Hab-Zeph
10/7	Haggai 1-2	10/8	Zech 1-7
10/9	Zech 8-14	10/10	Mal 1-4
10/11	Mat 1-4	10/12	Mat 5-6
10/13	Mat 7-8	10/14	Mat 9-10
10/15	Mat 11-12	10/16	Mat 13-14
10/17	Mat 15-17	10/18	Mat 18-19
10/19	Mat 20-21	10/20	Mat 22-23
10/21	Mat 24-25	10/22	Mat 26
10/23	Mat 27-28	10/24	Mark 1-3
10/25	Mark 4-5	10/26	Mark 6-7
10/27	Mark 8-9	10/28	Mark 10-11
10/29	Mark 12-13	10/30	Mark 14
10/31	Mark 15-16	11/1	Luke 1
11/2	Luke 2-3	11/3	Luke 4-5
11/4	Luke 6-7	11/5	Luke 8-9
11/6	Luke 10-11	11/7	Luke 12-13
11/8	Luke 14-16	11/9	Luke 17-18
11/10	Luke 19-20	11/11	Luke 21-22
11/12	Luke 23-24	11/13	John 1-2
11/14	John 3-4	11/15	John 5-6
11/16	John 7-8	11/17	John 9-10
11/18	John 11-12	11/19	John 13-15

Date	Passage	Date	Passage
11/20	John 16-18	11/21	John 19-21
11/22	Acts 1-3	11/23	Acts 4-6
11/24	Acts 7-8	11/25	Acts 9-10
11/26	Acts 11-13	11/27	Acts 14-15
11/28	Acts 16-17	11/29	Acts 18-20
11/30	Acts 21-23	12/1	Acts 24-26
12/2	Acts 27-28	12/3	Rom 1-3
12/4	Rom 4-7	12/5	Rom 8-10
12/6	Rom 11-13	12/7	Rom 14-16
12/8	1 Cor 1-4	12/9	1 Cor 5-8
12/10	1 Cor 9-11	12/11	1 Cor 12-14
12/12	1 Cor 15-16	12/13	2 Cor 1-4
12/14	2 Cor 5-9	12/15	2 Cor 10-13
12/16	Gal 1-3	12/17	Gal 4-6
12/18	Eph 1-3	12/19	Eph 4-6
12/20	Phi 1-4	12/21	Col 1-4
12/22	1 Thess 1-5	12/23	2 Thess 1-3
12/24	1 Tim 1-6	12/25	2 Tim 1-4
12/26	Titus-Phm	12/27	Heb 1-6
12/28	Heb 7-10	12/29	Heb 11-13
12/30	James	12/31	1 Pe
1/1	2 Pe	1/2	1 John
1/3	2 John-Jude	1/4	Rev 1-3
1/5	Rev 4-8	1/6	Rev 9-12
1/7	Rev 13-16	1/8	Rev 17-19
1/9	Rev 20-22		

About the Author

Eugene Han is the founder of dailyqt.org, an online community where readers have shared daily reflections on Scripture for more than a decade, following the reading plan printed in this book. He has taught Sunday School classes at First Baptist Church in Dallas for many years, and much of the material in *The Daily Quiet Time Reflections Series* was first discussed aloud in those classrooms. He previously worked at the University of Illinois at Chicago School of Public Health, and he has written books on personal finance and biblical theology as well as devotional works. He and his wife, Chi, live in Dallas, where their family runs a Taekwondo school together.

The Daily Quiet Time Reflections Series walks through the entire Bible, book by book, in daily readings designed to be read alongside an open Bible. More resources, including the daily readings and audio reflections, are available at dailyqt.org.