

Elementary

*The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting
(Leviticus 1:1 ESV)*

*“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.
(Matthew 5:17-18 ESV)*

I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. (Gal. 4:1-2 ESV)

What Does The Law Teach Us About God?

June 20th, 2021

Leviticus 1:1-9

Rev. Levi denBok

Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to Leviticus 1.

This morning, we are beginning a series in the Book of Leviticus – a book which has led to the abandonment of countless Bible-reading plans – a book which is more often cited by online critics of Christianity than it is by Christians themselves – a book which, unfortunately, is considered by a wide swath of Christians to be more of an embarrassment than a help. For all of those reasons and more, I believe this series is going to be really helpful for us.

And I can't help but smile at the fact that God – in His providence – has us preaching this series out in this public setting. Leviticus on the lawn! Here we are in week three of our launch and our church growth strategy is well underway!

The title of this series is “Elementary” because we understand that Leviticus – and all of the Mosaic Law – was given to us by God to function as a sort of tutor. The Law was given to teach us, to reprove us, to correct us and to train us in righteousness. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Galatia:

So then, **the law was our guardian** until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. (Galatians 3:24 ESV)

The Law was like our kindergarten teacher – it taught us elementary lessons about sin and worship and God and redemption. And it's not as if Jesus came to render those lessons obsolete. On the contrary, Jesus came to EMBODY and PERSONIFY those lessons. He said:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; **I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.** (Matthew 5:17 ESV)

That's why we call him the word made flesh!

Think of it this way: The Law was like a candle. It provided a flickering light that helped us to understand our surroundings. But Jesus is the SUN, and through him we see all of the things that the law only revealed in part. I like how B.B. Warfield put it:

The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted; the introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clear view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before.... Thus the Old Testament revelation of God is not corrected by the full revelation which follows it, but is only perfected, extended and enlarged.¹

Isn't that helpful? In Christ, the lights have been turned on. Therefore, as we look back to study the Law and the sacrificial system and the priesthood, we see it all with the light of Christ illuminating those things that were once dark. The Israelites only understood the symbols in part, but we see what the object lessons were pointing towards. In Christ, the lessons of the Law are perfected, extended and enlarged.

All of that being said, this morning we are going back to the kindergarten classroom, and we are going to revisit the elementary lessons that were taught to us there. In particular this morning we're going to ask the question:

What Does The Law Teach Us About God?

¹ B.B. Warfield as quoted by Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 152.

To that end, please look with me in your Bibles to Leviticus 1:1-9. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, saying, ²“Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, When any one of you brings an offering to the Lord, you shall bring your offering of livestock from the herd or from the flock.

³“If his offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he shall offer a male without blemish. He shall bring it to the entrance of the tent of meeting, that he may be accepted before the Lord. ⁴He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him. ⁵Then he shall kill the bull before the Lord, and Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁶Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, ⁷and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. ⁸And Aaron's sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, the head, and the fat, on the wood that is on the fire on the altar; ⁹but its entrails and its legs he shall wash with water. And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. (Leviticus 1:1-9 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In this passage we are introduced to the burnt offering – the most common sacrifice in Israelite worship. Burnt offerings were made every morning and every evening. Each day would begin and end with a pillar of smoke rising up from the tabernacle. The burnt offering included a spotless male from the herd, the laying on of hands, the shedding of blood, and the burning of the dismembered sacrifice. Every aspect of the sacrifice was divinely ordained for our instruction.

But before we even get to the sacrifice, we learn our first valuable lesson. The first thing that the Law teaches us about God is that:

1. He draws near

In the Hebrew, the book of Leviticus begins with the word “wayicar” which means “and He called.” That's a curious way to begin a book, isn't it? If you were writing a book that was meant to stand alone, you would not begin it with the word “and.” And neither would Moses. He is expecting us here to read Leviticus in light of what came before it – that is, Exodus – in order to understand the context of this passage.

In fact, ALL of the Pentateuch is meant to be read as one story. And Leviticus is positioned as the centre of that story. Leviticus is the climax. Did you know that? In Genesis God's people are cast out from His presence because of their sin. In Deuteronomy, God's people are living in the presence of God again preparing to enter into the Promised Land. What happened? How is this relationship possible? Well, that's the story of Leviticus. As one commentator puts it:

The primary theme and theology of Leviticus (and of the Pentateuch as a whole) is YHWH's *opening a way for humanity to dwell in the divine Presence.*^{□2}

Flip back a page to Exodus 40, and let's remind ourselves of what took place immediately before God called to Moses in Leviticus 1:1. In Exodus 40:34-38 we read:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and **the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.**³⁵ And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.³⁶ Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out.³⁷ But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up.³⁸ For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys. (Exodus 40:34-38 ESV)

That is the context for our passage this morning. God's glory is bursting forth from the Tabernacle! God – the same God who expelled Adam and Even from the garden because He could not allow their sin to coexist with His holiness – the same God who positioned an angel and a flaming sword at the entrance of the garden to keep sinful man from ever entering back into His presence – the same God who spoke to Moses in thunder and clouds on the top of Mount Sinai and who warned that any Israelites who even so much as touched the base of the mountain would die – GOD condescended to let His glory reside in a tent!

Isn't that remarkable?! God's people had been cast out of the garden of Eden, but in the Tabernacle, God had brought the Garden of Eden back into their midst.

At the bottom of the mountain, in the presence of a sinful people, in a portable tent, the holy, perfect, spotless, God of the universe was once again dwelling amongst His people. His glory was

² L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend The Mountain Of The Lord (A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus)*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 23.

so awe inspiring that it was like the tent was enveloped in smoke! Can you imagine what that must have been like for the Israelites? What a blessing and a privilege it must have been to tangibly see the presence of God in their midst! Our God is the God who draws near! Hallelujah!

And yet, what a holy fear it must have inspired. If Adam and Eve were not fit to dwell in the presence of God – if their sin and rebellion brought death and curse – then how much more will this entire tribe of grumbling, ungrateful, sinful Israelites incite the wrath of God? Indeed, that’s the second lesson that the Law teaches us about God:

2. He can only be approached on His terms

Look back at Exodus 40 again. In particular, look at verse 35:

And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. (Exodus 40:35 ESV)

Even though God was once again dwelling with His people, there was still a very real problem. The Israelites were covered in their sin – Moses included. When the glory of God fell, not even Moses – not even the spiritual leader of the nation who had been set apart by God – was fit to enter into God’s presence. L. Michael Morales notes:

Exodus 40 closes with a wonder: the garden of Eden planted, as it were, in the midst of Sinai’s arid wilderness. Israel’s mediator, however, is unable to enter through Eden’s gates into the glory of the divine Presence... Leviticus begins with Israel, God’s second firstborn son (or second Adam), standing outside the cherubim-guarded entry of Eden.³

God brought Eden back into the midst of His people, but they still couldn’t enter!

Exodus, then, ends with an enormous question: Who can dwell with the LORD?

Before we rush to *answer* that question, I think we would be well served to *sit in it* for a moment.

³ L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend The Mountain Of The Lord (A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus)*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 111.

Who can enter the presence of God? Who is blameless? Who is spotless? Who has never done wrong? Whose thoughts are always and only perfectly pure? Whose actions are always and only above reproach? Who can stand before the perfect, righteous, holy God and say, “I belong in your presence?”

Can you?

When the glory of God was made manifest in the temple, not even Moses could draw near!

One of the elementary lessons that we learn in the Law is that it is a dangerous thing to approach God casually and carelessly. We see this played out in devastating fashion in the story of Nadab and Abihu. Do you remember what happened to them? Flip ahead to Leviticus 10:1-2. There we read:

Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it and laid incense on it and offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, **which he had not commanded them.** ² And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. (Leviticus 10:1-2 ESV)

Commentators speculate as to what exactly Nadab and Abihu might have done. Perhaps they had become drunk before entering into the holy of holies, or perhaps they were mocking God. Perhaps. But we don't need to speculate because the text tells us what the heart of the problem was. They offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, **which he had not commanded them.** They didn't approach God on His terms. They thought that they could come into His presence whenever and however they liked.

And they died.

Are you offended by that? Then you don't yet understand how holy God is and how sinful we all are. Read Genesis and Exodus and hear the history of Israel's rebellion. Watch as they respond to marvellous grace with indifference and ingratitude. Listen in as they grumble and complain when they ought to be giving thanks. Those stories ought to leave you wrestling with two undeniable realities:

1. These Israelites sound just like me! And:

2. It's a wonder that God would ever draw near to us at all!!

Exactly. As Saint Augustine said:

The law was given, in order to convert a great into a little man - to show that you have no power of your own for righteousness; and might thus, poor, needy, and destitute, flee to grace.⁴

That was one of the primary purposes of the Law. It is a mirror that reveals how sinful we truly are. And, when we see ourselves as we are, it begs the question: Who can enter the presence of our holy, holy, holy God? That is the question that makes the first word of the book of Leviticus so gloriously good! Waycar – “and He called.”

Here, we learn a remarkable lesson about God:

3. He goes first

We begin Leviticus with the glorious presence of God once again dwelling in the midst of His people. But there is still a degree of separation. Moses stands at a distance, unwilling and unable to approach the manifest glory of God lest he be struck down dead.

What will we do next?

Can this chasm between us and God ever be bridged?

Are we to live forever gazing from a distance at the God that we long to know?

Those are the questions that we are left sitting in as we conclude the book of Exodus. But then we come to these three, glorious words:

⁴ Augustine as quoted by John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion (Beveridge Translation)*, (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 2.7.9. 223.

And God called.

He didn't simply speak. He didn't simply teach. God *called*. He called to Moses, in particular. Then, in the 27 chapters that followed, God explained to Moses exactly how His people would be enabled to enjoy His presence. That's what the book of Leviticus is all about: A holy God prescribing a way for his unholy people to live in fellowship with Him as they slowly but surely grow in holiness themselves.

The book of Leviticus is the story of sinners graciously saved and made to look like their saviour.

It may not appear so at first glance, but this is a gospel book!

God goes first. Old Testament and New, our God calls out to sinners, and He invites them into relationship with Himself. He doesn't wait for us to get our act together. He doesn't sit idly by while we do our best to build a ladder to heaven! No, He goes first.

He called out to Moses. He gave clear and precise instructions as to how His people would be enabled to enjoy His presence. And in those instructions, we learn the fourth elementary lesson about God:

4. He will not overlook sin

The very first instruction that we find recorded in the book of Leviticus is the institution of the burnt offering. While our text this morning doesn't explicitly state the purpose of this sacrifice, the evidence suggests that it was understood to be a ransom offering for sin. Look with me at verse 4:

He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him **to make atonement for him**. (Leviticus 1:4 ESV)

Job seemed to understand the burnt offering in this way. Anytime his children held a great feast, he would wake up early and offer burnt offerings on behalf of each of them because he thought:

"It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually. (Job 1:5b ESV)

So, the whole burnt offering was a significant part of Israelite worship, and the purpose of this offering was to make atonement for sin. The Israelite was to bring a spotless male from his herd to the temple. There he was to lay his hand on the animal as a way of signifying his identification with the offering and the transmission of his sins to the offering. Then, we read:

Then he shall kill the bull before the Lord, and Aaron's sons the priests shall bring the blood and throw the blood against the sides of the altar that is at the entrance of the tent of meeting. ⁶ Then he shall flay the burnt offering and cut it into pieces, ⁷ and the sons of Aaron the priest shall put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. (Leviticus 1:5-7 ESV)

Having identified himself with the animal and having symbolically placed his sin upon the animal, the Israelite was to kill the unblemished animal and then he was to cut it into pieces before it was burned in the fire. We grimace at the brutality of this scene and our first inclination is to rush past the gory details. But the brutality is a large part of the lesson that we are supposed to learn.

Here is an elementary lesson: The penalty for sin is death.

There was no way for the Israelite to miss that in this ceremony. And, lest we fall into the temptation of saying, "It's a good thing that this story is in the OLD Testament", let me remind you that the penalty for sin in the New Testament is no different. Referring to those who have died in their sins, Revelation 14 says:

And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name. (Revelation 14:11 ESV)

Every day, the Israelites saw the smoke billowing up from the Tabernacle. It reminded them that God does not overlook sin. It reminded them that the wages of sin is death. Old Testament and New, God takes sin deadly seriously.

And the gory details that we so often fly by here in Leviticus 1 pale in comparison to what we see at the cross. As Andrew Bonar explains:

this arrangement is the better fitted to exhibit another feature in the death of Jesus... the awful violence done to one so pure, so tender, and so lovely. We shrink back from the terrible harshness of the act, whether it be plunging the knife into the neck of the innocent lamb, or wringing off the head of the tender dove. But, on this very account, the circumstances are the better figure of the death of Jesus.⁵

When we consider the bloody alter – when we envision the innocent animal slaughtered and broken to pieces – when we catch a glimpse in our mind’s eye of the smoke ever billowing up from the tabernacle – it should direct our minds to the cross. It should awaken our hearts to the terrible sight of the innocent lamb of God flayed and disfigured bearing in his body the curse for our sin.

But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:5 ESV)

The sacrifices WERE gruesome. Just thinking about them jars our senses. And that’s the point.

Here we are confronted with the danger of sin. Our God will not overlook it. He is not a God who shrugs His shoulders and turns a blind eye to iniquity. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and the Law has taught us from day one that we absolutely cannot bring our sin into His presence. Before we can approach His throne, it must be dealt with.

And that leads us to the final lesson that the Law teaches us about God:

5. He will make a way

Look again at the second half of verse 9:

And the priest shall burn all of it on the altar, as a burnt offering, a food offering with a pleasing aroma to the Lord. (Leviticus 1:9b ESV)

⁵ Andrew A. Bonar, *A Commentary On Leviticus*, (Carlisle, PA. The Banner Of Truth Trust, 1966), 27.

The word translated here as “pleasing” could also be translated as “quieting” or “soothing” or “tranquilizing.”⁶ As the smoke of these sacrifices ascended to heaven every morning and every evening God’s unflinching demand for justice was satisfied.

Had the Israelites somehow become sinless? No. Would they go on to sin the very next day? Certainly. How then could they continue to dwell with a holy, holy, holy God?

By trusting in the means that He had provided for them.

Every day, as they performed these sacrifices, the Israelites believed God and it was counted to them as righteousness.

The Law teaches us that God does not overlook sin, but thanks be to God, the Law also teaches us that God has made a way to deal with our sin!

Sin is dealt with by the spilling of blood. It is dealt with by death of a spotless sacrifice. It is dealt with by the imputing of sin and the absorbing of justice and wrath. Sin is dealt with as the people of God lay hold of the provision of God in faith. Amen? Amen.

Conclusion

As we conclude this morning, I want to make sure that we don’t content ourselves with the elementary lessons. Now that we see what the Israelites saw, we need to go a step further and to consider these elementary lessons in light of what has been revealed through Christ. As B.B. Warfield said:

Thus the Old Testament revelation of God is not corrected by the full revelation which follows it, but is only perfected, extended and enlarged.⁷

PERFECTED, EXTENDED and ENLARGED! Which means that we can still proclaim that our God is the God who draws near! It was scandalous when He humbled Himself to reside in a tent in

⁶ 5207 נִיחֵם and (Lv 1:9) נִיחֵם⁴³ n. [m.] a quieting, soothing, tranquillizing. [BDB](#), s.v. “נִיחֵם,” 629.

⁷ B.B. Warfield as quoted by Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 152.

the wilderness, but that paled in comparison to the scandal of the incarnation! The God of the universe clothed Himself in flesh and entered into the womb of one of His creatures. Jesus condescended down into our brokenness so as to lift us up into his fullness!

When we approach God on His terms – when we turn from our sins and place our trust in the completed work of Christ on the Christ – the scandal of God’s nearness becomes even more unfathomable. He sends His Spirit to dwell in the hearts of all His people. God Himself – the God who dwelt in the Tabernacle in the wilderness and Whose presence caused a cloud of glory to fill the tent – now dwells IN YOU, Christian!

And our God is still the God who goes first.

God shows his love for us in that **while we were still sinners**, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8 ESV)

Are you a sinner? Have you done things that you’re ashamed of? Do you feel like it would be a miracle for God to ever forgive and love you?

Well get in line!

It IS a miracle! It’s a miracle that God has drawn near to us! It’s a miracle that He has sent His Son to redeem us! It’s a miracle that – rather than waiting for us to take some initiative of our own – God in His mercy stooped down to call us to Himself.

But that’s what He does. That’s what He’s always done! Because that’s who He is! Just as God called to Moses as he stood afar from the Tabernacle, so too does He call to us today. Jesus looked out at the crowds – those people who knew that they were broken and lost – those people who knew that they had no business standing before a holy God and he said:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. (Matthew 11:28 ESV)

He looked out at another weary crowd and he called out, saying:

The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”
(Mark 1:15 ESV)

In the same way, Jesus is calling out to sinners today:

The Spirit and the Bride say, “Come.” And let the one who hears say, “Come.” And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who desires take the water of life without price.
(Revelation 22:17 ESV)

Your sin separates you from God. Yes. That was true in the Old Testament, and it is true today. He’s seen it all – all of your evil thoughts, all of your wicked deeds, everything that you try to hide from the world – He sees it. And your sin is reason enough for God to banish you from His presence forever.

But, God has made a way for sinners to be brought into right relationship with Him, and the way is Jesus.

In the same way that the Israelites laid their hand upon the offering as a way of identifying with the sacrifice, so too are we to lay our hand on Christ. Reach out in faith and grab a hold of the cross. Say to God, “I identify with this sacrifice! This blood was shed for MY sin! This sacrifice settled MY debt!” And, as you do that, hear Jesus proclaim from the cross: “It is finished!”

The sacrifice is accepted! Your sin is gone! The way has been made!

That’s the elementary lesson that we learn in the Law, and the beauty of it is fleshed out in Christ. God is holy and just, and He is also merciful and good. That’s the message of the Bible – Old Testament and New. And this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.