
STRANGE FIRE, SUDDEN DEATH

An Introduction to the Book of Leviticus

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Following their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, the people of God traveled south on the eastern edge of the Gulf of Suez until they came to Mt. Sinai (Mt. Horeb). For two years they stayed encamped beneath its shadow, where forty years earlier Moses had encountered God in the burning bush. Upon Mt. Sinai, Moses received the Ten Commandments, as well as other sets of instructions for how to live.

In the Book of Leviticus, the meeting place with God shifts from the mountaintop to the “tent of meeting,” the “tabernacle.” Instead of Moses going to a fixed, holy place to meet with God, God moves with His people, leading them with His glory and with His words.

The Torah, the Law, was written during those two years, 430 years after Abraham received the “covenant promises” from the Lord. God was preparing His people to live in the future He had in mind for them. The instruction process, being rid of the lifestyles and thought patterns of the cultures that surrounded them, and being acculturated into the ways of their God, took time.

Leviticus begins with the phrase “*Then the Lord called...*” and its original Hebrew name could be translated the *Book of Calling*. It is God’s call to the people whom He has rescued. After setting them free, He wants to set them straight—not in an angry attitude, but with a passion that comes from God knowing just how high the stakes are. God freed Israel from Egypt because Israel is His. What He did for them He did because they are His people. He identified with them; now He wants them to identify with Him.

Exodus teaches us the importance of following God’s guidance for deliverance, and it reveals to us basic patterns and designs for life the way God intended it. The essence of that life is holiness. *Leviticus*, the *Book of Calling*, calls God’s people to holiness. But the call is not just a religious or moral injunction, what to do in worship or in the spiritual aspects of life, but rather, in every area of

life—social, civil, spiritual, and economic, and at every dimension of being, God’s people are to live differently than all the other people of the earth.

TO BE GOD'S PEOPLE IS TO BE LIKE GOD

“Speak to all the congregation of the sons of Israel and say to them, ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.’” ~Leviticus 19:2

This is the essence of Leviticus. God calls us to His way of being, His way of living. God’s people were delivered from their bondage, not because of their intrinsic goodness, but because of God’s covenant choice of and promise to their ancestor, Abraham. At the time of their rescue from Egypt, they were anything but holy. They had lived for hundreds of years intermingling with pagan cultures.

God had little interest in merely delivering them out of the midst of one pagan culture, and inserting them in the midst of another. Several other nations of people, whose ways of life were an abomination to the Lord, surrounded the Promised Land. In fact, God was dispossessing the very people who currently inhabited Israel’s inheritance because of their evil practices. Throughout Leviticus, God warns His people:

“...You shall not follow the customs of the nation which I will drive out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I have abhorred them.” ~Leviticus 20:23

Prior to their deliverance, the people of God were identified as belonging to Him on the basis of their *ancestry*—being the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Circumcision marked that connection. But God wants them to be distinguished from all the other peoples by how they worship, and by how they live. It is one thing to claim relationship with God when we need to be delivered from cruel circumstances; it is altogether another thing to manifest that relationship with Him on a day-to-day basis.

Leviticus is all about holiness in the mundane, day-to-day affairs of our life. No other book in the Bible delves into such detail about sacrifices, relationships, sicknesses, celebrations, and the difference between clean and unclean. Probably the reason why the title *Leviticus* was chosen by translators is because of how prominently the Levites figure throughout the book. Their duties, dress, and privileges are spelled out in great detail, but the focus of Leviticus is actually much more on how holiness ought to pervade our entire life. The Levites serve as a reminder of that thread of holiness. God has patterns for us to follow for everything in our life, not just its ostensibly spiritual aspects.

Leviticus begins with an elaborate explanation of five types of sacrifices—burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, and guilt offerings. As we will see later, the whole purpose of these and other practices outlined in Leviticus is to maintain relationship and nearness with God. Essentially, sacrifices serve one of two purposes: 1) acknowledge God's deeds and thank Him for His greatness, 2) acknowledge our deeds and ask Him for His forgiveness.

THE BOOK OF CALLINGS

Next, the *Book of Callings* describes the central role the priests are to play: offering sacrifices; teaching the people to avoid uncleanness; testing for leprosy and other forms of unhealthiness; presiding over celebrations and holy days; attending to the tabernacle; and, redeeming (converting) vows, possessions, land, or people. The message? Everything that is holy belongs to the Lord, and everything that is truly His is holy.

NADAB & ABIHU

The Bible is full of wondrous and sometimes puzzling stories. We have to keep remembering that the Scriptures are ultimately a record of two realities intersecting one another. One reality is the one to which we are accustomed—the natural world of physical substance and human capacities. The other reality, which is actually much more significant, is filled with beings and dimensions that are utterly foreign to us.

Because spiritual reality is so incredible (i.e. beyond the possibilities and beyond the comprehension of our natural perceptions), we have a difficult time incorporating it into the parameters of our thinking. We know, for instance, that diamond-back snakes are dangerous and should be avoided. No one would feel put upon to be told to stay away from them. We appreciate being warned about physical danger.

But we don't always recognize spiritual peril. Neither knowing nor understanding much about the heavenly realm, we can become somewhat self-righteous and indignant when a story in the Bible seems a bit harsh. We're tempted to question God when He takes drastic measures to warn His people away from unseen, spiritual danger.

Take for instance the story of Nadab and Abihu—sons of Aaron and, thereby, priests to God. They ignored the detailed specifications of the Lord about what kind of incense was to be burnt before Him, and they made their own mixture. The Bible calls their offering *strange*. And God killed them. Why?

Strange means foreign—as in a god, thing, or practice that is outside the way of life God has prescribed for His people. It is the same word for a *harlot* or an *adulteress* to which a man would turn aside to lodge with. It also means *profane*.

Nadab and Abihu, like many people today, had the mistaken idea that we can choose ourselves any way we want to worship God—as though He ought to be satisfied that we are even making an attempt to bother with Him at all. People forget that worship is not something they originate on their own; worship starts with God. He prescribes its elements, its form, and its make up. When we worship, we do what He has asked us to do. Jesus puts it this way:

“If you love Me, you will keep (pay attention to) My commandments.” ~John 14:15

Nadab and Abihu were trying to test God. They attempted to worship Him on their own terms and, thereby, they endangered an entire nation’s spiritual future. If God had allowed them to get away with their mockery of worship, Nadab and Abihu would have led all the people astray. Worship would have become *“whatever you want to do, whatever you feel like.”*

This story, which is the central episode and the only narrative in the entire Book of Leviticus, gets at the very heart of what true holiness is all about. From the beginning (Genesis), God’s words have been the basis for life as He meant it to be. He spoke and the worlds were formed. His words make things the way they are supposed to be. That’s why the devil’s assault upon His people was to challenge what He said in an attempt to get them to disregard God’s words.

What God says, defines *holy*. Keeping His commandments, following His instructions, paying attention to the particulars of what He says—these are the essence of obedience. That’s why obedience leads to holiness. When God spoke to Abraham, Abraham *believed* what he was told. Nadab & Abihu did not hold to God’s words. They followed their own recipe for incense. They tried to worship on their own terms. Turning away from the way God said things should be done, they brought upon themselves the wrath of God.

That wrath is against all ungodliness—the character choices to violate God’s way and all unrighteousness—the attempts to establish another order than God’s (Romans 1:18). As surely as God was dispossessing the peoples of the land for their evil practices, so did He destroy priests for their strange and evil practices.

Ultimately, how we live is a choice we make between gods as to whose people we will be. That is why, near the end of *Leviticus*, God tells the people what will happen to them depends on whose words and ways they keep:

“You shall not make for yourselves idols, or shall you set up for yourselves an image or a sacred pillar, nor shall you place a figured stone in your land to bow down to it; for I am the Lord your God. You shall keep My sabbaths and reverence My sanctuary; I am the Lord.

If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments so as to carry them out, then I shall give you rains in their season, that the land will yield its produce and the trees of the field will bear their fruit. Indeed, your threshing will last for you until grape gathering, and grape gathering will last until sowing time. You will thus eat your food the full and live securely in your land. I shall also grant peace in the land, so that you may lie down with no one making you tremble. I shall also eliminate harmful beasts from the land, and no sword will pass through your land. But you will chase your enemies and they will fall before you by the sword; five of you will chase a hundred, and a hundred of you will chase ten thousand, and your enemies will fall before you by the sword.

So I will turn toward you and make you fruitful and multiply you, and I will confirm My covenant with you. And you will eat the old supply and clear out the old because of the new. Moreover, I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt so that you should not be their slaves, and I broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.” ~Leviticus 26:1-13