

“Meeting God at the Altar” series (A study from Leviticus)

Week 1: An Overview

November 2, 2025

Introduction

- Have you ever tried to read through the bible? I have done this numerous times in my life, but I remember when I tried it the first couple of times.
- I figured that I would read it like a regular book. Start at the beginning and read through to the end. Maybe you did this as part of one of those one year reading plans.
- I began in Genesis – “In the beginning” – creation, garden of Eden, snake, fruit. Cain and Abel and the first murder. Then Noah and the earth destroyed. This is pretty exciting.
- Then I read about Abraham, seeing Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed and having to offer his son Isaac. Then about Jacob. Then the amazing story of Joseph. Famine, family squabbles, God’s intervention.
- I’m feeling pretty good. I turn the page to Exodus and it gets better.
- The Israelites are enslaved in Egypt. We read how God protected Moses and how he had to run for his life. We have the burning bush, then coming back to Egypt with the 10 plagues and leaving Egypt. I enjoyed how God parted the Red Sea and destroyed the Egyptian army.
- Then God does these amazing miracles by providing heavenly food, brings water from a rock.
- Then I ran into coming to Mount Sinai, and there are the 10 commandments.
- But then it starts to bog down. There are few chapters of rules and laws, most of which didn’t make a lot of sense to me. Then there are bunch of chapters about how they were to build a worship tent called the tabernacle, how to build the altars, even how to make the clothes and decorations for priests and more.
- But then we have the incident of the golden calf where the people abandoned God. It resulted in people being struck dead, judgment and more.
- My hope was renewed and I finished Exodus and began Leviticus.
- If you’re at all like me, this is when you began to panic.
- “The sons of Aaron the priest are to put fire on the altar and arrange wood on the fire. Then Aaron’s sons the priests shall arrange the pieces, including the head and the fat, on the wood that is burning on the altar. You are to wash the internal organs and the legs with water, and the priest is to burn all of it on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.”
- It did not get better.
- “You may eat any animal that has a divided hoof and that chews the cud. There are some that only chew the cud or only have a divided hoof, but you must not eat them. The camel, though it chews the cud, does not have a divided hoof; it is ceremonially unclean for you.”
- At this point, I begin to skim read, looking for anything that might be interesting. Nope.
- “As for any fabric that is spoiled with a defiling mold – any woolen or linen clothing, any woven or knitted material of linen or wool, any leather or anything made of leather – if the affected area in the fabric, the leather, the woven or knitted material, or any leather article, is greenish or reddish, it is a defiling mold and must be shown to the priest.”
- It seems as though the whole book is like this.
- It is at this point that many, many people stop reading their bibles and give up. They get stuck and can’t be motivated to keep on going, or they flip to the gospel accounts of Jesus and never go back.
- Can anyone relate at all to this?

- And so last year when I was away planning and praying about this year, it struck me that we should take some time to go through this very book – Leviticus.
- That's because it is a hugely important book.
- It gives one of the clearest pictures in the entire bible on who God is, who we are, and the lengths God will go through to be in relationship with his creation. It is a template on how, even today, we can approach God in a way that changes our lives such that the blessings he has promised us can be evident in our lives.
- And as we do our survey through Leviticus in the weeks ahead, we are going to examine how this works, and why this is the case.
- Every one of us has entire chunks of our lives where we are hard, or stuck in a specific way of thinking or behaving, areas where we struggle to believe what God has said, or have difficulty understanding why a God who loves me is treating me the way he is.
- What we will see throughout Leviticus is the central role that the altar played for the Israelite nation. It was at the altar that the Israelites were invited to meet God and let him change their lives. We will see how today we are still invited today to meet God at the altar, even if what this looks like for us is different than what it looks like for them.
- Because it is at the altar that God can break up the hard soil of our lives, to prepare us to receive what he wants to give us, that we might thrive and grow.
- And that is something we all desire.

Main Sermon Text

- To understand what is going on this book, we need to understand what went before.
- Exodus is the story of how Israel became a nation in Egypt. They spent four hundred years there, ended up being enslaved, so they had no freedom, but grew in numbers as a nation within Egypt's borders.
- God used Moses to lead them out of Egypt, towards the "Promised Land", and land they would be able to call their own and flourish.
- But between Egypt and the Promised Land, God had to address a serious problem.
- The nation knew about God from what they had been told about the lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They knew where they were descended from. But there were two things they did not know.
- First, they did not really know what God was like. They had spent centuries worshiping the God of Abraham, but they did so in a polytheistic culture of Egypt with many gods. The way they worshiped their gods, the types of gods they served, had influenced the Israelites.
- Second, they did not know how to relate to this God. Again, their primary model was the culture they lived in. The morals of the people they lived among. And even though they held on, at some level, to the one true God and the integrity he desired, they had to real frame of reference on how to do this, how to approach this God, if it were even possible, and what the result should be in how they lived.
- And so when they come out of Egypt, one of the first things God did was take them to Mount Sinai, the holy mountain, and show his glory and give them the law. It was the blueprint on what God was like and how to relate to him and others.
- It showed that God's standards were different from the other nations, from culture.
- One of the biggest differences was that the God of Israel was not a distant, unapproachable God, to whom you made sacrifices hoping to appease him enough to get what you desired. He had a covenant relationship with Israel, unlike anything they had ever known or seen.
- This covenant relationship meant he wanted his people, Israel, to KNOW him.
- And so he told them how to build a tabernacle – a center of worship, where God could be among them and they could interact with this personal God.

- It is on the completion of this tabernacle that the entire book of Leviticus begins.
Leviticus 1:1 The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting.
- God is among his people. He is speaking to his representative Moses from this tent, this tabernacle.
- But Israel had already broken their covenant with God with the golden calf – they needed more direction on the two things they did not understand. That is what the book of Leviticus is all about.

I. God is holy.

- Some people have termed Leviticus the holiness handbook. Just a quick perusal of the book shows you that God's holiness is the central theme.

Leviticus 22:32 Do not profane my holy name, for I must be acknowledged as holy by the Israelites. I am the LORD, who made you holy

Leviticus 19:2 Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy."

Leviticus 11:45 I am the LORD, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.

Leviticus 20:7 Consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am the LORD your God. 8 Keep my decrees and follow them. I am the Lord, who makes you holy.

Leviticus 21:22 He may eat the most holy food of his God, as well as the holy food;

- The word holy is found 56 times in this book.
- The words clean and unclean, which are references to holiness in daily life, are found another 165 times.
- Throughout all his instructions, God wanted his people to understand his holiness.
- Holiness is to be set apart, to be different. God as the creator, the author of life, is not like us. He is just, pure and flawless. There is nothing in him that is unclean or sinful.
- He is not like the gods served by the nations. He is majestic, powerful, and so far above that even a look at him would kill them. When he appeared to Moses on the mountain, he wouldn't even let the people set foot on the mountain because of his holiness. He had to grant Moses special dispensation to approach him, and even then, he would not let Moses see his face, because it could have killed him.
- And so God prohibited them from making idols or statues or images of him. They would be slap in the face of this holy God.
- He emphasized through sacrifices and feasts this holiness. He wanted the people to never forget that their God was the true God, the only one worthy of their lives and worship.
- The problem was that as holy as God was, the Israelites (and us) were unjust, impure and sinful.
- A holy God and a sinful people were incompatible. Yet God had a covenant relationship with the Israelites and wanted them to pursue him.
- So in the book of Leviticus we see how God provided a way for his people to live in his presence, and to have this sinful people be reconciled to a holy God.

II. God desires relationship.

- God initiated this relationship. He chose Abraham. He called him out of his own country and promised to make him a nation.
- Now he had led this nation out of Egypt to a land of their own.
- His desire was that they would know him, and that this knowledge would so affect their lives that they would be a model to the entire world of why people should seek after their creator.

- In the book of Leviticus, we read how God outlined a process by which the people would know and remember and honor God as holy, while pursuing this covenant relationship with their God.
- The whole book is like a pyramid.
- It begins with rituals and ends with rituals. Ch 1-7 describes the variety of offerings they were to bring (seven of them). Ch 23-25 describe the various festivals they were to celebrate. Every offering and every ritual pointed the Israelite nation towards God, who he was, and how they were to treat him.
- Chapters 8-10 and 21-22 are about the priesthood. God appointed people to represent him to the people and represent the people before him. He detailed how they were to be selected, how they were to act, and the level of holiness required to perform this role between a holy God and a sinful people.
- Chapters 11-15 and 18-20 deal with how the people were to live as holy. The purity of their lives. They can't be casual in God's presence with their lives, their actions, their sin.
- God was clear that this purity impacted their obligations toward God himself and also their obligations to their neighbors. To love God and then express that love in how they loved others. They were to live differently, to do justice, to have sexual purity, to care for the lowly, which was opposite of the world around them.
- All of this is centered around the middle to chapters of the book, Chapters 16-17, which focuses on the day of atonement. The preeminent sacrifice made annually which demonstrated God's desire to remove sin and its consequences from the people. It was the sacrifice of a lamb for the sins of the people.
- Now if you are paying attention, you will notice there are two concluding chapters, chapters 26-27. In them, Moses enumerates the blessings of living in this covenant relationship with God and the curses when you do not.
- This is why we are studying the book of Leviticus for the next weeks.
- It shows a holy God, set apart, without defect, making a way for his people to be in covenant relationship with him.
- It is where God meets his people – at the altar.
- The altar is where people would come to confess, to repent, to give thanks, to acknowledge God's supremacy, to commit anew to serve and follow him, to receive his blessings.
- It was at the altar that God demonstrated his holiness and his grace.
- It's where he reminded them of who they were and what he was like.
- And the altar always required action. You had to humble yourself and come to God. You had to admit your need of him. And then God would rightly orient them to himself.

ILLUSTRATION

Back to our original illustration. It was here that God would break up the soil, turn over what needed to be loosened and weeded out what needed to be gone, and plant what he desired to plan

- the entire point of Leviticus is how a sinful people can be in relationship with a Holy God. Remember the first verse of Leviticus

*Leviticus 1:1 The LORD called to Moses and spoke to him **from** the tent of meeting.*

- Then we read all about how God is making a way to be in relationship with him.
- And the first verse of the next book, Numbers, says:

*Numbers 1:1 The LORD spoke to Moses **in** the tent of meeting*

- Coming to God makes all the difference.
- You might still be thinking that this is all fine, but it is all Old Covenant, Old Testament
- My friends, all of this is important because it demonstrates what was fulfilled in Jesus.
- It is a beautiful picture that foreshadowed who was to come.

Conclusion

- God still desires a relationship with you.
- God wanted Israel to know him, and that this knowledge would so affect their lives that they would be a model to the entire world of why people should seek after their creator. The same invitation is for us – to know God through Jesus in a way that our lives would change and our world would seek after him.
- In the book of Leviticus we see how God provided a way for his people to live in his presence, and to have this sinful people be reconciled to a holy God. Through Jesus God has provided a way for us as sinful people to be forgiven and reconciled to a Holy God.
- And just like with Israel, there is a need for humility and sacrifice – for us to come to God in need and longing. The difference is that we have Jesus. And we have access to what Israel longed for.
- My friends, the altar is not just a place to become a Jesus follower. It is a place to meet God, through Jesus, to encounter his love and grace in a way that changes your life.
- And when we do, we will find that God's love and grace are humbling but never humiliating
- We will spend the next weeks discovering what this looks like through our study. I pray that we all will be open to meeting God at the altar.