

LISTENING TO LEVITICUS

The Old Testament book of Leviticus can initially come off as a stale book of codes and regulations for a people and a time long removed from us. Because of its details and some repetition it can be a tedious book to read. But there is far more to the third book of the Bible than this!

Leviticus is an important part of The Story! It is set right after the Exodus and its purpose is to instruct Israel on how to be holy. Consider the events leading up to Leviticus. God had dramatically delivered his people from bondage. He had established a covenant with them—He as their God and they as his people. It was a watershed moment for the Hebrew people! Yet, they immediately violated that covenant. From the start it did not go well. There was a disconnect that had to be corrected. God is holy—so must his people be—set apart and uniquely his in heart, in worship and in behavior. So Leviticus offers God’s instructions on holiness in order to lift up Israel as his holy nation.

Outside of the Tent

The Leviticus narrative begins with God calling Moses “from” the “tent of meeting” (Leviticus 1:1). This “tent of meeting” was the pre-tabernacle place where God dwelt among his people. It was pitched outside the community to symbolize how God could not dwell among them due to Israel’s rebellion and breaking of the covenant (Exodus 33:7,9). At this point Moses was not even allowed in the tent—also signifying the unclean nature of Israel. They were all outside the tent in need of instruction and guidance on how to be a people who could approach the holiness of God. The book of Leviticus provides just this guidance.

How to be Holy

Leviticus offers three avenues of instruction to Israel on how to become God’s own people—holy and set apart for his purposes.

- The first centers on certain rituals—sacrifices and celebrations designed both to honor God and remind his people of his grace and salvation. The first six chapters of the book detail several types of sacrifices, which both thank God for his blessings while also acknowledging sin and guilt before him. Later in chapter 16 the “Day of Atonement” is detailed—for the purpose of sin offering, but also again to remind Israel of God’s holiness. Then in chapter 23 God establishes several special days and celebrations to be kept and honored within Israel—all for the purpose of reminding them of his mercy and grace along with their place before him and within The Story. All of these events would continually place God at the center of daily life within the Hebrew community. These rituals were designed to lead his people to a higher appreciation and understanding of God’s place among them and their responsibilities to him. This was God giving them his calendar—how to order their life around him. There remains a great need for this now and listening to Leviticus demonstrates that.

- The second is about those especially chosen to administer God's gifts among his people—those called to be priests. In two sections (8-10 & 21-22) Leviticus highlights the purpose, place and character of those who would serve as intercessors between God and man. The overriding factor within this information is God's call for his priests to maintain the highest moral character possible—demonstrated not just by the detailed instructions, but also by the failure of Aaron's son's Nadab and Abihu. The dramatic end to their story served to illustrate how God would not tolerate his special servants compromising their call. This sent an unequivocal message to Israel that God's call to be holy was not to be taken lightly by anyone, especially priests. His priests were to be the conduits through which his people could learn, grow and approach him. All of the rules associated with them may seem to us like overkill, but in order for Israel to reflect the holiness of God and truly be his people, the priests were a key component to making this happen. God only wanted the best from them—to honor their call among his people. Not by accident he asks the same of us—his priests—today (see 1 Peter 2:9).
- The third avenue to holiness in Leviticus is the general call for all Israel to be pure. Within this is a call to be ceremonially clean, that is, free from elements that would contaminate and therefore create separation from God (such as contact with bodily fluids, skin disease, mold and mildew, skeletal bones, and eating certain foods—see 11-15). All of these prohibitions were not given arbitrarily. They protected Israel against disease and health concerns along with keeping them ceremonially clean before God. Any Hebrew contaminated could not come into the presence of God. It was another way for God to remind Israel of who he was and who they were called to be—not to mention his way of protecting them from devastating disease. Also within this overall call of purity was the challenge to be morally and sexually clean (see 18-20). No way Israel could be who God called them to be through immoral conduct. So detailed instructions were offered to guide them. Once again these instructions not only protect them spiritually but physically as well. It would still do us well to continue to listen to Leviticus in this regard.

Other instructions are given with the book—concerning taking care of the poor; social justice; and honoring God in all relationships—that would be key to Israel representing the holiness of their God within their community of nations. It all connected back to the holy nature of God and how he desired his people to honor, be led by, and embrace this holiness in their daily lives. It was to be their identity as they lived and settled among the nations. It would be the way they would bless the other nations and direct them to their God—the one true God. The reason for Leviticus was to make this clear and show them the way to accomplish it.

It Worked!

The book that follows Leviticus in the Bible is Numbers. In Numbers 1:1 this is what we read: “The Lord spoke to Moses *in* the Tent of Meeting...” From outside of the tent to inside of it! Moses made the transition (as did all Israel). How did that happen? By listening to Leviticus.