

## Free Bible Commentary on the Book of Leviticus

Introduction: Leviticus is the second of the five books written by Moses. Its name comes from the tribe of Levi, the tribe set apart by God for priestly service in Israel. The priests came from the family of Aaron in Levi. The rest of the Levites assisted the priests in various ways in God's holy service. The book of Leviticus contains laws for sacrificial and ceremonial worship led by the priests, and for other duties of the priesthood. The central idea in Leviticus is the holiness of God.

This seems a dull book to many readers, with its endless repetitive details of sacrifice and ceremony. People who read their Bibles through on a regular basis dread Leviticus. Yet it holds some great principles that we need to understand:

1. God's people must be holy because we serve a holy God. "Be holy, for I am holy" - Leviticus 11:44, 45; 19:2; compare 1 Peter 1:14-16. Leviticus teaches us the importance of separation between the holy and the profane, the clean and the unclean. Its emphasis on ceremonial cleanness is a picture of how sin affects our relationship to God.
2. God's care for his people is seen in his wise dietary and hygienic regulations. Medical science confirms that there were sound health reasons behind many of these regulations.
3. The sacrifices in this Old Testament system prefigure the sacrifice of Christ himself, the Lamb of God, as he made atonement for our sins. The continual shedding of sacrificial blood reminds us that though we are forgiven by God's grace, sin has a price that has to be paid to satisfy God's holy justice. Jesus paid the price by giving his life in our place.
4. In Leviticus we see the great honor and reverential fear that needs to be shown toward God.

### Notes on Leviticus 1-11

Leviticus 1-7 contains directions for the various sacrifices. There were five basic kinds of sacrifice: the **burnt** offering, the **grain** offering, the **fellowship** offering, the **sin** offering and the **guilt** offering. See the attached table from the *NIV Study Bible*.

1:3 - burnt offering - This was a voluntary offering, an expression of one's complete commitment to God.

male - For this offering only a male animal or bird was accepted.

without defect - This was required in everything offered to God, to remind the Israelites that God is greater and deserves more honor than any other being.

1:4 - lay his hand - Thus the devotion of the worshiper is symbolically transferred to the bull, (the worshiper identifies with the bull) which is then devoted totally to God in the fire.

atonement - Offerings for specific sins and types of sin are covered later, but the burnt offering was given in atonement for sins in general.

1:5 - blood - God did not allow the Israelites to use the blood of animals for any other purpose than atonement. God explained that the life of every living creature is in its blood and since the penalty of sin is death, life is required to atone for sin. The New Testament shows that the lifeblood of an animal could never really atone for the life of a person forfeited because of sin. It took the blood of a sinless human being, Jesus, to do that. See Hebrews 9, 10. But God gave the animal sacrifices as a temporary measure so that the people could have a place to focus their faith until the real sacrifice of Christ should come.

1:9 - burn all of it - The burnt offering was completely consumed by fire. No part was kept or eaten by priests or worshipers (except for the hide which the priest could keep). This symbolized the total dedication of the worshiper to God.

aroma pleasing to the LORD - Not because God feels physical hunger, but because he is pleased with the devotion of his people to him expressed in sacrifices.

1:10 - from the flock - Some people could not afford to offer a bull.

1:14 - birds - God understood people's poverty and accepted birds where people could not afford to offer a ram - compare 5:11.

2:1 - grain offering [KJV: meat offering--when KJV was translated, meat did not just mean flesh, but food] - Also voluntary, this offering usually accompanied animal sacrifices.

2:2 - fine flour - Again, God deserves only the best.

2:3 - belongs to Aaron and his sons - God has always provided support for his full-time servants - compare 1 Corinthians 9:14; 2 Timothy 2:3-7; Galatians 6:6; 1 Timothy 5:17, 18.

3:1 - fellowship offering [NASB, KJV: peace offering] - The *NIV Study Bible* calls it a voluntary act of worship, thanksgiving and fellowship which included a communal meal. This offering seems to have signified peace between God and the worshiper. It was often offered when the worshiper had some special reason to be thankful.

3:11 - as food - Not that God is physically hungry, but as a symbolic gift.

3:17 - not eat any fat or any blood - These were entirely reserved for offering to the LORD. Compare 17:10-12.

4:2 - unintentionally - If a person sins in ignorance of the law, or is overtaken in a moment of weakness, God judges him or her differently than he does the person who sins with premeditation and defiantly against God's law - Numbers 15:28-31; compare Luke 12:47,48. No sacrifice is provided for defiant sin.

4:3 - The fourth type of offering was the sin offering, offered when someone sinned unintentionally or in weakness and the sin did not require restitution. This sacrifice is offered in reference to specific sins.

4:5 - anointed priest - Priests are human and therefore imperfect.

4:12 - burn it - Unlike the guilt offering, the animal of the sin offering must be burned up, even the parts not burned on the altar. This is because its blood has been sprinkled inside the tabernacle, not just on the altar outside.

4:13 - whole Israelite community - Sometimes the people sinned as a nation together.

4:22 - leader - Someone other than the priests, who were covered in 3-12.

4:27 - member of the community - One of the common people who sins individually.

4:28 - female goat - Notice that a leader had to offer a male goat, which was a more costly sacrifice. Does this imply that the sin of a leader is more blamable, since he is responsible to be an example to the rest of the people? Compare James 3:1.

5:1 - If a person sins - In this section examples are given of what is meant by unintentional sin.

5:7 - If he cannot afford - God is kind to the poor. See also verse 11.

5:15 - guilt offering - Also offered for unintentional sin, but for sins where restitution is involved.

5:17 - he is guilty - Wrong is wrong, even if a person does not realize he is doing wrong at the time he does it. God is merciful to the unintentional sinner, but his actions are still treated as sin.

6:5 - make restitution in full - Any heart that is really sorry for sin will want to undo the damage as far as it is reasonably possible.

add a fifth - To repay the victim for his suffering or loss.

on the day he presents his guilt offering - Compare Matthew 5:23.

6:9 - regulations - Here Moses begins to give the priests directions for their part in presenting the various offerings.

fire must be kept burning - Perhaps as a symbol of continual worship and penitence by Israel.

7:11 - There were three types of fellowship offering:

1. an expression of thankfulness
2. A votive offering - offered in connection with a vow made to God.
3. A freewill offering

7:20 - anyone...unclean eats...cut off - It was extremely wrong for anyone ceremonially unclean to eat the holy offerings of God.

cut off - This usually means execution, though it could sometimes mean banishment or an act by God himself toward the offender.

7:31 - breast belongs to Aaron - God designated certain portions of the offerings as part of the living of the priests.

7:33 - right thigh - another portion given to the priests.

7:34 - waved...presented to God in recognition that they are his, then used by the priests.

8:2 - Bring Aaron - Directions for this ordination of the priests were given back in Exodus 29.

9:4 - the LORD will appear to you - The coming of the LORD to the people was no small thing and the sacrifices were in preparation for his coming.

9:24 - fire came...consumed the burnt offering - This was God's confirmation to Moses, Aaron and the people that God was with them, was pleased with the tabernacle and the priesthood, and would always meet Israel at the tabernacle if they remained faithful.

10:1 - unauthorized fire - Normally fire for incense was taken from the altar of burnt offering - Numbers 16:46. If God has specified how he wants something done, we honor him by doing it that way and we dishonor him if we do not.

10:2 - consumed them - These men had committed a very presumptuous act of irreverence. Perhaps God's punishment was all the more severe because this was the beginning of national worship in the tabernacle, and for the future welfare of the people things had to start off right. Compare God's striking of liars Ananias and Sapphira in the beginning days of the Jerusalem church - Acts 5.

10:3 - I will show myself holy...I will be honored - Nadab and Abihu had not respected God's holiness and had supposed they could approach him in any way they chose. This carelessness about God's awesome holiness cost them their lives.

Aaron remained silent - Though his heart was breaking, he knew that God was right and that he could not say anything against what had happened.

10:6 - hair...unkempt...tear clothes - Outward signs of mourning. Since God had done this thing for a holy reason, the priests of God could not mourn about what God had done. The dignity and reverence of God's service had to be maintained. God requires more of leaders than of others.

whole community - A leader can by his sin bring trouble on the people in his care.

10:9 - not to drink wine - This probably indicates that Nadab and Abihu became careless because they were drunk. No one can imagine the amount of tragedy drunkenness and other substance abuse have brought on the world.

10:10 - distinguish between the holy and the common - You cannot approach or worship the awesome, holy God in a common, nonchalant, careless way. It is fearful how casually we approach God or talk about him. How self-assertive and full of ourselves we often are even when we are worshiping. Distinguishing between the holy and the common is vitally important for God's people. Many of the regulations in Leviticus are for this purpose.

10:19 - Would the LORD have been pleased - Though Aaron had omitted to eat the sin offering as commanded, he did not do so defiantly or rebelliously. It didn't seem right to him in these tragic circumstances and God in mercy accepted Aaron's action.

11:2 - animals - Chapter 11 distinguishes the "clean" animals which God allows the Israelis to eat.

11:3 - split hoof...chews the cud - This is the basic rule for animals. Science has shown good health reasons behind some of these restrictions.

11:9 - fins and scales - The basic rule for water creatures. Catfish, for example, was prohibited.

11:13 - birds - Many of the unclean birds mentioned were scavengers or carrion-eaters.

11:20 - all fours - a figure of speech meaning to crawl rather than walk on two legs. Literally insects have six legs.

11:24 - whoever touches - It would be very easy to accidentally touch a dead insect that was unclean. We understand what Peter meant when he referred to the law as a yoke that neither they nor their fathers were able to bear - Acts 15:10. And what Paul meant when he spoke of the bondage of the law.

11:29 - move about on the ground - Crawling rodents and reptiles and similar animals.

11:38 - water...on the seed...unclean - God may be protecting the people from the multiplication of bacteria.

11:39 - animal...dies - Even a "clean" animal which died of illness or injury could be a health hazard.

11:45 - I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt... - God often reminds his people of this. They are to be a holy people because of the kind of God they serve. Compare God's call to Christians, 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1; 1 Peter 1:14, 15.

11:47 - may be eaten - What a relief when Jesus "made all foods clean" - Mark 7:19; compare Colossians 2:13-22.

The many ceremonial regulations of the Old Covenant gave the people practice for understanding separation from sin.

© By G.B. Shelburne, III (except for any graphics and scripture quotations). May be reproduced for non-profit, non-publishing instructional purposes provided document content is not altered and this copyright notice is included in full. Format may be altered. South Houston Bible Institute, 14325 Crescent Landing, Houston, TX 77062-2178, U.S.A., telephone 281-090-8899, email <shbi@shbi.org>, web site <www.shbi.org>. Scriptures, unless otherwise noted, are taken from the HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION © 1978 and 1984 by the New York International Bible Society, used by permission of Zondervan Bible Publishers. Some courses available via Distance Learning.