

119

MINISTRIES

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Parashah Points: Vayikra – Why Leviticus Matters

Welcome to another episode of Parashah Points—short thoughts from the weekly Torah Portion.

This week’s Parashah Point comes from Vayikra, which is Hebrew for “And he called,” and it goes from Leviticus 1:1 to Leviticus 5:26.

This Torah portion lays out the laws of burnt offerings, grain offerings, well-being offerings, sin offerings, and offerings for restitution.

There’s a lot we can talk about in this Torah Portion. Today we’re going to talk about why Leviticus matters.

Leviticus 1:1-2

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

These are the first two verses in the book of Leviticus. From here, the text goes on to give details about the burnt offerings performed in the tabernacle. The next chapter gives all the details about grain offerings. Then the next chapter provides all the details about peace offerings. These instructions about various offerings go on for several chapters.

After that, there are a couple of chapters about the consecration of priests, which involved even more instructions about offerings. A story about two of Aaron’s sons messing up an offering interrupts this pattern. But then we get right back to a bunch of laws: purification rituals for childbirth and skin diseases and bodily discharges, which—you guessed it—involved offerings and priestly mediation. Then there are details of the priestly and sacrificial rituals for Yom Kippur, and so on.

Aside from chapter 11 concerning God’s dietary instructions, we really don’t find any laws that directly apply to us today until chapter 17.

Because the book is so tied to the ancient Israelites and their unique historical and cultural context, many Christians today consider Leviticus to be almost entirely irrelevant. We don't live in a world where we worship at the physical tabernacle or temple in ancient Israel. Therefore, why do we need to know about offerings, consecrating Levitical priests, or ritual purity? In our cultural context, we simply don't deal with these things in our daily lives.

However, we know that ALL Scripture is profitable to us as believers, equipping us to live for God's glory (2 Timothy 3:16-17). So how might we appreciate Leviticus today?

We might begin by understanding this book within the broader scope of God's unfolding story. Leviticus isn't just some random list of rules governing an ancient nation of Israelites; it's a manifestation of God's eternal purposes established for all mankind in creation.

For instance, in creation, God brings order to the cosmos—he separates the light and darkness, the waters above and below, the earth and the seas, putting everything in its rightful place (Genesis 1:4, 6-7, 14, 18). In Leviticus, God yet again separates and brings order. He calls his people to separate the holy from the common, the clean from the unclean (Leviticus 10:10; 11:46-47; 20:24-26).

In Genesis, God brings Adam and Eve into his ordered world—the Garden of Eden—and blesses them, provides for their needs through the produce of the garden, and gives them Sabbath rest (Genesis 1:28; 2:3, 8-25). In Leviticus, God had brought the Israelites out of Egypt and established them as a nation—bringing them into his ordered system—blessing them, providing for their needs through the produce of the land, and giving them Sabbath rest (Leviticus 23:3; 26:4-5 9-10).

In Genesis, mankind is given a vocation—a purpose and mission—to bear God's image, representing his character and will in the world (Genesis 1:26-28). In Leviticus, Israel is likewise given this vocation to bear God's image, representing his character and will in the world: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord [YHWH] your God am holy” (Leviticus 19:2).

In Genesis, God walked with his people in the garden (Genesis 3:8). In Leviticus, one of the blessings for obedience is that God would dwell among his people in the land and walk with them (Leviticus 26:11-12).

To the ancient Israelites, Leviticus was an incredibly meaningful instruction manual, which taught them how to relate to the Holy God in their midst, worship him properly, live rightly before him, and reflect his image in the world.

So how is any of this relevant to us today? Christian scholar Jay Sklar gives an excellent summary:

In short, the book of Leviticus not only answers questions raised by its immediate context, it also casts a vision that takes the Israelites back to the Lord's intent for humanity from the beginning of the world: to walk in rich fellowship with their covenant King, enjoying his care and blessing, and extending throughout all the earth his kingdom of justice, mercy, kindness, righteousness, holiness and love. In this way, the vision of Leviticus should actually feel very familiar to the people of God today, since it is the very same vision for which Jesus teaches us to pray: ‘Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matt. 6:10). Old Testament or New, the Lord always calls his people to pray for, embody and extend his kingdom in this earth, both for his glory and for their blessing.

-Jay Sklar, Leviticus (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), p. 30

As followers of the Messiah, we are brought into God's ordered system and plan, given the same calling to live rightly before him and be a light to the nations, reflecting his image and holiness. Leviticus gives us the manual for what that looks like—and that standard hasn't changed for today's believers:

1 Peter 1:14-16

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since **it is written**, "You shall be holy, for I am holy."

While much of what's recorded in Leviticus cannot apply literally to our current circumstances, the principles that we learn from things like the sacrifices and ritual purity laws extend beyond their literal application. These laws remind us that YHWH is utterly holy, which teaches us to have reverence for his presence. If we genuinely believe that God's presence dwells with believers in Yeshua as the New Testament teaches (Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5), that spirit of reverence and awe for him, which Leviticus emphasizes, is especially relevant for us. Do we fear the Lord and take him seriously in every aspect of our lives?

Of course, all of the practical laws in Leviticus—everything from what we eat, when we rest, how we treat each other—are certainly relevant if we desire to live holy lives for God's glory, loving him with all our hearts and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Oh, and by the way, "love your neighbor as yourself," which Yeshua calls the second greatest commandment, comes from Leviticus (Leviticus 19:18).

We can't unpack all the reasons why Leviticus matters in this short teaching—for instance, we haven't even touched the amazing prophetic symbolism embedded in every detail of the sacrificial system—but hopefully, what we shared will encourage you to dive into this amazing book.

Thank you for joining us for another Parashah Point!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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