THE BOOK OF LEVITICUS

The King Who Draws Near

Leviticus, Unfiltered

For teens who think they've heard it all

BILL McLEOD

Papa Bill Books

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR TEENS

The King Who Draws Near: The Book of Leviticus, Unfiltered

Part of The Old Testament for Teens series.

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In the author's own text, pronouns referring to God the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit are capitalized for reverence. Scripture quotations follow the WEB Protestant Edition exactly, including its capitalization.

AI Disclosure. This book was written by Bill McLeod with the assistance of artificial intelligence tools for drafting, research, and editing. All content was reviewed and approved by the author, who takes full responsibility for it. Readers are encouraged to open the Scriptures and study them for themselves.

A WORD TO THE READER

Before You Start

You know the saying by now: “If you want to get something done, hire a teenager while they still know it all.” But here’s a confession. Most people don’t think they know Leviticus. They think they know they don’t want to. Leviticus is where read-the-Bible-in-a-year plans go to die. Goats, grain, blood, mold, skin diseases, and long lists of rules. What could that possibly have to do with you?

More than you’d think. Leviticus answers a question that sits underneath the whole Bible: how can a perfectly holy God live right in the middle of messed-up people without destroying them? Exodus ended with God moving into a tent in the middle of Israel’s camp. Leviticus is the house rules, and it turns out they’re mostly about grace. They show how guilty people can be forgiven, how unclean people can be made clean, and how outsiders can be brought near.

Leviticus is also where you’ll find one of the most famous sentences ever written, the one Jesus called the second greatest commandment: love your neighbor as yourself. It’s where the Day of Atonement and the scapegoat come from, and the Year of Jubilee, when debts were canceled and slaves went free. And when the New Testament explains what Jesus did on the cross, it keeps reaching for the language of Leviticus.

So don’t skip it. Read it slowly, ask hard questions, and watch for the God who keeps saying, in one way or another, I want to be with you.

How This Book Works

This book walks through Leviticus in nine chapters: the offerings (Leviticus 1–7), the priests and the tragedy of Nadab and Abihu (8–10), clean and unclean (11–15), the Day of Atonement (16–17), the boundaries of chapter 18 and 20, the great love chapter (19), holy priests and holy days (21–24), the Jubilee and the covenant blessings and warnings (25–27), and finally how Christians read Old Testament law today. The detailed ritual instructions are summarized more briefly than the big ideas, so you can see the whole picture.

Before chapter 1, a section called Setting the Scene explains what kind of book Leviticus is, where it fits, and the world it came from. Read it first.

Each chapter ends with a Key Verse quoted word for word from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain modern translation used for every Scripture quotation in this book (Scripture is quoted exactly as the WEB prints it; in the rest of the book, pronouns for God are capitalized out of reverence); Real Talk questions to think through alone or argue about with friends; and a Try This challenge.

On questions where sincere Christians disagree, such as why some foods were unclean, and how much of the Old Testament law applies to Christians today, I'll lay out the main views fairly and leave the decision to you, your family, and your church. Leviticus also talks frankly about sexual sin and abuse. When it does, you'll find a box with a safety note. This book quotes Leviticus in places and explains it mostly in my own words, so keep a Bible open next to it. Don't take my word for it. Take His.

FOR THE ADULTS

A Note for Parents and Youth Leaders

Thank you for putting this book in a teenager's hands. It's the third book in The Old Testament for Teens, a companion to the New Testament for Teens series, written for readers who can smell a sermon coming a mile away. I've tried to write honestly, directly, with some humor, and with real respect for what these readers can handle.

Leviticus raises questions teens will ask. I've presented the main explanations of the clean and unclean food laws fairly (hygiene, symbolism, separation from pagan practice, and the order of creation), and I've laid out the main Christian approaches to Old Testament law, including the traditional moral, civil, and ceremonial distinction, the view that the whole law is fulfilled in Christ, and the Jewish understanding of Torah as still binding. I'd encourage you to share your own church's view with your teen, and to explain why other Christians see it differently.

Leviticus 18 and 20 address sexual sin, including incest and the abuse of family members. These chapters are summarized briefly and age-appropriately, without graphic detail. A safety box tells readers that sexual abuse is always wrong, that it is never the victim's fault, and that they should tell a trusted adult, with the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline (1-800-422-4453). The harsh penalties in Leviticus 20 are explained in their historical setting,

with the reminder that Christians do not carry out those penalties today.

The closing section, Where This Points, shows how the New Testament, especially the letter to the Hebrews, sees the sacrifices, the priesthood, and the Day of Atonement fulfilled in Jesus, while acknowledging that Jewish readers continue to read Leviticus in their own rich ways. Wherever Scripture is quoted directly, in the chapters and in the Key Verses, the wording is from the World English Bible (WEB), Protestant Edition, a public-domain translation.

The Real Talk questions are designed for discussion. They work well for a youth group, a small group, a family dinner table, or a car ride. Don't rush to the right answer. Let them wrestle. Faith that has been thought through tends to last.

My prayer is that every reader will meet in Leviticus a holy God who makes a way for sinners to come near.

Grace and peace,

Bill McLeod

Papa Bill Books

BEFORE YOU OPEN THE BOOK

Setting the Scene

The Priests' Handbook

The name Leviticus comes from the Levites, the tribe of Israel that served at the tabernacle, and from Aaron's family within it, who were the priests. In Hebrew the book is called Vayikra, which means and He called, from its first words: the LORD called to Moses. That's a good way to think of the whole book. It isn't just a manual. It's God calling His people to come close.

Part Three of the Torah

Leviticus is the third of the five books of Moses, the Torah, and it sits right in the middle of them. Exodus ends with the glory of God filling the tabernacle. Leviticus picks up immediately, with God speaking from that tent. All of it takes place while Israel is camped at Mount Sinai, over about a month. Numbers then continues the journey through the wilderness.

The Big Problem

At the end of Exodus, even Moses couldn't enter the tent when God's glory filled it. That's the problem Leviticus solves. God is holy, which means utterly pure, set apart, and full of life. People are sinful, and they live in a world marked by death and decay. If God is going to live among them, something has to bridge the gap. Leviticus is God's answer: sacrifices to deal with sin, priests to stand between, and purity laws that teach Israel what it means to live near a holy God.

Three Key Words

Three words keep showing up in Leviticus. Holy means set apart for God, belonging to Him. Clean and unclean describe whether a person or thing is fit to come near God's presence; being unclean usually isn't a sin, just a temporary condition. Atonement means covering or wiping clean, making things right between God and people. If you understand those three, Leviticus starts to make sense.

Who Wrote Leviticus?

Leviticus repeatedly says that the LORD spoke to Moses, and Jewish and Christian tradition has long held that Moses wrote it. Many scholars believe it was assembled later from priestly sources, perhaps edited during or after the exile. Others hold that Moses is the main author, with later editing. Christians with different views agree that Leviticus is God's Word.

The World It Came From

Every ancient nation had temples, priests, and sacrifices. Many believed the gods needed food, and that rituals could control them. Leviticus uses similar practices but changes their meaning. Israel's God doesn't need feeding. He can't be manipulated. Instead, He gives the sacrifices to His people as a gift, so they can be forgiven and come near. And unlike many neighbors, Israel's laws protected the poor, foreigners, and the disabled, and forbade child sacrifice.

Hard Passages and Safety Notes

Leviticus talks openly about sexual sin and includes harsh penalties. Including a law in the Bible doesn't mean Christians apply it the same way today, and we'll talk about why. When we come to these

passages, you'll find a safety box. Here's what they say: abuse is always wrong, it's never the victim's fault, and if something like it is happening to you or a friend, tell a trusted adult. In the United States you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, or call 911 in an emergency.

The Map

Chapter 1 (Leviticus 1–7): The five offerings.

Chapter 2 (Leviticus 8–10): Priests and strange fire.

Chapter 3 (Leviticus 11–15): Clean and unclean.

Chapter 4 (Leviticus 16–17): The Day of Atonement.

Chapter 5 (Leviticus 18, 20): Boundaries that protect.

Chapter 6 (Leviticus 19): Love your neighbor.

Chapter 7 (Leviticus 21–24): Holy priests and holy days.

Chapter 8 (Leviticus 25–27): Jubilee.

Chapter 9: Reading Leviticus today.

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CHAPTER 1

Gifts on the Fire

Leviticus 1–7

Leviticus begins with a voice from a tent. At the end of Exodus, the cloud of God's glory filled the tabernacle so completely that even Moses couldn't go in. Now, from inside that tent, God calls Moses and starts explaining how ordinary people can come near. The first answer is offerings. Chapters 1–7 describe five kinds, and if you've ever wondered why the Bible spends so much time on animals and altars, this is where it starts.

Here's the first thing to notice: the instructions begin with when anyone brings an offering. Not when anyone has to. Some offerings were required, but the tone is invitation. God is telling His people how to give Him gifts, how to be forgiven, and how to share a meal in His presence.

The first offering is the burnt offering (chapter 1). The worshiper brought an animal from the herd or flock, a bull, a sheep, or a goat, without any defect. If he was poor, he could bring two birds instead. Then came a simple, powerful action. "He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him." The hand on the head said, this animal stands in for me. Then the animal was killed, and the whole thing was burned on the altar, rising as smoke, "a pleasant aroma to the LORD." Nothing was kept back. It was total surrender.

BACKGROUND CHECK **What Does Atonement Mean?**

The Hebrew word for atonement, kipper, probably means to cover or to wipe clean. Some scholars connect it to a ransom price paid to set someone free. Either way, atonement is about repairing the relationship between God and people when sin has broken it. English translators in the 1500s needed a word for it and basically invented one: at-one-ment, being made at one with God. When you see the word in Leviticus, think of reconciliation, two parties who were separated being brought back together.

The second offering is the grain offering (chapter 2). Not every gift involved an animal. A worshiper could bring fine flour mixed with oil and frankincense, or baked bread without yeast. A handful went on the fire, and the rest went to feed the priests. Every grain offering had to be seasoned with salt, which the text calls the salt of the covenant. Salt preserves things, so it was a picture of a lasting relationship. Ancient people sealed agreements by sharing a salted meal.

The third is the peace offering, sometimes called the fellowship offering (chapter 3). This was the happiest one. Only the fat and certain organs were burned for God; the priest got a share, and the worshiper and his family ate the rest in a feast. Imagine it: a barbecue in God's front yard, with God as the host. People brought peace offerings to say thank you, to keep a promise, or just because they wanted to. It's a picture of friendship with God.

REAL TALK **Why So Gross?**

Let's be honest. The sacrifices sound messy and violent. Blood was splashed on the altar. Animals died. If you'd been there, the smell and the sound would have stuck with you. But maybe that was the point. Sin isn't a small thing that can be fixed by saying oops. It destroys lives and relationships and leads to death. The sacrifices made that visible. Every time an Israelite laid a hand on an animal and watched it die, they learned that sin is serious, that it costs a

> life, and that God had provided a substitute. It's also worth knowing that, for most Israelites, eating meat at all was rare, and much of it happened at these sacred meals. Sacrifice was woven into everyday life in a way that's hard for us to picture.

The fourth is the sin offering (chapter 4), sometimes translated purification offering. This one dealt with sins committed unintentionally, by mistake or without realizing it. That might surprise you. Why would you need forgiveness for something you didn't mean to do? Because sin isn't just about intentions. It leaves a stain, on you and on the world around you, even when you didn't see it coming. The bigger the person's responsibility, the bigger the offering: a bull for the high priest or for the whole nation, a goat for a leader, a female goat or lamb for an ordinary person. And the chapter keeps repeating a wonderful promise: the priest shall make atonement for them, "and they shall be forgiven."

The fifth is the guilt offering, also called the reparation offering (chapters 5–6). This was for sins that harmed something or someone, like cheating a neighbor, lying about lost property, or misusing something holy. Here, forgiveness came with restitution. The guilty person had to pay back what he took, plus a fifth extra, and then bring an offering to God. Saying sorry to God wasn't enough if you hadn't made it right with the person you hurt. Before any offering, the sinner had to own up. "He shall confess that in which he has sinned."

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Five Offerings at a Glance**
>
> Burnt offering: total surrender to God; the whole animal burned. Grain offering: a gift of thanks from the harvest; shared with the priests. Peace offering: a fellowship meal with God, the priests, and the worshiper's family. Sin or purification offering: cleansing and forgiveness for unintentional sins. Guilt or reparation offering: forgiveness plus repayment when someone was

wronged. Christians see all five fulfilled in Jesus, who gave Himself completely, who is the bread of life, who makes peace between us and God, and who paid for our sins.

REAL TALK **Making It Right**

The guilt offering teaches something we often skip. If you've stolen something, lied about someone, or broken something that belongs to somebody else, God's forgiveness is real and free. But following Him also means going back and making it right where you can: returning what you took, telling the truth, paying for what you broke. Jesus said the same thing: if you remember that someone has something against you, go and be reconciled first (Matthew 5:23–24). It's hard and humbling. It's also one of the most freeing things you'll ever do.

REAL TALK **Giving Your Best**

Notice that the animals had to be without defect. You couldn't bring God the sick sheep you were going to lose anyway. Centuries later, the prophet Malachi scolded people for doing exactly that, offering blind and lame animals and keeping the best for themselves (Malachi 1:8). The principle still applies. It's easy to give God our leftovers: leftover time after everything else, leftover money after we've bought what we want, leftover energy at the end of the day. Leviticus pushes us to give Him the first and the best. That might mean praying before you pick up your phone in the morning, giving part of your paycheck before you spend it, or using your best gifts to serve others. And notice the grace built in too. The poor could bring birds or flour. God never asked for what people didn't have. He asked for their hearts.

Chapters 6–7 go back over the same offerings, this time with instructions for the priests: who could eat what, where, and when. One small detail stands out. "Fire shall be kept burning on the altar continually; it shall not go out." Day and night, the fire on the altar never stopped. The way to God was always open, but it was always costly.

It's worth picturing what this looked like for an ordinary Israelite family. Say a farmer has a bumper crop, or his child recovers from a dangerous fever. He picks out the best young ram from his flock, the one he could have sold for a good price, and leads it to the tabernacle. His family comes with him. At the entrance, he presses his hand on the animal's head, and maybe says a prayer of thanks. A priest helps him with the sacrifice. Part of the animal is burned, the smoke rising into the sky. The priest gets his share. And then the family sits down together near the tent and eats a feast, the kind of meal they might only have a few times a year, in the presence of the God who rescued them. That was worship. It was costly, physical, communal, and joyful all at once.

Now picture a different day. The same farmer realizes he's cheated his neighbor in a land deal. He goes to his neighbor, admits it, and pays him back with an extra fifth on top. Then he brings a ram to the tabernacle as a guilt offering, confesses his sin, and hears the priest declare that he is forgiven. He walks home lighter. That's what the offerings were for: real people, real sin, real gratitude, and a real God who made a way.

What did all this mean? Some Israelites, like people in any religion, probably thought of the sacrifices as a transaction: give God an animal, get forgiveness, carry on. The prophets later blasted that attitude. God says through Hosea that He desires mercy, not sacrifice (Hosea 6:6), and David prays that God wants a broken and contrite heart (Psalm 51:17). The sacrifices were never magic. They were a gift from God, a way for a humble and trusting heart to come near.

The New Testament takes all of this and points it at Jesus. The letter to the Hebrews says, "apart from shedding of blood there is no

remission," but it also says the animal sacrifices could never fully solve the problem, because they had to be repeated over and over. Jesus is the sacrifice that finished it. Paul uses the same picture for us, urging Christians to present their bodies "a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God." The altar fire now burns in a different way: in lives that belong completely to Him.

KEY VERSE

He shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it shall be accepted for him to make atonement for him.

Leviticus 1:4 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God made forgiveness so visible and so costly in Leviticus?
2. Which of the five offerings stands out most to you, and why?
3. The guilt offering required paying back what was taken. Is there anything you need to make right with someone?
4. What would it look like for you to be a living sacrifice this week?

TRY THIS *Make a chart of the five offerings with three columns: what was offered, what it meant, and how it points to Jesus. Use Hebrews 10:1–14 to help you fill in the last column.*

CHAPTER 2

Strange Fire

Leviticus 8–10

Chapters 8–10 are the only real story in Leviticus, and it's a dramatic one. It starts with a week-long ordination, peaks with fire from heaven, and ends in tragedy.

In chapter 8, Moses gathers the whole community at the entrance to the tent and ordains Aaron and his four sons as priests, just as God commanded in Exodus 29. He washes them with water. He dresses Aaron in the high priest's clothes: the tunic, the robe, the ephod, the breastpiece with its twelve stones for the twelve tribes, and the turban with a gold plate engraved Holy to the LORD. "He poured some of the anointing oil on Aaron's head, and anointed him, to sanctify him." Then Moses offers sacrifices and puts some of the blood on Aaron's right ear, right thumb, and right big toe. It's a strange-sounding ritual, but the meaning is beautiful: his ears to listen to God, his hands to serve God, and his feet to walk in God's ways. For seven days the priests stay at the entrance of the tent.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **What Did Priests Do?**
>
> Israel's priests were go-betweens. They represented the people to God by offering sacrifices and praying for them, and they represented God to the people by blessing them and teaching them His law (Leviticus 10:11). They also acted a bit like health inspectors, examining skin diseases and mold, and like judges in difficult cases. All priests came from Aaron's family, part of the

> tribe of Levi. The rest of the Levites helped care for the tabernacle. The New Testament says Jesus is now our great High Priest, and also that all believers are a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9), people who represent God to the world and bring the world's needs to God.

On the eighth day, the priests begin their work. Aaron offers a sin offering and a burnt offering for himself first, then offerings for the people. Then comes the moment everything has been building toward. "Moses and Aaron went into the Tent of Meeting, and came out, and blessed the people; and the LORD's glory appeared to all the people." And then: "Fire came out from before the LORD, and consumed the burnt offering and the fat upon the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted, and fell on their faces." God accepts the offering. The system works. A holy God and a sinful people can meet.

Then, almost immediately, it goes horribly wrong. "Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer, and put fire in it, and laid incense on it, and offered strange fire before the LORD, which he had not commanded them." And the same fire that had just consumed the offering comes out again. "Fire came out from before the LORD, and devoured them, and they died before the LORD."

What did they do wrong? The text doesn't spell it out, and Jewish and Christian interpreters have offered several ideas. Maybe they took fire from somewhere other than the altar. Maybe they went where only the high priest could go, or at the wrong time. Maybe they were drunk; right after this story, God tells Aaron that priests must not drink wine or strong drink before serving (10:8–9), which some see as a clue. Maybe it was pride, trying to grab a moment of glory on the biggest day in Israel's history. What's clear is that they

did something God had not commanded, in the place where God's holiness was most intense.

REAL TALK **Is God Scary?**

This story can be hard to read. Two young men die instantly for what looks like a worship mistake. Does that mean God is harsh, or looking for a reason to strike people down? Here's another way to see it. Holiness is like the sun. It's the source of light and life, and without it nothing on earth would survive. But you can't treat it casually. Nadab and Abihu were priests who had been told exactly how to approach, and they ignored it on day one. The point of the story isn't that God is touchy. It's that He is real, and that coming near Him is only possible on His terms. That's why the good news of Jesus is such good news: He made a way for us to come near without fear.

Moses explains it with words from God. "I will show myself holy to those who come near me, and before all the people I will be glorified." And then comes one of the saddest lines in the Bible: "Aaron held his peace." A father who has just watched two of his sons die says nothing. Moses tells Aaron and his remaining sons not to tear their clothes and mourn publicly while they're on duty, but the whole community is allowed to grieve for them.

SAFETY NOTE **When Someone Dies**

If you've lost a family member or friend suddenly, you might relate to Aaron's silence. Grief can leave you numb, angry, or confused, sometimes all at once. That's normal. It helps to talk with someone you trust, like a parent, pastor, school counselor, or grief group. If you ever feel hopeless or think about hurting yourself, call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline, any time. God doesn't need you to hold your peace. The psalms are full of people who cried out to Him in grief, and Jesus Himself wept at a friend's grave (John 11:35).

REAL TALK **Worship Your Way?**

Some people say it doesn't matter how you worship God, as long as you're sincere. Nadab and Abihu were probably sincere about something. But they

did what God had not commanded. That doesn't mean every worship style has to look the same. The New Testament gives churches lots of freedom: different music, different languages, different buildings, different times. Christians from different traditions worship in very different ways. But it does mean worship is about God, not about us. We come on His terms, through Jesus, honoring what He's said. The question isn't whether worship feels exciting or impressive. It's whether it honors the God who is actually there. Next time you're at church or youth group, ask yourself: am I here to perform, to be entertained, or to meet with God?

The chapter ends with another tense moment. Aaron's surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, fail to eat part of a sin offering the way they were supposed to, and Moses gets angry. But Aaron answers gently: after what happened today, would God really be pleased if I ate it? And Moses accepts that. It's a small, human scene. God's holiness is serious, but He also sees the heart of a grieving father.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Nadab and Abihu Before This**

Nadab and Abihu weren't random priests. They were Aaron's oldest sons, the next in line to lead Israel's worship. Back in Exodus 24, they had gone partway up Mount Sinai with Moses and seventy elders, and the text says they saw the God of Israel and ate and drank in His presence. Few people in history had such a privilege. That makes their story even more sobering. Being close to holy things, growing up in a godly family, or having a spiritual experience doesn't guarantee you'll take God seriously. Every generation, and every person, has to choose to honor Him.

God also gives the priests their job description in this chapter. "You are to make a distinction between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean." That's exactly what the next section of Leviticus is about.

KEY VERSE

Fire came out from before the LORD, and consumed the burnt offering and the fat upon the altar. When all the people saw it, they shouted, and fell on their faces.

Leviticus 9:24 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. The same fire that accepted the offering also destroyed Nadab and Abihu. What does that teach you about God's holiness?
2. Why do you think the Bible doesn't tell us exactly what Nadab and Abihu did wrong?
3. What would it mean to take God seriously without being terrified of Him?
4. Peter says all Christians are priests. What does that mean for how you treat the people around you?

TRY THIS *Look up Hebrews 4:14–16. Write down three differences between Aaron as high priest and Jesus as High Priest. Then use verse 16 as a prayer.*

CHAPTER 3

Clean and Unclean

Leviticus 11–15

If people give up on Leviticus, it's usually here. Chapters 11–15 deal with clean and unclean animals, childbirth, skin diseases, mold on walls, and bodily discharges. It can sound random, or even embarrassing. But there's a logic to it, and once you see it, these chapters say something surprisingly important.

First, a key point: unclean doesn't mean sinful. In Leviticus, a woman who gave birth was unclean for a time. So was anyone who touched a dead body, even when burying a loved one was the right thing to do. Being unclean was a temporary condition, not a moral failure. It mostly meant you couldn't enter the tabernacle until you'd been cleansed, often by washing and waiting until evening. Being clean meant you were ready to come near God. Being holy meant you belonged to Him in a special way. Sin was a separate problem, dealt with by sacrifice and forgiveness.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Holy, Clean, Unclean**
>
> Scholars often picture three zones. Holy is God's zone: the tabernacle, the priests, the offerings. Clean is the normal state of everyday life, people and things free to approach. Unclean describes things touched by death, decay, or disorder, which had to be kept away from the holy. Sin and uncleanness could move things down the scale. Sacrifice and cleansing moved them back

up. The whole system was a giant picture lesson: God is life, and everything connected with death has to be dealt with before you come near Him.

Chapter 11 lists clean and unclean animals. Land animals were clean if they had split hooves and chewed the cud, like cows, sheep, and goats. Pigs, camels, and rabbits were out. Sea creatures needed fins and scales, so no shrimp or lobster. Many birds of prey and scavengers were unclean, along with most insects, though locusts and grasshoppers were allowed. God gives the reason in a sentence that sums up the whole book. "For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Why These Foods?**

People have argued about the food laws for a long time, and there are several main theories. The health theory says the laws protected Israel from disease; pork can carry parasites, and shellfish can spoil fast. But many clean animals carry disease too, and the Bible never gives health as the reason. The symbolic theory, held by some early Jewish and Christian writers, says the animals were living lessons; for example, animals that chew the cud picture someone who thinks deeply about God's word. The separation theory says the laws set Israel apart from its neighbors, some of whom used pigs in pagan rituals. The order-of-creation theory, made famous by anthropologist Mary Douglas, says clean animals fit their category perfectly, like fish with fins and scales, while unclean ones blurred the lines, and that this taught wholeness and order. Many scholars think more than one of these is true. Christians differ on which is most convincing.

Chapter 12 deals with childbirth. After giving birth, a mother was unclean for a period of time, then brought a burnt offering and a sin offering. That doesn't mean having a baby was sinful. Childbirth involves blood, which the Bible connects with life, and a woman's body went through a powerful change. The offering marked her

return to worship. And look at the grace built in: "If she cannot afford a lamb, then she shall take two turtledoves or two young pigeons." Centuries later, Mary and Joseph brought exactly that offering when Jesus was born (Luke 2:24). They were poor.

Chapters 13–14 deal with skin diseases, often translated leprosy, though it covered many conditions, not just what we call leprosy today. A priest examined the person, sometimes isolating them for a week to see whether it spread. If it did, the person was declared unclean. "He shall dwell alone. His dwelling shall be outside of the camp." The same chapters cover mold or mildew in clothes and houses, which the priest also inspected. Chapter 15 deals with bodily discharges, natural and unusual, for both men and women.

REAL TALK **Outside the Camp**

Imagine being told to live outside the camp, to wear torn clothes, and to call out Unclean whenever someone came near. It must have been terribly lonely. Some people today feel like that, because of an illness, a disability, their family's situation, or just the way others treat them at school. Now look at Jesus. A man with leprosy came to Him, and Mark says, "Being moved with compassion, he stretched out his hand, and touched him." By the rules, touching the man should have made Jesus unclean. Instead, the man was made clean. Jesus reversed the direction of contagion. His holiness was more powerful than the man's uncleanness. Who is outside the camp in your world? How could you move toward them?

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Woman Who Touched Jesus**

Leviticus 15 says a woman with an ongoing flow of blood was unclean for as long as it lasted. In Mark 5, we meet a woman who'd had that condition for twelve years. She'd spent everything on doctors and only gotten worse. For twelve years she would have been kept at a distance from worship and, in many ways, from people. She pushed through a crowd and touched the edge of Jesus' clothes, hoping no one would notice. She was healed instantly.

> Jesus stopped, found her, and called her daughter. He didn't just heal her body. He restored her place among God's people, in public, for everyone to see.

These chapters also show why it mattered so much. "Thus you shall separate the children of Israel from their uncleanness, so they will not die in their uncleanness when they defile my tabernacle that is among them." God lived among them. That was the privilege, and that was the danger. You don't wander into a holy place carrying death with you.

> **REAL TALK** **Bodies Matter**
>
> It might feel awkward that the Bible talks about periods, discharges, and skin conditions. But think about what that says. God isn't embarrassed by bodies. He made them. Leviticus doesn't treat the body as dirty or bad; it treats it as something that matters to God. The purity laws dealt with the facts of life in a fallen world, where blood, disease, and death are part of everyday experience. If you've ever felt ashamed of your body, remember that God created it, cares about it, and in Jesus took on a human body Himself. And if something about your health worries you, talk to a parent, a doctor, or a school nurse. That's not shameful. It's wise.

There's one more thread running through these chapters that's easy to miss. Every one of the conditions that made someone unclean was connected in some way with death or the loss of life: a corpse, a dead animal, blood leaving the body, skin that looked like it was wasting away, mold slowly eating into a wall. God is the living God, the source of all life. Death was never part of His original design; it entered the world through sin (Genesis 3). The purity laws kept reminding Israel that the God who lived among them was on the side of life, and that everything touched by death had to be dealt with before coming near Him. That's why it matters so much that Jesus touched lepers, was touched by a bleeding woman, and took

hold of a dead girl's hand (Mark 5:41). Death and uncleanness didn't defeat Him. He defeated them. And when He rose from the dead, He showed that death itself would one day be undone.

So do Christians keep the food laws? The New Testament says no, and it says it clearly. Jesus taught that what goes into a person doesn't make them unclean, and Mark adds a note in his Gospel that Jesus was "making all foods clean." Later, God gave Peter a vision of unclean animals and told him, "What God has cleansed, you must not call unclean." The point was bigger than food: the gospel was for Gentiles too. Many Jewish people today still keep kosher, out of faithfulness to God's commands, and Christians should respect that. But for Christians, the purity laws find their fulfillment in Jesus, who makes people clean from the inside out. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous to forgive us the sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

KEY VERSE

For I am the LORD who brought you up out of the land of Egypt, to be your God. You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy.

Leviticus 11:45 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What's the difference between being unclean and being sinful in Leviticus? Why does it matter?
2. Which explanation of the food laws do you find most convincing, and why?
3. Jesus touched the man with leprosy. Who are the people at your school who get treated as outsiders?
4. What does it mean to you that Jesus can make you clean from the inside out?

TRY THIS *Read Mark 1:40–45 and Mark 5:25–34. In both stories, someone unclean meets Jesus. Write down what happens to the uncleanness, and what happens to the person.*

CHAPTER 4

The Day of Atonement

Leviticus 16–17

Leviticus 16 is the center of the book, and many scholars think it's the center of the whole Torah. It describes the most important day of Israel's year, the Day of Atonement, in Hebrew Yom Kippur. Jewish people still observe it today as the holiest day of the year, with fasting, prayer, and repentance.

The chapter opens with a reminder of Nadab and Abihu. The LORD tells Moses to warn Aaron "not to come at just any time into the Most Holy Place within the veil, before the mercy seat which is on the ark; lest he die." The Most Holy Place was the inner room of the tabernacle, where the ark of the covenant sat behind a thick curtain. It was the place where heaven touched earth. Only one person could go in, the high priest, and only on one day a year.

> **BACKGROUND CHECK** **The Mercy Seat**
>
> The ark of the covenant was a gold-covered wooden chest holding the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. Its lid was called the mercy seat, or the atonement cover, with two golden cherubim facing each other above it. God said He would meet with His people there. Think about the picture: God's law inside the box, and on top of it, the place where blood was sprinkled for forgiveness. Mercy literally covered the law. Paul uses the same Greek word for the mercy seat when he says God put Jesus forward as an atoning sacrifice (Romans 3:25).

On this day, Aaron takes off his glorious high priest's robes and puts on plain white linen. He doesn't come in splendor. He comes humbly. First he offers a bull as a sin offering for himself and his family, because the high priest is a sinner too. He fills the Most Holy Place with a cloud of incense, and sprinkles the bull's blood on and in front of the mercy seat.

Then come two goats. Aaron casts lots over them. One is for the LORD; the other is for Azazel, often translated the scapegoat. The first goat is killed as a sin offering for the people, and its blood is brought behind the curtain and sprinkled like the bull's. This cleanses the sanctuary itself from all the uncleanness and rebellion of Israel that had built up over the year.

Then comes the most memorable part. "Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions, even all their sins; and he shall put them on the head of the goat, and shall send him away into the wilderness." A man leads the goat out, far away. "The goat shall carry all their iniquities on himself to a solitary land."

BACKGROUND CHECK **Who or What Is Azazel?**

The Hebrew word Azazel appears only in this chapter, and nobody is completely sure what it means. Some think it means the goat that goes away, which is where the English word scapegoat comes from. Some think it's the name of a rugged, remote place in the desert. Others, following some ancient Jewish writings, think Azazel was the name of a demon thought to live in the wilderness, so that sin was sent back where it belonged. All the views agree on the main point: the people's sins were removed, carried far away, never to return.

Why two goats? Because sin has two problems. It deserves death, and it pollutes. The first goat showed that sin had to be paid for with a life. The second showed that sin could be taken away completely. Together they paint a picture of total forgiveness. A psalm puts it like this: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us."

> **REAL TALK** **Scapegoats**
>
> Today, a scapegoat is someone blamed for things that aren't their fault. Maybe you've seen it happen in a family, a team, or a group chat. Someone becomes the easy target, the one everybody dumps on. That's the opposite of what Leviticus 16 means. The original scapegoat carried sins willingly provided by God to set people free, not to make one person miserable while everyone else feels better. If you're the one who always gets blamed, that's not okay, and it's worth talking to a trusted adult about. And if you're the one doing the blaming, the cross is a reminder that someone already carried the blame. You don't have to put it on anybody else.

The whole community took part. On the tenth day of the seventh month, they were to humble themselves, which Jewish tradition understood as fasting, and do no work. And then came the promise: "for on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you. You shall be clean from all your sins before the LORD." Imagine hearing that, once a year, and knowing it was for you.

> **REAL TALK** **Carrying Guilt**
>
> Some people carry guilt for years: something they said, something they did, something nobody else even knows about. They replay it at night. They wonder if God could ever really forgive it. The Day of Atonement was God's way of saying, I don't want you carrying this. Bring it, confess it, and let it go. Once the goat had gone into the wilderness, nobody went looking for it. In the same way, when God forgives you through Jesus, He doesn't keep a file on you, waiting to bring it up again. If you've confessed something to God and

still feel crushed by it, it can help to tell a pastor, youth leader, or trusted Christian friend, and let them remind you of what's true. And if the guilt is about something that hurt someone else, the guilt offering in chapter 5 is a reminder that making it right, where you can, is part of moving forward.

Chapter 17 adds instructions about blood. Israelites were to bring their sacrifices to the tabernacle, not offer them in the fields to goat demons, as some had apparently been doing. And they must never eat blood. God explains why, in one of the most important verses in the Bible for understanding sacrifice. "For the life of the flesh is in the blood. I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life." Blood stands for life. When blood was shed on the altar, a life was given in place of a life.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Blood and Life**

Ancient people understood that when blood drained out of a body, life drained out with it. That's why the Bible treats blood as sacred. Noah was told not to eat meat with its blood (Genesis 9:4), and Jewish kosher practice still drains blood from meat. The early church, at the Jerusalem Council, asked Gentile Christians to avoid blood too, mostly out of respect for their Jewish brothers and sisters (Acts 15:20). When Christians speak of the blood of Jesus, they don't mean anything magical about the liquid. They mean His life, poured out for us.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Yom Kippur Today**

Yom Kippur is still the holiest day of the Jewish year. It falls in September or October. Many Jewish people fast for about twenty-five hours, from sunset to the next nightfall, and spend much of the day in synagogue praying prayers of confession and repentance. Many wear white, a reminder of purity, and some echo the high priest's plain linen. The service ends with a long blast on the shofar, the ram's horn trumpet. Jewish tradition teaches that Yom Kippur atones for sins against God, but that for sins against other people, you must

first go to the person you hurt and ask their forgiveness. That's a lesson Christians can learn from too.

Hebrews draws a direct line from this chapter to Jesus. The high priest went into the Most Holy Place once a year, with the blood of animals, and had to do it again the next year. But Christ, "through his own blood, entered in once for all into the Holy Place, having obtained eternal redemption." Like the bodies of the sin offerings, which were burned outside the camp, "Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people through his own blood, suffered outside of the gate." Jesus is both goats: the one who died, and the one who carried our sins far away.

KEY VERSE

for on this day shall atonement be made for you, to cleanse you. You shall be clean from all your sins before the LORD.

Leviticus 16:30 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think the high priest wore plain linen instead of his glorious robes on the Day of Atonement?
2. What do the two goats teach about forgiveness?
3. Have you ever been a scapegoat, or made someone else one? What happened?
4. How does it feel to know your sins can be carried as far as the east is from the west?

TRY THIS *Read Hebrews 9:11–14 and 10:19–22. Write a short prayer of confession, then write Psalm 103:12 under it. Tear up the confession and throw it away as a reminder that your sins have been carried off.*

CHAPTER 5

Not Like Egypt

Leviticus 18 and 20

Starting in chapter 17, Leviticus shifts its focus. The first half of the book is mostly about holy places and holy rituals. The second half, often called the Holiness Code (chapters 17–26), is about holy living, in families, in fields, in business, and in the bedroom. It's no longer just the priests who must be holy. Everyone is.

Chapter 18 opens with a powerful framing. "You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived. You shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. You shall not follow their statutes." Israel had been shaped by Egypt for centuries, and soon they'd be surrounded by Canaanite culture. God says, you're going to be different. You belong to Me. And He adds a promise: "You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, which if a man does, he shall live in them." God's ways aren't designed to crush life. They're designed to give it.

The chapter goes on to list sexual relationships that are off-limits. Most of the list is about family members: parents, stepparents, siblings, half-siblings, aunts and uncles, in-laws, grandchildren. Then it forbids adultery, offering children to the god Molech, sex between men, and sex with animals. Chapter 20 repeats many of the same laws and adds penalties, many of them severe, including death.

SAFETY NOTE **Abuse in Families**

Leviticus 18 makes something very clear. Sexual contact between family members is wrong, and so is any sexual contact forced on someone who can't say no. If anyone, including a parent, stepparent, sibling, cousin, relative, coach, or family friend, has touched you in a sexual way, asked you to keep a secret like that, or shown you sexual images, it is not your fault. You haven't done anything wrong, and you don't have to protect them. Tell a trusted adult, like a teacher, school counselor, pastor, or relative outside the situation. If the first person doesn't listen, tell another. In the United States you can call or text the Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline at 1-800-422-4453, any time, day or night. If you're in danger right now, call 911. God sees, He cares, and He is on your side.

Why such a long list about family? In the ancient world, extended families often lived together in one large household. Without clear lines, the most vulnerable people, especially women and children, were easy targets for the men with power over them. These laws drew a protective fence around the family home. They said: the people you live with must be safe with you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Molech**

Molech was a god worshiped by some of Israel's neighbors, and the Bible connects his worship with child sacrifice. Leviticus 18:21 and 20:2–5 forbid it in the strongest terms. Sadly, later kings of Judah did it anyway, and the prophets were horrified (Jeremiah 32:35). Archaeologists have found evidence of child sacrifice in the ancient Mediterranean world, especially in the Phoenician city of Carthage. Israel's God says, never. Children are not to be used for anyone's gain, not even in the name of religion.

Some readers are surprised by how plainly the Bible talks about these things. But silence often protects abusers. When families, churches, or schools refuse to talk about sexual sin and abuse, victims are left confused, ashamed, and alone. Leviticus does the

opposite. It names what is wrong, out loud, in front of the whole community. It tells every Israelite that these things are not private family business. They matter to God. That's a model for Christians today: we should be the kind of people who are safe to talk to, who believe those who come forward, and who make sure abuse is reported and stopped, not covered up to protect someone's reputation.

What about the penalties in chapter 20? They're hard to read, and it's okay to say so. Several things help. First, these were laws for Israel as a nation, governed directly by God, at a specific time in history. Second, many scholars believe the death penalty in ancient law often worked as the maximum sentence rather than the usual one, and in later Jewish practice the rules for applying it became so strict that it was rarely carried out. Third, the New Testament never asks Christians to carry out these penalties. When a woman caught in adultery was brought to Jesus, He refused to condemn her, while also telling her to leave her life of sin (John 8:1–11). Christians today agree that the church's role isn't to punish people physically, but to call everyone, including ourselves, to repentance and grace.

> **REAL TALK** **Different on Purpose**
>
> Leviticus says God's people should be different from the culture around them, and it starts with sex. That's still true today, and it's not easy. You're surrounded by messages that say sex is no big deal, that whatever feels right is right, and that porn is harmless. God's design is different: sex is a gift meant for the lifelong covenant of marriage. Christians disagree about how some of these laws apply today, especially the verses about same-sex relationships, and those conversations should be had with honesty, humility, and kindness. But all Christians agree that following Jesus means letting Him shape your choices about your body. If you've messed up, there's forgiveness. If you're

struggling with porn, talk to a trusted adult or youth leader. You're not the only one, and you don't have to fight it alone.

REAL TALK **Consent and Pressure**

If someone pressures you into anything sexual, online or in person, through threats, guilt, money, or promises, that's wrong, and it's not your fault. This includes being asked to send nude photos. If someone threatens to share images of you unless you send more or pay them, that's called sextortion, and it's a crime. Don't pay, don't send more, and don't deal with it alone. Tell a trusted adult right away, save the messages, and report it to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children at CyberTipline.org or 1-800-843-5678. They can also help get images taken down. You won't be in trouble. You'll be helped.

Chapter 20 ends by explaining the reason behind it all. "You shall be holy to me, for I, the LORD, am holy, and have set you apart from the peoples, that you should be mine." Holiness isn't just about avoiding the wrong things. It's about belonging to the right Person.

KEY VERSE

You shall therefore keep my statutes and my ordinances, which if a man does, he shall live in them. I am the LORD.

Leviticus 18:5 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. God told Israel not to live like Egypt or Canaan. What parts of today's culture do you think Christians should be different from?
2. How do the laws in Leviticus 18 protect vulnerable people?
3. How did Jesus treat the woman caught in adultery? What does that teach you about both truth and grace?
4. What does it mean to you that God has set you apart to be His?

TRY THIS *Write down the names of three trusted adults you could go to if you or a friend were ever unsafe. Save the Childhelp number, 1-800-422-4453, in your phone.*

CHAPTER 6

Love Your Neighbor

Leviticus 19

If you only read one chapter of Leviticus, make it this one. Leviticus 19 is where the Holiness Code shows what holiness looks like on a regular Tuesday. It opens with God's big command. "You shall be holy; for I, the LORD your God, am holy." Then it gets very practical, very fast.

The chapter jumps from one topic to another. Respect your parents. Keep the Sabbath. Don't make idols. Don't steal or lie. Pay workers on time. Don't trip up the blind. Be fair in court. Don't spread rumors. Respect the elderly. Use honest scales. At first it seems random. But look closer and you'll see a pattern. Almost every section ends with the same phrase: I am the LORD. Holiness isn't a list of religious extras. It's what happens when God is in charge of every part of your life.

Some of the laws are surprisingly kind. "When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, neither shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest." Farmers had to leave some of their crop for "the poor and for the foreigner." It wasn't a handout; the poor did the work of gathering. It was a built-in social safety net. That's exactly how Ruth, a poor foreign widow, met Boaz, generations later.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Gleaning Today**

The gleaning laws inspired real-world ideas. Many food banks and charities run gleaning programs, where volunteers collect leftover crops from farms after harvest and give them to people who need food. Some grocery stores and restaurants donate unsold food the same way. You could volunteer with one. It's one of the easiest ways to live out Leviticus 19 literally.

Then come laws that protect people who can't protect themselves. "You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind." The deaf can't hear the insult. The blind can't see the stumbling block. Only God sees. That's the point: holiness shows up in what you do when you think nobody's watching. The same goes for judges. "You shall not be partial to the poor, nor show favoritism to the great." Justice can't be bought, and it can't be bent by pity either.

REAL TALK **Paying People Fairly**

Leviticus 19:13 says not to hold back a hired worker's wages overnight. Day laborers lived paycheck to paycheck, and waiting even one day could mean a family went hungry. Today, if you babysit, mow lawns, or work a part-time job, you know how much it matters to get paid on time and fairly. And someday you might be the one paying others. Holiness shows up in business: paying what you promised, being honest about what you sell, and not taking advantage of people who need the work. James later warned rich people who cheated their workers that the cries of those workers had reached the Lord's ears (James 5:4). God notices who gets paid and who doesn't.

Next comes a warning about gossip. "You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people." Then, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor." In other words, don't let anger simmer in secret. If someone wrongs you, talk to them honestly.

REAL TALK **Gossip and Group Chats**

Leviticus 19:16 could have been written for social media. Spreading rumors, screenshotting private messages, posting about someone behind their back, or piling on in a group chat are all modern versions of going around as a slanderer. And the next verse tells you what to do instead: if you have a problem with someone, go to them directly, in private, and be honest. That's harder than venting to your friends. It's also how relationships actually get fixed. Before you post or forward something about someone, ask: would I say this to their face?

Then comes the verse that changed the world. "You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people; but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD." Centuries later, when someone asked Jesus which commandment was greatest, He quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 about loving God, and then added, "A second likewise is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Paul said the same: "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, in this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Notice what comes right before it: don't take revenge, and don't hold a grudge. Love starts with letting go. And notice who it's for. A lawyer once asked Jesus, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answered with the story of the good Samaritan, a man from a hated group who stopped to help a stranger. At the end, Jesus asked which one had been a neighbor, and the lawyer said, "He who showed mercy on him." Then Jesus said, "Go and do likewise."

Leviticus 19 already pushes in that direction. "The stranger who lives as a foreigner with you shall be to you as the native-born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you lived as foreigners in the land of Egypt." Israel knew what it felt like to be the outsider. So they were commanded to love outsiders the way they loved themselves.

REAL TALK **Loving Yourself?**

Some people read love your neighbor as yourself and think it means you first have to learn to love yourself. That's not really the point of the verse. It assumes you already care about your own needs: you feed yourself, protect yourself, and want good things for yourself. It says to want the same for others. But if you struggle to see any value in yourself, that matters too. You're made in God's image and loved by Him. If you feel worthless or hopeless, please talk to someone you trust, or call or text 988, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline. Loving your neighbor doesn't mean hating yourself.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Golden Rule Before Jesus**

Love your neighbor as yourself was well known among Jewish teachers by Jesus' day. A famous story tells of a man who asked Rabbi Hillel, who lived shortly before Jesus, to teach him the whole Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel replied that what is hateful to you, you should not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary; go and learn it. Jesus put it in a positive form: "whatever you desire for men to do to you, you shall also do to them; for this is the law and the prophets." Not just avoiding harm, but actively doing good.

The chapter also includes some puzzling laws, like not mixing two kinds of seed in a field or two kinds of fabric in a garment, and not cutting the edges of your beard. Some of these probably taught Israel about being set apart, and some may have been aimed at pagan mourning or religious practices. Others remain a bit mysterious. It's okay to admit that. What's clear is that the chapter never lets holiness float away from ordinary life. Holy people respect the elderly: "You shall rise up before the gray head and honor the face of the elderly." Holy people run honest businesses: "You shall do no unrighteousness in judgment, in measures of length, of weight, or of quantity." Holy people look like God.

KEY VERSE

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people; but you shall love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.

Leviticus 19:18 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Leviticus 19 mixes worship and everyday life. Why do you think God put them side by side?
2. Who are the deaf and the blind in your world, people who can't defend themselves? How can you protect them?
3. Is there someone you're holding a grudge against? What would it take to let it go?
4. Who is the foreigner or outsider at your school, and what would loving them as yourself look like?

TRY THIS *Read Leviticus 19 and pick one command to practice every day this week. At the end of the week, write about what happened.*

CHAPTER 7

Holy Priests, Holy Days

Leviticus 21–24

Chapters 21–22 return to the priests. Because they served closest to God's presence, they were held to higher standards. They had to avoid contact with dead bodies except for close family, marry carefully, and keep the holy food holy. The high priest had the strictest rules of all.

These chapters also say that a priest with a physical defect, such as blindness, a disability, or a skin condition, could not offer sacrifices at the altar. That can sound unfair, even hurtful. But the same passage says that such a priest could still eat the holy food, the bread of his God (21:22). He was still a priest, still part of the family, still fed from God's table. Many scholars think the rule was symbolic: everything at the altar, priests and animals alike, had to picture wholeness and perfection, pointing to the perfect God.

> REAL TALK **Disability and Belonging**
>
> If you or someone you love has a disability, Leviticus 21 might sting. It helps to see the whole Bible's story. In 2 Samuel 9, King David brings Mephibosheth, who couldn't walk, to eat at the king's table like one of his sons. Jesus went out of His way to welcome and heal people with disabilities, and He told His followers to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to their feasts (Luke 14:13). And Jesus, our perfect High Priest, rose from the dead

> with scars still in His hands. In God's family, nobody is less valuable because of their body. Churches should be places where everyone belongs and serves.

These chapters also include rules for the animals offered as sacrifices: they had to be without defect, just like the priests at the altar. And they add a beautiful detail about how God sees His people's gifts. Even a foreigner living in Israel could bring an offering, and it would be accepted (22:18). God's house had room for outsiders.

Chapter 23 is God's calendar. "The set feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are my set feasts." Israel's year was built around worship, rest, and remembering what God had done. Here's the lineup.

The Sabbath, every seventh day, came first: a day of rest from work. Then the spring feasts. Passover remembered the night God rescued Israel from Egypt, followed immediately by the Feast of Unleavened Bread, a week without yeast. The Firstfruits offering gave God the first sheaf of the barley harvest, trusting Him for the rest. Fifty days later came the Feast of Weeks, a harvest celebration. In Greek it's called Pentecost.

Then came the fall feasts. The Feast of Trumpets opened the seventh month with trumpet blasts; Jewish people call it Rosh Hashanah, the new year. The Day of Atonement followed ten days later. Then came the Feast of Booths, or Tabernacles, one of the most joyful weeks of the year. "You shall dwell in temporary shelters for seven days." Families camped out in huts made of branches, remembering how God cared for them in the wilderness. Jewish families still build these huts, called sukkot, every fall.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Jesus and the Feasts**

The New Testament connects many of Israel's feasts with Jesus. He died at Passover, as the Passover Lamb. He rose on the day after the Sabbath following Passover, when the firstfruits of the harvest were offered, and Paul calls Him "the first fruit of those who are asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20). The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, the Feast of Weeks, and three thousand people were brought in, like a harvest. At the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus stood up and invited the thirsty to come to Him and drink (John 7:37). Some Christians think the fall feasts point to Jesus' return. Christians don't have to keep these feasts, but many find it moving to learn about them, and some churches celebrate a Christian Passover meal.

Even in the middle of the festival calendar, God remembers the poor. Right after the harvest feasts comes a reminder: "You must leave them for the poor and for the foreigner." Celebration and generosity go together.

REAL TALK **A Day Off**

God built rest into the calendar, every week. For Israel, that was radical. Slaves in Egypt never got a day off. The Sabbath said: you're not a machine, and your worth isn't measured by your productivity. That's a word for teens today, with school, sports, jobs, and screens that never turn off. Christians differ on how to observe a day of rest; many treat Sunday as a day of worship and rest, while others hold that every day belongs to God (Romans 14:5). But all of us need rhythms of rest. Try a few hours each week with no homework, no phone, and no hustle. It's not lazy. It's trust.

BACKGROUND CHECK **Pentecost Then and Now**

The Feast of Weeks came fifty days after Firstfruits, at the end of the grain harvest. Later Jewish tradition also connected it with the day God gave the law at Mount Sinai, which by the Bible's timeline came about fifty days after the exodus. So when the Holy Spirit came on the first followers of Jesus at Pentecost (Acts 2), it was a powerful echo. At Sinai, God came down in fire and gave His law on tablets of stone. At Pentecost, the Spirit came with

tongues of fire and wrote God's law on human hearts, just as the prophets had promised (Jeremiah 31:33). At Sinai, about three thousand people died after the golden calf (Exodus 32:28). At Pentecost, about three thousand people came to life.

Chapter 24 includes instructions for the lamp and the bread in the tabernacle, and then a short, hard story. During a fight, a man with an Israelite mother and an Egyptian father blasphemes God's name. The people bring him to Moses, who waits for God's answer, and the man is stoned. God then states that the same law applies to the native-born and the foreigner alike. The chapter also includes the famous rule, an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

BACKGROUND CHECK **An Eye for an Eye**

An eye for an eye sounds brutal, but in the ancient world it was actually a limit on revenge. It meant the punishment must fit the crime, no more. You couldn't kill someone for knocking out your tooth. Judges, not angry victims, applied it, and in practice it was often settled by payment rather than injury. Jesus later went further, telling His followers not to take personal revenge at all, but to turn the other cheek and love their enemies (Matthew 5:38–44). The legal principle of fair punishment still guides courts today.

KEY VERSE

The set feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, even these are my set feasts.

Leviticus 23:2 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Why do you think God built Israel's calendar around feasts and rest?
2. How do the feasts point to Jesus? Which connection surprises you most?
3. What would a weekly rhythm of rest look like in your life?
4. How should churches make sure that people with disabilities belong and serve?

TRY THIS *Plan a simple celebration of something God has done for you or your family. Invite people, share food, and take turns telling the story.*

CHAPTER 8

The Year of Jubilee

Leviticus 25–27

Leviticus 25 describes one of the most remarkable laws ever given. Every seventh year was a Sabbath year for the land. Fields weren't planted and vineyards weren't pruned, and whatever grew on its own was for everyone to eat, including the poor, servants, and even wild animals. The land got to rest, just as people rested every seventh day.

Then, after seven Sabbath years, came the fiftieth year, the Jubilee. It began on the Day of Atonement with a blast of the ram's horn trumpet across the land. "You shall make the fiftieth year holy, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee to you; and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family." In the Jubilee, land that had been sold went back to the family that originally owned it. Israelites who had sold themselves into servitude because of debt went free.

> BACKGROUND CHECK **The Liberty Bell**
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> The words of Leviticus 25:10, in the King James Version, are engraved on the Liberty Bell in Philadelphia: Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof. The bell was cast in 1752, and later abolitionists, who fought to end slavery in the United States, adopted it as a symbol and gave it

its name. More recently, a worldwide campaign called Jubilee 2000 drew on Leviticus 25 to call for canceling the debts of the world's poorest countries.

Why would God do this? He explains: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; for you are strangers and live as foreigners with me." Nobody really owned the land. God did. The Israelites were more like tenants. So no family could lose its inheritance forever, and no one could build up endless wealth by buying up everybody else's land. Every fifty years, the system reset.

The chapter is full of protections for the poor. "If your brother has become poor, and his hand can't support himself among you, then you shall uphold him." You couldn't charge him interest or make a profit on the food you sold him. If a relative had to sell land, a family member called a redeemer could buy it back. If an Israelite fell so deep into debt that he had to work for someone else, he wasn't to be treated harshly as a slave, but as a hired worker, and he went free in the Jubilee. God gives the reason: they are My servants, whom I brought out of Egypt.

REAL TALK **What About Foreign Slaves?**

Leviticus 25:44–46 allowed Israelites to buy slaves from the nations around them, and those slaves didn't go free in the Jubilee. That's a hard passage, and Christians have wrestled with it, especially since slaveholders in American history used verses like this to defend slavery. Several things help. Ancient servitude was usually based on debt or war, not on race, and Israel's laws gave servants protections that many nations didn't, including the Sabbath rest. Many scholars see these laws as God regulating a widespread practice in a fallen world, much as Jesus said some laws were given because of the hardness of people's hearts (Matthew 19:8), while the Bible's larger story of the exodus, the Jubilee, and the gospel pushes toward freedom for all. Paul says in Christ there is neither slave nor free (Galatians 3:28), and

Christians led many of the movements to end slavery. If you're wrestling with this, you're not alone. Ask a pastor or youth leader to talk it through with you.

BACKGROUND CHECK **The Redeemer**

In Leviticus 25, when someone became poor and had to sell land or even himself, a close relative could step in and buy back what had been lost. That relative was called the go'el, the redeemer. The book of Ruth tells the most famous story of a redeemer: Boaz, who bought back the land of Naomi's family and married Ruth, a poor foreign widow, so that the family line would continue. Their great-grandson was King David. The Bible later calls God Himself Israel's Redeemer (Isaiah 43:14), and the New Testament says Jesus redeemed us, buying us back at the cost of His own life (1 Peter 1:18–19). He's the close relative who pays what we owe.

Did Israel ever actually keep the Jubilee? We don't know. There's little evidence in the Old Testament that it was regularly practiced, and the prophets later accused Israel of ignoring the Sabbath years (2 Chronicles 36:21). But the hope of the Jubilee never died. Isaiah looked forward to a day when someone anointed by God's Spirit would proclaim liberty to captives (Isaiah 61:1–2). And in His first sermon, in His hometown synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus read from that very passage: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." Then He sat down and said that the passage was fulfilled that day (Luke 4:21). Jesus is the Jubilee.

REAL TALK **Enough**

The Sabbath year asked Israel to trust God enough to stop working the fields for a whole year. God promised that the harvest of the sixth year would be big enough to last (25:21). That's the opposite of how most of us live. We worry there won't be enough, so we work more, buy more, and hold on tighter. The Jubilee said: you don't have to grab. God provides, and He wants you to share. It also says something to anyone who feels stuck because of their

family's money problems. In God's eyes, nobody is supposed to be trapped forever. If your family is going through hard times, you're not less valuable, and it's okay to accept help from your church or community. That's exactly what Leviticus 25 was designed for.

Chapter 26 is about blessings and warnings. If Israel follows God, the rain will come, the harvests will be good, and they'll live in peace. And God makes the best promise of all: "I will set my tent among you, and my soul won't abhor you. I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you will be my people." That's what Leviticus is really about. Then comes a long list of disasters if Israel turns away, ending in exile from the land. But even then, God promises not to abandon them. "Then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, my covenant with Isaac, and also my covenant with Abraham." Judgment isn't God's last word. Faithfulness is.

REAL TALK **If I Obey, Will Life Go Well?**

Leviticus 26 promises blessing for obedience and trouble for disobedience. Does that mean if you follow God, nothing bad will happen to you? Not exactly. These promises were made to Israel as a nation in the land, and the Bible itself shows that faithful people often suffer, like Job, Jeremiah, and Jesus. But the principle still stands: God's ways lead to life, and turning away from Him leads to brokenness. Sometimes that's obvious right away. Sometimes it takes years. And sometimes the blessing is not an easier life, but God's presence with you in a hard one.

Chapter 27 closes the book with rules for vows and gifts dedicated to God, including the tithe. "All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD's. It is holy to the LORD." It's an odd, quiet ending, but maybe a fitting one. Leviticus began with people bringing gifts to God, and it ends the same way.

KEY VERSE

You shall make the fiftieth year holy, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee to you; and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family.

Leviticus 25:10 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. What do you think the world would look like if the Jubilee were practiced today?
2. God said the land belonged to Him. How would it change the way you use your money and stuff if you believed everything you have belongs to God?
3. How did Jesus describe His mission in Luke 4? How is it like the Jubilee?
4. What do you do with hard passages like the laws on foreign slaves?

TRY THIS *Pick one thing you own and give it away to someone who needs it more than you, or help a family member with a debt or a chore with no strings attached. Call it your own small jubilee.*

CHAPTER 9

Reading Leviticus Today

Leviticus 1–27

By now you might be asking: so what am I supposed to do with all this? Do Christians have to keep these laws? Should I avoid bacon and shrimp, poly-cotton shirts, and tattoos? What about the Sabbath and the tithe? If not, why do we still quote love your neighbor as yourself? This is one of the biggest questions in the whole Bible, and sincere Christians have answered it in different ways.

Start with Jesus Himself. "Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill." Jesus didn't throw out Leviticus. He fulfilled it, which means He brought it to its goal. At the same time, the New Testament is clear that some laws no longer apply in the same way. The letter to the Hebrews says that in speaking of a new covenant, God "has made the first obsolete." The food laws are set aside, and the sacrifices have ended because Jesus offered Himself once for all. Paul writes that the feasts and Sabbaths "are a shadow of the things to come; but the body is Christ's." So how do you sort it out?

> BACKGROUND CHECK **Three Kinds of Law**
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> The most common traditional approach, taught by Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and many others, divides the Old Testament law into three kinds. Moral laws, like do not steal and love your neighbor, reflect God's character and still apply to everyone. Civil laws, like penalties and land rules, governed

> Israel as a nation and don't apply directly today, though their principles of justice still teach us. Ceremonial laws, like sacrifices, food laws, and purity rules, pointed forward to Christ and are fulfilled in Him. Critics point out that the Bible itself doesn't divide the law this neatly; Leviticus 19 mixes all three in a single chapter. But many Christians find the framework helpful.

Other Christians take different approaches. Some say the entire law of Moses was a covenant for Israel that ended with Christ, and that Christians now live under the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2), so Old Testament commands apply only as they are repeated or renewed in the New Testament. "For Christ is the fulfillment of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes." Others say the whole law, all of it, still teaches Christians, as long as we read it through Jesus, asking what each command reveals about God and how it is fulfilled in Him. And some Christians, especially Messianic Jews, still keep many of the laws as an expression of their Jewish identity and faith. Paul says Christians shouldn't judge one another over such things (Romans 14:1–6).

Jewish readers, of course, have their own understanding. For observant Jews, the Torah is still God's living covenant with Israel. Since the temple in Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70, sacrifices haven't been offered, and Jewish teachers taught that prayer, repentance, study, and acts of kindness take their place. Many Jewish families keep kosher food laws and celebrate the feasts of Leviticus 23 every year. Christians should read Leviticus with deep respect for the people who first received it.

> **REAL TALK** **What About Tattoos?**
>
> Leviticus 19:28 forbids cutting your body for the dead or getting tattoo marks. Does that mean Christians can't get tattoos? Christians disagree. Some think the command still applies, and that it reflects a respect for the body God made. Many others note that the verse appears in the context of pagan

mourning practices, and think it was about rejecting those practices rather than banning all body art forever. Either way, Paul's principle applies: your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). If you're thinking about a tattoo, talk to your parents, think about what it says and why you want it, and remember that laws in most places don't allow tattoos for minors without a parent's permission.

REAL TALK **What About Mixed Fabrics?**

Leviticus 19:19 says not to wear a garment made of two kinds of material. You'll sometimes see this verse in memes mocking Christians who quote other parts of Leviticus. So what's going on? Interestingly, the priests' clothing did mix materials, and so did the curtains of the tabernacle. Many scholars think mixtures were reserved for holy things, so that ordinary Israelites keeping their fields, animals, and clothes unmixed was a daily reminder that they were set apart and that God's holiness was unique. Christians generally see this as a ceremonial law fulfilled in Christ. The lesson underneath it still stands: every part of your life, even what you wear, can remind you that you belong to God.

It may help to think about how you read any old letter or document. If you found a letter your great-grandparents wrote to each other, you'd learn a lot about them, their love, their values, and their struggles. But you wouldn't think the instructions in it, like when to milk the cows or what to bring to the church potluck, were addressed directly to you. Christians read Leviticus a bit like that, but with an important difference: it's not just an old letter. It's God's Word, and the God who spoke it is still speaking through it. So the question to ask of every law isn't just do I have to do this? but what does this show me about God, how does it point to Jesus, and how does it shape the kind of person I'm becoming?

That way of reading changes how you see even the strangest chapters. The food laws show a God who cares about the details of

everyday life. The skin disease laws show a God who takes illness and isolation seriously, and who sent Jesus to touch the untouchable. The sacrifices show a God who provides a substitute. The Jubilee shows a God who hates permanent poverty and loves freedom. You might never eat a meal in a booth or bring a goat to an altar, but you can still learn from every page.

Here's what nearly all Christians agree on. First, Leviticus reveals God's character. He is holy, He hates sin, He loves the poor and the outsider, and He wants to live with His people. That never changes. Second, Leviticus shows our need. Nobody could keep it perfectly, which is why the sacrifices were needed in the first place. Paul calls the law "our tutor to bring us to Christ." Third, Leviticus finds its fulfillment in Jesus. He is the sacrifice, the priest, the scapegoat, the Passover Lamb, the Jubilee, and the presence of God living among us.

And fourth, the heart of the law is love. "Love doesn't harm a neighbor. Love therefore is the fulfillment of the law." Jesus summed up everything Moses taught in two commands: love God with everything you have, and love your neighbor as yourself. Peter quotes Leviticus directly when he tells Christians how to live: "You shall be holy, for I am holy." That's still the call. Not holy as in stuck-up or weird, but holy as in set apart, belonging to God, and looking like Him.

> **REAL TALK** **Cherry-Picking?**
>
> Skeptics sometimes say Christians cherry-pick Leviticus, quoting the verses they like and ignoring the rest. It's a fair question, and you should be ready for it. The honest answer is that Christians don't ignore any of it; we read all of it through Jesus, as the New Testament teaches us to. That's not a trick invented to dodge hard verses. It's how the earliest Christians, who were Jewish, read their own Scriptures. If someone pushes back, don't get

defensive. Explain how you read the law, admit what you're still figuring out, and keep the conversation going.

KEY VERSE

Don't think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I didn't come to destroy, but to fulfill.

Matthew 5:17 (WEB)

REAL TALK

1. Which approach to Old Testament law makes the most sense to you, and why?
2. What does Leviticus teach you about God's character that you hadn't noticed before?
3. How would you answer a friend who says Christians cherry-pick Leviticus?
4. What would it look like for you to be holy this week, set apart for God and looking like Him?

TRY THIS *Pick three laws from Leviticus. For each one, write down what it shows about God, how it points to Jesus, and how it might shape the way you live today.*

THE END (AND THE BEGINNING)

Where This Points

Leviticus ends with a holy God living among His people, but at a distance. Only priests could enter the tent. Only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, once a year, never without blood. The sacrifices had to be repeated again and again, day after day and year after year. Leviticus leaves you longing for a sacrifice that would finish the job, and a way into God's presence that would never close.

Jewish readers have treasured Leviticus for thousands of years; Jewish children traditionally began their Bible study with it, and after the temple was destroyed, prayer, repentance, and kindness took the place of sacrifice. The New Testament writers, who were Jewish themselves, believed that Leviticus pointed to Jesus. John the Baptist called Him "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" The letter to the Hebrews says the old sacrifices were a shadow, because "it is impossible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins." But Jesus, our great High Priest, "offered one sacrifice for sins forever" (Hebrews 10:12). When He died, the veil of the temple "was torn in two from the top to the bottom" (Matthew 27:51). The way in is open.

Here's what the Bible says about where that story leads, as plainly as I can put it.

1 God made you, and He loves you.

God made you on purpose, and He wants to be with you. That's the heartbeat of Leviticus: a holy God who comes to live among His people.

> *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only born Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life.* **John 3:16 (WEB)**

2 We all fall short of His holiness.

Leviticus shows how seriously God takes sin. The Bible says all of us have turned from God and can't make ourselves clean.

> *for all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God;* **Romans 3:23 (WEB)**

3 Sin has a real cost.

God is good, so He doesn't shrug off evil. That's why the sacrifices involved blood and death. The Bible says the result of sin is death, separation from God forever.

> *For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.* **Romans 6:23 (WEB)**

4 Jesus is the sacrifice.

Like the scapegoat, Jesus carried our sins away. Like the sin offering, He died in our place. And He rose again, never to die again.

> *For him who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* **2 Corinthians 5:21 (WEB)**

5 You can't earn it. You receive it.

The Israelites brought sacrifices God provided. Salvation isn't a reward for being good enough. It's a gift you receive by trusting Jesus.

> *for by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, that no one would boast.*
> **Ephesians 2:8–9 (WEB)**

6 Turn and trust.

Turn from running your own life, and trust Jesus as your Savior and King. Then you can know, not just hope, that you have eternal life.

> *that if you will confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*
> **Romans 10:9 (WEB)**

So what do you do with that? You don't need perfect words. You can talk to God honestly, right now, wherever you are. If it helps, you could pray something like this:

> *God, You are holy, and I'm not. I've sinned against You, and I can't make myself clean. Thank You for loving me anyway. Thank You that Jesus died for me as the perfect sacrifice and carried my sins away, and that You raised Him from the dead. I'm turning to You. Forgive me and make me clean. I trust Jesus as my Savior, and I want to follow Him as my King. Thank You that I can come near to You. Make me holy, and teach me to love my neighbor as myself. In Jesus' name, amen.*

If You Just Said Yes

Tell someone. A parent, a youth leader, a pastor, or a Christian friend. Start there.

Read the real thing. Read Leviticus 16 and 19, then read the letter to the Hebrews, and watch for the High Priest, the sacrifice, and the open way into God's presence.

Find your people. Get connected to a church where the Bible is taught and Jesus is honored. Ask about being baptized.

Come near. You don't need a priest or an animal to approach God. Take time every day to pray, confess, and thank Him, with confidence, because of Jesus.

Not Sure Yet?

Not ready? That's honest, and honesty is a good place to start. Keep asking. Keep reading. Leviticus was written so that God's people would know how to come near to Him. Just don't settle for "I already know all that."

Because if Leviticus is right, the holy God who lived in a tent in the desert wants to live with you too.

I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you will be my people.

Leviticus 26:12 (WEB)