

The Book of Leviticus

Rules for a Holy Nation



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I. Outline: The Book of Leviticus

You are going to see similar introduction for the lessons on Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

This lesson is meant to give an overall background to your own self-reading of the Book of Leviticus. As I have mentioned, three particular books (Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) is often skipped altogether by the Christian readers because it is indeed difficult to understand. This is for two main reasons:

- **It is dull and boring (but it is the very Word of God!).** This is especially a problem in today's society which appreciates instant gratification. We love instant results, and we are used to being stimulated by the media. So, let's face it. It is dull and boring, as it lists all the rules and regulations, some of which are not applicable to the modern society, and lists them in such detail. But it is the Word of God; and that should be reason enough for us to read it. I like Bob Deffinbaugh's explanation: "the greatest and most significant communications of history have not been particularly entertaining. The Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence, or the Constitution of the United States are not written to entertain us. If we want to be entertained we turn to writings which begin, 'once upon a time,' and end 'happily after.' If we want to be informed about things vital to the present and to eternity, we most often must set aside our desire for entertainment. How many of you go to the Richardson Public Library and check out the city code book for entertaining reading? No one does, but they do read the city codes very carefully if they plan to build a house in Richardson. The Texas Driver's Manual is not great entertainment either, but anyone who wants to get their driver's license had better study it well."

And so, we must study these books, dull though they may seem, because these are the very words of God, an instruction for life and godliness that we must heed.

- **It seems inapplicable (but all Scripture is God-breathed!).** The varying laws which seems inapplicable to the modern societies are listed in detail; giving instructions to the minute details. However, we are told that *all* Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for our spiritual lives (**2 Tim 3:16-17**). So we may be missing something important if we disregard the Torah. As a short explanation, if we categorize the Law into the traditionally accepted moral-civil-ceremonial categories (though we must be careful because we are then putting our own judgment on the Word of God by deciding to categorize it ourselves), we will at least agree that the moral laws (such as the 10 commandments) are based on God's eternal character and therefore is not bound by tie or culture. And that despite the fact that the civil laws are not to be taken literally, we will still need to extract and apply its essential principles of justice, goodness and holiness. We will also need to understand how the ceremonial laws are fulfilled in Christ (see for example **Heb 8:5-6**), and how that understanding should lead us to better appreciate His sacrifice.

Having said that, what I am trying to accomplish in these lessons of the Book of the Laws is not to give you an exhaustive lessons on the laws. I am, rather, trying to give you an outline of the book so as to give you the overall purpose of the books. I will attempt to show why certain laws are given: what were their contexts, purpose and audience. I hope that by doing this, you will do a reading of your own; and that this outline can be used as a guide in your reading.



Chapter	Description	Highlight
1	Rules for the Five Levitical Offerings (Burnt Offering, Grain Offering, Fellowship Offering, Sin Offering, Trespass Offering)	The Five Levitical Offerings
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8	Ordination of Aaron and his sons as the very first priests	The first priests' ministry
9	The priests began their ministry	
10	Nadab and Abihu put to death for offering strange fire	
11	Clean and unclean food	Ceremonially Clean and unclean
12	Uncleanness after childbirth and how to cleanse	
13		
14	Uncleanness of skin diseases and what to do about it	
15	Uncleanness because of bodily discharge	
16	Cleansing for the High Priests - Day of Atonement	
17	Eating blood forbidden	
18	Preserving sexual and familial purity	Holy - separated from other nations
19	Preserving moral and religious purity	
20	Punishments for impure practices	
21	Purity for the priests	
22		
23	The Lord's Festivals and Holy Days	The Lord's Festivals and Holy Days
24		
25		
26	Basis for the laws: Covenantal Relationship	Intent and Purpose of Law
27	Intent of the laws: Worship	

Table 1: Content of the Book of Leviticus

The Book of Leviticus lists all of the duties that Levitical priests were supposed to perform. They were commanded to ensure ceremonial purity of all the people of Israel – both the king, the people, as well as the priests themselves. All the regulations set therein were detailed instructions on what were required of them – including what they were to do to gain atonement for their sins.

However, reading Leviticus gives off a very strange vibe; especially to people brought up in the modern western culture. Would the blood of bulls and goats take away wrongful doings of the people? Where is the justice in a transference of sin when the requirements for righteousness were not met? What need did God have for aromas, for food, for the produce of the earth that were offered up to Him? What real value would these sacrifices have, for none of these brought about real spiritual or moral change in the people? Were these rituals not merely representative of the primitive nature of ancient religion?

These rules are what we are confronted with at the very beginning of the Book of Leviticus. But what do these rules mean for us?

Rules for Sacrifices (Lev 1-7)

1. Theological Significance

The chart below describes the Old Testament Sacrifices as detailed in the Book of Leviticus, and it reiterates their purposes.



	Verses	Elements	Purpose
Burnt Offering	Lev 1; 6:8-13; 8:18-21; 16:24	Bull, ram, male bird (dove or pigeon for the poor) wholly consumed; no defect.	Voluntary act of worship; atonement for unintentional sin in general; expression of devotion, commitment, and complete surrender to God.
Grain Offering	Lev 2; 6:14-23	Grain, fine flour, olive oil, incense, baked bread, (cake or wafers), salt; no yeast or honey; accompanied burnt offering and fellowship offering (along with drink offering).	Voluntary act of worship; recognition of God's goodness and provision; devotion to God.
Fellowship Offering	Lev 3; 7:11-34	Any animal without defect from herd or flock; variety of breeds	Voluntary act of worship; thanksgiving and fellowship (it included a communal meal).
Sin Offering	Lev 4; 5:1-13; 6:24-30; 8:14-17; 16:3-22	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Young bull: for High Priest and whole congregation. The blood was to be sprinkled in front of the veil and put on the horns of altar of incense 2. Male goat: for leader. The blood was to be put on the horns of the altar of burnt offering 3. Female goat or lamb: for common person. The blood was to be put the horns of the altar of burnt offering 4. Dove or pigeon: for the poor. The blood was to be put on the horns of the altar of burnt offering 5. 1/10 ephah of fine flour: for the very poor 	Mandatory atonement for specific unintentional sin; confession of sin; forgiveness of sin; cleansing from defilement
Trespass Offering	Lev 5:14-19; 6:1-7; 7:1-6	Ram	Mandatory atonement for unintentional sin requiring restitution; cleansing from defilement; make restitution; pay 20% fine

Table 1. Old Testament Sacrifices Chart.

Taken from thirdmill.org, accessed 01 June 2015

But basically, the Book of Hebrews give a very comprehensive summary of the purposes of these rituals and sacrifices; and they are as follows:

“The Law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming- not the realities themselves. For this reason, it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of their sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:1-4).

The writer of Hebrews thus agreed with our earlier objection! The blood of goats and bulls could never have taken away sins. In fact, in and of themselves, they lack any eternal value. Nonetheless, they were commanded for these reasons:

- **As a shadow and a copy.** Shadows are images of the true object; and despite the resemblance they bear, they lack important dimensions and details for its viewers to be able to discern the shape of the actual object. But they do one thing: They ensure that when the true object is revealed, the viewers would have enough information to identify if the object being revealed was in fact the reality of that which was concealed. Similarly, a copy resembles the original, but lack a dimension or two. Hebrews tells us that the Law is only a shadow, and the sanctuary a copy (**Heb 8:5; 9:24**) – and they both conceal and reveal Christ who would come as the true revelation of God. So the Law is given so that when Christ finally came in its fulfillment, those to whom God would speak to would have enough to identify Him as the revelation of that which was previously concealed; and the rules for sanctuary worship is given so that when Christ performs His perfect sacrifice, his people would recognize it and worship God in Spirit and in Truth.



- **For drawing near to God and to glorify Him.** The sacrifices were given as regulations of worship; for drawing near to God. It is a reminder that sinful men cannot casually approach God just as they are; but that they needed propitiation for their sins. The painful lesson of Leviticus would be this: *“Among those who approach Me I will be proved holy; in the sight of all people I will be honored” (Lev 10:3)*. Let me just give this the due emphasis it was given. The Book of Leviticus gives all of these commandments for this reason: So that the name of God will not be profaned (see how this is repeatedly warned in **18:21; 19:12; 20:3; 21:6; 22:2; 24:16**). These are given so that God’s name would be glorified among the nations. The Israelites were called to be different, so that the nations would realize that Yahweh is also qualitatively different to the useless idols they served.
- **As a reminder of sins.** The rituals are meant to show the holiness of God. But the other side of the coin is also true. The rituals also show that man cannot casually come to God because they are sinful; and that if God were to account their sins against them they would not be able to stand in God’s presence; but would rather be consumed in wrath. The sacrifices, then, served as constant reminder of their sinful state; and the slaughtered animals also were illustrative of their fates had justice been executed.
- **Propitiation.** But there was one thing the sacrifices was not able to achieve – they could not make perfect those who draw near to worship. As such, these sacrifices could only be seen as provisional and temporary. These weaknesses are to be finalized and accomplished in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ; the true Lamb of God. But nonetheless, these animals were slain *in our stead*, and so, imperfect though these sacrifices may be, they were necessary as foreshadow that point to the propitiation work of Christ.

So these laws were all fulfilled in the work of Christ: *“by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (Heb 10:14)*. That which the Old Testament foreshadowed was revealed in Christ. And when these have been accomplished, physical observances to these rituals are no longer required. And therefore the writer of Hebrews continued, *“and where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary” (Heb 10:18)*. For more on the continuity and discontinuity of the Old Testament Laws, refer to the lesson *“Continuity and Discontinuity of the Old Testament Law (Power Point Slide notes).”*

2. Providential Significance

But aside from these theological significance, we also see that God was using these laws as providence for His people.



Name	Verses	God's Portion	Priest's Portion	Offerer's Portion
Burnt Offering	Lev 1; 6:8-13; 8:18-21; 16:24	Entire Animal	Skin (to be sold)	Nothing
Grain Offering	Lev 2; 6:14-23	1. Priest's own offering: Entire portion to God 2. Others: Memorial portion (a handful)	1. Priest's own offering: none (all the remainder to be burnt) 2. Others: all the remainder (had to be eaten within court of tabernacle)	Nothing
Fellowship Offering	Lev 3; 7:11-34	Fatty portions (fat covering inner parts; fat tail, kidneys, lobe of the liver)	Breast given to High Priest (wave offering), right foreleg given to officiating priest (heave offering)	1. Thanksgiving offering: all the remainder (to be eaten the same day); no left over allowed 2. Vow or freewill offering: remainder (to be eaten the same day and the next day); any left over to be burnt on the 3 rd day
Sin Offering	Lev 4; 5:1-13; 6:24-30; 8:14-17; 16:3-22	Fatty portions (fat covering inner parts; fat tail, kidneys lobe of the liver)	1. Atonement for High Priest and congregation: none (all the remainder was to be burnt outside the camp where the ashes were thrown) 2. Atonement for others: all the remainder ((had to be eaten within court of tabernacle)	Nothing
Trespass Offering	Lev 5:14-19; 6:1-7; 7:1-6	Fatty portions (fat covering inner parts; fat tail, kidneys, lobe of the liver)	All the remainder (had to be eaten within court of tabernacle)	Nothing

Adapted from <http://www3.telus.net/public/kstam>. Accessed 01 June 2015

As we can see above, some of the sacrifices had portions that were given to the priests. And the Peace Offering, especially, had a portion for which the people of Israel were invited to partake. The portion reserved for the priests were of special interest to note, because the Levites were consecrated for work in the Temple, and were not allowed to possess inheritance from the land (**Num 18:20-24**). And this verse explains most clearly what God intended for the Levites, *“this is why the Levites have no share or inheritance among their fellow Israelites; the Lord is their inheritance”* (**Deut 10:9**). Because the Lord is the inheritance for the Levites, God ensured that part of the sacrifices that were given to Him were providentially given to the Levites. This showed how God used the ceremonial system as a providence for the Levites, to ensure that they are not materially lacking.

Now, notice also that the Israelite as a whole can take part of but one of the five Levitical sacrifices; and that is the Fellowship Offering. These are freewill offering by the people with the purpose of expressing gratitude and joyfulness to the Lord (see **Lev 7:11-34**). This, then, is an invitation from God for the people to partake in the divine liturgy – a heartfelt worship from a wilful heart. The climax of worship, indeed, is when the people come not out of coercion, but out of a willing and thankful heart; acknowledging God as their source of blessing and joyfully partaking in the joy of their Master.



The First Priests' Ministry (Lev 8-10)

After setting out the laws which the Levites were to adhere to, Chapters 8 to 10 gives us a short story of what happened to the very first priests who were on duty. In Chapter 8 we see Moses and Aaron's absolute obedience to the instructions of God, as we shall see it being concluded: *"So Aaron and his sons did everything the Lord commanded through Moses"* (8:36). In Chapter 9, we see the priests beginning their ministry in absolute obedience to God's instructions, and the result was that the offering was pleasing in God's sight, and His glory appeared to all the people, and everyone was rejoicing (9:23-24).

But this did not last for long. Immediately in chapter 10, we see Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu put to death because they offered unauthorized fire that was not in accordance to what God commanded. This meant that they tried to worship God, but tried to do so in their own terms. They sacrificed to God, but sacrificed to Him in a way that was not prescribed. And the result was terrifying. The *"fire that came out from the presence of God"* that consumed the offering in 9:24 now consumed Nadab and Abihu and burned them to death in 10:2. Most modern readers would react in protest. Why would God put Nadab and Abihu to death for such a minor mistake? Weren't they at least sacrificing to the Lord? Shouldn't their sincerity at the very least be counted in their favor; that it should at the very least warrant pardon? Why such severity?

But the cause of such severity was exactly this: Honor and holiness. Moses explained to Aaron the severity that transpired by God's words, *"Among those who approach Me I will be proved holy; in the sight of all the people I will be honored"* (10:3). See, we misunderstand the gravity of this error exactly because we are focusing on the wrong angle. Worship is about glorifying God; not about pleasing men. It is about approaching the holy God, not about how beneficial the act would be to us. The fact that God revealed Himself in a consuming fire was to be a warning to Israel, that He is a jealous God (Deut 4:24) who will neither tolerate it when His glory is undermined, nor share that glory with anyone. Nadab and Abihu made a grave mistake by offering unauthorized sacrifice because they were taking the commandments of worship lightly; and were therefore insulting God's holiness. They were approaching God casually, and not acknowledging the fact that their sins, if left unatoned, would immediately pose them to the fire of God's wrath. See, the sacrifice, as we have discussed, were foreshadowing the redemption of Christ. And in such understanding, accurate adherence were commanded if they were to truly prefigure the work of Christ. This was why every commandment for the ceremonial laws, the building of the Temple, the clothes of the priests, were to be followed right to its most subtle details – because these symbols in their entirety prefigure Christ's complete redemptive work. No more, no less is allowed. By failing to follow strict adherence, Nadab and Abihu approached God without the merit of Christ; and in so doing, attained wrath for their unatoned sins.

Now just so we don't think that such severity were a thing of the past; that it was applicable only in the New Testament prior to the accomplishment of grace; I will now present to you a parallel of this tragedy in the New Testament. Open with me to **Acts 5:1-11**, and tell me if the story of Ananias and Sapphira doesn't resemble that of Nadab and Abihu. They are eerily similar! In both cases, the people were just rejoicing greatly before the Lord (you must see the story of Ananias and Sapphira as the continuation of the exceedingly generous description of the Christians in **Acts 2:42-47** where the people sold their possessions). In both cases also, two people were giving their offerings and sacrifices to God. In both cases, the offering were given not in full sincerity of heart and truthfulness. In both cases, we the readers will initially feel that the punishment was too harsh for the crime. In both cases, God struck them dead! In both cases, the result was that people revered the Lord and did not dare to approach Him casually.

Alright, now tell me again the New Testament is unlike the Old. It's not!



Ceremonially Clean or Unclean (11-22)

Leviticus 11-15 talks about what are ceremonially clean or unclean. What is basically laid out here is this:

- Chp 11, 17 - Food can be clean or unclean.
- Chp 12- 15 – Man and woman can be clean or unclean; and what to do to make them clean.
- Chp 21-22 – Priests can be ceremonially unclean

Once again, these seem to be theological gibberish to the modern Christian. Some have resorted to saying how God was providentially giving them dietary laws that were beneficial for their life-conditions back then. Although these are also true (and we shall discuss this later), however, we must realize that these laws were given first and foremost as foreshadow to the work of Jesus Christ; and these laws were no exception.

1. Theological Significance

How are these regulations significant Christologically and theologically to the New Testament Christians?

We can see in the Laws provided in Leviticus that not only were the animals categorized into clean and unclean, but even people, priests, and objects can be clean and unclean. But what was the purpose of distinguishing between those which were clean and those which were not? There is one verse in which God made clear the purpose of distinguishing – when He was punishing Nadab and Abihu for their disobedience. Although this was referring to the priests, I believe this applies to all of those God chose to consecrate: “*So that you can distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean*” (**Lev 10:10**). The holy is also the clean; and the common is also the unclean.

Those that are considered holy and consecrated are the people, objects, days, people who are *set apart* by God for worship. Therefore, they are pronounced clean, or are ritually cleaned because they are to be used *for worship*. We see this exact principle in the pre-Mosaic era of Noah, who was able to distinguish between the clean and unclean animals based on the criteria of which animals were to be used for sacrifice (see **Gen 7:2-3**). Clean animals are those that will be sacrificed for worship, and therefore more than one pair was needed. They are not considered clean because they were somewhat more superior – and the same logic is used for us as believers, whereby we are saved not because of our inherent righteousness but solely because of God’s sovereign choosing. These are considered clean because God has given them a special purpose for His glory. Even the Levites, who were generally considered the more spiritual bunch, had to abide by certain rules so they would remain clean. Only God is holy in and of Himself.

So this is how we read the laws in Leviticus in a nutshell. Certain animals are considered clean because they are to be used as a sacrifice for worship. Men and women must keep a constant awareness of the need to purify themselves before they approach the holy God. Objects need to be consecrated before they could be used in God’s sanctuary. These are non-negotiable arrangements that God had ordained so that He would be regarded as holy by those who would approach Him.

In the New Testament, though, we are no longer required to carry out these written codes. But this does not mean that we should throw out the whole book of Leviticus; because unless we understand the Old Testament Laws, we would never appreciate its ultimate accomplishment in Christ.

The Book of Hebrews, then, is where we must turn to understand how Christ had indeed accomplished all of the requirements found in Leviticus. Just like the priests who entered the curtain into the *copy* of the Most Holy Place, Jesus Christ entered into the *actual*, heavenly Most Holy Place. Unlike the priests who offered the animal sacrifices but had to cleanse himself and offer a sacrifice for his own sins, Jesus offered the once and for all the perfect sacrifice for sin when He in all righteousness sacrificed Himself.



Chapter 22 ends with the same warning given prior to its beginning, that those who approach God must glorify His Name. *“Keep My commands and follow them. I am the Lord. Do not profane My holy Name, for I must be acknowledged as holy before the Israelites. I am the Lord, who made you holy and who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord” (22:31-33).*

2. Providential Significance

After we have laid out the theological significance of the levitical laws, it is also interesting to note that these laws were also practically beneficial for the people of God. In a day and age when refrigeration was not available, certain dietary habits were very harmful to the body. Some of the prohibited diets were not only spiritually unclean, they were also biologically unclean or unhealthy.

I will not dwell too long on the providential significance, because these have little use for today’s spiritual living. We do note that those who overemphasize on these benefits have ended up reducing the theological significance of the laws – and have encouraged the people today to forget of the powerful significance these would hold when we look at what Christ actually accomplished in his earthly work; as we have discussed above.

Dis Jesus break the Sacrificial Law of Leviticus?

Now that we have understood the intent of the Sacrificial Laws of Leviticus, we are better equipped to address some apparent difficulties in the New Testament. Let me take as an example the event of **Luk 6:1-11**. We all know Jesus can’t be wrong. But we need to be able to explain how Jesus’ explanation of Sabbath wasn’t merely creative (but irresponsible) hermeneutics. And we also need to know that Jesus acted in accordance to the Law and not in opposition of it. Even in this event, what Jesus explained was the FULFILLMENT of the Law, not its ABOLISHMENT.

The charges of the Pharisees given in Luk 6:1-11 was clear cut. The Disciples picked some grains during Sabbath and ate them. It was unlawful during Sabbath to harvest. Therefore what they did was unlawful and wrong.

Now, the explanation that Jesus gave have been seen and interpreted by some as this. Jesus said, “I am the Lord of the Sabbath,” and this meant that Jesus was its Master and not its servant. And therefore He was free to REINTERPRET the Sabbath any way He liked. To stretch it further, some have extended this to say that God is the Lord of the Bible. You know what comes next. You see the problem this entails.

So how should we explain this apparent discrepancy; especially in light of what we have just learned about Leviticus?

Well, for starters, we need to develop the scene. The Pharisees during the times of Jesus had already developed their system of 613 laws, consisting of 365 negative laws and 248 positive laws. But these laws were not directly imported from the Scriptures, but were rather interpretations of Scriptural laws that they made absolute. Included in these lists were some blatantly man-made traditions which had nothing to do with Scriptures; much like the rules of the folklore every custom would have. And many times, the Pharisees elevate these traditions, sometimes above Scripture itself. This is what Jesus Himself rebuked them for in **Mat 15:1-20**; when they charged Jesus not with violation of sacred Scripture, but a trespass of tradition. Christ turned the argument against them and charged them with this: *“you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition” (v. 6)*. In doing so, Jesus exposed their hypocrisy for performing apparent worship without adhering to its essence – a heart drawn near to God (see **v. 8-9**). Even when these rules were in fact a direct interpretation of Scripture, they did so in a manner that was not consistent; trespassing their own boundary when it was beneficial for them to do so (see this argument elsewhere in **Luk 13:10-17**). These were even more blatant hypocrisy!

So the scene was this. Inherently, the Pharisees had no intent whatsoever to obey the law of Sabbath. They were just creating barricades for their sinful heart with an apparent and outward obedience that was void of submission.



Having said that, Jesus' arguments was that they were trespassing the intent of Sabbath, but that He was fulfilling it. Christ's claim as Lord of Sabbath did not mean that He would do whatever He pleased with it; but that He alone had the absolute authority to explain its purpose and intent. In explaining the same story, Mark quoted Jesus as making this explanation, "*the Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath*" (**Mar 2:27**).

Now, back to the Old Testament. We see that Sabbaths were not only to be observed by the men and women of Israel; but by the community as a whole. Animals and slaves were to observe Sabbaths. Even the land was to be put to Sabbatical rest. The *providential significance* for this was that God was giving a welfare order that would prevent man from exploiting themselves, their servants and their resources to feed their greed. God was aware of the potential for harmful exploitation of lands and servants that would surely happen if these desires were not restrained. But perhaps another side of the coin that is mostly missed is this. Sabbath commanded rest, but it also commanded work. The existence of a Sabbatical day of rest also meant that the other six were meant for productive endeavor done in submission to the Cultural Mandate to have dominion over creation; to work it and take care of it (**Gen 1:26-28; 2:15**). So, the commandment of Sabbath not only prevented harsh exploitation of slaves and resources; but it also commanded masters not to be lazy and unproductive. Imagine how much good this would have been if we had just adhered to this moral system.

But aside from the providential significance, there was also the *theological significance*, which bore the greater importance by far. The theological significance brought Sabbaths to be theocentric – to be centered on God's work. In the Old Testament, it reminded them of a time when God created all things and rested on the seventh day (**Gen 2:2-3**). It brought them to a weekly reminder of how things as God created them was very good. It reminded them of a time when work would have been a joy and the grounds had not begun producing thorns and thistles as a result of sin (**Gen 3:17-19**). It was a weekly reminder for worship and for a hopeful faith for a better world-order that would be granted by God if they would obey Him when Adam disobeyed. It would point forward to the time of the "Promised Land" where everything could be once again potentially Eden-like. Of course, we in the New Testament know that Canaan was not to be the final rest, the final Sabbath; for in Canaan, man was still prone to sin. Instead, we now look backward to Creation to similarly remind us to heartfelt worship; but look forward to the final Sabbath where there would be a final rest (**Heb 4:9**). And just as the Old Testament taught that ALL of the Israel community benefited from the Sabbaths, at the present time, all of creation is groaning awaiting for the revealing of glory when all creation shall be liberated from the bondage to decay (see **Rom 8:18-25**). It is a day of powerful reminder of the work that God began; but also a hope for the work that God will bring unto completion (see **Phil 1:6**). And because of this assured hope, we now persevere in spite of sufferings.

Can you see how mistaken the Pharisees were about their rules for Sabbath? The calories needed for certain tasks were never the consideration; but how during the day of Sabbath we were commanded to remind ourselves of how worship should be the ultimate goal of life; and therefore, we were to refrain from self-benefiting tasks. But helping others should not be categorized as such self-benefiting labor; and therefore, as Christ concluded how He wasn't trespassing but rather fulfilling the Law: "*therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath*" (**Mat 12:12**)

I gave a rather lengthy explanation of this particular topic for two reasons. ① Because the trespassing of Sabbath is one of the most frequent charge to Christ's ministry and ② To illustrate how a proper understanding of the Old Testament could aid us to understand the New Testament better (and vice versa!). Those of us who fail to pay due attention to the Old Testament would not only not grasp the depth of its fulfillment in the New testament; but could potentially misunderstand its message altogether. Without referring to Leviticus, Christ's statement of being the Lord of Sabbath could easily be misinterpreted to mean that He was changing the rules of the game single-sidedly. In short, a proper understanding of the Old Testament is a crucial pre-requisite for understanding the New Testament.



Unlike Other Nations (18-20)

Among the commandments to be ceremonially clean, we read of two chapters that seemed out of place. At first glance, **Leviticus 18-19** seemed to have nothing to do with ceremonial worship. No ritual is being described here; nor any cleansing rites or burnt offering. It doesn't seem levitical and seems to me like something belonging to Exodus or Deuteronomy. And that is why I skipped this part earlier on – because this portion deserves a special emphasis.

Leviticus 18 talks about sexual and familial lifestyle, and Leviticus 19 seems to resemble the commandments given at Sinai. Again, nothing about this seems levitical; but that is because these are central to levitical laws!

The sexual and familial lifestyles that were prohibited in Lev 18 were actually sandwiched between the purpose God had to specify those laws: *“You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices” (18:3)* and then again *“do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, because this is how the nations that I am going to drive out before you became defiled. Even the land was defiled; so I punished it for its sin, and the land vomited out its inhabitants. But you must keep My decrees and My laws. The native-born and the foreigners residing among you must not do any of these detestable things, for all these things were done by the people who lived in the land before you, and the land became defiled. And if you defile the land, it will vomit you out as it vomited out the nations that were before you. Everyone who does any of these detestable things – such persons must be cut off from their people. Keep My requirements and do not follow any of the detestable customs that were practiced before you came and do not defile yourselves with them I am the Lord your God” (18:24-30)*. Get the hint? Israel was to separate themselves from the other nations. They were to be different.

But how was it that they were to be different? If they were not to subscribe to the detestable identities of the nations surrounding them, what kind of people were they supposed to be? What should be their identity?

To answer this, Leviticus 19 was written. It wasn't enough that we are not conformed to the pattern of the world (note the language style I am using? If not, I'll reveal later), but we are to live out a different pattern, one we are to be transformed into. And this is why Lev 19 begins with the following explanation, *“Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy” (19:2)*. You see, the Israelites were to conform themselves to God's standard – to become like Him in true holiness and righteousness. This was the goal of worship!

And so to close off this section, I will tell you that I have written the explanation for Lev 18-19 in the structure and style that Paul used in **Rom 12:1-2**. Leviticus taught – do not be like other nations. Paul similarly exhorted – do not be conformed to the patterns of this world. Leviticus taught – be like God in true holiness and righteousness. Paul similarly exhorted – be transformed to be Christ-like by the renewing of your mind. But here's the reason why these rules were given. Rom 12:1-2 gave with the greatest clarity the reason for non-conformity and the need to be transformed – because *“this is your spiritual act of worship” (Rom 12:2)*!

And so in hindsight, could you repeat again what the purpose of the laws of Leviticus was? It was for approaching the holy God – it was for WORSHIP! So could you now see how **Rom 12:1-2** succinctly explained the whole Book of Leviticus?

The seemingly out of place chapters were in fact revealing one of the greatest truths about worship. It is true how the saying goes: We become who we worship. And when we worship God, it is pertinent that we do not conform to the detestable patterns of the world, but are instead transformed to become like Christ, whom we worship. And notice how Paul in the same Book of Romans similarly alluded to sexual and familial lifestyle as the spiritual thermometer of human sinfulness (see **Rom 1:18-31**). And see how much more richly we can understand books like Hebrews and Romans when we understand Leviticus (and vice versa)? I don't know about you, I find myself getting excited about Leviticus!



The Religious Festivals (23-25)

Next, in chapters 23-25 we find the instructions given for various religious festivals that the Israelites were commanded to observe. These are holy days; set times during which Israel were to remember certain spiritual truths. And three times in a year they were to appear as a whole assembly of Israel before the Lord. Let me map these festivals out and its New Testament significance.

Again, for a more topical approach to how the whole of OT laws are fulfilled in Christ (including these festivals), refer to the lesson “*Continuity and Discontinuity of Old Testament Law.*”

Feast	Time	OT Description	NT Fulfillment/ Prophecy
Passover <i>Pesach</i>	14 Nisan	Remembering God bringing Israel out of Egypt	Christ our Passover lamb (1 Cor 5:7)
Unleavened Bread <i>Hag Hamatzot</i>	15 Nisan (week)	Remembering the haste with which they left Egypt. Yeast as symbol of sin was forbidden.	Sanctification of the Church (1 Cor 5:7-8). Note “ <i>let us keep the feast.</i> ”
First Fruits <i>Yom Habikkurim</i>	16 Nisan	Beginning of barley harvest, earliest crops.	Christ the firstfruit of the risen (1 Cor 15:20) as promise for resurrection of the dead
Pentecost <i>Shavuot</i>	6 Sivan	Beginning of wheat harvest. The giving of the law at Sinai 50 days after crossing the Red Sea.	The birth of the Church (Acts 2). The Law written in our hearts by the Spirit (Ez 11:19; 2 Cor 3:3)
Trumpets <i>Rosh Hashanah</i>	1 Tishri	Beginning of the 7 th (Sabbatical) month	Second Coming (1 Thess 4:13-18) with a trumpet call
Day of Atonement <i>Yom Kippur</i>	10 Tishri	(Annual) Removal of the people’s sin. High Priest makes sacrifice.	(Once and for all) Sacrifice of Jesus the Great High Priest (Heb 7:27) to be fully realized.
Tabernacles/ Ingathering/ Booths <i>Sukkoth</i>	15 Tishri (week)	Final harvest. Commemorating God’s deliverance and protection during the wandering. (see Lev 23:39-43)	John 7:2. Christ as Living Water and Light of the world VS water ceremony & illumination of the temple. Rev 7:9-17; 21:1-22:5. The Final Ingathering and union.
Sabbath	(Week)	Completion of Creation.	Completion of New Creation. The final Sabbath-rest (Heb 4:9)

The table above reveals one basic thing about the festivals of the Lord – they map out God’s plan to bring about salvation in and through history. It attests that God’s plan for salvation is in fact, eternal. They have been established before the foundation of the world but were accomplished in and through history “when the time had fully come.”

In the Old Testament, there are three annual Festival seasons during which the Jews had to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem. In March/ April, they will make their first pilgrimage to celebrate the Passover, the Feast of Unleavened Bread and the Festival of Firstfruits for a week. In May/ June, they will come again to celebrate the Feast of Weeks (or as we call it today, Pentecost). And finally, in September/ October for the Feast of Trumpets; the Day of Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles. The three groupings represent **distinct stages** in the history of salvation.

The New Testament sees all of these festivals fulfilled and being fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In saying that, the shadow and the copy has now become redundant because the reality has been revealed. The most effective illustration for what fulfillment means is thus. If a boyfriend and a girlfriend are in a long distance relationship, they would each constantly keep photos of the other close by them. This will sound romantic, because it represents their desire to be reunited. However, if after they had been reunited, the boyfriend refuses to meet the girlfriend and instead keeps



on looking at the photograph and confessing his desire to be united; it will not only lose its romanticism, it will start to be very offensive! And so it is with the ceremonial laws. As we have discussed, Christ has fulfilled each and every one of those ceremonial requirements. And so, after the resurrection of Jesus Christ, every sacrifice of lambs did not only lose their value, they have now become offensive. And this is because the very thing the sacrifice represented had already come!

Lets's see how these are fulfilled in Christ. The first and second group of festivals (ie. Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits + Passover) has been fulfilled in the 1st coming of Christ.

- As explained in the table above, Christ our **Passover** Lamb has been sacrificed – thereby paying the penalty for our sins and causing death to similarly pass-over us .
- The Feast of **Unleavened Bread** commemorates the Israelites leaving Egypt in a hurry, thus having no time to put yeast in their bread, which speaks of the sanctification done for the Church; and how sinners are to decisively repent and to not to look back to their old lives.
- The Feast of **First Fruits** remembers Christ's resurrection as the firstfruit of the risen from the dead – and therefore an assurance that we too shall experience a bodily resurrection.
- Now the Feast of **Pentecost**, the beginning of the wheat harvest was begun when the Holy Spirit was poured out, thus beginning the harvest of true believers. Similarly during the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, the Church was born and the harvest of the last days had begun.

The third group of Festivals shall only find its ultimate fulfillment in the Second Coming of Christ; however the “already and not yet” nature of our salvation also means that God has now revealed how these feasts will be fulfilled in Christ. And because we have attained knowledge of its fulfillment, we also leave behind the physical feasts that acted only as foreshadows, and we keep the feast by looking forward to its fulfillment.

- The Feast of **Trumpets** looks forward to the day when the Second Coming of Jesus Christ shall be announced with a trumpet call.
- The Day of **Atonement** looks forward to the day when the justified saints shall finally be glorified with Christ.
- The Feast of **Tabernacles** looks forward to the accomplishment of the total harvest when all the elect shall be “ingathered,” and when we shall finally look behind to our days on earth tents like the Israel in the promised land looked back when they were still living in their tents. We hence admit that the earth is our pilgrimage, our temporary tents and that our eternal home is with Christ.

And in all of its fulfillment, **Sabbath** looks forward to the time when we shall enjoy the final harvest, the final rest which marks the climax of the New Creation. It was in this very context that Jesus reprimanded the Pharisees on their wrong interpretation of what the Sabbath was supposed to be (see **Luk 6:1-11**). The Pharisees looked at the Sabbath only as a written code, a commandment to be adhered in its strictest sense; but had forgotten the context and intent it was initially given in. However, as is expounded throughout the Torah, Sabbaths were to be observed in thankful reminder of the goodness of Creation – and thus were not to be observed only by the people, but also by the animals and the land. It should have been a day of thankful and quiet celebrational worship.

In the Old Testament, then, Sabbaths were backward looking. It looked to the pre-fall creation and to its goodness and purpose. However, in the New Testament, we are commanded not only to look backwards, but to look forward. There remains a final Sabbath, where we celebrate not the Creation as told in Genesis, but the New Creation as foretold in Revelation. It shall be, finally and ultimately, a final rest given to the elect (**Heb 4:9-11**).

Having said all that, there is now ONE and only ONE feast our Lord Jesus Christ commands us to **physically** keep. And this one feast stands in direct fulfillment of ALL the feasts of the Old Testament.



- It remembers the Passover, Unleavened Bread and Firstfruits in the body and blood of the Lamb of God sacrificed for sins; and so encourages us to feast in its remembrance; to live holy and unleavened lives and to commemorate Christ's death and resurrection as the firstfruit.
- It remembers the Pentecost, as it commands us to eat whilst acknowledging the baptism into One Body of Christ (**1 Cor 11:28-29**)
- It looks forward to the Trumpets, Day of Atonement and Tabernacles when the believers will be called up for the feast of the Lamb; and when we shall finally but remember the days in which we live on our earthly tents and celebrating the completion of God's deliverance.

Keeping the Festivals

The Festivals of Leviticus 23-25 was a sacred invitation for Israel to partake in God's plan for salvation in history. **Ex 23:14** describe these festivals as a CELEBRATION. These are not to be observed as a burden, but rather as a joyous occasion.

I have explained how Jesus Christ commands but one Feast in place of those commanded in Leviticus; and it is the Holy Communion. The Holy Communion similarly retains this idea of celebration; a divine invitation to celebrate and partake in God's plan for salvation. Notice how even the Lord Jesus Christ was eager for this feast (**Luk 22:15-16**). It fills me with great joy and wonder to know that our Lord is eagerly waiting to have the feast with us. This is the Lord who takes pleasure in the relationship He initiated with us.

The Base of the Relationship: Covenant (26-27)

The Book of Leviticus closes with promises of blessing for obedience, and punishment for disobedience (**Chp 26**); and then a long list of rules for dedicating people or things to the Lord (**Chp 27**). And these final promises and commands were given was in a typical format for a covenantal relationship that is formed on the basis of Suzerain-Vassal Treaties.

The Suzerain-Vassal treaties in the Ancient Near East cultures were treaties between a greater king or conqueror (the Suzerain) and the lesser king or the defeated foe (the vassal). The treaties were given to assure the protection of the vassal, in exchange for a vow of loyalty. God, in this relationship, is the initiator of the covenant, and promises blessing and protection for obedience, and threatens curses for disobedience. This means that our relationship with God is within a covenantal context, within which God promises to be our God, and we His people. But such worship was meant as something wilfully and sincerely done; and therefore chapter 27 gives rules for freewill dedications to the Lord – a sincere worship done in thankful heart to the Lord.

With this, God reminds us that our obedience and strict adherence to these laws are to be done not in blind obedience to the written codes, but as ① the outward expression of our inherent relationship to the Lord, and ② as the outward expression of worship.

I would thus like to close with a statement given by John Piper, that "God is most glorified in us when we are most pleased in Him." This is a very wonderful statement which must not be misunderstood, It does not mean that when we come to God in worship, it is to please ourselves; that our self-pleasure is the ultimate benchmark for proper worship. In fact, it is the other way around. God's sole pleasure and will is the single and most important aim of worship.

How then, should we understand the statement? Piper explained it this way. Supposed a husband is bringing a bunch of flowers to his wife. The wife is pleasantly surprised, and asked him, "Oh! That's so sweet of you. Why did you do that?" Now if the husband answers something along this line, "I don't know. I just supposed that this is the job



description of a husband, so I did it,” the wife would no longer feel elevated. In fact, she will feel insulted! However, if the husband answers something along this line, that “I love you, and wanted to show my appreciation for who you are to me. This gift is just to show how special you are to me.” I think the wife will be even more elevated when she hears this. Using the structure of the sentence above, the wife is most elevated in their relationship when the husband is most pleased in her. These sacrifices, these laws, these rules are but the means to an end – the means for sincere worship. And when we find ourselves delighting in God, and in His ways, God will be most glorified. When we do this in Christ – through His perfect sacrifice (thus the covenantal aspect of this relationship), such worship in Spirit and in truth is surely accepted by God the Father, in the merit of His Son.

ⁱ Deffinbaugh, B (2004) *Learning to Love Leviticus*. Taken from <https://bible.org/seriespage/learning-love-leviticus>

