

3.

INTRODUCTION TO SECTION I MESSAGES ON ISRAEL'S RELIGIOUS SYSTEM

Leviticus 1:1-17:16

The opening MESSAGES of the book of Leviticus deal with the religious ceremonies of Israel. This emphasis continues through Chapter 17, after which there is a distinct difference in the emphasis of the MESSAGES. Therefore, chapters 1-17 belong together in one section that is devoted to a discussion of the religious system God designed for Israel.

These MESSAGES were not the first instructions Jehovah spoke to Moses concerning Israel's religious system. The Book of Exodus contains the record of instructions given to Moses concerning the furniture of The Tabernacle (Ex. 5:1-40; 27:1-8; 30:1-10,17-21), the structure of The Tabernacle (Ex. 26:1-37; 27:9-19), the oil for the lamps of The Tabernacle (Ex. 27:10-21), the garments of the priests (Ex. 28:1-43), the ceremony for hallowing the priests (Ex. 29:1-37; 40:12-15), the continual-offerings (Ex. 29:38-42), the purpose of The Tabernacle (Ex. Lev. 29:42-45), the memorial gifts for the support of those who served at The Tabernacle (Ex. 30:11-16), the holy anointing oil (Ex. 30:22-33), the holy incense (Ex. 30:34-38), the construction of The Tabernacle (Ex. 31:1-17; 40:1-8), and the ceremonies for hallowing The Tabernacle (Ex. 40:9-11). Those instructions are basic and necessary to an understanding of the MESSAGES contained in Leviticus 1-17, which discuss the ceremonies that were to be observed at and associated with The Tabernacle. They include the various fire-offerings to be offered at The Tabernacle (Lev. 1:1-10:20), the various creatures and conditions considered to be clean or unclean (Lev. 11:1-15:33), and the Day of Covering (Lev. 16:1-34). One final chapter deals with religious ceremonies that Israel was forbidden to practice (Lev. 17:1-16). These MESSAGES in Leviticus are not fully intelligible without the preceding MESSAGES recorded in Exodus. However, the heart of Israel's religious system is found, not in Exodus, but in Leviticus. The MESSAGES God gave Moses in Exodus deal primarily with the material equipment used in worshiping Jehovah: the house, the furniture, the clothing, and the tools. The MESSAGES in Leviticus deal with the worship ceremonies that used that material equipment. These MESSAGES are more significant because they reveal the meaning and spiritual significance of Israel's worship. They show what Jehovah worship truly means.

One of the most basic and important questions related to these chapters is the manner in which the various ceremonies are to be interpreted. It is necessary to reach some conclusion concerning the general interpretation of the ceremonies before it is possible to even begin to understand their details.

Significance of the ceremonies. Three different approaches have been suggested concerning the nature or character of the Leviticus ceremonies.

(1) *Ritual.* Most modern critical scholars take the position that the simple ritualistic performance of the ceremonies brought benefit to the worshiper and pleasure and satisfaction to God. At least they contend that the Israelites believed the ritualistic performance of the ceremonies produced those results. According to this view the value of the ceremonies was found simply in their performance. A number of different explanations have been offered as to why the mere performance of these ceremonies should have been beneficial.

(a) *Legal.* According to this view, the Israelites thought that going through the form of the ceremonies pleased God simply because they were obeying what He had commanded. The forms did not have to have a reason or a meaning. Obedience was what mattered. This view is contrary to the basic truths about God that the Pentateuch reveals. The book of Leviticus presents Jehovah as a moral God,

interested in right and wrong, not just in rituals. If God is moral, the ceremonies He taught Israel to observe must have had a moral meaning. They must have contained lessons about moral principles and could not have been just rituals performed for their own sake. Jehovah does demand complete obedience, but He never made demands just for their own sake. He gave commands based on moral principles. Obedience to His commands was never meant to be solely for the purpose of meeting legalistic stipulations. Rather it was for the purpose of achieving moral living.

(b) *Magical.* A second explanation is that performing the ceremonies accomplished some magical result desired by the worshiper. This idea is based on the pagan concepts of magic, spiritism, and taboo. Nothing could be a more serious forcing of foreign ideas on the text or a more serious twisting of Biblical ideas than this view. The book itself is so forceful in rejecting and condemning pagan religions and their magical ideas (Lev. 18:2-18,21; 19:4,26b,27,31; 22:24-25,28) that it is amazing that anyone could have proposed such an explanation. This view must be rejected.

(c) *Appeasement.* A third explanation is that performing the ceremonies appeased God and caused Him to remove His anger against the worshiper. Essentially it means that the worship bought off God's anger by performing ceremonies in His honor. This idea is equally pagan. It is totally foreign to the Pentateuch, which presents God as a gracious, forgiving God, who is slow to anger and plenteous in mercy. The books of the Law reveal Jehovah as extending mercy and grace and offering forgiveness freely upon repentance. Those revelations completely eliminate thoughts that God is motivated by arbitrary anger and that ritual observances can appease that anger and obtain His favor. This view also must be rejected.

(d) *Sacramental.* Still another explanation is that the ceremonies were sacraments that brought God's grace and blessings to the worshiper. Those who offer this explanation say that performing the ceremonies imparted grace to the worshiper when the worshiper presented them in the right spirit and attitude. This view is a vast improvement over those mentioned previously; however, it also is out of keeping with the truths revealed about God in the Pentateuch. The basic truth the Law reveals about God is that He is a personal God who seeks after people even when they are running from Him and who receives people when they simply open their hearts to Him. Those truths about Jehovah God can be seen even in a casual reading of the books of the Pentateuch. If people could know God in daily experience just by opening their hearts to Him, they had no reason to perform a ritual to gain the blessings God would give them freely when they simply opened their hearts to Him. Christians who hold the sacramental concept of salvation find this approach appealing, but Leviticus and the Pentateuch contain no more support for it than the New Testament does.

All attempts at explaining the value of the ceremonies of Leviticus in terms of ritual fail to pass the tests of Scripture and reason.

(2) *Typical.* A second view of the significance of the ceremonies is that they were types of events that were to come to pass in the future. The technical meaning of a "type" is that it is an act that God brings about to foreshadow a future event. Most of the older interpreters explained the ceremonies of Leviticus in this manner. They held that Israel's ceremonies foresaw and foretold the death of Jesus on the Cross to pay for the sins of the world. It can scarcely be doubted that a study of Leviticus from this point of view has definite value, but two strong reasons show that this view is an inadequate explanation of the primary meaning of the ceremonies of the Book of Genesis.

The first reason is that this approach makes the ceremonies of Israel to be meaningless mysteries to the

people to whom they were given. If the offerings, festivals, and cleanliness customs of Israel had meaning only in foreshadowing events that the Israelites could not have known about or expected, then Jehovah taught them to observe repeatedly through a millennium and a half ceremonies that had absolutely no meaning to them. It is hard to imagine a more sterile exercise in futility than for thousands of Israelites to offer millions of offerings for one thousand five hundred years that they could understand only as dark mysteries containing in hidden fashion truth that would be made clear only long after they were dead. The ceremonies of Israel can have meaning when studied as types of Christ now that He has come into the world, but understanding them primarily from that point of view means they had no real meaning for the people who observed them.

The second reason that this approach is inadequate is that it reduces the richly varied ceremonies of Israel to only one constantly repeated theme. That theme, cleansing through the blood of Jesus, is without question the most important theme in the Bible and in all human knowledge. But, it is not the only truth in the Bible. To make all the ceremonies of Israel typify only that one truth is to miss the exciting multiplicity of spiritual truths Jehovah revealed to Israel at Sinai. This explanation does not do justice to the rich variety of ceremonial forms found in Leviticus.

It has been argued that the typical approach to Leviticus is proven to be correct by the New Testament book of Hebrews. Hebrews has been called the greatest commentary on the book of Leviticus that has ever been written. This statement is misleading. Unquestionably, Hebrews refers to many of the ceremonies of Leviticus and draws important lessons from them. However, Hebrews is not and does not claim to be a commentary on Leviticus. It is an epistle or treatise that develops its own theme in its own way. The primary way that it uses the ceremonies revealed at Sinai is to show that Jesus and the worship He introduced is vastly superior to the priests and The Tabernacle ceremonies revealed at Sinai. Hebrews reveals that the ceremonies of Sinai have been replaced by a simpler and deeper way of worship that is performed in the heart instead of at a physical altar. Jesus has brought us far beyond the intricate rituals of Sinai; however, the truths He revealed did not abrogate those rituals or deny their truthfulness or value. He simply taught the same truths in a richer and fuller way. Still value comes from studying the Leviticus rituals, because they show how God revealed the truths that Jesus emphasized long before Jesus came into the world. However, at Sinai Jehovah revealed those truths in a ritual way that the ancient Israelites were able to understand at their stage of spiritual insight.

It is necessary, therefore, to approach the rituals of the book of Leviticus with a desire to understand them for their own sake. When that approach is taken, they reveal a vast array of truths about Jehovah and His worship that are fully compatible with Jesus and the New Testament. However, studying the Levitical ceremonies as types is an inadequate way of revealing the many lessons that the rich variety of Leviticus ceremonies contain. The practical meaning that the ceremonies held for the Israelites prior to Jesus' coming will be sought and explained in this commentary. When the spiritual truths that are revealed in the ceremonies are understood, it is clear that those truths are just as alive and practical today as they were Moses' day. Jesus said He came to fulfill the law, not to destroy it (Matt. 5:17). He filled the laws of Sinai so full of spiritual meaning that it is no longer necessary to observe those rituals in order to reveal the truths they contain.

(3) *Symbolic.* A third view of the purpose for the Leviticus ceremonies is that they symbolized real spiritual experiences available to the Israelites in the day in which the instructions were given. According to that view, the value of the ceremonies was two-fold: (a) to teach the Israelites the meaning of spiritual experiences that were available to them through the covenant, and (b) to give Israelites a means of expressing those experiences by outward, symbolic action. This view is the only view of the Leviticus ceremonies that is consistent with Biblical truth.

The Leviticus symbols and the New Testament revelations both teach the same spiritual truths, but the New Testament explains those truths more clearly and more fully. Therefore, Christ could say He did not come to destroy but to fulfill the law (Matt. 5:17-19). At the same time, He took the law to its death with Him on the Cross (Col. 2:14). After Christ, the ceremonial laws of Sinai were dead as far as their observance was concerned, but they live on in that the truths and experiences they illustrate are still real and vital to God's people. The fuller light that was given in Christ both explains the meaning of the ceremonies more fully and makes them unnecessary to practice.

The symbolic approach to the Leviticus ceremonies yields their only truly satisfactory interpretation. This approach will be followed in this commentary, trusting that the reader will be convinced through studying the comments that this view gives a richer understanding of the ceremonies than any other approach could hope to give.

Symbolism of the ceremonies. Once it is accepted that the Leviticus ceremonies were meant to be symbols, the question arises as to what they were meant to symbolize. At least three major answers have been proposed to that question.

(1) Salvation. Many contend that the main lesson taught by the Leviticus ceremonies is the way of salvation. It is claimed that the main idea in the altar offerings is atonement through the death of Jesus and the main idea in the cleansing ceremonies is cleansing from sin through the death of Jesus. The substitutionary death is the central truth of Christian theology. A Christian can scarcely think of the bloody offerings offered by the ancient Israelites or of the cleansing ceremonies of Leviticus without thinking of the salvation and cleansing that come through the blood of our Savior. However, several strong factors weigh heavily against the view that the death of Jesus on the Cross is the only meaning of the Leviticus ceremonies.

The first factor that reveals that the Levitical ceremonies taught more than salvation through the shed blood of Jesus is that the ceremonies of Leviticus were given to a people who were already in covenant relationship with Jehovah, that is, who already were saved if they had truly accepted the covenant in their hearts. Israelites became God's people individually and God's nation became His people collectively, not by offering offerings on the altar or by observing regulations concerning clean and unclean. They became God's people by accepting Jehovah's covenant. This great truth is made clear in the nineteenth chapter of Exodus, which was given prior to the revelation of any of the Leviticus ceremonies. Accepting the covenant to become God's people was for the Israelites the same thing that accepting Christ to become God's child is to the Christian. In Exodus 19:5-6, Jehovah explained the covenant by saying, **"So now, if you will truly hearken to My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all peoples (for all the earth is mine), and you will be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation."** As Jehovah revealed more and more about the covenant, it became increasingly clear that "hearken to My voice" (faith) explained the way to become God's people and "keep My covenant" (works) explained the way to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. When Israel turned quickly to worshipping a golden calf and showed that they had not truly accepted the covenant, in Exodus 34:6-7, Jehovah explained more fully the way to be accepted by Him. He said, **"Jehovah, Jehovah God, merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in love-grace and faithfulness, keeping grace for thousands [of generation], forgiving iniquity and rebellion and sin."** In those explanations of the way to be restored to God, Jehovah said nothing about the fire-offerings or the cleansing ceremonies. Instead He spoke of faith and grace. Then the Israelites entered into covenant with God with better understanding and sincerity. Those who truly accepted the covenant at Sinai became God's people. In New Testament language, they were saved. Jehovah gave the Leviticus ceremonies to the Israelites after they had accepted His covenant and had become His people. Therefore, a much more reasonable explanation is that the ceremonies symbolized the life that the

Israelites were expected to follow after accepting the covenant. In New Testament language, they symbolized the responsibilities and experiences of the redeemed life.

A second factor that argues against the idea that the purpose of the Leviticus ceremonies was to illustrate the way of salvation is the concept of “atonement” in Leviticus. When a Christian, familiar with the concept of atonement through the blood of Jesus, reads the word “atonement” in English translations of Leviticus, he immediately thinks of salvation through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus. However, a study of all references to “atonement” in Leviticus shows that the concept of “atonement” in Leviticus is quite different from the New Testament doctrine of atonement. The Hebrew word translated “atonement” in Leviticus had a much different meaning from the atonement for sin that Jesus makes possible through His death on the Cross. (See comments on Leviticus 1:4 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading “to cover over him”). Almost all English versions translate the significant word used in Leviticus 1:4 as “atonement.” However, that translation is misleading. The Hebrew word means “covering.” It refers to the covering God provides for a believer in daily life, not only to the covering of the sins of a lost man through Jesus’ blood. As shown in the comments on Leviticus 1:4, an Israelite received the “covering” by a variety of means, not just by the splashing of blood. The means that brought “covering” to the Israelites were the worshiper’s attitudes and deeds, not the substitutionary sacrifice of another Person. The Hebrew word usually translated as “atonement” did not refer only to removing the penalty of sin through the giving of Jesus’ life. Instead, it also referred to being restored to fellowship with God daily through the believer’s attitudes and actions. The Leviticus ceremonies did not symbolize only the experience of salvation but the experiences of forgiveness and fellowship that a believer in Jehovah needs every day. They symbolize experiences that help believers overcome their weaknesses and grow in spiritual strength.

A third factor that shows that the Leviticus ceremonies taught more than the way to be saved is the great variety of concepts found in the fire-offerings and the cleansing ceremonies. Leviticus describes five different major types of fire-offerings and at least nine different conditions from which a person needed cleansing. If all of those ceremonies symbolize salvation, the concept of salvation found in them would be a far cry from the simple plan of salvation by grace through faith that is taught in the New Testament, and in the Book of Exodus for that matter. It would have been a salvation that resulted from commitment of self (rededication-offering), stewardship (homage-offering), repentance (sin-offering), restitution (offense-offering), and fellowship (slaughter-offering),¹ as well as from a worshiper’s own efforts (cleansing ceremonies).² Such a view of salvation is incompatible with the salvation that the Bible reveals in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. On the other hand, the teachings of all of those ceremonies are completely compatible with experiences in the daily life of a child of God, whether Israelite or Christian. A much better understanding of the Leviticus ceremonies is that they teach the rich variety of aspects of the life of one who has entered into covenant with God and is a true believer.

(2) Approach to God. An often-repeated explanation of the Leviticus ceremonies is that they symbolize approach to God, that is, how a sinful person can approach a holy God. Some commentators who use the explanation of approach to God seem to mean the initial approach to God in salvation. However, most commentators who use that explanation make it clear they are referring to a believer’s approach to God in his daily life.

¹ These offerings are explained in MESSAGE 1 through MESSAGE 7 (Lev.1:1-7:21).

² These ceremonies are explained in MESSAGE 14 through MESSAGE 19 (Lev. 11-15).

Two considerations show the error of this position. The first consideration is that Jehovah stated that the purpose of The Tabernacle was that Jehovah might “dwell among the children of Israel” (Ex. 25:8; 29:42-45). Thus, The Tabernacle was not a symbol of the aloofness of God, indicating that Israelites had to go through a complicated process at The Tabernacle to be able to approach Him. Rather it was a symbol of the nearness of God, showing that He was constantly in their midst to receive their worship and to speak to them at all times. The Tabernacle taught that, when men are in covenant relationship with God, He is always near to them and available at all times. Making the offerings to be symbols of a process that Jehovah’s people had to go through in order to approach Him destroys the first and basic purpose for which The Tabernacle existed.

The second consideration that argues against the interpretation that the Leviticus ceremonies symbolize the way to approach God is that the Book of Leviticus strongly emphasizes that all an Israelite had to do to approach Jehovah was to walk up before Him. God was always present and ready to receive them. (See Leviticus 1:5,11; 2:8; 3:1,7,12; 4:4,6,7,15,17,18,24; 6:6,7,14; 7:30; 8:26,27,28; 9:2,5,21,24; 10:1,2,15,17; 12:7; 14:11,12,16,18; 15:15,30; 16:1,7,10,18; 19:22; 23:11,20,28; 24:3,4,5.) Numerous similar passages occur in Exodus and Numbers. (See comments on Leviticus 1:5 in MESSAGE 1 under the heading “before Jehovah.”) Thus, the offerings were not rites that the Israelites performed in order to be able to approach God but symbols of experiences they enjoyed because they had the freedom to approach Him at any time.

(3) *Experiences of the covenant life.* The facts stated above indicate that the most satisfactory interpretation of the Leviticus ceremonies is that they symbolized experiences and responsibilities of the covenant life. They portray what it is like to live in covenant relationship with Jehovah God and to dwell in His presence. They were great teaching symbols, designed to lead believers to understand what is involved in being God’s people.

Full evidence of this position will be found in the comments throughout this commentary, but one important indication should be noted here. The order in which the offerings are introduced in the book strongly supports this view. If the offerings had symbolized the way to approach God and come into His presence, surely the first offering to be presented would have been the sin-offering. Sin is the first matter to be dealt with in coming into God’s presence, so if the offerings symbolized how to approach God, the offering that symbolized removing sin should have been presented first. However, in the text, the first offering mentioned is the rededication-offering, which symbolized total dedication of the inner life to God. Total dedication is the basic and all-important principle of the covenant life. Thus, placing the rededication-offering first is strong evidence that the offerings symbolized experiences in the covenant life rather than how to enter that covenant life. Many have been led astray in their interpretations because they have rearranged the Record to fit their theories, when they should have arranged their theories to fit the Record (see comments on Leviticus 8:18-21 in MESSAGE 10).

This understanding of the ceremonies of Israel does not minimize the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. Rather it shows that the shedding of the blood of a substitute is necessary to give meaning to every experience in a believer’s life. The significance of the sacrifice of the Messiah on the Cross does not exhaust itself on the day we are saved. It is necessary for covering the sins we commit every day when we seek to completely dedicate ourselves to God, which is symbolized by the rededication-offering. It is just as necessary when we go to Him to ask to be restored to fellowship we have lost through sinning again and again after we are saved, which is symbolized by the sin-offering. It is powerful in restoring us to fellowship with someone we have wronged when we seek to make restitution for harm we have done, which is symbolized by the offense-offering. It is also required when we seek to enjoy the fellowship and comradeship that we have with God, His ministers, and other believers, which is symbolized the slaughter-offering of peace-offerings. The comments on each of these offerings will clarify these insights in the studies that follow.

If the offerings of Israel symbolized experiences in the covenant life, they have living value for all believers, Israelite and Christian. Christians do not need to practice the ceremonies. In fact, Jews do need to practice them since the death of Jesus. But both Jews and Christians do need to live the life Israel's ancient ceremonies symbolized. Studying the Leviticus ceremonies will help today's believers understand the life God expects of us, just as practicing those ceremonies helped the Israelites understand what God expected of them long ago.