

P R E A C H I N G T H E W O R D

Leviticus



HOLY GOD,
HOLY PEOPLE

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GENERAL EDITOR

Leviticus

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Published by Crossway Books
a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover banner by Marge Gieser

Art Direction: Keane Fine

First printing, 2009

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN PDF: 978-1-4335-0629-1

ISBN Mobipocket: 978-1-4335-0630-7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mathews, K. A.

Leviticus : holy God, holy people / Kenneth A. Mathews; R. Kent Hughes, general editor.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-4335-0628-4 (hc)

1. Bible. O.T. Leviticus—Commentaries. 2. Bible. O.T. Leviticus—Relation to the new Testament. 3. Bible. N.T.—Relation to Leviticus. 4. Christian life—Biblical teaching. I. Hughes, R. Kent. II. Title.

BS1255.53.M38 2009

222'.1307—dc22

2008051194

TS	19	18	17	16	15	14	13	12	11	10	09			
15	14	13	12	11	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

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1

Hearing from God Before Seeing God

LEVITICUS 1:1

God has spoken that we might believe, and that believing we might see.

Our image-driven culture in the West operates as the Chinese proverb recommends: “Hearing about something a hundred times is not as good as seeing it once.”¹ We often say, “I’ll believe it when I see it.” We typically give priority to seeing over hearing. Home video cameras and surveillance cameras have caught events serendipitously and broadcasted them as part of our “reality” culture. Perhaps we are caught off guard by the Bible’s picture of God who speaks before he shows himself. At creation God spoke the worlds into existence, and at Sinai the Lord created the nation Israel by his commanding word (Genesis 1; Exodus 20). The New Testament tells us that faith comes by hearing, and this hearing fosters belief in those things not seen (Romans 10:14-17; Hebrews 11:1). Jesus commended those who had heard and believed in his resurrection, though they had not seen him. “Jesus said to [Thomas], ‘Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed’” (John 20:29).

WHEN GOD SPEAKS

Leviticus begins in the same manner, giving priority to the word of the Lord (1:1). The book continues the prior account in Exodus 40:34, 35 that describes the completion of the Tent of Meeting at Mount Sinai. Leviticus begins with God summoning Moses to hear his word spoken “from the tent of meeting.”² What the Lord created at Sinai was a nation, formed by

a covenant-relationship of trust, and he manufactured a home in their midst for his dwelling-place — that is, “the tent of meeting.” In a word he established a relationship with the slaves who had been incarcerated in Egypt. This relationship was based on the redemption he achieved on their behalf by the blood of the Passover lamb. Salvation came before relationship. At the Red Sea the Lord liberated his people from Egypt’s armies.

“The tent of meeting” was a portable tent. It was the transient epicenter of the world in the eyes of Israel. A movable ground zero, so to speak, so that the focus of Israel’s attention was always directed toward the tabernacle that was at the center of their lives wherever they moved about. American life once made the fireplace or hearth the vital center of family life where meals were prepared and where the family enjoyed its light and warmth. Now living areas in our homes have the entertainment center as the focal point. The hub of ancient Israel’s national life was the tabernacle, the visual reminder of God’s presence. It was the vital center of Israel’s experience and identity.

Before the people departed for their promised homeland in Palestine (ancient Canaan), the Lord spoke from the tent. The book of Leviticus is essentially the message that God spoke to his people at that time in preparation for their departure. The teaching of Leviticus was both revelatory and regulatory.³ This message revealed more about their God and also regulated the relationship that he had established with them at the exodus. Repeatedly in Leviticus we are told that the Lord “spoke to [Moses]” (1:1).⁴ Moses was the mediator of God’s word to his people. Unlike any other person, the Lord met with Moses: “With [Moses] I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the LORD” (Numbers 12:8). At Sinai the mount was enveloped by a cloud that was identified as “the glory of the LORD” from which the Lord spoke to Moses. The language that begins the book is an exact echo of God’s revelation to Moses at Sinai in Exodus 24:16: “The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day *he called to Moses* out of the midst of the cloud.” Moses actually entered into the cloud on top of the mountain and remained there for forty days and nights (Exodus 24:18).

Although the people saw “the glory of the LORD,” it was not a cloud of benevolent revelation for them: “Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel” (Exodus 24:17). In fear they distanced themselves from the mountain (Exodus 24:17, 18). In the book of Leviticus we discover that the people, however, gladly saw “the glory of the LORD” after the priests prepared the way by instituting the first sacrifices in the tabernacle: “And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the LORD *appeared* to all the people. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering

and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people *saw* it, they shouted and fell on their faces” (9:23, 24).

God has spoken that we might believe, and that believing we might see.

From the mountain. The Lord delivered the covenant (Exodus 20-24), instructions for building the tabernacle (Exodus 25-40), and the regulations found in the book of Leviticus at Sinai. The opening words of Leviticus assume the Sinai location, and the book concludes with a special mention of “Mount Sinai” (27:34). The people resided on the mountain for about a year and a half (cf. Exodus 19:1, 2; Numbers 10:11). During this period the Lord provided the regulations for worship and holy living in Leviticus across a month’s time (Exodus 40:17; Numbers 1:1). The importance of “Sinai” for the setting of Leviticus shows the strategic magnitude of the revelation that God gave regarding worship and holy living. It was the site of revelation, promise, and command. It was the first place where Moses encountered the Lord (Exodus 3:1-4; Acts 7:30) and the place where the Lord gave Israel the two tablets of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 31:18). Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) had parallel significance for Christians. It was the place of revelation. Jesus painted the profile of righteous citizenship for kingdom citizens. Moreover, the transfiguration of Jesus occurred on a mountain (Matthew 17:1-8). And a cloud too rested over Jesus and his disciples from which the Father spoke. Jesus’ face and garments radiated the glowing majesty of God. Jesus as the Son of God embodied the glory of the Lord as truly God (2 Peter 1:16-18).

Israel associated “Sinai” with the majesty of God whose presence shook the earth and whose voice was like thunder (Exodus 19:16-19; 20:18-21; Deuteronomy 4:11, 12). The smoke and fire of God’s appearance at the mountain forever marked the people’s vision of God’s blazing glory (Psalm 104:32; Habakkuk 3:6). Moses himself was utterly petrified with fear (Acts 7:32; Hebrews 12:21). But we who know the Lord Jesus have not come to the Mount Sinai with trembling. The writer to the Hebrews declares that we who know Christ have come to the heavenly Mount Zion, the heavenly abode of all who have faith in the Lord (Hebrews 12:18-24). We have no fear but rather confidence in the eternal destiny to which our pilgrimage here on earth will lead. This heavenly citizenship was accomplished through the shed blood of our Lord Jesus Christ.

From the tent. Although the Lord was remembered for his revelation at the mountain, the people could not remain at the mount if they were to receive God’s provision of the promised land. The mountain was immovable. There were no more “Sinai’s” along the desert trek. The Lord therefore furnished a portable “Sinai,” the tabernacle shrine where God might reside among his people wherever he might lead them. We are familiar with the advantages of portability in our high-tech society. For example, the pop-

ular computer-based iPod enables a person to carry on the small digital device up to 5,000 musical songs. Whenever the cloud that hovered above the tabernacle moved, the people knew to set off on another stage of their journey. The regulations of Leviticus fit between the two descriptions of the movements of the tabernacle in Exodus 40:36-38 and Numbers 9:15-23. Those two passages are like bookends that highlight the portability of the tabernacle but also reinforce the importance of God's presence among his people. They were not to take one step apart from the presence of God. Moses met with God at the tent and there received the assurance of God's word and presence.

That the Lord's revelation to Moses was as authentic at the tent as it had been at Mount Sinai was shown in two ways. First, there was a correspondence between the three divisions of the tent and the three circles of holiness that ascended to the summit of the mountain.⁵ The tent consisted of two rooms, separated by a curtain. The inner room of the tent was known as "the Most Holy," and the outer room was simply "the Holy Place" (Exodus 26:33). The third division was the courtyard that encircled the tent (Exodus 27:9). Correspondingly, at the peak of the mountain, as in the Most Holy Place, the Lord spoke, and no one could approach God at the summit except Moses. In the same way, only the high priest could enter into the Most Holy Place (Exodus 19:20; 25:22; Numbers 7:89). Below the peak was the cloud to which Moses and the elders of Israel ascended. This corresponds to the Holy Place, the room that the priests could enter to assist the high priest in his duties (Exodus 20:21; 24:1, 2, 15, 16). Last was "the foot of the mountain" where the people stood (Exodus 19:17; Deuteronomy 4:11). Here was the equivalent to the courtyard where the laity could enter for sacrifice and worship (Leviticus 1:3; 8:3).

Second, the visage of Moses after speaking with God recalled his sojourn on the mountain. Whenever Moses entered into the presence of the Lord, his face glowed brightly as it had initially upon his descent from the mountain. His face reflected the effulgent glory of the Lord (Exodus 34:29-35). The significance of the opening words of Leviticus is that God continued to speak, although the forty days of revelation at the mount would come to an end.⁶ The Lord continued to provide for his people regardless of their proximity to the mountain. By this perpetual presence among his people, the Lord provided for closeness between him and Israel. This continuous presence of the tabernacle assured Israel uninterrupted provision and protection.

God has made the same provision for us as Christians but in a much more personal way. The Apostle John drew on the imagery of the tent when he declared, "[T]he Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). The term "dwelt" translates the Greek term (*skenoō*),

which is related to the word “tent” (*skene*) in our passage. Our Lord Jesus Christ became flesh — the incarnate God — who made his tent among us. By this habitation the Lord exhibited the glory of God. Whereas in the past God revealed himself by means of dreams, visions, and the prophets, he now has shown himself uniquely through the incarnation of his Son. Jesus is the very expression of God himself — fully God and fully human (Hebrews 1:1-4). There is no option for Christians to include other religious figures on the same stage as the Lord Jesus. It cannot be “Jesus and Caesar” or “Jesus and Mohammad.”⁷ By becoming a human being, our Lord Jesus assured us as human beings of God’s salvation for all who will hear and believe the gospel.

THROUGH HIS MEDIATOR

His servant Moses. If the book of Leviticus teaches us anything, it is that the Lord God demands that only qualified persons can commune with him. He is the awesome holy God who is unlike any other. It was long recognized that a go-between was necessary for men and women to relate to the Lord (Job 9:32, 33). It was at the risk of death that someone transgressed the sacred space that God inhabits, unless preparatory steps were taken to become fit to meet with God (Exodus 19:12-14). God permitted Moses to speak with him “face to face” (Exodus 33:11), yet elsewhere we learn that God prohibited Moses from seeing God’s face: “you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Exodus 33:20; cf. John 1:18). The descriptive language that God met with Moses “face to face” must mean that the Lord’s presence was with him. Moses could not look upon the essence of God by viewing his face; he could only see his back and survive (Exodus 33:23). Yet, by his gracious mercies God made it possible for the people to know him despite their sinful condition as human beings.

The chief mediator or safeguard between the Lord and the people was Moses, who was the mouth of God. Moses enjoyed a special relationship with God. Initially, the Lord made himself available to Moses at any time from a special tent outside the camp. Progressively, Moses’ access to God became limited once the tabernacle structure was built. Moses actually entered the cloud on Mount Sinai (Exodus 24:18), but when the Lord took up residence in the Tent of Meeting, the cloud so filled the tent that Moses could not enter (Exodus 40:35). He received the word of the Lord while standing *outside* the tent. It was from this position that the Lord gave to Moses the beginning revelation and regulations of the book of Leviticus (Leviticus 1:1). Later, at the induction of Aaron and his sons, Moses’ role became a transitional link to the established order of the Aaronic priests who alone made intercessory sacrifices on behalf of the people (Leviticus 9:23). Especially, the ritual on the Day of Atonement restricted entrance to the

Most Holy Place to the high priest alone who was an exclusive descendant of Aaron (Leviticus 16:11-14).

His Son Jesus. Jesus was “the second Moses,” who delivered the word of the Lord to God’s people. Despite Moses’ great stature as the quintessential prophet (Deuteronomy 34:10), he was not able to mediate the glory of the Lord perfectly. He failed the Lord through angry disobedience and was prohibited from leading the people into the promised land (Numbers 20:12). Jesus exceeded even the great prophet Moses. Although Moses was a loyal *servant*, Christ was a faithful *son* (Hebrews 3:3-6). The divine son, Jesus, is the very image of God, fully divine and fully human (2 Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15; Hebrews 1:1-3). He is the complete and perfect mediator (1 Timothy 2:5). Jesus fully revealed the Father (John 1:18; 6:46; 14:9). The radiant glory that Moses’ face shone was temporary, but those who gaze upon him will experience the permanent transforming power of Christ’s glory (2 Corinthians 3:12-18). Those of us in the household of faith no longer stand outside the tent looking from afar; we are brought close to God through the sacrificial death of our Lord Jesus Christ. He performed flawlessly the vicarious death that removes our sin and reconciles us to God (Hebrews 7:27; 9:26).

GOD REVEALS HIS GLORY

From the tent. The initial revelation that God gave Moses in Leviticus pertained to the steps necessary for Israel to receive the revelation of God’s glory. The Lord had provided the tabernacle, but now there was the need for the proper features of worship. Leviticus spells out the five sacrifices that God ordained for worship, including atonement for their sin (Leviticus 1-7). Additionally, the Lord directed Moses to carry out the ordination of the priests who were to function at the altar where the sacrifices were carried out (Leviticus 8). After all had been revealed regarding the means of maintaining the relationship between the Lord and his people, the first sacrifices were performed by the newly consecrated priests, Aaron and his sons. Aaron carried out the animal sacrifices for his own sins and then offered up the sacrifices for the sins of the people (Leviticus 9). It was only after the proper place, persons, and offerings occurred that the Lord showed his approval of the worship offered by the people. By an amazing pyrotechnic display, God confirmed his presence and pleasure:

And Moses and Aaron went into the tent of meeting, and when they came out they blessed the people, and the glory of the LORD appeared to all the people. And fire came out from before the LORD and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar, and when all the people saw it, they shouted and fell on their faces. (Leviticus 9:23, 24)

This blazing fire came from *within* the tent, presumably from the ark of the covenant in the Most Holy Place (Exodus 40:21). It was a continuation of God's presence demonstrated at Sinai where "the glory of the LORD" was previously seen as "a devouring fire" (Exodus 24:17). The implication of the passage is that the fire on the altar became a perpetual flame fed constantly by the priests each morning and evening (Leviticus 6:12, 13). The prior seven days of ordination sacrifices ensured that the altar maintained a constant smoldering fire from the daily sacrifices. But on the eighth day in a flash the whole of the offerings were instantaneously burned up. By this the Lord approved of the intercession of Aaron, and the people responded gladly that by means of the tabernacle structure, the animal offerings, and the ministry of Aaron, the Lord had indeed visited his people as he had promised.

In the Lord Jesus. At the incarnational appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glory of the Lord was found exclusively in him. There is no other means by which we can behold the glory of the Lord. We have all sinned and thus failed to live in accord with the majestic glory of God (Romans 3:23). We must hear and receive the gospel, and once received we behold "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6; cf. 2 Corinthians 3:18; 2 Thessalonians 2:14). The enabling presence of the Lord in the life of Israel led them to their reward in the promised land by the radiant glory of the cloud. By the presence of the Lord in the life of the believer and the church, we too will persevere in the knowledge and hope of our resurrected Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who has called us for greater destiny — the eternal glory that is ours at his coming (Colossians 3:4; 2 Peter 1:3).

Hear, receive, obey, and see with the eyes of faith the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. God has spoken that we might believe, and that believing we might see.

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