

# LEVITICUS 17-27

Regulations for a Holy Nation





## Leviticus 19:1-10

### Focus Thoughts

With what is “holiness” concerned? What do holy people do? Do we imagine hushed prayers and quiet reflections, hard beds and harsh diets, seriousness and silence, perhaps bald monks and cloistered nuns. Are these our primary images of holiness? And do we envisage that Jesus of Nazareth, the holy son of God, was only a serious man, for whom a good joke and a hearty laugh were inappropriate? Did he frown upon fun? Or did he enjoy banquets as well as baptisms? If our children and students are going to understand and, we trust, embrace holiness, we will need to fill out this much misunderstood word in keeping with biblical revelation. And there is no better place of start than Leviticus 19.

What are the concerns of holiness? After the definitive command, “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy”, the concerns of holiness are rich and varied. They include caring for Mum and Dad as well as keeping the Sabbath (19:3), turning away from idolatry and rightly sacrificing peace offerings (16:4-8) as well as purposely leaving fallen grapes and the left-over grain to be gathered by travellers, the needy and the poor (16:9-10). As the chapter proceeds, more laws give content to holy living. There are prohibitions on stealing and lying, the insistence that wages be paid promptly, the maintenance of justice in the courts and love for one’s neighbours. Perhaps most striking of all is the command to not mock the disabled and vulnerable: “You shall not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind .” Laws concerning farming, sexual purity, tattooing, care for strangers and business practices follow. And what about this law regarding the aged: “You shall stand up before the gray head and honor the face of an old man, and you shall fear your God.” (19:32)

Over and over again, the laws are followed by the refrain: “I am the LORD” or “I am the LORD your God” – seven times in 19:3-18 and seven more times in 19:19-36. Then for good measure in 19:37 the phrase is used one more time: “I am the LORD.” These laws give content to holy living! They address aspects of life about which the creator of the universe is deeply concerned. If he was to live with the Israelites in Canaan, Yahweh insisted on holy practices such as these. Here are specific examples of what it meant to be holy more than three thousand years ago.

When Jesus Christ was asked to summarise Israel’s law, he firstly answered: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” Then drawing on Leviticus 19, he added the words: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>32</sup> And in a stunning summary statement, Jesus then affirmed: “On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”<sup>33</sup> Love for God and love for fellow humans. Love that is embodied in communities of justice, kindness, compassion and truth . these are the concerns of a holy life. And in Christ’s resurrection and Pentecost outpouring of the Holy Spirit, these concerns have not diminished rather been extended as God establishes his holy presence among people of every tribe, tongue, nation and language.

It is critical that young people in the twenty-first century earth their understanding of holiness in all the stuff of life. It is critical they understand “holiness” in terms of “wholeness” – not merely individuals who live well but also communities where holy practices are widely exhibited. Such communities, including families and schools, will be wholistic in their concerns – respect for the aged and care for the disabled, love for enemies as well as neighbors, justice



in business offices and law courts. Such communities will embrace both fervent prayer and festive play. They will enjoy silences and symphonies, they will work hard and rest well. They will ground holiness in all the stuff of life. And in so doing, they will honour the holy God who governs the universe.

### **Prayer**

Father God, some of us have thought that holiness was withdrawal from life more widely. Forgive us. We see from your word that to be holy is to be whole – whole in terms of living 24/7 for you, whole in terms of bringing all of our lives under your lordship, whole in terms of making sense of all of life from the truth of your word. LORD, make us people who are whole. Make our relationships honouring to you. And today, we bring our learning to you and pray that you will be glorified by our imaginations, our memories, our reading and listening and speaking and writing. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Further Thoughts**

#### **Examine my heart ...<sup>34</sup>**

The founder of Kraft Foods was an outstanding Christian. Mr. Kraft spent the last few winters of his life in Miami. He had an invitation to address a convention in San Francisco, and the newspapers of Miami made note of it. The night before he left for San Francisco, the telephone rang. A woman's voice, filled with sadness, said, "Mr. Kraft, I see by the paper that you are going to San Francisco tomorrow. I want to ask a favor. My son is in Alcatraz for life. I write him and send him gifts, but he has never responded. Would you please go see him, and ask him just to write me a note?"

Kraft agreed to the lady's request. He went to the prison and was granted permission to visit the young man. He started down the corridor to where it turned right, to the visiting room. Just as he made the turn, a big hand shot out in front and clamped him by the chest, and a voice said, "Stand perfectly still, Mr. Kraft, don't move for a moment." Kraft said he heard a buzzing sound ... then a voice said, "OK, Mr. Kraft, you're clean." Offended, he asked, "What do you mean, 'I'm clean?' Of course I am!" "I mean," said the guard, "that you don't have anything that you should not take to the visitor's room." ...

He went on down the hall thinking to himself, "Suppose Christ would stop me around the next corner and say, "Stand still, Kraft, let me see if your heart is clean inside." Said James Kraft, "I stopped where I was and asked God to examine me."

## **Leviticus 20:1-8**

### **Focus Thoughts**

By what is holiness offended? In reflecting on Leviticus 19 we inquired into the concerns and delights of holiness. Now with regard to Leviticus 20 we ask: "What does holiness despise? What profanes the holy name? Desecrates the holy place? Wounds the holy heart?" The answer is clear. Idolatry. And in this passage it is idolatry at its worst.



Molech. The god to whom children were offered by fire. Referred to on just eight occasions in scripture,<sup>35</sup> Molech was worshipped by Canaanite tribes in the land and became known particularly as the favoured deity of the Ammonites. This idol god was usually depicted as having a human body with the head of an ox. The statue of Molech, seated on a bronze throne with hands extended, was hollow. To prepare the idol-king to receive sacrifices, his image was heated to red hot temperatures by a fire built within it. One commentator continues:

The parents then placed their children in the heated arms, while the noise of drums and cymbals drowned the cries of the little sufferers. It's also said that there were seven chapels connected with the idol, which were to be entered according to the relative value of the offering presented. Only those who presented children were allowed to enter the seventh chapel.<sup>36</sup>

On seven occasions in this chapter death penalties are pronounced on behavior offensive to holiness (20:2, 9, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16). Cursing of parents, acts of sexual immorality, the offering of sacrifices to Molech – such practices are detestable in God's eyes. In striking language the LORD affirms that the land will "vomit" out any who live that way (20:22).

That violent expulsion finally came upon Israel in 586 BC. Babylonian armies destroyed Jerusalem, devastated the land, murdered, pillaged and then exiled the population. Despite the strong prohibitions and warnings in Leviticus, some of Israel's kings, among them Solomon, Ahaz and Manasseh, continued to seek after Molech, building altars and offering sacrifices. They did so in a narrow valley area on the southern side of Jerusalem, the valley known as Ben Hinnom. The ravine was Jerusalem's garbage dump. Here was also the place in which the corpses of executed criminals were disposed. A fire continually burned in Hinnom to consume Jerusalem's refuse. This contemptible place became a daily reminder of divine judgment. Subsequently the Greek word for hell – "Gehenna" – was derived from its Hebrew name, "Gehinnom", the Valley of Hinnom.

Holiness is defined not only by what it loves, but also by what it despises and opposes. If young people in our times and places need substantial positive content for their understanding of holiness, they also need to think deeply about what is offensive and opposed to holiness. They need to love what God loves and despise what he despises. They need to embrace a vision of humanness defined by both of these. So do we all.

The gospel of Christ's life, death, resurrection, ascension, rule and outpouring of God's Spirit considerably sharpens the contours of holiness. Not only did Jesus taken on himself the full wrath of God against all that defiles human life but in his resurrection he unleashed the Holy Spirit throughout the world so that human life might be powerfully renewed by grace. In this era before his return, those who serve Christ have a mighty obligation to embrace and display holiness in individual and communal life in the face of ongoing idolatries.

Theologian Brian Walsh has argued that the god of modern secular societies is "economism", a god that values humanness only on the basis of its economic worth and that reduces educational goals to the production of highly achieving economic agents who will further the ends of economic profit making. This is an idol, Walsh asserts, with "an insatiable desire



for child sacrifice.”<sup>37</sup> Perhaps “economism” is the Molech of the modern world. May we stand against such idolatry and model another way until Christ returns and exercises final judgment, once and for all, against all that holiness despises.

### **Prayer**

LORD, we are challenged to reflect on what you despise – and on what we should despise. Forgive us that we often do not despise what you despise. Reveal to us the idols of our times. Give us wisdom and discernment to expose them to our children and students as we teach. LORD, help us all to love what you love. We commit the young people in our care to you this day and pray that you would build into their lives deep convictions concerning truth, goodness and beauty. May they live fully human lives in the freedom of the gospel. We pray in Jesus name. Amen.

### **Further Thoughts**

#### **Irresistible Holiness**

C. S. Lewis (1898-1963) expressed the viewpoint that if even 10% of the world’s population lived truly holy lives, the rest of the world would be converted. In his book *Letters to an American Lady*, Lewis wrote the following memorable words:

How little people know who think that holiness is dull. When one meets the real thing ... it is irresistible.<sup>38</sup>

## **Leviticus 20:9-16**

### **Focus Thoughts**

Sexual immorality is rife in many twenty-first century nations. This is one fruit of the widespread belief that freedom is primarily “freedom from” – freedom from restrictions or restraints to the right of the individual to do or have anything he or she desires.

That freedom has come to include widespread access to pornography, a freedom that is devastating to individuals, families and the well-being of human society. Many were horrified when the findings of a nationwide investigation into internet child pornography in Australia, code named Operation Centurion, were recently released. Police discovered that more than 1500 Australians had accessed an obscure European website on which pornographic images of children had been placed. In the three days that the images were available, the site was deluged with 12 million hits by almost 150,000 different computer IP addresses from 170 countries. Over 2800 of these were from Australia.<sup>39</sup> Young people today are confronted with sexual temptations and immoral practices unthinkable even a generation ago. We have moved a long way from the sorts of prohibitions on sexual promiscuity detailed in Leviticus.

The passage from Leviticus 20 is severe. And yet each of these laws arises out of the LORD’s holy commitment to the family as the basic unit within and from which human life will flourish. In Israel those who abused the sanctity of the family were to be harshly punished. That commitment had been embodied in the Ten Commandments given to Moses and Israel at



Sinai. These specific laws now detail those commandments.

In Leviticus 20:9-16, seven offenses were punishable with death, presumably by stoning – cursing one’s mother and father, perhaps by appeal to pagan ritualistic magic (20:9), adultery (20:10), incest with the wife of one’s father or one’s daughter-in-law (20:11-12), male homosexuality (20:13), and bestiality (20:15-16). Furthermore, if a man had sexual relations with a mother and her daughter, all three were to be burned to death (20:14). Incest with a half-sister (20:17), sexual relations with a menstruate woman (20:18), incest with an aunt (20:19–20), and adultery with the wife of one’s brother (20:21) carried lesser, nevertheless, severe penalties. Offenders were to be cut off, that is, excluded from Israel. Or they would die childless. This was a penalty presumably enacted by God himself.

Note the extremely strong language used throughout this passage describing lawbreaking as “perversion” (20:12), “abomination” (20:13) and “depravity” (20:14). In the section following, further terms such as “disgrace” (20:17), “iniquity” (20:19) and “sin” (20:20) are added. The repeated phrase “their blood is upon them” (20:9, 11, 12, 13, 16, 27) insists that offenders are responsible for their actions and must bear their guilt. All of this follows upon the governing command throughout Leviticus 17-27: “Consecrate yourselves, therefore, and be holy, for I am the LORD your God.” (20:7)

What are we to make of such laws in twenty-first century cultures that have largely cut themselves adrift from any knowledge of the holy God of scripture? God’s people must lead the way in matters of morality. Indeed, we understand that the gospel of Christ has not lessened God’s requirements for pure living, rather ushered in grace and power for holy life unlike anything offered through the laws of Moses. The LORD has graciously delayed final judgment on human disobedience. He invites us all to die to sin and live to righteousness by the power of the Holy Spirit. Sexual purity and flourishing family life will be one of the most convincing ways by which we model true human freedom in our times and places. So it was in the first century when Paul wrote the following words to believers in Thessalonica:

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality, that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor, not in the passion of lust like the Gentiles who do not know God, that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you. For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you.<sup>40</sup>

So it is for us today, faced as we are by new idolatries and perversions of goodness, truth and beauty. May we lead our children into an understanding of freedom as not being about freedom from restrictions to my rights, rather about freedom from tyranny and deception as well as freedom for holy living both individually and within families.

### **Prayer**

LORD, we long to be fully free – free to be truly human, to serve you and to grow to maturity in Christ. We ask your forgiveness for our immorality. For those times that we have looked at pornography or lusted after others, we ask your forgiveness. We repent of our disobedience



and pray that your Holy Spirit will work in us a purity of heart and mind that will be honouring to you. Please sanctify us. Make us like Jesus. Surround us with godly people with whom we can form godly communities. Help us to be people of self-control. And as we teach young people, we ask that our example to them would always glorify you. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## Further Thoughts

“Your Body is a Battleground!”

The writing on the tee-shirt said: “Your body is a battleground!” Perhaps it should have said: “Your humanness is a battleground!” for it is not only human bodies that are the prize of war in twenty-first century societies but humans themselves – mind, soul, body, spirit – everything. This battle is at its fiercest in the area of human sexuality. What does it mean to be male? Female? Married? Is homosexuality acceptable for those who serve Christ? Can we choose our sexual preferences? Change them? Are we born the way we are and can't help the way we feel and behave?

All of these questions and many others need careful consideration if young people are to live holy lives. One organisation that has been established in Australia to advise young people about aspects of sexuality is Liberty Christian Ministries. Their website is: <http://www.libertychristianministries.org.au/> The following extract is from the final chapter of their excellent book “What Some of You Were: Stories About Christians and Homosexuality” which includes stories of people struggling with issues of sexual identity.

The teaching of the New Testament concerning sexual union between humans is consistent with the teaching of the Old Testament. The male-female union within the bond of marriage is the only sexual union sanctioned by God. The New Testament writers regularly cite occurrences of sexual immorality in the Old Testament as behaviour to be avoided. However, within this strict moral guideline, the New Testament also acknowledges the weakness of the flesh and the power of God's grace. While homosexual activity is clearly described by the apostle Paul as sin, it is not the only sin, nor the worst sin. There is no justification, therefore, in persecuting homosexuals in the name of Christian piety. ... The Christian faith will be true to the New Testament when it affirms both the purity of God's ways and the forgiveness that is available to those who truly repent.<sup>41</sup>

## Leviticus 23:15-22

### Focus Thoughts

In comparison with for example, John the Baptist, Jesus enjoyed food and drink. “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look at him! A glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’”<sup>42</sup> Jesus did frequent feasts. He enjoyed festivities. Luke's gospel account in particular relates many such events. And when Jesus attended a wedding at Cana and transformed water into the best wine, John relates that his glory was manifested.<sup>43</sup> If we are to rightly understand holiness, then we need to reconsider the place of feasting and remembrance in the holy life. The LORD gives considerable priority to such events in Old Testament scripture, indeed, both fasting and feasting receive much emphasis. This is never



more evident than in Leviticus 23.

After mention of the weekly Sabbath day (23:3), seven annual feasts are commanded – four associated with spring and early summer (March-April) and then about four months later, three associated with the autumn season (September-October). Our attention is drawn to the Feast of Weeks (23:15-22), the fourth in this annual cycle.

Shavuot (the Hebrew name for the Feast of Weeks) was to be held 50 days after Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (23:15-16). This was at the end of the wheat harvest and prior to the wine harvest. Able-bodied men from across Israel were commanded to attend for a single great day of festivity and thanksgiving in Jerusalem. Women, children and family groups also joined in. Offerings and sacrifices were made. Work was not allowed, only rest and celebration. “Leavened” bread was baked (23:17). This was the only feast during which that was the case!<sup>44</sup> And particular mention is made at the end of this passage of remembering the poor and those who were travelling (23:22). Four months would pass before the next day of national feasting. The summer gleanings were to be left for those who were most needy.

Many of God’s desires for his holy people were apparent on this day – a nation unified as they came together in Jerusalem to give thanks and celebrate, people who would cease work and trust in God’s provision, who were conscious of seasonal rhythms as evidence of God’s covenant faithfulness, who remembered well and rested willingly. And in future generations, this day would be invested with even greater significance. It was recognised as the day when the LORD gave Moses the Law on Mount Sinai. It came to be spoken of as the day on which Israel’s great King David was both born and died. The book of Ruth, a celebration of love, provision and renewal, was habitually read on this day in later generations. And subsequently, Messiah Jesus chose this day – the Day of Pentecost – on which to rain down the Holy Spirit on believers gathered in Jerusalem, fifty days after his crucifixion. What a day this became. What a feast!

If young people in our times and places are going to embrace holiness they must understand all of the contours of which we have been speaking – feasting, unity, remembrance, rest, thanksgiving, and the life-giving, life-enhancing presence of God through his Spirit. They must realise that celebration and festivity do not necessitate drunkenness, gluttony and immorality. They must model a different way, one embodied in the Feast of Weeks and then exemplified by Jesus himself. It is a great future feast that John envisions in the final book of scripture. He hears a booming voice, crying out:

“Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns.  
Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory,  
for the marriage of the Lamb has come,  
and his Bride has made herself ready,  
it was granted her to clothe herself  
with fine linen, bright and pure”–  
for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints.  
And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper  
of the Lamb.”



We look forward to the greatest party ever held as Christ completes his renewal of the cosmos! Surely our imaginations are alive to the joy and thanksgiving that will attend that occasion. May our children and students see in us the joy of the LORD and embrace the joy of holiness in their lives as we lead them today.

### **Prayer**

LORD, we marvel at the feast days of Israel. Thank you that you are the God of seasons and crops, of work and rest, of remembrance and hope, of fasting and feasting. Today we recognise again that around the world multitudes of people need food and water to live. They need rain to fall and crops to grow. So we ask you to have mercy on the world and through your mysterious sovereignty we pray that you will bless the nations. LORD, help us to be obedient to you and to serve others in our times and place. And help us to impart to our children and students are heart for the world for which Jesus died, that you love so much. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

## **Leviticus 23:33-43**

### **Focus Thoughts**

What are the hopes of the holy? For Israel, those hopes were richly represented by the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. The great Day of Atonement, explored briefly in previous reflections on Leviticus 16, came to be known simply as “The Day.” This Feast came to be referred to as “The Feast”!

It was to take place just five days after the Atonement Day and was the last of the seven annual feasts. Each of them has been outlined in this chapter from Leviticus – after mention of the weekly Sabbath (23:3), the spring festivals of Passover (23:4-5), Unleavened Bread (23:6-8), Firstfruits (23:9-14) and Weeks (23:15-22) and then following a four month period, the autumn festivals of Trumpets (23:23-25), Atonement (23:26-32) and Booths (23:33-43) are described. The feast of Booths was the final great feast in Israel's calendar – the seventh of seven – and the only one on which God's people were actually commanded to rejoice! (23:40)

After Israel entered the land, during the autumn months, the grapes and figs and olives would be harvested. Winter approached. Now was the time to pause and offer praise. Everyone would ready themselves for this national celebration that extended through a full week. On the first day there would be rest from ordinary work, and then again on the last day. As the festival began they were to gather “the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook” (23:40). From these they would fashion temporary shelters in which to live for the week, wooden booths in which to recall the great events of the exodus and the journey to Sinai. They would remember God's awesome power and kind provision. They would give thanks for his shelter from heat and storm. Hanging samples of the autumn crops in each booth, they would acknowledge his faithfulness. There would be singing and rejoicing, burnt, grain and drink offerings in addition to the normal sacrifices (23:34-36). And most importantly, the people would trust the LORD for his continued blessings on the land flowing with milk and honey so that human life would continue to flourish.



The most immediate hope that came to be associated with this great autumn festival was expressed in prayers for early rains, essential for the following year's crops. We are told that from the Temple in Jerusalem in generations to come, "on the eighth and final day of the feast, the high priest of Israel, in a great processional made up of priests and tens of thousands of worshipers, descended from the Temple Mount to pause briefly at the Pool of Siloam. A pitcher was filled with water, and the procession continued via a different route back to the Temple Mount. Here, in the midst of great ceremony, the high priest poured the water out of the pitcher on to the altar."<sup>45</sup> This ceremony was accompanied with prayers for the LORD to again bless Israel with rain for the year to come.

Jesus, with staggering boldness, chose to reveal himself at the Feast of Tabernacles in first century Jerusalem, as the source of life and hope. It was on the last day, the "great day" as John puts it in his gospel account, that Jesus stood up and cried out, "If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'"<sup>46</sup> The living water of which he spoke, John tells his readers, is the Holy Spirit. And what commenced at Pentecost with the outpouring of God's Spirit will be consummated at the return of Christ in the renewed creation. So John, in the final chapter of scripture, sees "the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city ..."<sup>47</sup> And so the hopes of the Feast of Booths are fully realised.

What are the hopes of the holy? That humans will delight in godliness. That individuals, families and communities will flourish in a world being renewed by the grace of God. Is it possible? Indeed. It is possible, by the grace of the gospel and the faithful agency of God's people as they are led by the Holy Spirit. And it will be accomplished completely at the return of Christ. May our hearts grasp this hope. May our young people develop holy imaginations as they look forward to and hasten that day.

### **Prayer**

Thank you Father that we have such enormous hope through your word. Thank you that because of Christ, we imagine a wonderful future, a world flourishing under your rule as a place of righteousness and peace. Help us to dream big dreams today! Enliven our minds and hearts by your Spirit. But we also know Lord that a mighty struggle continues. So please give us courage to represent you well, particularly in our families and through education and teaching. Help us to equip young people to think and act with clarity and conviction as agents of the kingdom of God. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **Further Thoughts**

#### **Let the Trumpet sound!<sup>48</sup>**

The Feast of Trumpets is the first of Israel's autumn feasts. It is so important in Jewish thinking that it stands alongside the Day of Atonement as a "high holy day" on the Jewish calendar. It commences the "ten days of awe" before the Great Day.

Messianic Jews understand that the interval of time between the last of the spring feasts



(Pentecost or Weeks) and the first of the autumn feasts (Trumpets) signifies the present age of the church. Thus, we are living, as it were, between Pentecost and Trumpets – Israel’s fourth and fifth feasts. The outpouring of God’s Spirit at Pentecost started the church age. Trumpets, signaling Christ’s final coming to rapture the church and judge the wicked, will end it.

The Feast of Trumpets occurred on the first day of the Hebrew month, Tishri. It was held at the new moon. Only the slightest crescent needed to be visible. However, clouds could obscure the moon so witnesses were required. Watchfulness became a critical ingredient of this feast. The rabbis later added a second day to this feast to make sure they didn’t miss it. This need for watchfulness and preparedness in connection with the Feast of Trumpets is echoed and reechoed throughout the New Testament in connection with the Lord’s coming:

... waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be set on fire and dissolved, and the heavenly bodies will melt as they burn! But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace.<sup>49</sup>

Those who would understand holiness will benefit from a deep understanding of Israel’s feasts. We also must cultivate a watchful expectation and confident hope in the return of Christ to bring about an entire new cosmos – a place of righteousness.

## Leviticus 24:10-16

### Focus Thoughts

Blasphemy. It is offensive to holiness. The Third of the Ten Commandments addressed it in general terms: “You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain, for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain.” Now this.

The event recounted in Leviticus 24 is one of the few narratives in the book. We have previously explored another like it – when Nadab and Abihu offered “unauthorized” fire at the Tent of Meeting, dishonouring the LORD. They were punished with death. Now this! In the midst of Israel’s camp the unthinkable occurs. The Name of the LORD is blasphemed. He is reviled, publicly, in the hearing of others. Yahweh is cursed.

A fight had broken out. Two men. Neither named. One a “man of Israel,” but the other, the son of a mixed marriage – of a Danite woman named Shelomith and an Egyptian man, a foreigner, one of the “mixed multitude” who had left Egypt with the Israelites and probably with mixed motives.<sup>51</sup> How was this young man to be dealt with? No one was certain. And so he was apprehended while Moses sought the LORD.

What is blasphemy? Two Hebrew words are used in 24:11. The first, translated “blasphemed” literally means to “make light of” or “make small.” It carries the idea of diminishing something, of treating it as though it was without value. This is the direct opposite of giving something its weight, of recognising its substance or worth. To blaspheme the LORD in this sense was to



disregard his sovereignty, to deny his lordship, to diminish his personhood. It was to trample God underfoot. For this to occur at Sinai, after the remarkable exodus events, was shameful, indeed unthinkable.

Then a second Hebrew word is used in 24:11. It is translated “cursed” and literally means to “pierce something” or to “bore through.” This term carries the idea of attacking God, of despising and wounding and finally rejecting the LORD. One commentator concludes that in the Old Testament scriptures, including this passage, to blaspheme means to insult God, either by attacking him directly or mocking him indirectly. Either way the glory and honor of God are lessened ...<sup>52</sup> Words or actions can be blasphemous. Either or both dishonour the LORD and diminish his glory.

Moses sought God’s guidance and it was clear. The crime of blasphemy was as serious as murder. The penalty must be death by stoning. In 24:23 the sentence was carried out. The nameless offender was escorted outside the camp. All who had heard him curse God stepped forward. They laid their hands on his head. In so doing, the contamination of what they had heard was transferred back to the blasphemer. They stepped back. The crowd closed in and crushed the guilty man with stones and rocks.

It is ironic and sad, indeed tragic, that Jesus Christ was accused, among other things, of blasphemy. Tried before the high priest Caiaphas, Jesus was asked if he was the Messiah, the Son of God. His answer: “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven”, elicited cries of “Blasphemy!” and the demand for a death sentence.<sup>53</sup> But his words were not blasphemous. They were true. Subsequently Stephen, a man filled with the Holy Spirit was also tried and condemned to death for blasphemy.<sup>54</sup> He claimed to have met God in the person of Christ Jesus, one who was greater than Moses and the Old Testament Law. Again, this was not blasphemy. It was truth.

New Testament authors warned of blasphemous words and actions as they instructed converts to Christ in the first century. James for example, accused the rich of blaspheming “the honorable name by which you were called” through their unjust treatment of the poor.<sup>55</sup> In the twenty-first century, we desperately need to regain a sober assessment of the weighty glory of God. We need to understand actions and words that belittle him as blasphemous. And we need to honour him as we go about our parenting and teaching. May we do so today.

### **Prayer**

LORD God, forgive us for our careless words and dishonouring actions. Forgive us that we so often fail to recognise the weightiness of your glory and power. Help us to think, act and speak in ways that glorify you. LORD, we remember Paul’s words to believers in Ephesus: “Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving.” We realise that we have been called to live as people of light not darkness and as people of hope not despair. May our words be thankful and edifying today. And may the young people in our care be built up in their faith in you. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.



## Further Thoughts

### Blasphemy against the Holy Spirit

In Matthew 12:31-32 Jesus speaks these words:

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.

Similar statements are found in Mark 3:28-30 and Luke 12:10. What is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit? Can I commit that sin? What about family members or friends? Is it really unforgivable? One theologian offers the following interpretation of Jesus' words in Matthew:

This is not the only place in the New Testament in which an unforgivable sin appears (Hebrews 6:4-6, 1 John 5:16). Christians have often tried to identify this sin with such things as murder, adultery, or divorce, and individual believers have often wondered if they have committed such a sin. Even if all the details are unclear, we should observe that in this text only Jesus' enemies are in any danger – those who have never professed any allegiance to him and, at least in the pages of Scripture, never do. Instead, they intensify their opposition to the point of crucifying him. Probably blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is nothing more or less than the unrelenting rejection of his advances. Jesus' teaching thus parallels Acts 4:12. If one rejects the Spirit of God in Jesus, there is no one else in all the cosmos who can provide salvation. But we dare never label anyone as having committed this sin. Only God knows human hearts, and we would often make the wrong guess. Moreover, professing believers who fear they have committed the unforgivable sin demonstrate a concern for their spiritual welfare which by definition proves they have not committed it.<sup>56</sup>

## Leviticus 26:1-13

### Focus Thoughts

Much of the rest of the Bible depends on a right understanding of Leviticus 26. This is not an overstatement. The fact that this chapter is virtually unknown by contemporary readers of scripture is shameful. Without it, holiness is misunderstood. God's dealings with Israel become completely baffling. Most seriously of all, the gospel is severely diminished and the obligations on all of us who seek to be holy people in the twenty-first century are likely to be reduced.

Leviticus 26 lists the blessings and curses of the covenant between God and Israel. The section on blessings, or rewards for obedience, extends from 26:3-13 and the section on curses, or punishments for disobedience, from 26:14-39. The section detailing curses is substantially longer! Then in 26:40-46 the LORD affirms his willingness to forgive disobedient Israel and bring them back to the land after exile.

There is a clear pattern throughout. Leviticus 26:3 establishes the conditions of the covenant – "If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them ." This is followed by a series of consequences or rewards for obedience commencing with the words in 26:4 –



“Then I will .” These consequences are land-based and include seasonal rains, abundant crops, victory over enemies and peace in Israel. The culminating promise in 26:12 is at the heart of the covenant: “And I will walk among you and will be your God, and you shall be my people.” The LORD’s presence among his faithful people is the ultimate covenant blessing.

The pattern occurs again with regard to the curses. Leviticus 26:14 states the condition – “But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments .” and is followed by a series of consequences in terms of curses on Israel starting in 26:16 – “Then I will do this to you .” The curses are also land-based. They include disease, failed crops, a hostile earth, wild beasts and defeat in battle ultimately leading to exile from the land: “I will scatter you among the nations . and your land shall be a desolation” (26:33). If Israel is disobedient to God, he will forsake his people. This will be evident because they will forfeit the land. The covenant will appear to have failed.

How are twenty-first century readers of scripture to make sense of this? Israel had been set free from slavery in Egypt by God’s grace. They had been called into friendship with the holy LORD not because of anything they had done but purely by God’s choice. Leviticus 26:13 says as much – “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that you should not be their slaves.” However, having entered into relationship with Yahweh, Israel was bound to love and obey him. They had freely accepted this obligation in Exodus 19 prior to receiving the Ten Commandments – “All that the LORD has spoken we will do!” they cried out.<sup>57</sup> But Israel failed to obey God. They came under the severe covenant curses of Leviticus 26.

Generations would pass before a holy Israelite king would not only keep the Law on behalf of his people but then willingly take on himself the curses of the Law so that God’s forgiveness could flow not only to Jewish people but to all the nations, just as the LORD had promised Abraham. This Israelite king willingly went into exile under God’s punishment! Of course we are speaking about Messiah Jesus. New Testament authors understand the gospel in these terms. At the cross, in an ultimate sense, Jesus became subject to all of the curses of Leviticus 26. Thus Paul writes to the Galatians: “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’ – so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”<sup>58</sup>

What are the obligations for all who trust Christ in the twenty-first century? They are not less than those on Israel. They are more. For having received the Holy Spirit, we are charged with living Christlike lives in our generation. Having received grace upon grace, God’s overwhelming gift of forgiveness, we must speak and act in holiness with hearts and minds renewed by God’s presence in our lives and throughout our communities. We are bound to do so. Israel was invited to walk erect with heads held high (Leviticus 26:13). May we do so even more by the grace of the gospel in our times and places.

Prayer

LORD, we are under a holy obligation. You have called us to be your people. We have received from you grace upon grace. Today we ask that we might be found faithful as we go about our tasks for you. We love the image of walking tall, with heads held high! We recognise Jesus as



the King of Kings whose name is above all others, whose integrity is without blemish, whose humanness is complete, who is perfect and glorious in all aspects of his being. May we walk tall in Christ our Lord. May we exemplify you today as we lead young people into truth and righteousness. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

<sup>32</sup>Matthew 22:37 and 22:39

<sup>33</sup>Matthew 22:40

<sup>34</sup>This illustration was accessed on 7 July 2008 from: <http://elbourne.org/sermons/index.mv?illustration+1433>

<sup>35</sup>Leviticus 18:21, 20:2, 3, 4, 5, I Kings 11:7, II Kings 23:10, Jeremiah 32:35

<sup>36</sup>Freeman, J. M., & Chadwick, H. J. (1998). *Manners & customs of the Bible*. "Rewritten and updated by Harold J. Chadwick"--Cover., Includes index. (Rev. ed.) (155). North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers.

<sup>37</sup>Colossians Remixed ...

<sup>38</sup>Lewis, C. S. (1967). *Letter to an American Lady*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company. P. 19

<sup>39</sup>See Sydney Morning Herald articles on 5 and 6 June 2008, accessed on 6 July 2008 from: <http://www.smh.com.au/>

<sup>40</sup>1 Thessalonians 4:3-8

<sup>41</sup>Keane, C. (Ed.). (2001). *What Some of You Were: Stories About Christians and Homosexuality*. Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media. Pp. 163-164

<sup>42</sup>Matthew 11:19

<sup>43</sup>John 2:1-12

<sup>44</sup>Some Jewish commentators suggest that ...

<sup>45</sup>See "The Feast of Tabernacles" accessed on 6 July 2008 from: <http://www.christcenteredmall.com/teachings/feasts/tabernacles.htm>

<sup>46</sup>John 7:37-38

<sup>47</sup>Revelation 22:1-2

<sup>48</sup>The thoughts in this article are a summary and paraphrase of material accessed on 10 July 2008 from: <http://www.christcenteredmall.com/teachings/feasts/>

<sup>49</sup>2 Peter 3:12-14

<sup>50</sup>Leviticus 10:1-7

<sup>51</sup>This reference to the "mixed multitude" is from Exodus 12:38

<sup>52</sup>Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible*. Map on lining papers. (363). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House

<sup>53</sup>See Matthew 26:64 ff.

<sup>54</sup>Acts 6:11 ff.

<sup>55</sup>James 2:7

<sup>56</sup>Blomberg, C. (2001, c1992). Vol. 22: Matthew (electronic ed.). Logos Library System, The New American Commentary (204). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

<sup>57</sup>Exodus 19:8

<sup>58</sup>Galatians 3:13-14