

GOD WITH US
Part 1: The Great Blessing
Genesis – Deuteronomy

Message 9 – Holy Days and Ceremonies
Leviticus 16-27

Introduction

While the first half of Leviticus focused on sacrifices and the priesthood, the second half focuses on the life of the nation as a whole, as the people learn to live with the Holy God in their midst. Many laws focus on maintaining the holiness of the people. To represent Yahweh well to the surrounding nations – their ‘kingdom of priests’ job (Exodus 19:5,6) – they must maintain ways of living that are distinctly reflective of the character of their God. ***“I am the Lord who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; thus you shall be holy, for I am holy” (Lev.11:45).*** One major way the people will renew their commitment to this charge is through the national holy days, or feasts. Instructions concerning these ‘big days’ play a central role in this part of Leviticus.

Day of Atonement Ritual Instructions: 16:1-34

The annual Day of Atonement was celebrated on the 10th day of the seventh month. The purpose was to confess the sins of the entire nation and for the High Priest to offer a blood sacrifice *within the Most Holy Place* on behalf of all the people. If one’s sins had not been dealt with through the regular daily sacrifices, or if there was no provision given to atone for a specific sin, the worshiper could humbly come to the Day of Atonement with the hope that Yahweh would forgive his/her sin in the one act of national purification. This was the only day *anyone* could enter the Most Holy Place (also called The Holy of Holies).

“On the tenth day of the appointed month in early autumn, you must deny yourselves. Neither native-born Israelites nor foreigners living among you may do any kind of work. This is a permanent law for you. On that day offerings of purification will be made for you, and you will be purified in the Lord’s presence from all your sins. It will be a Sabbath day of complete rest for you, and you must deny yourselves. This is a permanent law for you. In future generations, the purification ceremony will be

performed by the priest who has been anointed and ordained to serve as high priest in place of his ancestor Aaron. He will put on the holy linen garments and purify the Most Holy Place, the Tabernacle, the altar, the priests, and the entire congregation. This is a permanent law for you, to purify the people of Israel from their sins, making them right with the Lord once each year” (16:29-34).

Law of the Blood: 17:1-16

This chapter stresses the importance of *the blood* in the religious life of Israel. There was to be no slaughter of an ox, lamb or goat without the blood being brought before the Lord at the Tabernacle. There was also to be no eating of flesh “with the blood in it.” Even when a bird or a beast was captured in the wild, its blood was to be poured out and covered with dirt. The reason for such regulations is stated clearly:

“ . . . for the life of the body is in its blood. I have given you the blood on the altar to purify you, making you right with the Lord. It is the blood, given in exchange for a life, that makes purification possible. That is why I have said to the people of Israel, ‘You must never eat or drink blood—neither you nor the foreigners living among you’ (17:11,12).

Clearly, without the shedding of blood there could be *no forgiveness of sin*. Thus, the blood was of the highest value in maintaining the relationship between God and His people. (See Addendum on pp.110,111 for further discussion of the blood.)

Laws concerning sexual practices: 18:1-30

Human sexuality is a gift from God, to be enjoyed in keeping with His instructions. Yet, sexual practices typically become degraded as people drift away from the Creator God. This was the case among both the Egyptians (Israel’s former environment) and the Canaanites (Israel’s future environment). Thus, Yahweh strongly warned His people to maintain purity in the enjoyment of God-given sexual privileges, and to avoid the practices of the surrounding culture. How could Israel be a testimony to God’s character if they were drawn into the perverse practices of their neighbors? (Note: Many of these forbidden sexual practices were part of the *religious practices* of the surrounding nations. Israel’s way of life *and* way of worship were to be entirely distinct from their pagan neighbors.)

“Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways, for the people I

am driving out before you have defiled themselves in all these ways. Because the entire land has become defiled, I am punishing the people who live there. I will cause the land to vomit them out. You must obey all my decrees and regulations. You must not commit any of these detestable sins. This applies both to native-born Israelites and to the foreigners living among you” (18:24-26).

Laws governing personal holiness: 19:1-20:27

Not only are the 10 commandments repeated here, but also other laws governing personal conduct and holiness. The intent behind all of these laws was twofold: 1) To prepare the Israelites to enter into God’s holy presence, and 2) to set apart their behavior from the surrounding peoples, so that they could be a clear witness to the character of Yahweh, their God.

“Thus you are to be holy to Me, for I the Lord am holy; and I have set you apart from the peoples to be Mine” (20:26).

There is special gravity in God’s warnings concerning the pagan practice of sacrificing infants in fire to Molech (20:1-5). The belly of the iron Molech idol was open with a fire kept burning inside. The worshiper would deliver his/her infant into the slide-like arms leading to the fiery belly of Molech, in hopes of appeasing the god and obtaining financial favor and future offspring. The worship of Canaanite gods such as Molech, Ashtoreth, Baal and others continued to plague Israel for 1,000 years after Moses. This was their most grievous sin against Yahweh, leading to their eventual expulsion from the Promised Land. It was not until the Post-exilic period (400BC) that Israel was finally ‘cured’ from idolatry.

Laws concerning the holiness of the Priests: 21:1-22:16

In their role as mediators between God and His people, the Levitical priests served within the holy spaces of the Tabernacle. Therefore, their lives required unique levels of holiness. They lived under laws not applying to ordinary persons. The priests had to remain constantly vigilant that they did not endanger the worship system by profaning the holy place through their own uncleanness. By reason of their devotion to Yahweh, their personal freedoms were more restricted. Of course, the earlier incident involving the sin of Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron the High Priest, made very clear the severity of sin in the case of spiritual leaders (Leviticus 10).

Just as all Israelites were, in a sense, “priests” of God to the world, so the New Testament teaches that all followers of Christ are “priests.” As such, we are to pursue holiness as God’s representatives here on earth. Peter wrote this in his first epistle, as he addressed the early Christians: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation” (1Peter 2:9-12).

Laws concerning flawless sacrifices: 22:17-33

Significant attention is given to the necessity of bringing visibly flawless sacrifices to Yahweh. If any animal had a visible defect, it was to be rejected as an offering to the Lord. Sadly, by the close of the Old Testament period, God was decrying through the prophet Malachi the constant bringing of flawed sacrifices: ***“But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?” says the Lord of hosts . . . “Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar! I am not pleased with you,” says the Lord of hosts, “nor will I accept an offering from you” (Malachi 1:8-10).*** God desires our love, and our love for Him is shown when we bring Him our very best, not our second best.

The National Holy Days: 23:1-44

One of the primary ways that God gave the Israelites to preserve and pass on their faith was the ‘holy days’ of national religious celebration. These special days, or ‘feasts,’ were as regular as the weekly Sabbath day, or as big and complex as the major once-a-year festivals. Essentially, these were Covenant-renewal ceremonies, calling the people back to the terms of the Covenant they entered into with Yahweh at Mt. Sinai. Three of the feasts called for every male to go to Jerusalem. Thus, the entire nation would be represented three times a year to renew their pledge to live as God’s nation of priests in this world (Exodus 19:5,6).

The following chart summarizes the key holy days prescribed by God, along with their purposes.

Name	Purpose
Sabbath	A holy day of rest, celebrating God's rest after creation.
Passover	Celebrating God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt.
Unleavened Bread	Dedicating to God the first crops/recalling the "bread of haste" and quick departure from Egypt.
Firstfruits	Praising God for the harvest and dedication of the first portion of the later crops (wheat).
Weeks (Pentecost)	Fifty days after Firstfruits, the celebration of the full harvest season.
Trumpets	Celebrating the beginning of the civil new year.
Day of Atonement	Atonement for the sins of the entire nation.
Tabernacles (Booths)	Celebrating God's provision throughout the wilderness years.

Sabbath: The weekly Sabbath (day of rest) formed the foundation for Israel's religious life. Note how this is evident from the fact that Sabbath-keeping is one of the Ten Commandments (in fact, the longest of all 10). All work ceased at sundown on Friday, with Sabbath observances continuing into the evening and all day Saturday until sundown. The purpose of the Sabbath was to rest, to acknowledge God's provision and rule in one's life, and to renew commitment to the Covenant with Yahweh. Failure to observe the Sabbath was a serious sin, essentially a sign of complete disregard for Yahweh's place in one's life.

Passover: The Passover commemorated Israel's deliverance from the bondage of Egypt, particularly the saving of their firstborn by means of the blood of the sacrificial lamb (Exodus 12). Recall that at the time of the first Passover, God instructed Israel that this would be "a night to remember" for all future generations. This

was one of the 3 annual feasts requiring the presence of all males in Jerusalem. Today, we who are “covered by the blood of the Lamb” are saved from God’s judgment. The Lord’s Supper was the Passover meal (Matt. 26:17-27). Jesus gave Himself as our Passover Lamb. ***“Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us” (1 Cor.5:7).***

The Feast of Unleavened Bread: This weeklong festival followed directly on the heels of Passover. It recalled the night of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt when they were instructed to eat the bread of haste (with no leaven in it). During this week, the Israelites scoured their homes removing every trace of leaven. In later biblical theology, leaven is a symbol of ‘evil’ (see 1 Cor. 5:6-8, Gal. 5:9). Christ our Passover Lamb cleanses us from sin and by His Holy Spirit’s power in our lives we are free from the power of sin. We are called to leave our old lives (leaven) behind, just as the Israelites did: ***“Clean out the old leaven so that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ our Passover also has been sacrificed. Therefore let us celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor.5:7,8).***

The Feast of First Fruits: This celebration occurred on the 2nd day of the Feast of Unleavened bread (right after Passover). It signified gratitude to and dependence upon God (Lev. 23:9-14). A sheaf of barley, the first grain of the new harvest season, was brought to the priest, who waved it before the Lord (Deut. 26:1-11). It was a thank-offering to the Lord for His provisions that would be enjoyed through the coming harvest. In the New Testament, the resurrection of Jesus is likened to the First Fruits: ***“But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming, then comes the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power” (1 Corinthians 15:20-24).***

The Feast of Weeks (Pentecost): “Pentecost” is Greek for fiftieth. This Feast started 50 days after the First Fruits festival. While First Fruits celebrated the beginning of the harvest, the Feast of Weeks celebrated the end of harvest. It was on the Day of Pentecost that God chose to pour out the Holy Spirit from heaven

and give birth to the Church (Acts 2). The death and resurrection of Jesus (occurring at the time of Passover and First Fruits) was now beginning to yield its full harvest of souls (Pentecost) as new believers poured into the family of God on that day.

The Feast of Trumpets/Rosh Hashanah/Jewish New Year:

Following the four spring festivals, there was a season of silence before the final three fall festivals. The first festival of fall was the Feast of Trumpets. The trumpet (shofar) was blown, causing the people to gather to hear God's Word. They were to feel the solemnity of living in this world as God's representatives under a holy covenant to represent Him well to the nations. There was also a sense that someday Israel would be called to a day of judgment for how they had, or had not, fulfilled their God-given duties. This feast reminds us of the trumpet blast that will sound at the second coming of Christ into our world (1 Thess. 4:16.) The sounding of that trumpet signals the day of God's judgment upon the world as all are called to account for how they have responded to God's mercies demonstrated at the first coming of Christ as the Lamb.

The Day of Atonement/Yom Kippur: Ten days after the Feast of Trumpets ended the Day of Atonement began. This was a solemn day for all of Israel to humble their hearts in repentance before their God due to their sin. The Day was the one on which the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies each year to make an offering for the sins of Israel. He would first of all have to make a blood sacrifice *for his own sins*, and then for the sins of the people. Part of the ritual of this day involved two goats, one of which would be sacrificed before the Lord, while the other would be released into the wilderness as the 'scapegoat,' symbolizing the carrying away of the sins of the nation. The New Testament teaches that on the day of Christ's death he was the true High Priest, entering into the true Holy Place (the presence of God in heaven) thereby providing permanent access to God for all who would come under His blood and approach in His name. ***"But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:11,12).***

The Fest of Tabernacles/Booths: The seventh and final feast took place five days after the Day of Atonement. For seven days the Israelites presented offerings to the Lord, during which time they

lived in huts made from palm branches. Living in booths recalled their sojourn in the wilderness after they came out of Egypt, prior to taking the land of Canaan (Leviticus 23:43).

The Lamp and the Bread in the Tabernacle: 25:1-9

Special instructions are given for the maintenance of light and bread inside the Holy Place of the Tabernacle. The design of the Lamp was given in Exodus 25:31-40. The seven oil lights were to be kept perpetually burning. This lamp was the *only* source of light within the sacred Tabernacle. Its symbolism was likely dual: first signifying God's perpetual presence with the Israelites, and secondly signifying the role of Israel to be a light unto the nation, pointing them to God. The twelve loaves of bread represented the 12 tribes of Israel. The twelve loaves were replaced weekly on the Sabbath Day, the previous loaves being eaten by the priests within the Holy Place. The loaves represented the twelve tribes of Israel. The fact that the representation involved loaves on a table likely symbolized God's willingness to have fellowship (meal) with the people of Israel, as they entered into His holy presence via sacrifice. Jesus pointed to Himself as *both* the bread and the light. In John's gospel, Jesus called Himself *the bread* that comes out of heaven to give life to the world, and also *the light* that comes from heaven to shine in the darkness.

The Sabbatical Year and the Year of Jubilee: 25:1-22

Aside from the weekly Sabbath Day, there were other very important "Sabbaths" that Israel was to observe. Every seventh year the entire land was to be given a year of rest. No crops could be sown or harvested in that year. Israel had to depend upon God for provisions from the previous six years, sufficient to meet their needs in the seventh year. (Failure to observe these Sabbatical Years caused God to establish the duration of Israel's later captivity in Babylon at 70 years, as they had forsaken the Sabbatical Year tradition for 490 years!)

Furthermore, every 50th year was to be a Year of Jubilee. This was a year of *entire release of debts* and *reversal of fortunes*.

"You shall thus consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim a release through the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family. You shall have the fiftieth year as a jubilee; you shall not sow, nor reap its aftergrowth, nor gather in from its untrimmed vines. For it is a jubilee; it shall be

holy to you. You shall eat its crops out of the field” (Leviticus 25:10-13).

The economic implications of this Year of Jubilee were staggering, as it involved the return of *all property* lost through hardship (v.28), and the forgiveness of *all debts* likewise incurred. This meant that the *economic playing field of Israel was re-leveled every 50th year*. Those who had become rich were suddenly less rich, and those who had become poor were suddenly less poor. This should cause us to wonder what God thinks of modern economic systems that tend to permanently indenture the poor and empower the rich to become even richer. Would God prefer that capitalistic societies, such as ours, also contain a scheduled “do-over date?”

Imagine the relief that a deeply indebted person would feel when the Year of Jubilee rolled around! All wrongs were forgotten, all hardships reversed, all losses regained. How interesting that Jesus used the Year of Jubilee as the picture to describe His earthly mission. In His opening sermon in His home synagogue at Nazareth, He announced His mission as the onset of the favorable Year of the Lord (Jubilee): “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.” And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (Luke 4:18-21). In Jesus, things are reversed for us! Our sins are gone; our debt undone; our dirt washed away; our inheritance restored; our Paradise regained!

Laws governing redemption rights: 25:23-55

Prominent in these laws is the idea that God does not want the poor and oppressed to be permanently taken advantage of. There must be legitimate ways for those on the losing end to recapture their losses at fair redemption rates. Most interesting is to see how God instructs the Israelites concerning *interest rates*:

“Now in case a countryman of yours becomes poor and his means with regard to you falter, then you are to sustain him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you. Do not take usurious interest from him, but revere your God, that your countryman may live with you. You shall not give him your silver at interest, nor your food for gain. I am the Lord your God, who

brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God” (25:35-38).

Essentially the message is this: We *all* owe *all* that we have to God; thus, who are we to *take advantage of others* through our wealth? We should be generous, just as God is generous.

Interesting practicalities may arise from these ancient words for those today that earn wealth in ways that involve loans at interest. There seems to be nothing wrong with charging a modest, or ‘fair’ interest rate to someone who borrows money from you. On the other hand, there IS something wrong with charging exorbitant interest rates to anyone, either directly or indirectly. Much of our modern wealth is obtained through investing, so we must use wisdom here. For example, I once had an opportunity to invest in a fund that specialized in ‘buying up’ high interest debt. The potential returns of this fund were attractive; but when I dug into what might be happening far down the line, in some real person’s life, I had the sense that I might end up profiting greatly at the expense of another’s unfortunate indebtedness. This passage from Leviticus caused me to put my investment money elsewhere. Is there any way that you are using your current, God-given wealth to take advantage of the oppressed and increase their burden?

Blessings for obedience and penalties for disobedience: 26:1-46

The entire book of Leviticus was intended to be read as *a part of the Covenant treaty* made between God and Israel at Mt. Sinai. This becomes clear from the closing line of chapter 26:

“These are the statutes and ordinances and laws which the Lord established between Himself and the sons of Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai (26:46).

Thus, closing lines in the Covenant involve blessings for fulfillment of covenant responsibilities, and penalties for disobeying the stipulations. The foremost ‘blessing,’ the ongoing presence of Yahweh in Israel’s midst, is listed last:

“Moreover, I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt so that you would not be their slaves, and I broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect” (26:11-13).

The right to have Yahweh dwelling in their midst was, truly, Israel’s greatest privilege. Similarly, our relationship with God

Himself is our greatest prize! Not what He gives; but the Giver Himself.

The penalties for disobedience are severe, and they increase over time, IF Israel fails to repent and turn back to God. The ultimate judgment will be expulsion from the Promised Land (so that it can enjoy those neglected Sabbatical years) and being handed over to enslavement among the nations (to whom they were *supposed to be priests and witnesses of God*).

Yet, the closing note is one of divine mercy. Even if Israel disobeys the covenant, and even if they are sent into a terrible captivity . . .

“Yet in spite of this, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God. But I will remember for them the covenant with their ancestors, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, that I might be their God. I am the Lord” (26:44,45).

As Paul wrote in Romans 11:29 – “*the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.*” He is the great Promise-keeper, even for His Promise-breaking sons and daughters!!! Oh what a marvelously faithful and loyal love is our God.

Laws governing redemption of things vowed to God: 27:1-34

The final chapter of Leviticus reads something like an addendum to a contract. It concerns redemption prices assigned to things that might have been vowed to the Lord (promised to Him), where the vow was not fulfilled. The principle is very clear: God takes our vows seriously. The book of Deuteronomy will make this specific:

“When you make a vow to the Lord your God, you shall not delay to pay it, for it would be sin in you, and the Lord your God will surely require it of you. However, if you refrain from vowing, it would not be sin in you. You shall be careful to perform what goes out from your lips, just as you have voluntarily vowed to the Lord your God, what you have promised” (Deut. 23:21-23).

Afterword: Law is Grace in Disguise

When you read through a book like Leviticus, you might come away saying: *Laws, laws and more laws! Why all the laws? What ever happened to GRACE?* Yes, there are a lot of laws in Leviticus. However, upon closer thought, all of these laws are grace in disguise. Step back from the laws and consider what is

being offered to Israel: *Fellowship with Yahweh, the one true God. He is offering Himself to them. The laws are simply the access code to the presence of the Living God.*

Perhaps an analogy will help. Suppose a friend invites me to play golf at Oakland Hills Country Club, one of the finest courses in the world. The greatest names in the history of golf have walked this course. Now, I am being offered the opportunity of a lifetime, to walk in their footsteps and play “The Monster.”

In preparation for my visit to Oakland Hills, my friend tells me that there are some very important “rules” governing the day. 1) I cannot wear my cut-off jean shorts. 2) I must wear a properly collared golf-shirt. 3) I must have on real golf shoes, not gym shoes. 4) I cannot enter the club through the main dining area; but must enter through Men’s Locker Room. 5) I am not permitted to use my cell phone when we are in the clubhouse. 6) I must use either a caddy or a golf cart. 7) When I enter the grounds I must stop at the shack and check in with the guard. He will require a member’s name in order for me to go any further. 8) It will not be appropriate for me to ask for autographs from every famous person I see on the course that day!

Upon hearing this rather extensive list of “laws,” what would I say? *Ughh! What a bunch of rules! Forget about it.*

No, I don’t think so. Because I’d have my eye on the big picture: *I get to play Oakland Hills! What a story I’m going to have to tell my buddies!!! I’ll do whatever I have to in order to get this privilege.* The “rules” are the means of access to the GRACE – in this case, the gracious offer from my friend to be his guest at this great course. The unique privilege requires unique rules.

Similarly, when we step back from Leviticus, we must ask: What is the big picture here, behind all of these rules and laws? *The people of Israel are being given the unique opportunity to have Yahweh dwell in their midst. They are given the special privilege of being His representatives on the earth. They can actually go “to God’s tent” and have a mean with Him! They can have Yahweh guiding and empowering their lives. They get to do things that no other nation gets to do.*

The unique privilege (GRACE) requires unique rules (LAW).

Yahweh Himself IS their prize. The “rules” are simply the access code into His presence. Law is, then, grace in disguise.