
A Holy God Lives Among Us

DAVE BAST

When we experience a major change in our lives, the question we tend to ask ourselves is: Now what? The honeymoon was great; you moved into your new home, now what? You started a new job; showed up at the office, met your colleagues, now what? You finally made it to retirement; you wake up the first morning, now what? Now what is the question we are addressing in this new *Groundwork* series entitled: How to live in God's presence. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and Scott, we are beginning a new series, and it is all going to be looking at the book of Leviticus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which is a book we have not looked at, I don't think, before on *Groundwork*, and that probably won't be a shock to a lot of listeners.

DAVE BAST

It seems like by the time you got to Leviticus, it was starting to bog down a bit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, and it actually kind of starts in Exodus. I mean, Exodus is a fast-paced drama for the first twenty chapters. You get through the Ten Commandments, and then things slow down. We start getting rules, regulations, building instructions for the tabernacle; then those building instructions get repeated in the actual building of the tabernacle; and then you get to Leviticus and it is laws upon laws; but as we will see, Dave, there are wonderful things in this book...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it also still has wonderful relevance and resonance for our lives.

DAVE BAST

Leviticus 16 tells the story of the Day of Atonement—Yom Kippur—still the holiest day of the year for the Jewish people; and a day that for Christians clearly has much to say pointing toward Christ in the great sacrifices that were offered then; or you think of a verse like Leviticus 19:18, which Jesus quoted. It says: Love your neighbor as yourself. That is part of the two commandments that summarize the Law.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, what we want to do in this series...this program...the first program of four, as you said, Dave, an overview. What does it mean to live in the presence of God? That is sort of the question. The people of Israel

have been rescued from Egypt, they are now a nation—a covenant people with God. God wants to live in their midst. What does that mean? So, we will do a little overview. In our next program, we will think about holiness, and what does it mean to be holy, as Leviticus calls us to be. The third program on the whole sacrificial system. Why was sacrifice needed to atone for sin? In the final program, we will look at an interesting theme in Leviticus, and that is who do we treat the strangers, the aliens, the immigrants, the foreigners in our midst? It is kind of a big concern for God and for God's people. That will be the final program in this series.

DAVE BAST

To begin with, we might just talk about its name...its title. In the Hebrew Torah—the first five books of the Bible—the names are taken from the opening words in Hebrew; and in the case of Leviticus, the opening word is *vayikra*, which means “and he called” and the one who calls is the Lord, and the one whom he calls is Moses. So this is an introduction to the instructions that God is going to give Moses that is literally the Word of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is interesting, Dave, the Hebrew titles for the first five books of the Bible are always just the first couple of words, and if you know the Hebrew titles, you see that indeed these books are all in sequence. The Hebrew title of Genesis is “In the beginning,” then Exodus is “These are the names” (of all the descendants of Joseph who are in Egypt); now Leviticus, “and he called”. Now God is going to talk to Moses. Numbers, the Hebrew title is “In the wilderness,” and then Deuteronomy is actually “These are the words of Moses” (in his final sermon as the people leave the wilderness and go into the Promised Land. So, the books follow on each other...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And Dave, it is very important to notice that Leviticus follows on the end of Exodus.

DAVE BAST

And in fact, maybe we should look at the way the book of Exodus closes in order to set up the significance of Leviticus for us. So, here are the last few verses of Exodus Chapter 40, the final verses in that book: ³⁴Then the cloud...(and that *cloud* refers to the divine glory—the *shekinah*—that represented the presence of God) the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. ³⁵Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. ³⁶In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; ³⁷but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out until the day it lifted. ³⁸So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, that is the climax of the book of Exodus, which also helps bookend from the beginning of Genesis. In the beginning of Genesis, Adam and Eve fell into sin and were exiled from God's presence. Now, God is starting to make his move to rejoin his people; and so now at the end of Exodus, God has kind of moved in. He has moved into the tabernacle...end of Exodus. First line of Leviticus 1: And now God...(from that tabernacle) God calls Moses over; and he called and said: Okay, now that I have moved in, here is what you need to do to keep me here. If a holy God is going to live with these people, they are going to have to do some things to be distinctive, so that God can stay with them; and that sets up the entire book of Leviticus.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, if we ask ourselves where in the journey does this all take place, the answer is, we are still at Mount Sinai.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, Exodus chose the dramatic story of how the Israelites escaped from Egypt. You know, that is the first twenty chapters that you talked about, Scott. It is pretty exciting; and so, there are the plagues that happened; Moses and Aaron are sent to announce: Let my people go; and Pharaoh digs in his heels, and finally he has to give up because of the terrible things that have happened; and they escape through the Red Sea, and the Egyptian host is destroyed; and then they come to Mount Sinai, and the people are terrified on Mount Sinai because God is kind of scary, and so they ask Moses to speak on their behalf; and they build the tabernacle. God comes down, he fills it, but we are still there. Now, for the book of Leviticus, they haven't moved on yet...they haven't reached the Promised Land. There are some things they need to learn, and that is exactly what we are told in Leviticus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And unfortunately, if we just look ahead a little bit, they don't learn things terribly well because by the time you get to Numbers, which as we just said, the Hebrew title is "In the wilderness", they have a fall-off of faith quite quickly, and end up being in the wilderness for forty years; but right, this is where we are. The people were terrified of God, but God does want to show them what they need to do if they are going to keep God's presence with them as they travel. Eventually, if we look way down the road, the tabernacle...the tent of meeting...will be succeeded by the Temple in Jerusalem that ultimately Solomon will build, and then God will move in there and will sit on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant; but Leviticus asks the question: How do we live with God? We are sinful people...we are fallen people...but what can we do to live faithfully with God without God having to, you know, leave us, or without our being killed on account of the holiness of God, and so forth? So, what does this mean? How are the people going to do it? We will dig into a lot of the in the book of Leviticus in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, we were just saying that the message of the tabernacle, the Ark of the Covenant, the way the book of Exodus ended with God's holy and divine presence moving into the midst of his people Israel, that sets the stage for Leviticus; and here is how Leviticus begins: The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting, and said, ²"Speak to the Israelites and say to them, 'When any one among you brings an offering to the Lord, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock.'"

So, we start out very early, right in the first chapter, Dave, with this whole matter to which the entire third program of this series will be dedicated, this idea of sacrifice. They are going to have to keep doing things to keep their relationship with God intact.

DAVE BAST

Exactly; so, there are seven full chapters at the beginning of Leviticus pointing all these different offerings; and we will say a little something about each of them in a bit; but in addition to that, this had to happen sort of daily...constantly...because as we saw at the end of Exodus, they never went anywhere without God. God was the one who signaled with this cloud of glory and fire at night when they were to move and when they were to stop, and it would settle on the tabernacle; and the point is, that is not especially safe if you just kind of casually take it for granted, because it is a little bit like having some radioactive material in your kitchen...right in the middle of your house. You better have a shield of some sort to protect you from that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And unfortunately, early in the narrative...we don't often think of Leviticus as having a lot of narrative...a lot of story. We think about it as all laws, and a lot of it is, but there are narratives in here, and there is a very sad story involving some of the sons of Aaron, right? So, we call this book Leviticus because it is about the Levites...about the priesthood, and here we read in Leviticus 10:

Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu took their censers, put fire in them, and added incense; and they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord, contrary to his command. ²So fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord. ³Moses then said to Aaron, "This is what the Lord spoke of when he said, 'Among those who approach me, I will be proved holy; in the sight of all the people, I will be honored.'" Aaron remained silent.

Then there is a little more of a story about disposing of the bodies of Nadab and Abihu, but this is a very disturbing story.

DAVE BAST

Yes; right, absolutely; and it is one of many, especially in the Old Testament. There is a lot there that puzzles us. So, interestingly, we are introduced to this idea that is going to become the major theme of Leviticus, as we will see in our next program; the holiness of God, the complete, utter, absolute holiness. So, God says: Look, I will be proved holy in the sight of everyone. You are not going to mess with me; and apparently, these two sons of Aaron, who had seniority as the oldest...they were going to be the chief priests after him...but they die because of offering something that was improper...something that was illegitimate; and that bothers us, and it bothered Aaron, certainly; and then he is told by Moses: Now don't you grieve. You keep going. You've been ordained to the priesthood and you cannot break that or interrupt it. You have got to hang in there. So, there is a very sort of solemn setting here, as if to underscore the importance of doing these sacrifices just right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And again, we were saying, in Exodus the people of Israel at Sinai were terrified of God. So God spoke only to Moses; and now you sort of have this idea that, well, there might be reason for a little holy terror. Here are two people who, in the sight of the Israelites are zapped by God...killed on the spot; but this is one of those stories, Dave, that is very early in the history of Israel, and there is this sense in which a lot of the Old Testament is actually...well, ideally it was supposed to be the maturing of Israel...they have to grow up...they have to learn things...they are a very immature people right now; and so, consider this to be a very grim, fatal, object lesson that the holiness of God and the presence of God is nothing to be trifled with...

DAVE BAST

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You don't take it for granted, you don't break God's rules with impunity. So, Nadab and Abihu are a little headstrong, maybe. They get out ahead of themselves, they get out of their skins, they do something God didn't ask them to do in a way God told them not to do it. Now, the punishment seems kind of stiff, but again, this is part of the education of the people of Israel, and this is a very tough lesson, but it is meant to teach them something about how serious the presence of God in their midst really is.

DAVE BAST

Yes; as you were saying that, Scott, I thought of another story that comes later in the Old Testament; the story of Uzzah. He is the guy who put out his hand to steady the Ark when it was being moved on a cart in the time of David, and he died on the spot, because you just don't mess with the holy things...you don't do anything in an unauthorized way, including hauling the Ark around on a cart. So, that is part of the lesson that, as you say, the people of Israel had to learn; and interestingly, in these early chapters of Leviticus, the sacrifices are sort of sequentially spelled out. So, you start with a sin offering and a guilt offering, and those obviously were to do with one's own sin, or the people's sin...the sin of the community as a whole; and then

following that, they would be offered the burnt offering, which was completely consumed, and the grain offering or cereal offering, which represented sort of the worshippers' offering of themselves, completely and wholly, and their work—their labor—to the Lord; and finally there was the peace offering or the fellowship offering, as may be a better name for it, which symbolized actually participating with the community in fellowship with God. So, there was an order to do these things, and apparently that was the problem with Nadab and Abihu.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we will see in the next program on holiness, Dave, this really does become a constant, daily concern. They are not supposed to act like the other nations. They are...Israel, in God's plan, going all the way back to the call of Abram, way back in Genesis 12...Israel is God's beachhead; Israel is the launching pad for God's global salvation. The stakes couldn't be higher, in other words. Israel has to get this right. Israel has to be a distinctive, elect, covenant people of God because the salvation of the cosmos is ultimately going to depend on it. So, this is serious business, and this is a terrible story in Leviticus 10, but if you want to sober people up and get their attention, well, this was one way...a terrible way...to do it.

DAVE BAST

Right; and then there are lots and lots of laws in Leviticus, and we will talk about those in our future programs, but for now, perhaps we could just say many of these things no longer have relevance of us as Christians because they have been fulfilled in Christ, and we will talk about how that happens; but meanwhile, is there something of relevance still for us to find in this book, and we think there is. We will talk about that in just a moment.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork* and this first program in a four-part series on the Bible's third book, the book of Leviticus; and Dave, we just saw a symbol...a story...that showed the seriousness of what it means to live in the holy presence of God. A terrible thing happened that showed that indeed, this is serious; and the rest of Leviticus we will talk about holiness and sacrifice and welcoming the stranger, and we will think about that; but what we want to do in the closing of this program, Dave, is to say we are Christians now. This was a long time ago. We know a lot of this stuff doesn't really literally apply to us anymore. What does?

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, first let's talk about what doesn't. The biggest thing, probably, we need to take away is that we don't have to be afraid any longer of entering God's presence. We saw the story of the seriousness of doing that in maybe the wrong way; but the great change that has come with Christ into the world, and specifically with his death and resurrection on our behalf, is that the way is open right into the Holy of Holies. So, the book of Hebrews has this wonderful passage where it writes:

10:19¹⁹Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, (and you can see the imagery of the tabernacle and the Temple there) ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings.

So, we no longer have to be afraid. This is an incredible privilege. We can go straight ourselves. We don't need another priest to go on our behalf. We have Jesus, our great high priest, and the way has been opened straight to the throne, right into the Holy of Holies.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we will talk about in this series that holiness and holy practices properly remain a concern for Christians, but another thing that doesn't apply to us are a lot of the particulars of the ceremonial laws in Leviticus, and the food laws; and of course, some of that was still kind of a big deal in Jesus' day, but in Mark 7, when the Pharisees and teachers of the Law are accusing the disciples of eating things in an improper way, Jesus calls them up short and says: No, hold on a minute. ¹⁴So Jesus, (in Mark 7:14) called the crowd

and said, “Listen to me, everyone, and understand this. ¹⁵Nothing outside a person can defile them by going into them. Rather, it is what comes out of a person that defiles them.”

So, Jesus is now talking about inner purity. So, purity is still important for us Christians. We get to it now through the waters of baptism and through grace, but it is no less of a concern now than it was for Israel living in the presence of God.

DAVE BAST

But, he internalizes it...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, he is saying...in fact, Mark goes on to declare that Jesus said by saying this, he made all foods clean. There are no longer unclean foods, and we will see that there is a lot about that in Leviticus; but, it is no longer a matter of somehow being contaminated by something physical outside of you that makes you impure; but rather, it is the things that come out of your fallen, sinful heart that reveals the impurity; and as you say, Scott, that can be washed clean by the blood of Jesus and the waters of baptism. So, that is good news; and the other thing is, we need to learn to see people as children of God, and not as somehow unclean or impure themselves, either; which is one of the lessons...sadly, if you think about the history of Israel...we talked about...you mentioned, Scott, that they had to learn...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It was a learning curve; and they did learn. It was some hard lessons, especially in the exile, but they eventually learned to keep themselves very separate and to keep the laws very carefully; until by the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were noteworthy in this respect; but unfortunately, they had also developed a kind of a worldview that saw people as unclean...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Who weren't Jewish; and Peter had to be taught this lesson in the book of Acts when God gave him a vision of a sheet with animals in it, and the voice said: Peter, kill and eat.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it was not kosher food. Peter resisted. God there, in that vision, lifted food restrictions, but it was more important than that, because no sooner does he have that vision than there is a knock on his door and he is being invited to the house of a gentile named Cornelius; and Peter has to go there and eat their non-kosher food and be in their non-kosher presence because God does not show partiality, which will be something that will come up in the final program of this series.

So, those are some other things, but one thing we should say in closing, Dave, is that another lesson in Leviticus for today might be that even now, we don't have to be scared of God...we don't have to be terrified of God...you just read that great verse from Hebrews that we should enter God's presence with confidence. On the other hand, we shouldn't be overly chummy with God, or assume that God is just distant and we can do what we want. The sociologist, Christian Smith, has identified kind of a new heresy rampant in the United States called *moral therapeutic deism*, where people just sort of assume God doesn't care what we do as long as you are basically nice. God grades on the curve. He is the kind old man upstairs; no big deal. Maybe we have gotten overly casual about some things, including with our relationship with God...a little overly chummy...a little overly familiar, as though God is just another guy that we just have a... No, there is still

this incredible divide that we need to respect through holy living, through our obedience. This is still serious stuff.

DAVE BAST

Yes, absolutely; you know, it makes me think of a story from my days as an English major. There was a Victorian writer named Thomas Bowdler, who published a different...a new edition of Shakespeare's plays. He called it the *Family Shakespeare* because he had taken out "those words and expressions that are omitted, which cannot with propriety be read aloud in a family", and if you know Shakespeare, you know there is a lot of raunchy, racy stuff in it; and I think some people approach the Bible that way, and they kind of take out or ignore all those things that speak of God's holiness and God's setting himself against sin, and God's wrath even, and judgment; and Leviticus does not permit us to do that, really. We can be grateful for the rich teaching that it gives us of the character and the person of God. We can be especially grateful that the sacrifices have been fulfilled and all things are now clean and to be received by us with thanksgiving; but let's not trifle with God or pretend that we can somehow treat him as a pet.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that is, I think, an important lesson of Leviticus for today.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast. We hope you will join us again next time as we study the holiness code in Leviticus, and discuss how it applies to Christians today, as we seek to be holy as God is holy. Connect with us on our website, groundworkonline.com, and share what *Groundwork* means to you, or make suggestions for future *Groundwork* programs.

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