

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Fall, 2015

The Beginning of All Things – Genesis through Deuteronomy Have you ever wondered what the scriptures teach about the origin of the universe? What about the patriarchs, who were they, and why are they important? What relevance does the account of the exodus of the Hebrews from the land of Egypt have for Christian growth? What can the seemingly tedious ceremonial laws of Leviticus as well as the long list of names in Numbers teach us about godly living? How should a believer read and reflect on the five books of Moses collectively called the Pentateuch (or Torah)? How do these five books “fit in” to the over-arching story of scripture? These questions and more will be explored as we seek to understand this section of God’s Word.

The objective of this class is: to gain an overview of the first five books of the Bible (otherwise known as the Pentateuch), and understand the relation between these foundational books to Christ and Christian living.

Holiness Defined: Often when we think of holiness, we tend to think of rules and regulations that inhibit certain behaviors and encourage others; however, this could not be further from the truth. The biblical definition of holiness is completely different, having at its very core God and what he commands. The holiness of God is portrayed in scripture as essential to his essence. The holiness to which God’s people are called is a holiness of consecration, of being set apart to God. The holiness of God’s people is a dependent holiness since it is determined by their relationship with God. God’s holiness on the other hand is independent and originates from within his very character. The rituals and laws are simply external symbols that point to this internal, dependent reality. To better understand the distinction between the external symbol and the internal change, we should examine the classification of ritual impurity (or uncleanness) and ritual purity (or cleanness) and the relationship between ritual purity and holiness. This lesson will explore the world of ancient ritual purity and seek to understand the rationale and purpose for these rituals in light of a holy God who through covenantal accommodation makes himself known.

Point One: Holiness & Consecration – The 8th chapter of Leviticus begins with the command delivered to Moses to, “...Take Aaron and his sons with him, and the garments, and the anointing oil and the bull of the sin offering and the two rams and the basket of unleavened bread. And assemble all the congregation at the entrance of the tent of meeting” (Lev. 8:2-3). Then, through a ceremony commanded by God, both Aaron and his sons were set aside or consecrated to the Lord to labor in the holy things of the Lord. This ceremonial process lasted through the end of chapter 9 at which point the ordination ceremony was affirmed as accepted by God when, “...the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people. And fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the pieces of fat on the altar...” (Lev. 9:23b-24). The same day, the two oldest sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu offered an offering before the Lord of an incorrect substance and at an incorrect time. Therefore, the fire of God’s acceptance that had previously consumed the burnt offering consumed in judgment the sons of Aaron. Afterwards Moses told Aaron, “...this is what the Lord has said, ‘among those who are near me, I will be sanctified, and before all the people, I will be glorified.’ And Aaron held his peace” (Lev. 10:3).

The holiness of God is here demonstrated in a two-fold manner: 1) through the sanctification or consecration of those who draw near to God, and 2) through the requirement for those who are consecrated to worship God only in the way he commands. God is making a strong differentiation between worship of the one true God and the manner in which the worshippers of other cults and false gods worship. He is here making known to his people that he alone reserves the right to command how

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and when He is to be worshipped. This may seem foreign to modern man, the notion that God reserves the right to determine how and when he will be worshipped. It was perhaps no less foreign to the people of antiquity. Nevertheless, the purpose that the Covenant Lord is seeking to establish is the certainty that a holy God must be approached only in the manner he allows. If this seems a far cry from the intimate face to face relationship that existed between God and the patriarch Abraham, let us remember that God is seeking to covenantally disclose himself to a nation of ransomed Hebrew slaves with the intention of dwelling among them and being their God. Though Abraham had an intimate relationship with God, it cannot be said that God at any time dwelled among him. In this covenantal arrangement we see the creative purposes of God expressed to fallen man. From the account of the consecration of Aaron and his sons and the glorification of God among his people as a holy God who alone reserves the right to determine how and when he is worshipped, we progress to exploring more intimately the role of ritual purity in ancient Israel.

Point Two: Ritual & Righteousness – When considering the rituals of ancient Israel two things must be kept in mind: 1) there is a difference in a ritual state and a moral state. To be ritually impure or unclean did not make you morally impure or unclean. This distinction is important since a woman who has just given birth is technically ritually impure (Lev. 12), but is morally innocent of wrong doing since childbirth is obviously a blessing from God (Ps. 127:4) and is necessary for the propagation of our species. 2) God revealed himself to ancient Israel through cultural accommodation. According to Dr. Jay Sklar, “Accommodation refers to the fact that the Lord communicates his values to us in a way that we can understand, namely, by using the cultural realities that exist in our society. In short, accommodation means that the Lord expresses his values using cultural realities that the original hearers could understand. But it is equally important to clarify what accommodation does not mean: namely, that the Lord simply adopts the cultural values of the people in question. In fact the Lord often gives laws contrary to the cultural realities of the day”¹ Below we will take the time to examine more closely the role of ritual and its meaning for the Old Testament people of God while taking into consideration the role of cultural accommodation.

There are a variety of rituals that are mentioned throughout the book of Leviticus, some that seem quite extreme to modern man. These rituals must be understood in light of the tension identified last week that pervades the overall content of the book. The spectrum previously identified marks three main points on a line: unclean (or impure), clean (or pure) and holy. For the commoners within the Israelite community, many of them vacillated between the ritual state of purity and impurity. There were provisions under which a pure Israelite could become holy, such as the assumption of a Nazarite vow (Numbers 6:1-21), but by and large the majority of God’s people were considered ritually pure or impure. The priests, however, were consecrated to God through their functions within the service of the Lord. Therefore, the priests more often vacillated between pure, impure and holy than did the commoners within Israel.

Dr. Jay Sklar in his commentary on the book of Leviticus referenced below seeks to identify both the rationale as well as the purpose for the various rituals. For each ritual there is a moral obligation underlying it. According to Sklar, God is life; therefore, death or any circumstance in which death was evoked was seen as antithetical to God. For this reason, such behavior as touching a corpse or giving birth to a child were considered ritually impure. The former for obvious reasons, the latter because of

¹ Sklar, Jay Dr. *Leviticus, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. Pg. 55

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the significant loss of blood. This would also explain why a young woman would be considered unclean during her menstrual cycle.

Borrowing from the European anthropologist, Mary Douglas whose pivotal work, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* seeks to determine why some things are considered culturally taboo and others not, Sklar defined the standard by which something was or was not considered to be ritually impure to be culturally determined by whether or not something failed to properly conform to a standard. For instance, in the determination of unclean and clean animals the passage makes a distinction between those who split the hoof and chew the cud (the standard for land dwelling animals) and those who either chew the cud but do not split the hoof (such as camels) and those who split the hoof but do not chew cud (such as pigs). Mary Douglas (and Dr. Jay Sklar assents to this practice) views the ancient animal kingdom as being divided into three primary divisions: sky, land and sea. Each animal that does not adhere to a certain standard (consequently the result of the status quo within each division) is considered unclean or taboo. This explanation is proposed among others as being the most explicable given both the change in classification under the New Testament as well as the permissibility of consuming the flesh of these animal allowed under the new covenant. It is argued that if the animals designated unclean in the OT were unclean because of their health risk to man, then why are they permitted in the New Testament without having undergone any molecular change in composition.

The other theory proposed as to why these animals were considered ritually unclean entails their usage in ancient cultic worship. However, this explanation falls short because calves and sheep were used in ancient cultic worship as well, yet are considered ritually clean and allowed for consumption. The explanation of both Sklar and Douglas might be correct for explaining the rationale behind the ritual standard, but it does not address the issue of what moral principle underlies the ritual standard. To understand the moral principle behind the ritual system, we must take a look at two key characteristics.

First, we must understand the all-pervasive nature of the ritual system of ancient Israel. When God calls his people to be holy even as he is holy (Leviticus 11:44-45), it is in the context of ritual purity as well as God's historical redemptive acts. This is significant because the ritual system governs what many might consider to be non-religious elements of life, i.e. eating, clothing, sowing crops, and touching or coming near the dead. Likewise, when the people of God were slaves in Egypt there was no aspect of their lives whether their worship of God or the manner in which they ate that was exempt from their enslavement. In both instances, the sacred - secular split, which is the view of modern man, is utterly foreign to the OT mindset. Just as every aspect of their life fell under the captivity of their Egyptian task masters, so too every aspect of their lives was under the dominion of God. The split between the sacred and the secular, the spiritual and the mundane simply did not exist for the OT people of God. The same is true for the NT church. In **1 Corinthians 10:31** the apostle Paul states, "*So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*" Laws that were culturally bound were intended to convey a moral message that God seeks holiness in all of life.

Secondly, it is not that there is no longer a need for sacrifice when atoning for ritual impurities under the new covenant, but the death of Christ should be understood as comprehensive enough to account for the atonement required of the OT church. What Christ has done on the cross so purely cleanses from sin that the rituals are no longer needed today. Therefore, the values expressed in the rituals and laws of ancient Israel should be considered as originating from within the unchangeable character of God and

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are binding for God's people throughout all ages. Sklar states the following, "...though not every law in Leviticus is in force today, and though the expressions of the laws that are in force may differ, the values embodied in all of these laws are just as applicable today as then."²

Point Three: Holiness of Place and Person – Leviticus chapters sixteen through twenty-two include an array of laws governing what God's people are not permitted to eat (blood) as well as laws governing sexual behavior, observing the Sabbath, honoring one's parents, acceptable marriages of priests, and forbidding child sacrifice. Central to these laws is the repeated command, "...*You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy*" (Lev. 19:2). Again in 20:26 "*You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.*" Also in 22:31-33 we read, "*So you shall keep my commandments and do them: I am the Lord. And you shall not profane my holy name, that I may be sanctified among the people of Israel. I am the Lord who sanctifies you, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God: I am the Lord.*" From each of these passages we see that what is required on the part of God's people is an acknowledgement of God's moral superiority and power. The proper response to this acknowledgement is obedience.

One final comment regarding the holiness of place is the fact that Israel was not allowed to offer a sacrifice wherever they wished. They were only allowed to offer sacrifices to God in the place he commanded, i.e. the tabernacle (or later the temple). When one considers that the biblical tabernacle is the place where God chose to "*place his name*" and that God's desire for Israel was to be holy and, "*...not profane my holy name...*" then it becomes apparent that the latter was for the sake of the former, the command not to profane the name of God was because God had placed his name among his people. In other words, God was dwelling among his people in time and space, thus making holiness an indispensable prerequisite. After all, holiness in the book of Leviticus is a state of being in relation to God.

Conclusion: This week we explored the various rituals and laws governing holiness that were part of the Mosaic covenant. In our studies, we gained insight into the biblical definition of holiness. Next week we will explore how the OT covenant people observed holiness in *time* through the observance of the Sabbath as well as the Jewish festive calendar. As we meditate on the role ritual played in the life of ancient Israel our hearts should be filled with gratitude knowing that the atoning work of Christ was so thorough that it made observance of the ritual laws unnecessary. This should further create within us a spirit of worship as we look to God in whose sight we are declared righteous because of the finished work of Christ our Savior.

² Sklar, Jay Dr. *Leviticus, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. Pg. 61