

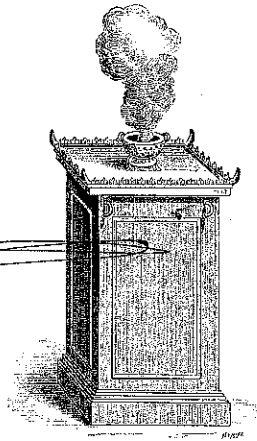
LETTING

# LEVITICUS

SEEP INTO

*YOUR SOUL*

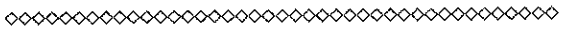
BY JAY SKLAR





JAY SKLAR, PH.D., is professor of Old Testament and vice president of academics at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis. He's also been studying the book of Leviticus for some 15 years. This decade-and-a-half exploration began during Sklar's Ph.D. program and has led him to write two commentaries, "Leviticus," and most recently, "Leviticus Bible Study: A Companion to Leviticus" with his colleague Scott Behm.

By Faith asked Sklar to distill a few of the key principles he's learned from such in-depth study of one of the Bible's more impenetrable books. We also asked him to talk about how his latest work might help readers appreciate the richness of a book that many Christians approach with uncertainty.



**LEVITICUS** was the main focus of my research and study as an Old Testament professor for more than 15 years. Do you know what happens when you study it that long? I know the types of answers many people would provide:

"You get to know your psycho-therapist really well."

"People stop inviting you to dinner parties."

Or perhaps the most common: "Is this a serious question? Who in the world would do this?"

Well, I did. And it changed my life in ways far different from those just named. In my experience, at least four profound things happen when this book begins to seep into your soul.



**YOU HUNGER FOR GOD'S HOLINESS MORE DEEPLY.**

I once taught a semester-long seminary class on Leviticus (yes, people actually did sign up). One of the last assignments of the class was to follow as many of the laws in Leviticus as possible for an entire week. This is something that many Jews do regularly, but for Gentile seminary students — most of whom had never thought twice about having bacon with their eggs — this was a daunting task.

During that week, the students had to keep a journal of their experience and then turn it in to me. There were understandable frustrations. One student noted, "Leviticus 19:19 says not to wear clothing woven of two kinds of material. That wipes out my entire wardrobe with the exception of a pair of polyester track pants. This is going to be a long week." Others made similar observations.


But by far, the most common theme of the journals went something like this: "Every day, I found myself focused on thinking about ritual purity and impurity. Partway through the week, I realized that I was thinking about these things *all day long* and *in every aspect of my life*, and that's when it hit me: God cares a lot about our purity and holiness. Not just from a ritual perspective, but also from a moral perspective. *All day long* and *in every aspect of life*, the Lord wants me to pursue purity in my heart, in my life, in my actions. He wants me to reflect His holiness in all that I do. I have been treating holiness way too lightly! 'O Lord, help me to be holy!'" That's the kind of prayer you begin to pray when you soak in Leviticus.



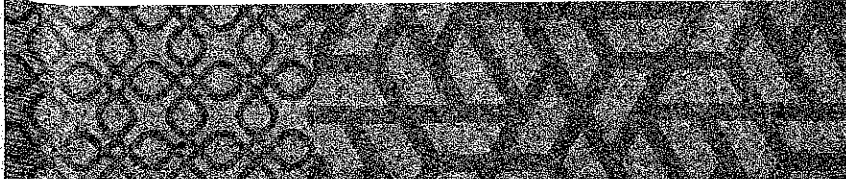
**YOU FEAR GOD MORE GREATLY.**

Leviticus 10 begins by telling the story of Nadab and Abihu. It's a story my Hebrew students translated one semester. And it impacted them deeply.

Nadab and Abihu were priests. This meant they had special duties in terms of leading God's people in worship. My students resonated with this because many of them are preparing to be pastors and will also have special duties in leading God's people in worship.



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As the story begins, Nadab and Abihu bring an offering the Lord had not commanded (10:1). The larger context shows that they tried to barge into the Most Holy Place — the very throne room of the Lord — without being invited (details in Sklar, “Leviticus,” 156-157). If barging into the throne room of an earthly king was a severe breach of royal protocol and a tremendous sign of disrespect (Esther 4:11), barging into the throne room of the King of heaven was unbelievably blasphemous.

The Lord guards His honor by sending out fire to consume the blasphemous priests (Leviticus 10:2) and then gives this warning: “Among those who approach me, I will show myself holy; in the sight of all the people, I will display my glory” (v.3).

In short, the Lord is telling the entire priestly family, “If you do not set me apart by your actions as the God worthy of reverence, I will use your death as an opportunity to remind all the people that I am indeed the God who is to be revered above all” (Sklar, “Leviticus,” 157-158).

There was a moment of holy silence in class that day as this truth began to grip our hearts. It was clearer to us than ever before that the Lord is not to be trifled with. And it was clearer to us than ever before that He holds those who lead His people in worship to an especially high account (James 3:1). We could not help but fear Him more greatly.

③

#### YOU LOVE JESUS MORE DEEPLY.

I began studying Leviticus when my wife and I moved to England so I could do a Ph.D. in Old Testament under an evangelical scholar named Gordon Wenham. For three and a half years I was focused on what the books of Exodus to Numbers teach about sin and impurity, and what they teach is God’s solution to these things.

About two years into my studies, something new began to happen to me when I was in church. Whenever we sang a song that mentioned sacrifice, atonement, or the Lord ransoming us from our sin, I found it hard to make it through without crying. None of these ideas was new to me; I had been going to church all my life. But Leviticus helped me see with even greater clarity how far the Lord has gone — in His love for guilty sinners such as me — to provide a way of forgiveness.

This became especially clear in a verse such as Leviticus 17:11. It explains that the Lord allowed the Israelites to ransom their guilty lives from His judgment by offering the lifeblood of a perfect animal in place of their own. Significantly, the Lord emphasizes His role in providing atonement by adding an extra “I” in the verse: “And I myself have given [the animal’s lifeblood] to you on the altar to make atonement for your lives.” *This in fact turns the idea of sacrifice upside down.* It was not just what the Israelites gave to the Lord. It “was first and foremost something He gave to them, in His grace, as a means of atoning for sin and achieving the forgiveness they so desperately desired” (Sklar, “Leviticus,” 54).

And it gets even better with Jesus. In the Old Testament, the Israelites still had to bring and present an atoning sacrifice to ransom their lives. In the New Testament, the offended King — in His unspeakably great love — provides the atoning sacrifice on behalf of the very ones who sinned against Him! Paul summarizes beautifully: “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us!” (Romans 5:8; John 3:16).

And so, all these years later, I find myself repeating Leviticus 17:11 every time I partake of Communion — and I still find it hard to sing songs about sacrifice without tears of thankfulness for Jesus, the One who “gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God” (Ephesians 5:2).

#### 4 YOU LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR MORE FULLY.

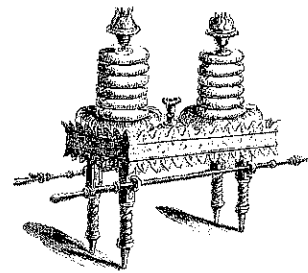
One of the best-known facts about the Bible is that it tells us to “love our neighbor as ourselves.” One of the least-known facts is that this verse is first found in Leviticus 19:18. And when seen in its context, it’s about a whole lot more than being nice and mowing our neighbor’s lawn when he’s sick.

If we look at the entire verse, it becomes clear that loving our neighbor involves forgiving the wrongs of others as quickly as we forgive our own: “*Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the LORD.*” To love our neighbor means to extend mercy and forgiveness to those who wrong us, and to do so because we follow the Lord, the one who so richly and freely extends His mercy and forgiveness to us (Psalm 86:5; Jeremiah 3:12; Ezekiel 33:11; 1 John 1:9).

But it is even more than that. If we look at the surrounding verses, loving our neighbor broadens to include embodying the Lord’s holy character in all of our daily interactions, from business practices (Leviticus 19:9-10, 35-36) to courts of law (vv. 15-16, 35a) to family matters (vv. 3a, 29) to proper treatment of the poor and disadvantaged (vv. 9-10, 13-14, 33-34) to social interactions in general (vv. 11-12, 17-18, 32).

To put it differently, loving our neighbors is not less than telling them about the glorious Gospel of Jesus (the primary way I thought of loving my neighbor as a young Christian), but it does include far more. Pursuing reconciliation, extending mercy, seeking justice in business dealings and courts of law — all these things become opportunities to love our neighbors by showing them God’s mercy, justice, and love.

And so while Leviticus emphasizes the importance of maintaining distinctions between the sacred and the nonsacred, the holy and the non-holy, it also emphasizes



that everyday acts of kindness and love and mercy are incredibly sacred, incredibly holy, because they show the incredible kindness and love and mercy of the One who is ultimately sacred and holy.

This is not how I grew up thinking about holiness. But it is how Leviticus thinks about it. It is how Jesus thinks about it (Luke 10:29-37). What would happen in our churches if we all began to think of holiness in these ways?

We need more Leviticus.

#### 5 HELPING READERS UNCOVER THE RICHES OF LEVITICUS

While the need for Leviticus is clear, most Christians struggle to read and appreciate it. This is no surprise, for several reasons: It consists almost entirely of law (not a favorite genre for most moderns), talks a lot about worship practices no longer required for Christians today (such as making sacrifices), and comes from a very different historical context (making it difficult to follow for those not knowing ancient Near Eastern history and culture). But the question I wanted to answer through my studies was this: How can we help Christians today not simply to read Leviticus but to learn from it and be changed from the rich lessons the Lord teaches there?

At this point, I reached out to Scott Behm, a friend, former student, and person who has spent a lot of time studying and thinking about how adults learn. I had written a commentary on Leviticus aimed at lay people but focused on explanation more than application. Scott took that as the starting point and wrote a Bible study (“Leviticus Bible Study: A Companion to *Leviticus: An Introduction and Commentary*”). The study guides participants through reading the biblical text and relevant sections of the commentary in a way that combines explanation and application.

For example, a text that seems very *inapplicable* is Leviticus 24:1-4, which instructs priests about keeping the tabernacle lamp burning all night. How might

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Or again, how might Christians apply Leviticus 23, which concerns the Israelite festivals? Here the study invites readers to consider:

These holy gatherings are always intended to be community celebrations, where brothers and sisters come together to strengthen and encourage one another to live holy lives before the Lord. In the New Testament, the Lord's Supper is the primary gathering for this purpose. Analyze your own church's practices in celebrating the Lord's Supper in terms of its nature as a robust community ritual:

- ⑧ • Are you confessing and repenting of sins to one another in community?
- ⑨ • Are you experiencing relational healing in community, either leading up to the Lord's Supper, during it, or in response to it? If not, what might be done differently?
- Are brothers and sisters connecting and reconnecting as a result of this time?
- What are some other ways in which you might celebrate the Lord's Supper as a "holy gathering" unto the Lord?

A final example is provided by Leviticus 24:17-22, which has various rules and laws about justice that at first glance might seem unconnected to life today. Far from it! The reader is encouraged to consider:

⑩ The principles of justice set forth in Leviticus 24:17-22 underscore the high value of human life (vv. 17-18, 21), the importance of penalties fitting the crime (vv. 19-20), and the equality of all people under the law (v. 22). Followers of Jesus should be at the forefront of advocating for justice in our communities, country, and around the world (Isaiah 1:17; 16:3; Micah 6:8; Luke 11:42; James 2:1-4).

*Read this passage & write down one*

this relate to us today? The study provides the following observations and questions:

By continually keeping the lamps burning, the priests affirmed their willingness to serve the Lord always. Today we are called to continually serve King Jesus, surrendering our very lives to the One who is worthy of all we have (Matthew 16:24-26). This can be done only with a whole heart, or it can't be done at all (Matthew 6:24; 10:37-39).

- ⑥ • Take a few moments to reflect on the things that may be preventing you from serving the Lord with a whole heart. *write them down*
- ⑦ • Write down two or three things you want to commit to the Lord in prayer and actively work to change.

- Evaluate how well you think the church is doing in advocating for justice around the world.
- Consider both its excellent efforts in many places and on many issues, as well as those places or issues where Christians seem to turn a blind eye to justice.
- Discuss steps your own church or small group might take to make even a small advance in Christian advocacy for justice.

Our prayer is that the Lord would use this to give believers access to a book that feels foreign and impractical but is filled with rich treasures.

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