

God Is Closer Than You Think



# God Is Closer Than You Think

Discovering the Nearness of God  
From the Book of Leviticus

by

Mike Darretta

An Installment of *The Biblical Relevancy Series*



Aventine Press

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*To my dear wife, Kim.  
Your faith in me is my inspiration.*



## *The Biblical Relevancy Series*

Are you interested in learning about God?

*The Biblical Relevancy Series* is designed to introduce you to the God of the Bible. Here, you will embark on a journey through the Bible to learn what it says about God and you. Each installment focuses on one or more biblical books and is relevant, thought-provoking and short enough to read in just a few sittings.

I invite you to begin today to learn about God and His plans for your life. Join me in reading *The Biblical Relevancy Series*.



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## Where Is God?

A young boy was running amuck in a small town. He stole from the local drug store, performed malicious pranks against unsuspecting folk, and did anything possible to disturb the community. His parents had tried just about everything to control the boy's behavior. Desperate for help, his parents looked to one last resort. They forced him to attend confession before the local priest.

The priest sat behind the confession booth, peeking at the young delinquent from his little portal. He knew full well this boy and his problems. He also knew that what this boy needed was a fearful encounter with God.

The priest started the conversation: "Young man, where is God in all your troublesome behavior?"

The young boy sat silent, staring off in the distance. The priest, assuming the boy was ignoring him, repeated again, "Young man, where is God in all of this?"

Again, the boy said nothing. The priest, now somewhat irritated by the boy's defiance, blurted out with a raised voice, "Young man, *where is God?*"

The boy immediately darted from the confession booth and fled for the chapel door. He raced down the town's main street straight for home. He arrived at his house, burst through the front door, found his mother and cried, "Mom! They've lost God and they think I took Him!"

Are you looking for God?

Do you need to find God, but don't know where to go? Are you looking for the "Man Upstairs" to guide you in this crazy thing called life?

If there is a God, then where is He? Is He perched upon a high mountain where only mystics can climb? Is God comfortably seated in a glamorous cathedral amidst a high steeple and a grand organ? Is God in a galaxy far, far away at the outer edge of the universe, conversing with the angels while we conduct our business down on Earth?

Is God simply a force that resides in all of creation? Maybe *God* is the *good* in you and me that can be found if we simply look deep within. Or, maybe He's the traffic cop determined to ruin all our fun on Earth. Or possibly He's the old great-grandfather gazing upon us from His celestial rocking chair, smiling at our every thought and action.

Regardless of who God is, can He really be found? And if so, where? Chances are, if you are asking these questions, you need Him right now.

Maybe you're facing a crisis in life. Is your marriage on the rocks? Are your children wandering the streets? Have you been "downsized" from your job? Are you facing terminal illness?

Maybe your life is at a crossroads. You have some important decision to make, and you want God's advice. Can He hear your prayers? Does He even listen? Does He even care?

Maybe life is fine. You are living comfortably. You have a promising career, a healthy family, and two cars in the garage. Yet, there's something deep inside that tells you, "There must be more." You feel an unexplainable emptiness that seems impossible to fill. You wonder if maybe God can fill this void. Sure, you would like to find out for yourself. But where do you go to find such answers?

Regardless of the situation, you're looking for something. You feel you need someone greater than yourself. And you feel that, maybe, you need God. Yet there remains one very basic question.

*Where is God?*

Let me assure you today that there is a God. And know it or not, He can be found. In fact, He wants to be near to you — closer to you than you ever thought.

How can one find God? I believe the best place to find the answer to this question is the *Bible* — a book about God. More specifically, the Bible is a collection of books that tell us the story of God and His work in human history.

To answer our basic question, I want to take you on a journey through the third book of the Bible, the book called *Leviticus*.

### ***Leviticus — A Book About a Faraway God***

The Book of Leviticus is an odd place to answer the question, “Where is God?” If you have ever tried reading it, you will find that it can be slow, tedious, and (if I may say so) very boring reading. The story is simple enough. It describes the commandments levied by God to the nation of Israel after their incredible escape from Egypt.<sup>1</sup> God speaks these commandments directly to Moses, Israel’s famous leader.<sup>2</sup> Most of the book, then, simply details descriptions of these rules and regulations, and would probably not make a very exciting sequel to *The Prince of Egypt*.<sup>3</sup>

Why, then, would we look to Leviticus to answer our question, “Where is God?” That’s a fair question, seeing that the basic premise of the book seems to undermine our very efforts. Read the Book of Leviticus, and you will arrive at a very troublesome conclusion. That is because

Leviticus does not tell us about a God who is near. In fact, Leviticus is a book about *a faraway God!* Leviticus teaches us about a God who is distant, unapproachable, and terrible to encounter.

Does that seem odd to you? Look at some of the things written within the pages of Leviticus, dictated by God Himself:

“Warn your brother Aaron not to enter into the Holy Place . . . whenever he chooses. The penalty for intrusion is death.” (16:2)

“Anyone who is discovered to have leprosy must tear his clothes and let his hair grow in disarray, and cover his upper lip and call out as he goes, ‘I am a leper, I am a leper.’” (13:45)

“If anyone commits adultery with another man’s wife, both the man and woman shall be put to death.” (20:10)

“Any of [Aaron’s] descendants from generation to generation who have any bodily defect may not offer the sacrifices of God.” (21:17)

“Anyone who curses his God must pay the penalty: he must die.” (24:15)

“But if you will not listen to me or obey me, but reject my laws, this is what I will do to you.” (26:14–15 — Read further to learn all the fun!)

Can you feel the goose bumps? Are you excited about finding the God who spoke these words?

Imagine living in the time of Leviticus. Think of how it would feel for you to be living “on edge” under the rule of a God who exacted difficult (if not impossible) rules to live by. He has given you strict rules on how to approach Him. He mandated standards for living that are cumbersome and very constricting. He told you what you could and couldn’t eat, where you could and couldn’t go, what you could and couldn’t wear. He even told you when you could and couldn’t work. He made you feel “dirty” for such natural things as menstruation, wet dreams, or oozing sores. If you were sick, disabled or outcast, you would feel inferior and rejected. Then, if you were to mess up just a bit, He could send fire down from Heaven and take you out in a second (sucker)!

Let’s take this a step further. Imagine if God required the same type of rules today prescribed in Leviticus. Are you planning on working this Sunday? Sorry, but those who work on the Sabbath are stoned. Feel like bacon this morning? Forget it — no pork for you! Do you have eczema? Better make an appointment with your local priest (and don’t plan on coming home anytime soon). Having marriage problems? Tough it out! Feeling overstressed? Get a life!

Welcome to Leviticus in the third millennium.

Now, does this sound like a God who wants to be close to you? Or, better yet, do you really want to get close *to Him*?

Well, I have good news. There is no Leviticus 2000. Things have changed. The days of a faraway God who exacted extreme regulations are no more. We live in a day where God is no longer distant, but near.

Why have things changed? Has God changed? Or did God simply “chill out” and “get with it”?

I believe the answer is none of those. God has not changed. He is the God of Leviticus *and* the God of today.

What, then, has happened to bring a faraway God near to us?

### *God Has Come Near*

Some two thousand years ago, a simple carpenter from a Jewish town called Nazareth was executed upon a wooden torture device called a “cross.” His death may have simply passed as one of many brutal executions performed in that age. Yet, this event has become the most remarkable moment in all of human history.

You see, it was God who hung from that cross.

Just about everybody has an opinion on the character known as Jesus Christ. Some consider Him a good man. Some, a trusted teacher. Others see Him to be a prophet. But those closest to Him knew He was something more. They believed that He was the single most significant figure to walk this Earth. They actually believed He was the Son of God.

Let’s read what they said about Him:

“I therefore testify that he is the Son of God.” (John the Baptist, John 1:34)

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (The Apostle Peter, Matthew 16:16, NKJV)

“Truly, this was the Son of God.” (A Roman officer at the cross, Mark 15:39)

“These are recorded that you will believe that he is the Messiah, the Son of God.” (The Apostle John, John 20:31)

Even Jesus testified that He in fact was “the Son of God” (John 11:4). Today, if a man claims to be divine, we rightly think of him as a lunatic. The world has seen enough David Koreshes destroy innocent lives with their insane egomania. Yet something separated Jesus from other self-proclaimed messiahs — His life. Jesus was quite simply the most compassionate, loving, thoughtful, and pure person anyone had ever seen. His life was one that extended hope to the hurting, healing to the afflicted, and even forgiveness to the sinner. He is quite simply the personification of love.

Yet, it wasn’t just character that separated Jesus from the other messiahs. The most compelling aspect of Jesus is this: *He was the human manifestation of God!*

“Before anything else existed, there was Christ, with God. He has always been alive and is himself God.” (John 1:1)

“I and the Father are one.” (John 10:30, Jesus speaking)

“My Lord and my God!” Thomas said [to Jesus].” (John 20:28)

This is a great mystery, and one which we’ll leave for the theologians to grapple with. But the Bible tells us that there was something incredible about Jesus that no man could ever rightly claim. He was more than a good man or a prophet. Jesus was the Son of God. And, in a very strange way, He was God Himself!

What does this all mean to you and me? It means that God has come near to us! In Leviticus, God speaks to us but does not commune with us. He demands things of

us but does not identify with us. Today, God has come to earth to live as a man, struggle as a man, be tempted as a man, and finally, to die a death horrifying to man.

In Leviticus, God is a faraway God. Add Jesus to the equation, and God is closer than you think.

### ***God Is Closer Than You Think***

So, where is God? He is right next to you, waiting for you to become His friend. Whether you are sitting on your sofa chair, or flying on an airplane, or waiting for your wife's friend to meet you at a hotel room, God is there. He is near to you because of Jesus. Jesus came to this Earth for one specific reason: to draw humanity back to God. As Jesus Himself put it, "I am the Way—yes, and the Truth and the Life. No one can get to the Father except by means of me" (John 14:6).

So, as we together examine the Book of Leviticus, we will do so with two perspectives in mind. First, we will see just how this book presents God as far from us. We will also see the book, though, through the filter of Jesus. You see, the whole Bible is divided into two sections: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament tells the story of God and man before Jesus came to Earth. With the New Testament, Jesus entered the picture and changed everything. He brought God near. So, when discussing Leviticus, we will not only see how far away God was, but how Jesus has actually brought Him near today.

I invite you to find a Bible and join me for a journey through the Book of Leviticus. We will begin with *The Way to God*, and then advance to *Your Walk With God*. As you read this book, I pray that you discover the God who is closer than you think.

## ***PART I: THE WAY TO GOD***

God has come near to man. How, then, can man approach God?

Different cultures and different religions all offer their opinions on how a person may approach God. Some teach that God is not concerned with the affairs of humanity and cannot be approached. Others say that you must first prove yourself worthy via some act of kindness or self-abasement before approaching God. Others impose no requirements whatsoever and simply say, “Come as you are.”

In the first 17 chapters of Leviticus, we see how ancient Israel approached God. For them, approaching God was hard, filled with restrictions, regulations and, at times, downright terror! The way to God was a difficult road — one that often led to a *dead-end street*.

Fortunately, you and I live in a day where the way to God is open. Jesus has entered the equation, and now we have access to God unlike ever before.

The way to God is available to all. The way to God is the way of Jesus.



# *The Price of Approaching God*

(Leviticus 1:1–7:38)

“Don’t come empty handed!”  
— *Customary party request*

“Aaron’s sons, the priests,  
will present the blood before the Lord.”  
— *Leviticus 1:5*

**D**iane and I sat outside at our company’s courtyard. We had scheduled this afternoon meeting to discuss the Bible, and in particular Diane’s personal struggle in reading it. I asked Diane what her concern was. She proceeded to describe how she tried to read the Bible, but it appeared so unapproachable to her. She wanted to understand it and apply its teachings, but it seemed to be an impossible task. Being the young minister that I was, I failed to probe further to better understand her struggle. Instead, I offered up my programmed responses learned from books and classes. After several minutes of conversation that seemed to lead nowhere, Diane interrupted my sermon and abruptly blurted out these words: “I just can’t get past all the blood!”

I suspect that Diane had been introduced to the Book of Leviticus.

There is nothing elegant about the Book of Leviticus. Here we find bleating sheep, squawking birds and roaring bulls. Each one is slaughtered in a seemingly heartless ceremony. The bodies of these unfortunate creatures are dismembered, disemboweled, even decapitated. Their carcasses are burned upon altars and discarded upon scrap

heaps. Their blood is sprinkled upon furniture, poured upon the dirt, even smeared upon people's bodies.

Yes. This is a messy religion. This is a bloody religion.

Maybe you are like Diane. You are interested in understanding more about God and the Bible. Maybe you started in Genesis chapter one. You read about how in the beginning there was only God. You saw how He created the earth. You saw how God brought about the moon, the stars and the Sun. You witnessed God create the plant and animal life, and finally, Adam and Eve. You then felt a sense of affinity with the Creator when God breathed His very breath into His prized creation, and man became a "living soul." At the time, it seemed very poetic, warm and inviting.

But it didn't take very long before you realized that this is not what the entire Bible is about. You saw how Adam and Eve sinned and were cast from the Garden of Eden. Since they realized they were naked, God provided them clothing — the skins of sacrificed animals! Then, after Noah is saved from the Great Flood, he offered animal sacrifices as burnt offerings to God. Maybe you felt a bit queasy when God instructed Abraham to kill and mutilate a cattle and birds as a means to bind an agreement. Sooner or later you had to face the hard fact: The Bible is very much about the shedding of blood.

If you are like Diane, then I would venture to say that this religion is a bit difficult to understand, let alone swallow. Leviticus, in particular, is very much about the shedding of blood. The blood was supposed to draw us closer to God. Yet, instead of drawing us closer, the Levitical system actually gave us a greater sense of separation from God. Why, then, does this book teach such a bloody religion? It is because the way to God is a messy way. The price of approaching God is the price of blood.

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Throughout Leviticus, mankind could only approach God via an offering of blood. If they wanted to show gratitude to God, they came with blood. If they wanted to express total devotion to God, then the requirement was blood. And, God forbid, if they ever sinned against God, He would only receive them back at the price of — you guessed it — blood.

Leviticus is indeed a book about a faraway God. God was so far, so unapproachable, that the only way to come to Him was through the shedding of blood of a poor, innocent animal.

But that was then. What about today? Isn't there a simpler, less messy, bloodless way to approach God? It may seem crazy at first, but the cost of approaching God was and still is the price of blood. God has not changed, and He still requires that innocent blood be shed before anyone may approach Him. Fortunately, though, it is no longer the blood of animals that gives us access to God. Today, we have a much better way that gives us complete, unhindered and shameless access to God. It is still blood, but not the blood of bulls and goats. It is the blood that Jesus willingly offered upon the Cross. With Jesus' shed blood, we find that God can become closer than we ever thought.

Before we examine this further, you might wonder why God instituted animal sacrifice in the first place. We'll look at this, and how these sacrifices really were intended to point the way to the final blood sacrifice — the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

### *Why Animal Sacrifice?*

I grew up in the Greater San Francisco Bay Area. This part of the United States is not very inclined to activities

such as hunting, and I personally could not bring myself to shooting a bird or a deer. Recently, I “surfed” the television channels and landed upon a weekend hunting program. I watched with some amusement as the big hunter dressed in fatigues pointed his cannonlike rifle toward a bush where a small bird was hiding. The hound dog stood by his side, anticipating the glorious moment. As the tension mounted and the big hunter held his ground, the little bird leaped from its hiding place and took to the air. Immediately the big hunter pulled the trigger, a loud blast sounded, and feathers flew everywhere! The hound dog chased down the lifeless bird and returned it to the hunter, who then placed the carcass into his jacket pocket and triumphantly marched away.

I had to laugh. I wasn't so much laughing at the poor creature that fell prey to the hunter's expertise. No, I laughed at how a big man, dressed in military fatigues, and holding a torpedo-sized weapon, felt so triumphant blowing away a little-bitty bird. It reminded me of the old Monty Python skit called “The Mosquito Hunters” — that fearless team whose sole purpose was to hunt down and retrieve the prized wings of a poor mosquito!

Hunting was never a part of my life. As such, I do not find any pleasure in the activity. So, when I read about animal sacrifice in Leviticus, I feel a sense of pity toward the bulls, sheep, goats, doves, and pigeons that lost their lives in this bloody ritual.

Why did God require animal sacrifice? Was this just entertainment for a heartless god? Is there any good reason for the bloody rituals of Leviticus? Consider these reasons:

First, ritual animal sacrifice did not begin with the Bible. For most of history, mankind had been sacrificing to the gods. Often these sacrifices afforded a sense of

communion with the gods. At other times, it was meant to appease the anger of the gods. Regardless, mankind saw that God (or the gods) was a faraway being, and he needed a way to approach Him. Sacrifice was often the chosen vessel. When God intervened in human history, His intent was to draw close to man. As such, He appears to have used a vehicle already understood and accepted: animal sacrifice.

Another reason for animal sacrifice is the *lifeboat* principle. *Lifeboat* is an ethical mind game with the following scenario. A ship is sinking in the ocean, and only a certain number of people can be saved by entering the lifeboat. The challenge is to decide who is worthy to be rescued from the sinking ship. Should the mother of three be saved instead of the corporate executive? Should the mentally retarded girl be rescued instead of the newborn baby?

God views this world like a sinking ship. Because we are all sinners — that is, we have all done something immoral, unethical, or just plain wrong — each of us is far from God. The chasm that separates us is so great that no man could ever bridge the gap. The Bible itself states that “the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). As such, our sins have doomed us to pay the highest penalty. This is where God intervened. Instead of making *us* pay for our sins, He chose a path less horrible — the death of an animal. It was life for life. The life of an animal would pay the penalty for the sin of a person. This, obviously, was unfair to the poor beast but served as a reminder that God considered his prized creation, mankind, to be of higher value than the animal kingdom. In a day when man and animals are often seen with equal esteem, this may be a foreign thought. But it is the Bible’s teaching on the character of God: God loves people above all else.

Another significant aspect is that slaughtered animals were often given as food for the priests and sometimes for the offerer as well. This is more in line with our modern culture, since we daily slaughter animals for food.

Despite all this, there is a key thought that must be recognized: Animal sacrifice was never God's ultimate intent. In fact, He was never really pleased (or appeased) by this continual bloodletting. Look at these quotes from the Bible:

"It wasn't sacrifices and offerings which you really want from your people. Burnt animals bring no special joy to your heart." (Psalm 40:6)

"You aren't interested in offerings burned before you on the altar." (Psalm 51:16)

"Has the Lord as much pleasure in your burnt offerings and sacrifices as in your obedience? Obedience is far better than sacrifice." (I Samuel 16:22)

Why was God not fully pleased with animal sacrifices? It is because sacrifice never really drew man closer to God. In fact, the offerer usually felt *farther* from God as he administered this exacting, and bloody, ritual. Animal sacrifice was merely a stopgap measure that anticipated something better.

This brings us to the final, and most important, aspect about animal sacrifice. Above all else, *animal sacrifice pointed to the final sacrifice of Jesus upon the Cross*. The entire Levitical system paints a picture of the sacrificial death of Jesus. Each offering served to illustrate that a day would come when a final, complete, and fully satisfying offering

would be made for the sins of all people. While animal sacrifices only made people feel farther from God, Jesus' self-sacrifice would actually allow man to freely approach God. The price was still blood, but Jesus' blood would finish the work like no other blood could do.

### *God's Prescribed Sacrifices*

Now that we've seen why God instituted animal sacrifice, it's time to look at the different sacrifices offered in Leviticus. Leviticus 1–7 describes five distinct categories of animal sacrifice. These are the burnt offering, the grain offering, the thanksgiving (or peace) offering, the sin offering, and the guilt offering. Each of these offerings served as a way to approach God.

(1) The burnt offering is described in Leviticus 1:3–17, and then again in 6:8–13.<sup>4</sup> When someone offered a burnt offering, virtually the entire sacrifice was consumed in fire. This sacrifice was a way for the offerer to show his or her complete devotion to God.

(2) The grain offering (2:1–16, 6:14–23) was an offering to acknowledge God's provision. This was a bloodless sacrifice, though the Book of Numbers tells us it was usually accompanied by an animal sacrifice. The offerer would burn a portion of the grain in fire — the rest was given to the priests for food.

(3) The thanksgiving (or peace) offering (3:1–17, 7:11–36), as the name implies, symbolized the offerer's gratitude toward God. After a portion of the sacrifice was burnt upon the altar, the remaining parts were divided among the offerer and the priest as a shared meal. This meal encouraged friendship and intimacy. This reminded the offerer that God was not only interested in people drawing close to Him; He also wants people to draw close to one another.

(4) The sin offering (4:1–5:13, 6:24–30) was one of the holiest offerings of all. Unlike the former three, this offering was mandatory. It was prescribed for all who committed a sin without previously realizing it. Throughout Leviticus, intended sins were punishable through either expulsion or death. But, if someone unintentionally committed a sin, then later became aware of it, he would offer a sin offering to receive forgiveness for the sin. This was a new concept for the offerer. Burnt offerings, grain offerings and thanksgiving offerings were already common in the ancient world (see Genesis 8:20 and Exodus 20:24). Sin offerings (and the guilt offering mentioned next) were rare, if they existed at all. This is because mankind offered animals to approach or appease the gods. What they didn't recognize was that their sins (both in act and in intent) would separate them from ever really approaching God.

(5) The guilt offering (5:14–6:7) was essentially the same as the sin offering (see 7:7). The main difference was that the guilt offering was for sins that required restitution. When a guilt offering was sacrificed, the offerer also returned the value of whatever was owed, with a 20 percent fee added on. (This discouraged people from forcefully taking zero-percent loans!) Like the sin offering, the guilt offering atoned for the particular offense.

We have barely touched the meaning of these five sacrifices. This system is comprehensive and can be tedious to study. They each, though, share some simple aspects that can help us grab hold of their true meaning.

First off, each animal offered was to be *without defect*. God did not want second-best; He was only interested in the best-of-breed. It would be easy for the offerer to pick an animal that was sickly, scrawny and useless for food or work. But it required a true "sacrifice" to offer something of value.

One Christmas, my family and I decided to purchase a family present — a puppy. We looked at all types of dogs: purebreds, half-breeds, complete mutts. As expected, the purer the breed, the more expensive the puppy was. More so, the more “perfect” the dog was within its own breed, the more expensive (and I mean *more* expensive) was the puppy. After weeks of search and study, we decided upon a purebred that was “average” within his breed. He was sufficient for our family (though he’s still not completely potty-trained!).

Imagine if this present were purchased for God. Would you feel comfortable giving to God an average-in-breed?

When Jesus died upon the Cross, He offered Himself as “the sinless, spotless Lamb of God” (I Peter 1:19). His sinless life was the best that could be offered and gave every person access to God.

The next significant aspect was that the offerer would place his hands upon the head of the animal before sacrificing it. In this way, the offerer *identified* with the sacrifice. It was as if the animal now stood in proxy for the offerer. The offerer deserved to be placed upon the altar, but the animal was sacrificed in his stead. This again reminds us that God is concerned for people. Though the offerer deserved the flames, God would accept an animal in his place.

Jesus’ sacrifice was in our place. But, in order for His death to be effective, He first needed to identify with you and me. Jesus did not proclaim His teachings from an ivory tower. According to Hebrews 2:18, Jesus experienced all the pains and temptations that life could offer. He knows what it’s like to be *us*! Because of this, “he is wonderfully able to help us” — He knows our struggles, and He also knows how to overcome them.

Finally, there was the ever-present *blood*. Without blood, man could not approach God. The writer of Hebrews

summarizes how important blood was to the whole Levitical system:

“In fact we can say that under the old agreement almost everything was cleansed by the sprinkling with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.” (Hebrews 9:22)

The Hebrew writer also recognized the limitations to this system. You see, the blood of bulls and goats could, shall we say, “cover sin.” It was effective in abdicating a person from the penalty of his or her sins. Yet, though it could *cover* sin, it never succeeded in *cleansing* sin. It could not remove the guilt of sin from a person’s conscience.

“For under the old [Levitical] system, gifts and sacrifices were offered, but these failed to cleanse the hearts of the people who brought them.” (Hebrews 9:9)

“The sacrifices under the old system were repeated again and again, year after year, but even so they could never save those who lived under their rules. If they could have, one offering would have been enough; the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and their feeling of guilt would be done. But just the opposite happened: those yearly sacrifices reminded them of their disobedience and guilt instead of relieving their minds. For it is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats really to take away sins.” (Hebrews 10:1–4)

The bottom line to all of this is the phrase from Hebrews 10:4: “It is not possible for the blood of bulls and goats

really to take away sins.” The Levitical system succeeded in reminding mankind how far from God he really was. It is similar to the plight of many of us today. We do what we feel is appropriate to draw near to God, yet He only seems farther. The more we try to reach God, the farther away He becomes.

This is the eternal problem of mankind. Unless, that is, we add Jesus to the equation.

### *The Once-and-for-All Sacrifice*

Today was laundry day. The same clothes that were cleaned on the previous laundry day were cleaned again today. And, I suppose, the same clothes that were laundered today will be laundered on the *next* laundry day!

This is kind of what it was like to live during the days of Leviticus.

Every day, sacrifices were made to ensure that the sins and misgivings of the people were absolved until the next day’s sacrifice. Each day, blood needed to be spilled.

As laundry day comes to a close, I think to myself, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if someone invented a detergent that would clean our laundry *forever*?”

The Levitical system reminded people that God was far. But today, we can look to a sacrifice that can clean our “dirty laundry” once and for all. This sacrifice is the sacrifice of Jesus.

Unlike the blood of bulls and goats, the blood of Jesus cleanses our sin and guilt. It not only has paid for the penalty of our deeds, but also gives us the ability to live as God would want us to. Look at how the New Testament writers put it:

“We have been sprinkled with Christ’s blood to make us clean.” (Hebrews 10:22)

“The blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanses us from every sin.” (I John 1:7)

“And if under the old system the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of young cows could cleanse men’s bodies from sin, *just think how much more surely the blood of Christ will transform our lives and hearts.* His sacrifice frees us from the worry of having to obey the old rules, and makes us want to serve the living God.” (Hebrews 9:13–14, italics mine)

Again and again, the New Testament confirms to us the importance of the priceless blood of Jesus. When Jesus died upon the cross, He became the final blood sacrifice that God ever required. His death paid the price for approaching God once and for all.

“Under the new plan we have been forgiven and made clean by Christ’s dying for us *once and for all.* Under the old agreement the priests stood before the altar day after day offering sacrifices that could never take away our sins. But Christ gave himself to God for our sins as one sacrifice *for all time.*” (Hebrews 10:10–12, italics mine)

Just think about it. For centuries, man tried to approach God yet never fully succeeded. Today, *God has come to man* through His Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus’ sacrifice has given us complete access to God. What mankind could not do, Jesus did through His death on the Cross.

Do you feel far away from God? Are you trying to draw near to God, but to no avail? If so, then know that the price for approaching God has been paid in full by the

blood of Jesus. Said another way, Jesus died for you so that you could come to God. It's that simple.

The price of approaching God has always been and will always be the price of blood. The blood of bulls and goats could never suffice. It is only the blood of Jesus that could pay the eternal price of approaching God.

Without Jesus, we would still daily offer sacrifices to try to approach God. With Jesus, God has become closer than you ever thought.

*Dear God, I thank You that Jesus' blood has paid the price for my sins. I accept what He did for me upon the Cross. I now draw near to You by this incredible sacrifice. Amen.*



# *God's Human Lighting Rod*

(Leviticus 8:1–10:20)

“God’s gonna get ‘cha for that,  
God’s gonna get ‘cha for that  
Every wrong thing that you do,  
God’s gonna get ‘cha for that”  
— “*God’s Gonna Get ‘Cha (for That)*”

*By Tammy Wynette and George Jones (lyrics by E. E. Collins)*

“So fire blazed forth from the presence  
of the Lord and destroyed them.”  
— *Leviticus 10:2*

It’s one of the classic scenes from the movie *Caddyshack*. Bishop Pickering is enjoying the greatest round of golf in his life. With his deranged caddy, Carl Spackler, at his side, the bishop continues to forge ahead, even as rain threatens to spoil the moment. Every drive, every putt, even every errant shot, somehow finds its way to the intended spot. As the rain increases, the bishop remains undaunted. His swing is golden and nothing — especially a little rain — will stop him. As the bishop himself states, “The good Lord wouldn’t interrupt the best game of my life.”

It’s the final hole and the rain has become a torrential downpour. In the midst of the horrendous conditions, the bishop eyes the final putt that will give him his best score ever. It’s now or never. The bishop approaches the ball and eyes the hole. With water streaming down his face, Bishop Pickering attempts his putt . . . and the ball completely rolls over the waterlogged hole! Enraged by the unfairness of the moment, the bishop raises his club and voices his

anger to the heavens. As if on cue, a sudden bolt from the sky turns the bishop's golf club into a convenient lightning rod, leaving him half-dead on the green. Carl Spackler quickly departs from the scene.

We all have somewhere in our minds the picture of the mean old lady pointing a crooked finger into our face and yelling, "God's gonna get 'cha for that!" Or, we probably all have stated at some time, "If I'm lying, may God strike me dead with a lightning bolt!" Of course, this image of a meanspirited, vindictive, lightning-slinging God who turns insubordinate people into little piles of charred ashes is nothing more than a morbid fairy tale from our childhood, correct?

Don't tell that to Aaron, the brother of Moses.

In one of the most unthinkable acts in all the Bible, two young men, Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, are struck dead by "fire from heaven" — lightning, I suppose — for seemingly doing nothing more than offering the wrong offering to God. It was quite the penalty for such a small offense. In a moment, they became God's human lightning rods. This sent an unmistakable message to those present: "Make one false move and God's gonna get 'cha!"

Have you ever felt afraid of God? I've seen so many people who live their entire lives in fear of God. Their sins, their past, whatever it may be, make them feel unworthy of coming to God. They fear He will reject them. They fear He will judge them for their sins. They reason that, if they come to God, He might sling a lightning bolt or two their way.

If you were living in the days of Leviticus, then you would probably be walking with your shoulders hunched, your eyes peering every which way, and your feet tiptoeing as if you were walking on eggshells. There would be that

ever-present fear of making one false move, making one errant step that would displease a very intolerant God. If you erred to the right or to the left, then there's the real chance that "fire from heaven" would devour you in an instant.

Leviticus presents a God who is a Thor-like figure of vengeance and wrath. As the God of wrath, He administers judgment on those who cross His divine boundaries. But there is another side of God — a side we don't see in Leviticus. When Jesus came to this earth, He came to pay the price for our sins. Yet, He also took upon Himself the wrath of God reserved for you and me! The Apostle Paul tells us:

"But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. Now he will save us from all of God's wrath to come."  
(Romans 5:8, 9)

In Leviticus, God is vengeful. But add Jesus Christ to the equation, and we find that God is also *loving*. To demonstrate this love to us, God poured His wrath upon His own Son. When Jesus died upon the Cross, He became the recipient of God's wrath because of our sins. God poured out His wrath on Jesus instead of us. He did this because He truly loves us. Now, He is no longer angry with us because of our sins. In effect, Jesus became God's human lightning rod.

God is the same today as in the days of Leviticus. Yet, because Jesus became God's lightning rod, we can have the assurance that God's wrath has been completely appeased. Because of Jesus, we can approach God with confidence.

God does not want you to be afraid to approach Him. Instead, He wants you to have the faith to draw near to Him.

## *The Fear of Approaching God*

I remember when I was about three years old. I was in a cot at the feet of my parents' bed, crying the blues. I don't remember exactly what my complaint was, but I guess I wasn't very happy that they were in bed and I was in the cot! My dad, who at the time was working two jobs and must have been very tired, was patiently reminding me that it would be a good idea for me to keep quiet and go to sleep. My mom, as usual, was using the more matronly approach of trying to calm me with soft words. After several minutes of being pampered by Mom and warned by Dad, the unthinkable happened. My father arose from his lair, approached my cot, and gave me a swat across the cheek that I'll never forget!

That was the first, and last, time that my dad ever swatted me. He never again needed to administer corporal punishment. From that moment on, I feared my dad. I knew the Wrath of Dad, and I made sure I wouldn't experience it again.

This one slap on the cheek was enough to give me a healthy fear of my father. No, this was not a fear that made me run and hide every time he entered the room. Instead, it was a fear that resulted in respect for my dad. I knew that if I stayed within the boundaries he established, things would be okay.

God does want us to fear Him, but He does not want us to be *afraid* of Him. Just like I respected my father's authority, God wants us to respect Him by living within the boundaries He prescribes.

It took one incident to make an indelible impression upon my psyche that Dad meant business. It took one incident to convince the Jewish people that God meant business too. He was a God to be feared. When He said

something, He meant it. They learned firsthand about the wrath of God.

The whole story began when Moses instructed Aaron and his sons to prepare themselves to be priests to the Jewish people. For most of this preparation period, the priests simply hung out in front of the entrance to the Tabernacle<sup>5</sup> (8:33). "If you leave," Moses said, "you will die — this is what the Lord has said" (8:35).

On the eighth day of the preparation, Moses summoned Aaron and his sons to offer the blood sacrifices for both themselves and the people. What happened next was awe striking:

"Moses and Aaron went into the Tabernacle, and when they came out again they blessed the people; and the glory of the Lord appeared to the whole assembly. Then fire came from the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and fat on the altar; and when the people saw it, they all shouted and fell flat upon the ground before the Lord." (9:23–24)

What an incredible sight! The first time "fire from heaven" enters the scene, it ignites the burnt offering (which from that point onward would stay lit day and night) and causes the entire congregation to fall prostrate before God.

Everyone, that is, except two:

"But Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, placed unholy fire in their censers, laid incense on the fire, and offered the incense before the Lord—contrary to what the Lord had just commanded them! So fire blazed forth from the presence of the Lord and destroyed them." (10:1–2)

Nadab and Abihu offered what the old King James Bible calls "strange fire." We don't know exactly what this "strange fire" was and why it ignited God's wrath. But, we do know this was not what God commanded. God wasn't happy, and He let His displeasure show. The same fire that ignited the sacrifice also lit up the *sacrificer*! The point was clear: When God says something, He means it.

Could you imagine how Aaron felt seeing his sons die before His eyes? Yet God didn't stop there. He passed on a warning to — of all people — Aaron and his remaining sons with these seemingly heartless words:

"Do not mourn — do not let your hair hang loose as a sign of your mourning, and do not tear your clothes. If you do, *God will strike you dead too, and his wrath will come upon all the people of Israel.*" (10:6, italics mine)

It seems ludicrous that God would get so upset over such a petty thing as offering "strange fire." It seems even more unconscionable that God's wrath would be poured upon an entire nation because a father mourned over his dead sons! But this is the wrath of God. It's intolerant of sin and unlawful deeds. It has no patience for self-seeking and pride. No wonder people walked around terrified of God. No wonder they were afraid to approach God. One false move and they too could become charred corpses.

God hates sin. When we realize how much He hates sin, we are confronted with His wrath. When we see how God hates things such as divorce (Malachi 2:16), idolatry (Deuteronomy 16:22), and even empty religion (Isaiah 1:13–14), we begin to realize that maybe we are on God's blacklist. Hopefully His eraser isn't in His hands ready to wipe us out!

Aaron was so afraid of God that he was even scared to eat! When Moses questioned him as to why he did not eat the meat of the sin offering (which God instructed him to eat), Aaron replied:

"They offered their sin offering and burnt offering before the Lord, but if I had eaten the sin offering on such a day as this, would it have pleased the Lord?" (10:19)

Approaching God is dangerous sport. As God Himself put it:

"I will show myself holy among those who approach me, and I will be glorified before all the people."  
(10:3)

God makes no exceptions. When people come to Him, they better remember that He is holy — pure, undefiled and completely intolerant to sin. It's a risky business, and one that few would want to undertake for fear of their very lives.

If you are afraid of God, you will probably never draw near to Him. Yet, if you are afraid to come to God, then you are probably aware of the sin in your life. This is really not such a bad thing. In fact, it's a first step toward truly coming to God. The next step, though, is equally crucial. You need to realize that God does not want to burn you to the crisp. He has a better plan. That plan is found in His Son, Jesus Christ.

### *The Faith to Approach God*

I recently completed a long stretch of cross-country travel. During this time, I flew in all sorts of conditions:

intense heat, snow, and even lightning storms. I have learned not to be afraid of flying during a lightning storm, even though a highflying jet is often struck by lightning. It seems pretty scary, but a plane full of hundreds of people can be hit several times during a lightning storm. Yet everyone inside is safe. This is because all jets are equipped with a lightning rod to absorb the hit. Though the weather outside is dangerous, everybody remains warm and cozy on the inside.

In the days of Leviticus, there was no place of safety from God's wrath. Cross the line, and you might absorb the lightning wrath of God. Today, though, we have a place of refuge from the storm of God's wrath. We have someone that has become our lightning rod. He has absorbed the wrath of God so that we could be saved from it.

Jesus is God's human lightning rod. When Jesus died upon the Cross, He did more than offer the final sacrifice for sins. He took upon Himself the fiery wrath of God. All of God's anger against sin, all of His wrath against mankind, was poured out upon Jesus. Jesus absorbed God's wrath so that we could be saved from it.

Let me illustrate this in a parable. A man was having quite the time running up his credit cards. Extravagant vacations, fine dining, fancy clothes — you name it, he was buying it. Of course, he had no way (nor intention) of paying off his debts.

After a while, the man's creditors got together and brought the man before the courts. The judge examined the evidence and saw no alternative. This man was as guilty as sin, and judgment needed to be passed.

The man trembled in fear as he approached the judge. The judge raised his gavel, ready to declare the "Guilty" verdict. Suddenly, a stranger burst through the back door of the courtroom. He screamed, "Wait!" as he ran toward

the judge's seat. The judge eyed the man with an amazed look and laid down his gavel. Peering down upon the stranger, the judge demanded, "What do you mean by this?" The stranger reached into his pocket and pulled out a check. "Here," replied the stranger, as he gave the check to the judge. The judge raised his eyebrows, shook his head in disbelief, and with a voice of satisfaction slammed the gavel and declared, "The payment has been made in full. I declare the defendant *not* guilty!"

This is exactly what Jesus did for us. According to Romans 3:23, we have all sinned and crossed God's intended boundaries. Because of this, we feel afraid to approach God, for God can rightfully look into our eyes and declare the verdict, "Guilty!" Yet, Jesus has exploded on the scene with a "check" — signed in His blood — that has paid our penalty in full. Because of Jesus, God can look at us, sin and all, and declare with complete satisfaction, "Not guilty!"

"And since by his [Jesus'] blood he did all this for us as sinners, how much more will he do for us now that he has declared us not guilty? Now he will save us from all of God's wrath to come." (Romans 5:9)

Jesus paid the penalty for our sins with His blood. But He also took upon Himself God's wrath over sin. Because of this act of love, we can have confidence in approaching God. We can come to God with *faith*, not *fear*:

"So let us come boldly to the very throne of God and stay there to receive his mercy and to find grace to help us in our times of need." (Hebrews 4:16)

"Now all those who flee to him to save them can take new courage when they hear such assurances

from God; now they can know without doubt that he will give them the salvation he has promised them." (Hebrews 6:18)

Jesus absorbed God's wrath so that we could be saved from it. How, then, does this incredible act of love enable us to approach God with confidence?

If you recognize that you have sinned, then you are on the right track. You know that there is a breach in your relationship with God, and that breach needs to be repaired. This is a healthy *fear* of God. The next step is the step of *faith*. To receive the benefits of what Jesus did upon the Cross, we need to express faith in Him. We need to stop trying to approach God by our own efforts and instead approach God by way of Jesus. Faith is simply trust — trusting in Jesus Christ to give us complete access to Father God. As the Apostle Paul put it:

"For I am not ashamed of the Good News about Christ. It is God's powerful method of bringing all who believe it to heaven. This Good News tells us that God makes us ready for heaven — makes us right in God's sight — when we put our faith and trust in Christ to save us. This is accomplished from start to finish by faith." (Romans 1:16–17)

Unfortunately, the next verse demonstrates what happens to those who reject Jesus' wonderful gift:

"But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, evil men who push away the truth from them." (Romans 1:18)

To these, the Bible says that God is still angry with them. Yes, He loves them as much as anybody else, but

they have not allowed Jesus to save them from God's wrath. They may try to appease God in their own way, or even ignore Him outright. God is too holy, too intolerant of sin to accept man's best efforts. Only the death of God's Son, Jesus Christ, gives us the confidence and assurance to approach God.

One day, Jesus sent messengers to some villages to prepare them for His coming. In the village of Samaria, the people refused Him entry. When two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, heard this, they offered, "Master, shall we order fire down from heaven to burn them up?" (Luke 9:54). Jesus immediately turned to these men and rebuked them for their intolerance and vengeance.

While James and John were still living in the mindset of Leviticus, Jesus was showing them a new way. He was showing them that people no longer needed to be afraid of God. He was ushering in a new day — a day where God would demonstrate His love for sinners, even though He hated their sins. You live in this day, and I invite you to take advantage of it.

*Dear God, I know that my sins deserve Your wrath. Today,  
I place my faith in Your Son, Jesus Christ,  
to save me from this wrath. Today,  
I come to You by placing my life in the trust of Jesus. Amen.*



# *A Blanket Invitation*

(Leviticus 11:1–47)

"And the sign said, 'Everybody welcome.  
Come in. Kneel down and pray.'"

— *"Signs"*

*By Five Man Electric Band*

"These are the distinctions between what is ceremonially clean and may be eaten, and what is ceremonially defiled and may not be eaten."

— *Leviticus 11:47*

**I**t was noontime. As was his custom, the Apostle Peter climbed to the rooftop of his home to pray. After praying for a good while, he became hungry and called for some friends to fix him a meal. As he waited for his lunch, Peter continued in prayer.

Maybe it was hunger, or maybe weariness, or maybe it was just the hot sun burning upon his head. Most likely, it was simply a miracle of God. Regardless of how it happened, Peter fell into a trance. In his dreamlike state, he saw the skies open, and what appeared to be a large sheet or blanket, tied at the corners, floated down to the earth. Upon this sheet were all types of animals — wild and domesticated beasts, reptiles, and birds.

While still in this trance, Peter heard God call to him from out of heaven and declare, "Go ahead, kill and eat whatever animal you wish."

Now, one might think that Peter's prayers had just been answered. He was very hungry — so hungry that he seemed delirious. Now, there before him was a table

set with food for the asking. There were steak and eggs, chicken, fresh bacon, and whatever else Peter's appetite could conjure up. Yet, Peter seemed anything but gracious. In fact, he appeared downright rude: "Never, Lord. I have never in my life eaten such creatures, for they are forbidden by our Jewish laws."

Peter was being neither rude nor ungracious, nor was he speaking out of turn. In fact, what he was saying was entirely correct according to God's very own laws. You see, Jewish law strictly prohibited the eating of certain animals. To eat such "unclean" creatures would have been an egregious breach against God. Peter understood the rules according to the Book of Leviticus, chapter 11. There was only one type of diet prescribed for the devout Jew. Peter would only eat *kosher* cuisine.

As this story (found in the New Testament in Acts 10) tells us, Peter and all his Jewish friends were very concerned about what they ate. Ever since the days of Leviticus, orthodox Jews have maintained a strict dietary menu known as kosher cooking. For food to be kosher, it must be of a certain type and cooked in a particular way. According to the rules, poultry is kosher, but pork is not. It's okay to eat salmon, but lobster is not on the menu.

There are many things that make a meal kosher. Yet, the most basic elements of what is kosher are found in Leviticus 11. Here, we find the animals that were "clean," or fit, for eating and which ones were not. It was a strict diet prescribed by God.

God was very concerned about what the ancient Jews ate. Not only did He prescribe strict rules on which animals could be eaten, but He even went so far as to prohibit even *touching* their dead bodies! Why did God care so much about a person's diet?

Some have suggested that kosher eating is simply healthy eating. Though there may be some truth to this, it does not explain the prohibition against approaching the carcasses of such animals, or even disposing of items that came in contact with them. It appears that the real reason for this God-prescribed diet is somehow found in verse 47:

"These are the *distinctions* between what is ceremonially clean and may be eaten, and what is ceremonially defiled and may not be eaten." (11:47, italics mine)

### *The Apple of Their Father's Eye*

The kosher laws in Leviticus seem to be less about health and more about *distinction* — the distinction between what is “clean” and what is “defiled.” God isn’t as much concerned about food as He is about people being different. God wanted the Jewish nation to be distinct — or different — from the rest of the world. He wanted a people who would be notably different from everybody else. By God’s own declaration, the world had turned its back on Him and gone its own way. God had enough, and He wanted to make a clear point that He was interested in the doings of mankind. He wanted to make it clear that He was the God of heaven and earth, and that the Jewish people were His chosen ones to declare this truth. Maybe these kosher laws helped to promote good health, dietary discipline or even spiritual character. But the basic intent was to distinguish the Jewish nation from the rest of the world.

The ancient Jews seemed to get the picture. They understood that they were different, distinct, from other

nations. Hadn't God handpicked them out of Egypt to be His very own people? Weren't they "God's chosen nation" for whom the Lord fought their battles?

If you take a cursory look at the Old Testament, you will find that this entire work focuses on God's relationship with a single nation — the nation of Israel. The Old Testament teaches how God chose the Israelites to be His very own special people, above all the people of the Earth. God would deliver them, guide them, defend them, and even chastise them. It was all about God and the Jews. One might rightly say that God had a favorite.

Here are just a few passages in the Old Testament that show how important the Jewish nation was to God:

"You shall be my own little flock from among all the nations of the earth." (Exodus 19:5)

"[God] has chosen you from all the people on the face of the whole earth to be his own chosen ones." (Deuteronomy 7:6)

"He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of [God's] eye." (Zechariah 2:8, KJV)

"You belong exclusively to the Lord your God, and he has chosen you to be his own possession, more so than any other nation on the face of the earth." (Deuteronomy 14:2)

This last verse, in context, speaks about the same kosher rules found in Leviticus 11. Without question, these dietary laws dictated by God were just another example of His special relationship with Israel. God had chosen the Jews above all the nations of the earth. These dietary laws

were kind of like an invitation to dine at his table. He sent out the invitation and prepared the menu. Unfortunately, the seating was limited. If you weren't a Jew, you weren't invited.

In the days of Leviticus, to be non-Jewish meant you were far from God. The Bible separates people into two broad categories: Jews and Gentiles. A Gentile is simply a non-Jew. And, unlike the Jew, a Gentile was not chosen of God. The New Testament sums up the condition of the Gentiles like this:

“Never forget that once you were heathen [people who didn't know God], and that you were called godless and 'unclean' by the Jews. Remember that in those days you were living utterly apart from [God]; you were enemies of God's children and he had promised you no help. You were lost, without God, without hope. *You were once far away from God.*” (Ephesians 2:11–12, italics mine)

So, the dietary laws were not so much about kosher food. They were about kosher *people*. Gentiles (that is, most of the world) were simply not kosher! Most of us are Gentiles. Our condition before God was not good. We were called godless and unclean. We were considered lost and without hope. And, most sadly, we were far away from God.

Fortunately for you and me, today there is hope. We no longer need to be seen as nonkosher. God wants to be near to us.

To the ancient Jew, the thought that God wanted to be near to Gentiles was strange. In their theology, God had little or no interest in having a relationship with dirty Gentiles. If God ever *did* want to be close to a Gentile, it was a secret to them.

## *Spread Out the Tablecloth*

We now return to the story of Peter.

Remember how God had just spread out a table before the Apostle Peter. Remember how Peter reminded God that he could not, by law, eat nonkosher food. True, Peter did not want to touch unclean animals. But know that he also felt the same about unclean people. Gentiles were viewed as unholy, separate from God, and not worthy of any relationship with God. They were barred from the Jewish synagogues, excluded from the Temple, and generally thought of as barbarous and ungodly. In fact, Jews such as Peter would not even eat a meal with a Gentile. They viewed God as their God alone, and Peter was no exception.

Peter told God “No, thank you” to this divine spread. But the story doesn’t end here. God’s response to Peter may possibly be some of the most important words spoken on behalf of every non-Jew ever to live:

“Don’t contradict God! If he says something is kosher, then it is.” (Acts 10:15)

This scene was repeated three times, and the sheet ascended back into heaven.

Peter was confused over what he had just seen. God, on the one hand, had prescribed strict dietary rules. Now, He was exhorting Peter to break these rules. As Peter considered what had just occurred, God spoke to Peter’s heart that three men had arrived downstairs to meet him. They wanted Peter to join them to a town called Caesarea to meet a man named Cornelius. They proceeded to share how Cornelius had also seen a vision. In this vision, he was to summon Peter to his home and listen to whatever

Peter would say. This seemed to be quite an honor to Peter, except for one minor detail.

Cornelius was a *Gentile*.

Only minutes earlier, Peter would have sent these three men away without giving them the time of day. But not now. Peter had the assurance that God was up to something. So he joined the men en route to Caesarea and the home of a Gentile named Cornelius.

It was then that Peter began to understand the vision. God was not so much interested on what *food* was kosher, but what *people* were kosher. God wanted Peter to know that *all* people were kosher to Him. Now, the invitation to dine at His table was not just reserved for the Jews. It was a blanket invitation for all.

When Peter finally arrived at Cornelius' home, he spoke these words:

“You know it is against the Jewish laws for me to come into a Gentile home like this. But God has shown me in a vision that I should never think of anyone as inferior. I see very clearly that the Jews are not God's only favorites! In every nation he has those who worship him and do good deeds and are acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:28, 34–35)

What God had said in the vision was basically this: He has spread open the tablecloth large enough for all people to eat at His table. Now, it is not just the Jews that are His special people, but all nations are dear to His heart. He wants to draw near to all people, regardless of race.

This was big news to Peter. It was even bigger news to his Jewish Christian friends. They argued vehemently against him and said such things as “You fellowshiped with Gentiles and even ate with them” (Acts 11:3). Yet, it

didn't take them long to get the picture. God, who was once far from the Gentiles, wanted to come near to them. God was not only the God of the Jews, but the God of all men as well.

### *God's Secret Plan*

The Apostle Peter was the first to understand that God accepts all people, regardless of race. It was the Apostle Paul, though, who made clear why this was now the case. Paul, who considered himself to be the Apostle to the Gentiles, taught what may have been the most controversial teaching of the early Church. It was, as he put it, God's "secret plan" (Ephesians 3:3).

Though the Old Testament presented a God who was biased toward a single nation, Paul recognized that God's real intentions were different. He had a secret plan. God had always wanted to invite all people to His table. Yet, this would not become reality until His secret plan was revealed.

What was God's secret plan? In Paul's own words:

"Never forget that once you were heathen, and that you were called godless and 'unclean' by the Jews. Remember that in those days you were living utterly apart from [God]; you were enemies of God's children and he had promised you no help. You were lost, without God, without hope. You were once far away from God.

"But now you belong to Christ Jesus, and though you once were far away from God, *now you have been brought very near to him because of what Jesus Christ has done for you with his blood.*" (Ephesians 2:11-13, italics mine)

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God's secret plan was to send Jesus to die so that all people might draw near to God. When Jesus gave His life on our behalf, He tore down the walls of separation between the Jew and the Gentile. He brought God close to all. As the Apostle Paul continues to write:

“For Christ himself is our way of peace. He had made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one family, breaking down the wall of contempt that used to separate us. By his death he ended the angry resentment between us, caused by the Jewish laws which favored the Jews and excluded the Gentiles.” (Ephesians 2:14–15)

Jesus Christ was the first *abolitionist!* He abolished the old way of separation and bigotry prescribed by the Levitical code and opened a new way of equality before God. Without Jesus, we would know a God who preferred one race above another. With Jesus, we all have the privilege of coming to a God who is near to us all.

### ***A Blanket Invitation***

The invitation to draw near to God is no longer for VIP members only. The sign reads “Everybody’s welcome.” The tablecloth has been spread out, and the meal is prepared. The invitation has been broadcast to all people. It is a blanket invitation to come and dine with the Father. Some say that seating is limited. I’m not sure if that’s true, but I plan on arriving early just in case.

*God, thank You for the invitation to draw near to You. I answer “Yes” to Your invitation and will not hesitate to arrive.  
Amen.*



## *A Story Twelve Years in the Making*

(Leviticus 12:1–8, 15:1–33)

“When a baby girl is born, the mother’s ceremonial impurity shall last two weeks, during which time she will be under the same restrictions as during menstruation.”

— *Leviticus 12:5*

“If the menstrual flow continues after the normal time . . . anything she lies upon during that time is defiled. Anyone touching her bed or anything she sits on shall be defiled.”

— *Leviticus 15:25–27*

The new mother held her baby daughter in her arms. She gently kissed the little girl’s forehead as she whispered the words of a lullaby. Her husband, Jairus, attended to the needs of his young wife and baby. He handed the new mother a drink, yet was careful to not touch her. As the head of the local synagogue, it was imperative that he remain untainted by the “uncleanness” of his wife. He knew that, for the next couple of weeks, he and his wife would need to live life at sort of a distance. Afterward, they could resume their normal pattern of tender touch and affection.

Across the village, another woman was in a similar state. As it was each month during her period, the woman needed to warn others of her uncleanness. Anyone who touched her would be unclean until the evening, and that included her husband as well. This would last for around a week, and then her life could return to normalcy.

The two weeks have expired, and in the morning the young mother climbs into the bed of her husband. She

reaches over and embraces him in his sleep. He awakes to sense once again the intimacy that had he so carefully restrained himself from. Jairus holds his wife near to him, then remembers that her uncleanness is still upon her. He reminds her that it will be a little less than two months until they could express their complete affections once again.

About that time, the other woman wakes from her sleep. She rises from her bed to check the new cloth that she wrapped herself in the night before. This morning there is blood, just like the previous two weeks. Her menstruation has continued twice as long as usual. Her husband opens his eyes and looks to her from across the room. Her disappointed glance tells him all he needs to know. Today, he will not draw near to his wife.

It is now a little over two months later. Jairus and his wife, along with their young daughter, bring a slain lamb and turtledove to the priest as an offering. After the priest conducts the short ceremony, he sends the young couple away. Delighted, Jairus places his arms around his wife and whispers that they should return home immediately. She quietly laughs, and says that she'll first put their daughter to bed. Intimacy has returned to this home.

That same day, the other woman hears the words of the physician. This doctor, like the one she saw last week, and the one the week prior, offers no diagnosis or cure. He simply cannot detect what has caused this incessant bleeding. The couple leaves the physician's room filled with sadness. This time, her husband holds her, despite the law forbidding his touch. It's just more than they can bear. The illness is hard, but the lack of touch and intimacy is harder still. This unending menstruation has lasted for over two months, and it would continue for much longer.

Twelve years longer.

In a day when sexuality is openly spoken of, and things such as menstruation and nocturnal emissions are considered part of our normal growth and life, it seems quite foreign to us to speak of these things in terms of being “unclean” or “dirty.” We know today that hormonal activity is not “dirty,” nor is it something that we should be ashamed of. So, it may be difficult to place ourselves in the sandals of the ancient Jew who had to deal stringently with such matters. The laws of Leviticus explicitly stated that the aforementioned discharges made a man or woman ceremonially unclean — unfit for entry into the temple, a carrier of uncleanness to the very bed or chair that the person was upon, and too dirty to be touched by any human, including a spouse. Then, to make matters more difficult, any woman who had a child would remain in a state similar to menstruation for one to two months, depending upon whether she gave birth to a boy or girl. It was a very bothersome, and sometimes lonely, burden to carry. It just isn’t fun being dirty.

So was it for the two unnamed women in our story. One woman, spoken of in Luke chapter 8 as the wife of Jairus, the head of the synagogue, experienced this uncleanness for a total of eighty days — twice the uncleanness required for having a boy. It was a tough three months, but she made it through. Now, with her body strengthened by the time off, she could resume a normal relationship with her husband — not just intercourse, but any other physical touch as well. Essentially, for eighty days she was “off limits.”

For the other woman, her uncleanness should have only lasted a week. But now, twelve years later, she remains “off limits.” We don’t know for sure, but her frustrated husband probably left her. Certainly, she was ostracized from the Temple. And who would want to be friends with someone

who was “off limits”? This woman was desperate. Her life was destroyed by a Levitical law that called her unclean. She was a very dirty person.

Have you ever felt dirty inside? These laws, like many of the laws in Leviticus, did just this for the ancient Jew. It reminded them of just how far they were from God, and how “unclean” they were in comparison to God. Today, menstruation and the like may not make us feel dirty on the inside, but something else does. This something is called “sin.” This is something we can all relate to. It may be something we did, or maybe something done to us. In either case, sin can make us feel dirty on the inside. And, being dirty on the inside can often make us feel far from God.

Yet, as before, this is not the way things need to be. When Jesus came onto the scene, He removed our “dirtiness” and brought God near to us again.

What we have seen in the lives of these two women was only a prelude to the real story. The real story was twelve years in the making. This story begins when one man enters the picture — the Man Jesus.

### *Reach Out and Touch Someone*

The story begins in Luke chapter 8:

“And now a man named Jairus, a leader of a Jewish synagogue, came and fell down at Jesus’ feet and begged him to come home with him, for his only child was dying, a little girl twelve years old.”  
(Luke 8:41–42)

I can think of few things more shattering than losing a child. My heart goes out to those who have lost a young

son or daughter to illness, tragedy, or any other misfortune. For Jairus and his wife, their only child was their greatest treasure on earth. There are few things that can cause a man to grovel at another man's feet. This is one of them.

Twelve years. This is how far we have come in the story. For twelve years, the little girl was strong, playful, vibrant. Now, an illness threatens her life.

Jesus begins toward Jairus's home, brushing shoulders with the crowd that has gathered to see this incredible man. As he moves ahead, someone in the mass decides to seize upon a golden opportunity:

“As they went, a woman who wanted to be healed came up behind and touched him, for she had been slowly bleeding for twelve years, and could find no cure (though she had spent everything she had on doctors). But the instant she touched the edge of his robe, the bleeding stopped.” (Luke 8:43–44)

Twelve years. This is how long the poor woman suffered this terrible illness. She, like Jairus before her, was desperate to the point of shamelessness. For Jairus, the desperation came suddenly, unexpectedly. For this woman, it was gradual. But now, after twelve years of isolation and uncleanness, she would not be deterred from the moment. She knew that the Healer was in town. She knew that if only she could touch the edge of His robe . . .

If only she could touch Him. This simple phrase seems innocent enough. But the truth was that the laws of Leviticus made this “touch” something other than innocent. It was downright dirty:

“Whenever a woman menstruates, she shall be in a state of ceremonial defilement for seven days afterward. If the menstrual flow continues after the

normal time, or at some irregular time during the month, the same rules apply . . . so that anything she lies upon during that time is defiled, just as it would be during her normal menstrual period, and everything she sits on is in a similar state of defilement. *Anyone touching her bed or anything she sits on shall be defiled.*" (Leviticus 15:19, 25–27, italics mine)

To touch Jesus was to defile Him. The woman knew this, but it didn't matter anymore. What mattered to her was that she was tired of being dirty. She wanted to be clean.

Have you ever felt this way? If you feel dirty inside, whether from something you did or something done to you, there is a solution. Reach out and touch the edge of Jesus' robe. Don't be like the masses who simply "rubbed shoulders" with Jesus. Be like this woman, and reach out to Jesus with a sense of desperation, knowing that only He can cleanse the dirty.

How did Jesus respond to this woman? Was He upset from being "defiled" by her? Did he rebuke her and send her away?

Saint Luke records Jesus' response in this manner:

"'Who touched me?' Jesus asked. Everyone denied it, and Peter said, 'Master, so many are crowding against you . . .' But Jesus told him, 'No, it was someone who deliberately touched me, for I felt healing power go out from me.'" (Luke 8:45–46)

It appears that Jesus was not very pleased by this little incident. His alarmed voice wanted to know right now who touched Him. It wasn't about the shoulders of

masses that crammed to see Jesus. It was about someone who reached out to Him and caused “healing power” to flow from Him.

The woman began to tremble. She had acted in a moment of desperation, but now she felt a sense of great guilt and fear. She had done what was considered “dirty” and “unlawful.” Her impatience with her condition finally caught up with her. She probably now felt dirtier than ever before.

When we reach out to Jesus, our natural response is that He will reject us. And for good reason, right? If we feel dirty inside, our sins make us feel farther from God, and undeserving of His love and “healing power.” But this just isn’t the way it is with God. God is closer than you think, and He wants us to extend our arms to Him and beg Him for cleansing and healing.

The woman fell at Jesus’ feet. She probably would have grabbed his heels, but refrained for fear of greater damage. With eyes solidly staring toward the ground, she confessed that, indeed, it was she who touched Jesus.

Jesus looked down to the woman. I suppose He smiled, and His voice became tender. “Daughter,” He said, “your faith has healed you. Go in peace.”<sup>6</sup> Immediately, her bleeding stopped.

If you feel dirty today, reach out to Jesus and allow Him to “stop the bleeding.” As it was for the woman, so is it for us. It is more than desperation that heals us — it is faith. It was the desperation of the woman that caused her to lunge toward the robe of Jesus. It was her faith that healed her.

It was a story twelve years in the making, and it had a happy ending.

But the story wasn’t over yet.

## *Do You Need “Healing Power”?*

The bearer of bad news spoke to Jairus: “She’s gone; there’s no use troubling the Teacher now.”<sup>7</sup> Jairus stood shocked. He had just witnessed the dramatic climax to a story twelve years in the making. Now, his twelve-year-old daughter was dead.

For most, this would be the end of the story — but not when Jesus is in town.

Jesus looked straight into Jairus’ eyes. His words were marvelous, incredible. They brought hope where there was no hope:

“Don’t be afraid! Just trust me, and she’ll be all right.” (Luke 8:50)

The rest of the story need not be told in detail. The sum total is this: Jairus’ daughter was dead, but Jesus brought her back to life. As Luke tells us, Jesus took the girl by the hand and raised her from the dead.<sup>8</sup>

For Jairus and his wife, his twelve-year-old story had a happy ending as well.

Your story may not be twelve years in the making. Maybe it’s been twenty, thirty, or more years. Maybe you are like Jairus’ daughter. A sudden calamity has brought you to a point where you are out of control. Or, maybe you are like the woman with the issue of blood. It has been a long and arduous road, and now you are desperate for “healing power.” Regardless, your story can have a happy ending as well.

Regardless of your situation, know that you can reach out and touch Jesus. Go on to the next chapter, and you will find how Jesus will touch you as well.

*Dear God, I am at a point of desperation in my life. I want to reach out and touch Jesus. By faith, I ask Jesus to bring His healing power to my situation. Amen.*



## *Who Would Touch a Leper?*

(Leviticus 13:1–14:57)

“No, I wouldn't touch a leper for a thousand pounds;  
yet I willingly cure him for the love of God.”

— *Mother Teresa*

“Now the leper on whom the sore is, his clothes  
shall be torn and his head bare; and he shall cover his  
mustache, and cry, ‘Unclean! Unclean!’”

— *Leviticus 13:45, NKJV*

**J**esus is not only touched by our uncleanness. He touches us while we're unclean.

Mother Teresa had long been considered one of the most compassionate and committed individuals on this planet — and rightfully so. Her work with the poorest of the poor, the destitute and leprous inhabitants of Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), India, has earned her a Nobel Prize and the praise of mankind. Now with her death, she is on track to receive the highest honor given any Catholic: sainthood. Her life's work has brought to many great healing, inspiration, devotion and even awe.

Still, Mother Teresa knew her limits. As quoted in her own words, “I wouldn't touch a leper for a thousand pounds.”

I'm with Mother Teresa. Who, in their right mind, would touch a leper? Yet, despite her own admission, Mother Teresa lived among the lepers, tended to their needs, and, I must believe, *touched* them.

You couldn't pay Mother Teresa enough money to touch a leper. But, for the sake of God's love, she dedicated her entire life to bringing them comfort, faith, and healing.

In fact, her life was an example of what the Apostle Paul wrote:

“Are we insane? If so, it is to bring glory to God. And if we are in our right minds, it is for your benefit. Whatever we do, it is certainly not for our own profit, but because Christ’s love controls us now.” (II Corinthians 5:13–14)

What compelled Mother Teresa to touch the leper? If a million dollars wasn’t enough, what was? It was nothing less than Christ’s love. And it is this same Jesus who is not only touched by our sin and weakness, but who touches us as well.

### *Terrible News*

Jesus was in town.<sup>9</sup> A man, suffering from an advanced case of leprosy, made his way toward where the Master was staying. This man had endured a long and difficult road. When he first noticed something was wrong with his skin, he no doubt tried to hide the problem. He knew what would happen if he was found out. The laws in Leviticus 13 were very clear about conditions such as his. Any swellings, boils, infected scabs, white spots, or other suspicious skin problems would require a visit to the priest, and most likely a quarantine period of at least a week. The best outcome would be temporary isolation, a cleansing procedure, and finally a release back into society. The worst scenario would be unthinkable — maybe even worse than death.

Eventually, the man could no longer conceal his condition, so he went to see the priest. By design of the Levitical laws, the priest inspected the infected area. We

don't know exactly what he saw, but it might have been a white spot impressed in the skin. The priest commanded that the man be placed under quarantine for seven days. During this time, the man would face complete isolation, save for an occasional meal quickly dropped off by a very nervous associate.

At the end of the week, the man appeared before the priest. The news was not good. The infected area had spread. By law, the priest had no other choice; he declared the man "unclean." The man fell to his knees, begging for mercy. The priest would have none of it and ordered the man to be taken away. He must, as the law required, tear his clothes to appear shabby and destitute, shave his head bald (a shameful mark for the ancient Jew), keep his distance from anyone other than a fellow leper, and scream out the horrible words that kept others at a safe distance: "*Unclean! Unclean!*"

I remember when I worked for a defense contractor in a highly secure building. This job required a very high-ranking clearance, so security was the top priority. Every once in a while, we would have people pass through the area who did have the proper "tickets," or clearances. So, one of us would escort the individuals around the complex. Whenever we walked down a hallway, opened a door, or entered an open area, we would cry out, "Uncleared! Uncleared!" Every so often, I succumbed to the stupid urge to cry out, "Unclean!" Of course, this embarrassed my poor visitor.

Can you imagine how shameful it would feel to ward off all around you with the words "Unclean! Unclean!" It was the definitive word that stated, "Keep far from me. Stay out of my way. You do not want to come near me or touch me at all." As the Living Bible simply states, it proclaimed, "I am a leper."

The leprosy described in Leviticus may or may not be the type of disease that Mother Teresa daily faced. Some scholars today think it may simply have been a severe form of psoriasis. Regardless, any God-fearing Jew dreaded it. The stigma of this disease is comparable to what those with AIDS often face. People simply did not want to come within a stone's throw of anyone infected with this disease.

So, the man knew the impact of his branding. He no longer could associate with friends, loved ones, business acquaintances, or any other "clean" person. He was dirty. He was a leper. His life would be with the lepers.

But now, Jesus was in town.

### *See Me, Feel Me, Touch Me, Heal Me*

The man fell before Jesus' feet. He buried his face down into the ground, possibly trying to hide his grotesque appearance. With his voice muted by the sand, he spoke:

"Sir," he said, "if you only will, you can clear me of every trace of my disease." (Luke 5:12)

The man could only hope for one thing. Maybe, just maybe Jesus would speak a magic spell, wave his hands, and the leprosy would disappear. One thing he knew for sure: Jesus would stay clear from touching him. After all, who would touch a leper?

We all love the stories of people who do the unthinkable. We are moved by Disney's classic *Beauty and the Beast*, for (as the opening scene suggests) "who could ever learn to love a beast?" We are touched by Mother Teresa, who could have opted for a far less difficult road, yet chose to live among the poorest of the poor. Jesus, though, sets the

standard. Unlike all the other heroes of our day, Jesus was completely, utterly *clean*! There was nothing in this man, past or present, which was selfish or sinful. Jesus was the epitome of cleanness.

Yet, Jesus touched a leper.

“Jesus reached out and *touched* the man and said, ‘Of course I will. Be healed.’ And the leprosy left him instantly.” (Luke 5:13, italics mine)

In the Who’s rock opera *Tommy*, the lead character, deaf, dumb and blind from birth, sings the words, “See me, feel me, touch me, heal me.”<sup>10</sup> It’s the cry of all who are outcasts, isolated, unclean. Look my way. Empathize with my pain. Reach out to me. Touch me. Heal me of my pain!

This was the cry of this poor leper. The laws of Leviticus had destroyed his life. But, Jesus, who was above the law, restored him.

### *A Beautiful Picture*

After healing the leper, Jesus instructed him to go before the priest, who would confirm the healing. Jesus didn’t do this to promote himself. In fact, he usually asked those who were healed to keep quiet. The reason for this confirmation was that the Levitical law required it. The man may have been cured, but now he needed to be declared *clean*.

Leviticus 14 describes to us the ceremony performed for those cured of leprosy. The most important part of the ritual involved a couple of birds, some wood, and a red string:

“If the priest sees that the leprosy is gone, he shall require two living birds of a kind permitted for food, and shall take some cedar wood, a scarlet string, and some hyssop branches, to be used for the purification ceremony of the one who is healed. The priest shall then order one of the birds killed in an earthenware pot held above running water. The other bird, still living, shall be dipped in the blood, along with the cedar wood, the scarlet thread, and the hyssop branch. Then the priest shall sprinkle the blood seven times upon the man cured of his leprosy, and the priest shall pronounce him cured, and shall let the living bird fly into the open field.” (Leviticus 14:3–7)

This ceremony was a beautiful (albeit bloody) picture of what had just occurred for the former leper. His life was essentially dead, like the poor bird killed in the clay pot. But now, he was healed, and essentially had been set free as the bird released in the open field.

Still, this doesn't tell the whole story. What is most likely pictured here is more than the healing of the leper. This illustration is more about the *Healer* of the leper — Jesus.

You see, Jesus was like the bird killed in the pot. He, like us, lived in a clay pot known as a “body” by which He was eventually executed. Then we see the living bird dipped in the blood of the dead bird, somehow connecting the two. With this blood was mingled the cedar wood, the scarlet thread, and the hyssop branch. The wood points to the Cross, a torture device of two beams connected in either a T or X configuration, used to painfully extend the joints of the suffering victim nailed to it. Some scholars say that the scarlet thread and hyssop branch remind us that Jesus'

crucifixion was approved of Father God, for it served the greater purpose of bringing mankind back to God.

But the greatest picture is of the bird set free. Jesus didn't just suffer and die. He rose from the dead! His body was set free from the decay of death. He is no longer dead, but alive! Because Jesus is alive, He can resurrect our dying souls to a new life with God for today and forever.

### *Inner Leprosy*

This was quite a celebration ceremony for those cured from the horrible disease of leprosy. The joy can be compared to someone being miraculously cured from AIDS or Alzheimer's. Imagine, then, the joy that one experiences when cured from the worst disease of all: sin. Sin is the "inner leprosy" that decays the soul and keeps us far from God.

Jesus reached out and touched a man afflicted with leprosy. His promise to the man was, "I am willing to heal you." Imagine how much more willing would Jesus be to touch us who are afflicted by the disease of inner leprosy. Our sin isolates us from God. Sometimes, we feel so dirty that we scream out to God, "Stay away! I'm a sinner. I'm unclean and can't draw near to You." Yet, Jesus says to the one who asks for His cleansing touch, "I am willing." He is the friend to the leper. He is the friend of sinners. And He can bring you close to God.

Mother Teresa smartly stated that she would not touch a leper for a thousand pounds. It seems that Jesus touched a thousand lepers for nothing more than the love of mankind.

*Lord, please touch me and heal me of my sin. I want to be cured of my inner leprosy so I may be near to God. Amen.*



# *The Ultimate Scapegoat*

(Leviticus 16:1–17:16)

“A good scapegoat is almost as good as a solution.”  
— *Anonymous*

“The rite of atonement shall be performed over  
[the goat], and it shall then be sent out  
into the desert as a scapegoat.”  
— *Leviticus 12:5*

scape•goat (skâp'got') n. [(E)SCAPE + GOAT, as transl. of Heb. *azazel*, goat of Azazel, goat that escapes.] 1. An individual or group bearing blame for others. 2. A goat sent into the wilderness on the Day of Atonement, symbolically bearing on its head the sins of the children of Israel.<sup>11</sup>

**H**ave you ever felt like you were somebody's scapegoat?

In my early years, I made it a habit of teasing less fortunate children who were either easily angered or too afraid to retaliate. My daily ritual was to inflict verbal barbs against these poor souls, making sure that their day was a bit less bright and my day a bit brighter. As I look back on this cruel period of my life, I realize that my intent was not just to hurt others. My true intent was to relieve myself of my own hurts.

You see, I was often teased myself. In my family, one of our prominent traits is the nose. To be blunt, my nose is pretty big. Maybe not quite Cyrano de Bergerac nor Jimmy Durante quality, but a large nose nonetheless. Today, it's a

cute trait that I rather like. As a child, it was a problem that I dealt with each day.

I teased others because I myself was teased. I made others a scapegoat to try and resolve my own issues.

When I think on those early years, I don't feel hurt for being teased. I do, though, hurt for the ones who were victims of my abuse. It's no fun being a scapegoat — being penalized for the problems of others. As someone with a problem once said, "A good scapegoat is almost as good as a solution."

In Leviticus 16, we find that the Israelites had a problem: a problem called sin. Since there was no solution for sin at that time, God showed the Israelites something almost as good — a scapegoat.

We all have a problem — a problem called sin. We all fail to do what God tells us. We try and try, yet fail to live up to God's command to "be holy, for I am holy."<sup>12</sup> Worse yet, our sin separates us from God, and keeps us from drawing near to Him. Wouldn't it be nice if we could push this problem on someone else? Wouldn't you love a scapegoat upon whom you can unload your sins? Well, there is a scapegoat, and His name is Jesus.

### *An "Escape" Goat*

The origin for our English "scapegoat" appears right here in Leviticus 16:

"Then he shall bring the two goats before the Lord at the entrance of the Tabernacle, and cast lots to determine which is the Lord's and which is to be sent away. The goat allotted to the Lord shall then be sacrificed by Aaron as a sin offering. The other

goat shall be kept alive and placed before the Lord. The rite of atonement shall be performed over it, and it shall then be sent out into the desert as a scapegoat.” (Leviticus 16:7–10)

The story of Leviticus 16 is what Jewish worshippers call *Yom Kippur*, or *The Day of Atonement*. This is the most holy day on the Jewish calendar, which falls sometime around September or October (the Jewish month of Tishri). The purpose for this day is to make things right between God and man — to deal with the problematic issue of sin. It is an annual event whereby the high priest performs a sacred blood ceremony “to make atonement for the people of Israel once each year, because of their sins” (16:34).

To perform this atonement ritual, the high priest needed two goats: one for the sacrifice, and the other as a scapegoat. The word “scapegoat” is actually a translation of the Hebrew word *azazel*, which means the “goat of departure” or “goat of escape.” Thus, a scapegoat is really an *escape* goat. It signified the goat that was allowed to “escape” into the wilderness.

What was the meaning for this *escape* goat? Many religions assume the term *azazel* to be a proper name for some demon-figure or Satan himself. I doubt this to be true, since this interpretation relies on folklore and misses the true essence of this ritual. The more probable meaning can be found in the ritual itself:

“When he [the high priest] has completed the rite of atonement for the Holy Place, the entire Tabernacle, and the altar [by using the blood of the first goat], he shall bring the live goat and, *laying both hands upon its head*, confess over it all the sins of the people of Israel. He shall lay all their sins upon the head of

the goat and send it into the desert, led by a man appointed for the task. So the goat shall carry all the sins of the people into a land where no one lives, and the man shall let it loose in the wilderness.” (Leviticus 16:20–22, italics mine)

On the Day of Atonement, the priest dealt with the national problem of sin. On that day, the Israelites were brought back into a right relationship with God. The key figure in this ritual is the scapegoat. It was the scapegoat who took upon the sins of the people and restored Israel back to God. Thus, *azazel*, or the scapegoat, was simply the one who carried the people’s sins.

The ritual went like this. After the first goat was sacrificed, the scapegoat was brought alive (lucky fellow!) before the high priest. Here, the high priest laid his hands upon the head of the goat and confessed the sins of the entire nation. Now, why did he do this? Remember that the laying on of hands is symbolic of *transferral* — it is the transferring of something upon another. By means of the priest’s laying hands upon the scapegoat, and confessing the sins of the nation, the goat in essence took upon itself the nation’s sins. Then, the scapegoat was sent off into the wilderness, whereby all the people could wave goodbye to their sins.

How wonderful. The people sinned, and now they had a scapegoat to toss their sins upon forever.

Well, maybe not forever. The ritual was only good for a time. A short time. That is, until the next day, when someone sinned again.

### *Okay, Guys, I’m Going In . . .*

In the ritual of the scapegoat, goat number two carried the sins of the people into the wilderness. He at least lived

to bah about the story. Goat number one wasn't so lucky.

Goat number one got the short end of the carrot. Just like the other innocent animals before him, he would give his own blood as an offering for the people. The blood of the goat was then used to atone for the Tabernacle and the people (vv. 15–19). The writer of Hebrews gives a very good summary of this event:

“Inside the [Tabernacle] were two rooms. The first one contained the golden candlestick and a table with special loaves of holy bread upon it; this part was the Holy Place. Then there was a curtain and behind the curtain was a room called the Holy of Holies. In that room there was a golden incense-altar and a golden chest, called the ark of the covenant, completely covered on all sides with pure gold. Inside the ark were the tablets of stone with the Ten Commandments written on them, and a golden jar with some manna in it, and Aaron’s wooden cane that budded. Above the golden chest were statues of angels called the cherubim—with their wings stretched out over the ark’s golden cover, called the mercy seat. But enough of such details.

“Well, when all was ready the priests went in and out of the first room whenever they wanted to, doing their work. But only the high priest went into the inner room, and then only once a year, all alone, and always with blood which he sprinkled on the mercy seat as an offering to God to cover his own mistakes and sins, and the mistakes and sins of all the people.” (Hebrews 9:2–7)

In this brief yet detailed summary, we see that the Tabernacle was divided into two compartments: the Holy

Place and the Most Holy Place – the *Holy of Holies*. All the priests were free to conduct their business within the Holy Place. But the Holy of Holies was different. Only the high priest was free to enter this domain, and that only once a year.

This annual event was the Day of Atonement. There was good reason why this was a once-a-year event, only administered by the high priest:

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Warn your brother Aaron not to enter into the Holy Place behind the veil [the Holy of Holies], where the Ark and the place of mercy are, just whenever he chooses. *The penalty for intrusion is death.* For I myself am present in the cloud above the place of mercy.’” (Leviticus 16:2, italics mine)

I trust you get the point. The blood of the sacrifice (goat number one, that is) was brought into the Holy of Holies once a year by the high priest. This blood was to atone for the sins of the people. If the high priest went into this most sacred room on the wrong day, or without the goat’s blood, or even without proper preparation (see 16:3–4), he could be struck dead on the spot! The Jews were very fearful of this ritual. So much so, tradition tells us, that a rope was tied to the waist of the high priest just in case things went awry. That way, if God struck the high priest dead, then no one would need risk his own hide to recover him.

This whole frightening ceremony served a very important purpose — to atone for the sins of the people. Yet, this fearsome ritual only had a minimal effect. Yes, it resulted in atonement for sin, but only for a time. As we saw in chapter two, blood sacrifice was not sufficient to completely resolve the issue of sin. The sacrificer walked

away forgiven, yet the feeling of guilt remained. His past sins were dealt with, but his sin nature was left untouched. As the anonymous author of Hebrews stated, “those yearly sacrifices reminded them of their disobedience and guilt instead of relieving their minds” (Hebrews 10:3).

It took two goats to administrate the rite of the Day of Atonement. One gave his blood; the other was a scapegoat. Still, the sum total of this ritual was nothing more than the guilty left feeling guiltier. Again, man tried to draw near to God, yet God seemed so far away.

### *The Ultimate Scapegoat*

For several months, a used hot tub was situated in the driveway of our small Bay Area home. It was obvious to my wife and me that we had neither the space, nor the resources, to install it in our yard. So, when someone offered to pay money to remove this item from our home, we gladly accepted. Then, when they even offered to carry it away themselves, we felt doubly blessed!

It’s one thing for someone to pay the penalty for our sins. It’s doubly special to have someone carry our sins. It took two goats to do this: one to die for sins, the other to carry them away. Yet, when Jesus died upon the cross, He not only paid for our sins, He also bore them upon Himself! And unlike the scapegoat, Jesus bore our sins and took them away *forever!*

“He personally carried the load of our sins in his own body when he died on the cross, so that *we can be finished with sin* and live a good life from now on. For his wounds have healed ours!” (I Peter 2:24, italics mine)

Jesus carried away our sins once and forever. As Saint Peter said, we can be finished with sin. What does this mean to you and me? It means that Jesus removed both the penalty and *power* of sin in our lives. Unlike the days of Leviticus, when people who offered sacrifices left feeling as guilty than ever, Jesus takes away our guilt and enables us to live as God intended. We might say that Jesus unloaded our burden of sin so that we might walk freely with God.

None of us can handle the sin issue alone. We need the ultimate scapegoat, Jesus, to carry our sins for us.

The Bible is full of references to Jesus, the ultimate scapegoat:

“For God took the sinless Christ and poured into him our sins.” (II Corinthians 5:21)

“Yet God laid on *him* the guilt and sins of every one of us!” (Isaiah 53:6)

“So Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many.” (Hebrews 9:28, NKJV)

Jesus was the sinless one who bore our sins. Upon Him, God laid the guilt of all mankind. Most importantly, He did this once for all — there is no need for another scapegoat.

Jesus became the scapegoat for you and me. He not only paid the price for our sins, but also carried them away for us. As such, He has freed us to live life as God intended. We no longer are bound to the power of sin. With Christ’s help, we can overcome the power of sin in our lives.

Jesus certainly is the way to God. His sacrifice on the cross has provided us access to the God who is closer than we think. But it doesn’t stop there. Jesus also enables us to

*walk* with God — to live life as God intended. This is the focus for the remainder of this book.

*Dear God, I thank You that Jesus carried away my sins. I accept His sacrifice for my sins and allow Him to carry away my guilt and shame. Amen.*



## ***PART II: YOUR WALK WITH GOD***

Now that you know how to draw near to God, what do you do once you have met Him?

Everybody knows someone whose brother had an uncle who visited a barber who married someone who lived across the street from a famous person. It's kind of exciting when we meet someone famous. It's quite another thing, though, if you and that famous someone are *friends*.

In the same way, it's one thing to say that you have met God. It's quite another thing to have a special friendship with God. This special relationship is what we will call *walking with God*.

Have you ever tried to walk with God, yet found the task difficult, if not impossible? You wanted to please God by living right, going to church, and giving to the poor. You would start well, but eventually would grow tired and give up. This is because you tried to walk with God as if you were living in the days of Leviticus. You tried to follow exacting rules and religious rituals, hoping to draw close to God in the process. The problem is that you did this by your own power. What you need is someone to help you along the way.

That someone is Jesus Christ. He not only provides the way to God, but also gives you the power to live as God intended and to develop a special friendship with Him.

Jesus enables you to walk with God.



# *The Dos and Don'ts of Walking with God*

(Leviticus 18:1–20:27)

“Good Christians don’t smoke or chew,  
nor go out with women who do.”

— *Old Church Motto*

“Love your neighbor as yourself, for I am Jehovah.”

— *Leviticus 19:18*

“I’ve finally figured it out! I don’t need to go to church to find God. God is right where I am!”

This was quite a revelation for Cynthia. She had been looking for God, shall we say, in “all the wrong places.” But now, as if struck by a flash of light from heaven, she finally got it. She finally realized that God was right there for her.

This wasn’t anything new for me. I had served God now for well over a decade, and knew firsthand that God was with me wherever I went. I realized that, in a certain way, Cynthia was right. You don’t need church to find God. In fact, for some, church has been an obstacle in reaching God. Yet, something didn’t bode well with me about Cynthia’s revelation. It seemed strange to me that Cynthia wanted to find God but not go to church. It was sort of like Christianity “with no strings attached.” She wanted God. Yet, when it came to attending church, well, she’d just as soon pass.

It is not uncommon for people to call upon God in time of need. Cynthia was at a point of spiritual crisis in her

life, and she was looking to God for answers. And, as a modern proverb says, there are no atheists in a foxhole. People are certainly interested in finding the *way* to God. Yet, how often do people try and learn to *walk* with God?

In the first half of this book, we saw that God is not to be found in high cathedrals or a mystic's mountain. No, in fact we discovered that God is right there next to you. He is closer than you ever thought. If you are looking for God, stop right where you are. He is right beside you waiting for you to draw near to Him.

Unfortunately, for many this is the end of the story. They want God. They want everything that God can offer. What they often forget, or are even downright ignorant of, is that God wants *them* as well. God not only wants us to approach Him, but He wants us to walk right alongside Him.

To walk with God means to build a relationship with Him. Why, then, do people like Cynthia only want to know the way to God, yet are not interested in walking with Him? I believe the reason is simple: Many people associate religion with a set of "dos and don'ts." They see religious activity as empty, constraining, boring, and even hypocritical. To them, walking with God is simply following the rules. This simply doesn't cut the mustard when we are looking for meaning to life.

Leviticus 18–20 is replete with "don'ts" and "thou shalt nots." To one seeking after God, it seems to be just another example of exacting rules intended to make life miserable. Here is just a small sampling:

"Don't act like heathen." (18:3)

"You may not marry your daughter-in-law."  
(18:15)

“Don’t reap the corners of your fields.” (19:9)

“Do not mate your cattle with a different kind.”  
(19:19)

“Do not defile yourself by consulting mediums and wizards.” (19:31)

This is just a smidgen of the *don'ts* in this section of Leviticus. In all, you will find over forty *don'ts* in these verses alone. And this is just three chapters of the Bible! Depending on whom you listen to, there are between 350 and 650 individual laws in the Five Books of Moses alone. That’s a lot of “dos” and “don’ts” to follow. And, for most of us, that’s just too many rules that complicate an already confusing life.

If you want to walk with God, do you really need to follow this unending set of ordinances? Well, what if we reduced these 600 or so rules to just a few “dos” and “don’ts”? Or, better yet, what if we eliminated the *don'ts* altogether and settled for a few simple *dos* instead?

### ***The Bottom Line***

A man asked Jesus this very question. “What,” he inquired, “is the most important rule in all the Bible?” To this Jesus replied:

“‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. The second most important is similar: ‘Love you neighbor as much as you love yourself.’ All the other commandments and all the demands of the prophets stem from these two

laws and are fulfilled if you obey them.” (Matthew 22:37–40)

Well, this makes things a bit simpler. Jesus brought it down to just two *dos*: Love God and love your neighbor. Do these two, and all the other laws kind of follow suit.

Most religious people know that you should love God. Loving your neighbor, though, isn't quite as popular. Jesus didn't just make up this law on the spot. It was a direct quote from Leviticus 19:18. While Leviticus 18–20 teaches a myriad of *dos* and *don'ts*, the middle verse of the middle chapter is the glue that holds it all together. It's the creamy center of an Oreo cookie. The bottom line is that we learn to love.

The *dos* and *don'ts* of walking with God are not based on some code of ethics but on relationship. It's a relationship first with God, then one another.

Walking with God is about a love relationship with God and each other. This doesn't mean, though, that we ignore God's laws. In fact, if we walk with God, we will want to do the things that please Him.

It is from this perspective that we approach Leviticus 18–20.

### ***We Don't Talk About This in Church!***

Okay, everybody, cover your ears! I have some raunchy stuff to declare. Are you ready?

Leviticus 18 is all about sex!

Sex is a staple of life. Without sex, by golly, we simply wouldn't be around to talk about it, would we? Yet, when it comes to church, it's a word you rarely hear. And, if you ever did, it was probably in a way such as, “Don't smoke or chew, nor go out with women who do.”

The funny thing is this: Sex is not a human invention. As one movie jokingly implied, Madonna didn't invent sex. It was the master plan of God Himself. Before there were any problems in the Garden of Eden (that is, before Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit), God spoke these famous words: "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). Now imagine how this must have felt to Adam and Eve. Here they are, frolicking about the Garden, stark naked, without a single soul to bother them. Then, God whispers to them the first command given to mankind: *Go for it!* Have fun. Please one another. And make some kids while you're at it!

Sex is God-given. Sex is good. Good, that is, as long as it's expressed as God intended.

In Leviticus 18, we find a lot of "don'ts" regarding sex. Most of them are pretty familiar to our modern culture. There are a lot of mandates against various forms of incest and bestiality (with their corresponding punishments in chapter 20), as well as adultery.<sup>13</sup> This is not surprising, since the ancient, nomadic culture that God addressed had little sexual restraint. In today's culture, we recognize and even punish people for committing such acts. We also find mandates against less culturally offensive practices such as sex during menstruation (18:19) and homosexuality (18:22). While it's not within the scope of this book to try and explain these laws, we can surely say that God has an opinion on sex.

If you want to walk with God, it would be wise to understand His view on sex. What, then, was God's intended use for sex? We find this interesting comment in the Book of Genesis, right as Adam meets Eve:

"This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife in such a way that

*the two become one person.*" (Genesis 2:24, italics mine)

Somehow, mysteriously, a husband and wife become one. How do two become one? The Apostle Paul sheds some light for us:

"And don't you know that if a man joins himself to a prostitute she becomes part of him and he becomes a part of her? For God tells us in the Scripture that in his sight *the two become one person.*" (I Corinthians 6:16, italics mine)

Here we see that a man and a prostitute can become one just like a husband and wife. What makes the two become one? The common link is the act of sex. Biblically speaking, we share a part of ourselves when we engage in sexual relations.

The Bible defines sex as intercourse between a husband and wife. It is the act that unites two into one. It was not intended to be spread across several partners, as our culture often suggests. Instead, sex is an act intended to be an expression of love within the secure confines of marriage.

If you want to walk with God, you should express yourself sexually in the way God intends. In this way, you show your commitment both to God and that one person who is yours "till death do you part."

### ***Oh No! It's That Guy!***

Leviticus 18 talks about the proper use of sex. Go to Leviticus 20, and you will find the penalties for disobeying these rules, along with penalties for consulting mediums

(know any 900-number psychics?) and worshipping idols. In the middle of these chapters is Leviticus 19. Here we see God's all-encompassing *do* — "Love your neighbor" (19:18).

There are a lot of *dos* and *don'ts* in Leviticus 19. Here are just a few of them:

1. Don't hoard your belongings, but save something for the poor. (vv. 9–10)
2. Speak truth under all circumstances. (vv. 11–12)
3. Pay your employees fairly and on time. (v. 13)
4. Don't mistreat others, even when they are unaware. (v. 14)
5. Judge without partiality toward rich or poor. (v. 15)
6. Don't gossip nor falsely accuse another. (v. 16)
7. Don't hate a person, hold a grudge, nor seek vengeance. (vv. 17–18)
8. Admonish those who disobey God's laws. (v. 17)

Note that all these rules are just an extension of "Love your neighbor." Of course, loving your neighbor isn't always easy. All of us know *that guy* whom we find difficult to like, let alone love. It would be so much easier if we could just ignore these people and love God in the privacy of our own little world. But this isn't what God intended. God wants us to know that, in order to love Him, we *must* love our neighbor! His whole system of *dos* and *don'ts* is based on a right relationship with God and each other.

So what do you do if you find it hard to love your neighbor? This is where you need Jesus. Jesus didn't just show us the way to God. He also empowers us to walk with God. If walking with God means you must love your neighbor, then you can bet that Jesus will empower you to do so.

Several years ago, my wife and I decided to help a young couple in our church that had a child in the hospital and no money. Throwing reason to the wind, I let them borrow my credit card to help them with gas expenses to and from the hospital.

At the end of the month, we received our credit card bill. Needless to say, I was shocked to find that my card not only provided fuel to the hospital, but also financed repairs at the shop, grocery items and even a few “vacations” out of town.

This went on for a couple of months (okay, I wasn’t very smart), and we finally asked that our card be returned.

This incident bothered me for several months. I really wanted to tell this couple a thing or two, and was in danger of growing quite bitter. Yet, instead of blowing a fuse or harboring a deep grudge, my wife and I instead decided to pray. We prayed not only that we have a godly attitude, but we also prayed for the couple. We knew that, no matter how mistreated we felt, God had commanded us to “love our neighbor.” So, we demonstrated this love through sincere prayer.

As time passed, something special happened. Instead of growing bitter, we began to forgive this couple from our hearts. This wasn’t because we’re nice people. It’s because Jesus empowered us to let go of the misdeed and forgive. While we prayed for them, Jesus was helping us! After a few months, we essentially forgot about the situation.

Some years later, that same husband approached me after Sunday church.

“Mike,” he said, “God has shown me how wrong I was to misuse your credit card. My wife and I have decided that, no matter how hard it may be, we want to pay everything back.”

After being resuscitated by a nearby EMT, I looked to the young man and replied:

“You can pay us back if you wish, but that’s not necessary. We forgive you.”

Well, we never got our money back, but I hope you get the point. There is something special about loving, even when it hurts. The Bible tells us that love covers all sorts of sins (I Peter 4:8). To love your neighbor, sometimes you need to forgive terrible wrongs. It is about letting go — even though you have every reason to be bitter. It is about suffering loss — even though you might be right. For most of us, this is a very difficult thing to do. But, if we ask Jesus for help, He will enable us to meet the challenge.

Do you want to walk with God? Then begin with the two big *dos*: Love God and love your neighbor. When you walk with God with an attitude of love, Jesus will walk alongside you. He’s kind of your *walking buddy*. He will be there whenever the walk seems long or difficult. Whenever you feel tired or weary, just ask Him for help.

Especially when *that guy* comes walking your way.

*Dear God, I will love You with all my heart. And I ask Your Son, Jesus, to help me to love my neighbor, even when they seem unlovable. Amen.*



# *All They Want Is Your Money*

(Leviticus 21:1–22:33)

“You’re not a man, you’re a bishop, for God’s sake!”  
— *Judge Smails to Bishop Pickering in Caddyshack*

“The Lord told Moses, ‘Instruct Aaron and his sons to be very careful not to defile my holy name by desecrating the people’s sacred gifts; for I am Jehovah.’”  
— *Leviticus 22:12*

Where were you when Jimmy Swaggart fell? Okay, maybe this wasn’t that important a moment in your life. But I certainly have vivid memories of that February evening in a hotel by the Oregon coast. I remember the scene of Reverend Swaggart, with tears pouring down his cheeks, confessing before the world how he solicited a prostitute. I had looked to this man as a proclaimer of the truth whose faith never wavered. One of my friends even jokingly referred to him as “the fourth person of the Trinity.” For a young minister like me, this was a fearful reminder of how quickly the mighty can fall.

Others saw this man in a far less flattering way. For years, people scoffed at his fiery preaching, accusing him to be nothing more than a greedy swindler. Many times I heard people say, “All he wants is your money!” Now, his face was being broadcast across the world. The implicit headlines read, “*Exposed! He’s a phony!*”

Anyone who is part of the clergy has accepted a very sacred role. People expect priests, pastors, rabbis, and the like to be men and women of integrity and trust.

Unfortunately, this trust has been broken several times over, often as headline news. Before Jimmy Swaggart, there was the sex and money debacle surrounding Jim Bakker. More recently, the horrific molestation scandal in the Catholic Church has cost that denomination millions in reparation and a severe breach of trust amongst its own constituency. These careless deeds cause a huge black eye upon the Church, and often turn seekers into skeptics.

The contemporary Christian singer Steven Curtis Chapman put it this way:

“‘Too many hypocrites,’ I heard her say, ‘I even saw it in the headlines today; ‘How can I follow God when His own people turn away?’”<sup>14</sup>

People often see God through the filter of the clergy. It is the role of the clergy to help us draw close to God. When a minister is right, he can be a significant help in leading others to God. When a minister goes bad, he becomes a roadblock to finding God.

Many of us, like Judge Smails in *Caddyshack*, hold the clergy to a higher standard. “You’re not a man,” Judge Smails announced to Bishop Pickering, “you’re a bishop!” A young man in my high school believed that the Pope must be the holiest man on Earth. A lady whom I knew left God after learning that her pastor had an affair. Jesus warned us of the impact of a minister when He warned, “Strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered” (Mark 14:27).

Steven Curtis Chapman summed it up well when he wrote,

“The skeptics are watching, to see who will fall.

While those disillusioned search for the truth in it all.”<sup>15</sup>

The clergy has a great impact on how people see God. Unfortunately, it is reality that ministers can and do fail. In fact, if you have spent any time in church, you have probably been offended to some degree by a member of the clergy. How should we respond when a minister fails us? Should we leave our church? Should we look to another religion? Should we forget religion altogether? Should we just keep our faith to ourselves and make sure no one hurts us again?

If we want to walk with God, we need to remember that our relationship with God is *not* dependent upon anyone else’s actions. Though ministers are called to draw us close to God, we can never let their misdeeds hinder our walk with God.

### *A Glass Bowl*

A minister must be a person of high character. That is why God addressed the qualifications for ministry in Leviticus 21–22. Here we find that the clergy must be measured by a higher standard. If they were to help people walk close to God, they needed to be near to Him as well. In its most basic form, Leviticus 21–22 presents us with three general rules for the priesthood, the Jewish clergy:

1. A priest must not defile himself by touching a dead body, unless it is a near relative (and only if he is not the high priest, 21:1–4, 10–11).
2. A priest must marry a woman who is a virgin and a full-blooded Israelite (21:7, 13–15).
3. A priest must not have any physical defect or other “defilement” (21:16–22:9).

The key word here is “undefiled.” A priest must not defile himself. He must not be defiled from his surroundings, from other people, nor from his own “defects.” Anyone found to be defiled was deemed unfit for the priesthood.

This mandate exceeded anything God had commanded to the average Jew. As God spoke to Moses:

“The priest is a leader among his people and he may not ceremonially defile himself as an ordinary person can.” (21:4)

The priest was a leader. He was “a holy man of God” (v. 7). People looked up to him for guidance and spiritual leadership. If people wanted to draw near to God, they looked to the priest. They sought his words and his example. God wanted to ensure that when people went to the priest, they approached a man who was undefiled, both outside *and* in.

When I began my first ministry assignment, my senior pastor told me this simple rule of the clergy: “When you become a minister, you live in a glass bowl.” That is, my life was now on display. People not only looked *to* me, but they were looking *at* me. They were interested not only in what I said, but what I did as well. My life must be in concert with my words. Otherwise, my sermons would fall flat and I would be incapable of helping others walk close to God.

I briefly mentioned a young lady who left the church after her pastor confessed to adultery. Now, this pastor was a prominent figure in the San Francisco Bay Area. His church membership was in the thousands, and his preaching was broadcast across the local airwaves. He was a tremendous communicator and teacher. He most

certainly taught this young lady the basic elements of what it means to walk with God.

Then, his adulterous relationship, seven years in the past, was exposed. It seemed that everything this pastor said before was nullified. His brief affair caused confusion among many, including my friend. She eventually walked away from God. This is an example of the damage that is incurred when the clergy becomes “defiled.”

When a leader goes bad, bad things happen. Add the power of the media, and the sins of one man can have devastating effects. Today’s youth culture is often skeptical, if not outright defiant, against organized religion. And who can blame them? If their opinion of Church is formed by the evils displayed on the evening news, is it any wonder they don’t trust religion at all? In many ways, we are a people who have “lost our faith.”

Without question, the sins of the clergy cause great confusion, disillusionment and, ultimately, indifference toward God. But is this an excuse for people to stay away from God? When a person dies and meets God face to face, what will He say? Will He ask us how well Reverend Bill led his church, or if Sister Mary ever offended you? I think not. The Apostle Paul reminds us that when we meet Jesus Christ, the only life deeds that will matter are our *own*:

“For we must all stand before Christ to be judged and have *our* lives laid bare before him. Each of us will receive whatever he deserved for the good or bad things he has done in his earthly body.” (II Corinthians 5:10, italics mine)

### *Finding Our Faith*

In an episode of *The Jeffersons*,<sup>16</sup> George and Louise’s maid, Florence, loses faith in God because one of the

preachers was caught stealing money reserved for a choir competition. Though the Jeffersons try their best to dissuade Florence from leaving her church, she remains defiant. She had lost faith in her leaders, and in the end, her faith in God.

In the closing sequence, Florence has a heart-to-heart with a head minister of her church. He explains to her a simple principle that we all should remember: We must not let the actions of others interfere with our walk with God. After some sincere discussion, Florence is convinced that her walk with God should not be tripped up by another's sin. She decides to stay in her church.

At the end of the episode, Florence reveals to George and Louise that, because of her pastor's wisdom, she won't leave the church.

After Florence exits the scene, George looks to Louise:

"That's it. I'm calling the hospital. Both you and I know that her pastor died last night."

Louise: "George, please don't. In a way, I almost believe her."

Are you disillusioned by what you see in the church? Have the sins of the clergy caused you to "lose your faith"? Are you a victim of abuse in what should have been the safest place on Earth? Maybe you, like Florence, need some divine intervention to encourage you to remain faithful to your walk with God. If this is you, please don't let another person's sins steal your relationship with God. Your walk with God is not dependent upon any man — unless, of course, His name is Jesus.

If you ask the average person on the street about their opinion of organized religion, you are going to receive a

variety of responses, both good and bad. If you ask that same person about his opinion of Jesus Christ, you will probably hear something like this:

“Great teacher!”

“A loving and compassionate man.”

“A holy man who helped others.”

“He was God in the flesh.”

You see, there are a lot of evil things that can be said, and rightfully so, about the church and those who lead in it. Yet, what wrong can be spoken about Jesus Christ? What evil thing did He ever do?

Jesus was “undefiled.” He was sinless. He genuinely loved people. He healed the sick, fed the hungry, taught the masses. And, ultimately, He hung upon the Cross to pay the price for our sins so that we could draw near to God.

This is who Jesus Christ is. The faith called “Christianity” is not about a church, a denomination, or any gregarious leader. Christianity is about its true founder, Jesus Christ.

Florence needed an angel to rekindle her walk with God. We, though, have someone better. We only need look to Jesus. You will not be hurt or disillusioned by this Man. He is the true leader of the church. It is to Him that we pledge our trust — not in fallible people.

Of the many wonderful words that describe Jesus, one of my favorites is the word *shepherd*. A shepherd tends to his flock. According to the Bible, we are God’s flock and Jesus is the shepherd. What type of shepherd is Jesus? He is called the *Good Shepherd* (John 10:11). He is always loving, always caring. We can forever trust Him. Even though other shepherds fail us, Jesus will always be for us the good shepherd.

### *Who Stands on Your Pedestal?*

When we look at the Church, we sometimes find good, sometimes bad. This is the nature of an institution that contains mortal beings. As Groucho Marx put it, "I would never join an organization that had me as a member." Ministers and others in the church may become "defiled" and cause us great confusion. Yet, if we focus firmly upon Jesus, we find peace. Though others fail us, Jesus always can be trusted.

If you have had a bad experience in the church, I encourage you to look past that experience and look squarely to Jesus. As the chorus to Steven Curtis Chapman's song reminds us:

"Do they see God for who He really is?  
For who He really is, is all they really need to see."<sup>17</sup>

*Dear God, help me to forgive those in the Church who have hurt me. Give me strength to look past these hurts and stay near to You. Amen.*

## *Christmas and Easter*

(Leviticus 23:1–44)

“Dear God, please put another holiday  
between Christmas and Easter.  
There is nothing good in there now.”

— *A child named Amanda*

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘  
Announce to the people of Israel  
that they are to celebrate  
several annual festivals of the Lord.’”

— *Leviticus 23:1*

**W**hile growing up, I wasn't very fond of church. I found the weekly event to be rather boring, and I just couldn't figure out what good it would ever do me. Still, my mom (bless her heart) ensured that every Sunday little Michael would be in church.

Since I was young, I didn't have a whole lot of say in the matter. In the back of my mind, though, I knew that someday this madness would cease. I had more important things to do in my life than waste an hour a week in church. “When I grow up,” I'd reason, “I would stop going to church!”

Except, of course, on Christmas and Easter.

Are you a “Christmas and Easter” church member? Maybe you haven't regularly attended church for years. Yet, every Christmas and Easter, you feel the urge to wake the spouse and kids, get dressed in your best clothes, and enter the house of God for an hour or so to show your respect to the Big Guy up there in the sky.

There is a cute joke sprinkled about the Internet concerning three churches that were dealing with an infestation of squirrels. The first church tried to resolve the problem by preaching to the squirrels. They taught them how the Bible tells us to be good neighbors and to respect other's property. Unfortunately, this approach failed. The second church tried to sing hymns to the squirrels. They figured that in an atmosphere of worship the squirrels would recognize their transgressions and cease digging holes in the lawn. This too failed. The third church discovered a miraculous solution. They simply baptized the squirrels and registered them as members of the church. Now they only see them on Christmas and Easter.

The experience of many is that church is boring, irrelevant, or even judgmental. Many joke that they're afraid that if they enter the sanctuary, the walls would cave in! So, they decide that it is more important to go to the lake, watch football, sleep late, go on a bike ride, or whatever else, than it is to enter the House of God.

Even for these same people, two days a year is bearable. If they can't stand being a regular church attendee, then they could at least give God two special days a year just to let Him know that they're thinking about Him.

I wonder, though, if God esteems Christmas and Easter as highly as we do. Does He ignore the other fifty weeks a year, just so long as we attend church on these special occasions?

Maybe so — if we were still living in the days of Leviticus.

In Leviticus 23, God established certain days in the year where the Jews were required to "attend church" and give honor to God. These were celebrations that represented

the most important holidays — or *holy days* — of the Jewish calendar. They were days in which the Jewish worshippers felt a total obligation to approach God to confess their sins and worship Him. It was similar to how many celebrate Christmas and Easter today. Yet, unlike today's *holidays*, these *holy days* were not just a few hours a year when a nonchurchgoer would make a cameo appearance in God's House. Instead, these days represented the heart and soul of the Jewish religion.

There are essentially two types of holy days presented in Leviticus (see Exodus 23:14–16). First, there is the *Sabbath*, which was celebrated from sunset to sunset every Friday through Saturday. Also, there are the Feasts. These are special celebrations set aside to help the Jewish community focus their attention upon God.

Of the feasts mentioned in Leviticus, the most important ones are these:

1. The Passover, celebrated around the end of March to commemorate the Jew's "exodus" from Egypt. (Remember the movie *The Ten Commandments*?)
2. The Feast of Pentecost, celebrated some seven weeks after the Passover, to give thanks to God for the new harvest.
3. The Day of Atonement, announced by the sound of trumpets, to provide the Jews an opportunity for forgiveness from sins. (We already looked at this in chapter 7, so we'll just mention it here.)
4. The Feast of Tabernacles, celebrated five days after the Day of Atonement, to remind the Israelites of their journeys in the wilderness.

For the Jews, these days are regarded as even more sacred than the Christian's Christmas and Easter. These

are “holy” days — days given entirely to drawing man’s attention back to God.

As important as these holy days were to the fabric of Jewish life, most of the ancients failed to grasp their true meaning. While they helped the Jewish worshipper encapsulate his or her faith in God, the days offered an even greater meaning. They actually provided an ongoing illustration of something far greater. You see, hidden deep within these days we find the story of Jesus Christ.

Consider this. The Sabbath is really a picture of the salvation offered through Jesus. The feasts of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles each give us a vivid picture of the story of Jesus: His life, death, resurrection, ascension into Heaven, and most likely His return to Earth. While many celebrate Jesus only on Christmas and Easter, the ancient Jew unwittingly celebrated Jesus all year long!

### *The Sabbath*

The Sabbath is much like the Christian’s Sunday worship. It is a weekly ritual held from Friday sunset through Saturday sunset to honor God for His work in creation. Genesis 1 teaches us that God created the world in six days. (Whether these are literal “days” or something else is not important here.) Since God worked six days, man is therefore allowed to participate in work (both vocational and personal) six days a week. Genesis 2:2 then tells us that God “rested” on the seventh day. To remember God’s work in creation, and to emulate God’s “work ethic,” Jewish worshippers “rest” on the seventh day, the Sabbath. He or she may not work for money or pleasure. This day is set aside as a holy day where man must rest from his earthly activities and focus upon the goodness and grace of God.

The writer of Hebrews extends this “rest” beyond the simple resting of the body to the resting of our soul. He writes:

“So there is a full complete rest *still waiting* for the people of God. Christ has already entered there. He is resting from his work, just as God did after creation.” (Hebrews 4:9–10)

The Greek word translated “full complete rest” is literally a “Sabbath rest.” The Jews rested their bodies one day a week. Yet, Jesus gives us “full complete rest” for our souls that lasts forever. The Sabbath is a picture of the salvation that Jesus offers. It reminds us of Jesus’ words when He said, “Come to me and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

### *The Feasts*

The holiest of holy days are the three feasts called Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. As mentioned earlier, they provide a beautiful picture of the life, death, resurrection and (possibly) the return of Jesus Christ.

(1) *The Passover*. The Passover commemorates one of the most amazing nights in human history.

For over 400 years, the Jewish people were kept as slaves in Egypt. God, through the hand of the great deliverer Moses (*not* Charlton Heston), demanded that the Pharaoh of Egypt release his people from bondage. Despite continual demands and numerous miraculous signs (called the Ten Plagues), Moses was unable to convince Pharaoh to release the Jews. Finally, God had enough and declared that His “death angel” would enter Egypt that night and destroy all the firstborn of Egypt. (The entire story is found in Exodus chapters 1–12.)

To ensure the death angel would not hurt the firstborn of the Jews, God instructed Moses to alert each household to wipe the blood of a slain lamb across the doorposts of their homes. When the death angel saw the blood, he would *pass over* that house and go to the next. In addition, the Jews were instructed to bake unleavened bread to allow a “quick getaway” the next morning.

The Passover reminded the Jew of how the death angel *passed over* their homes and instead inflicted punishment upon the Egyptians. Immediately after the Passover, the Jews celebrated the Feast of Unleavened Bread to remind them of their quick getaway.

Passover is held around the same time as Easter, and for good reason. Easter (along with Good Friday) commemorates Jesus’ death and resurrection. So why are Passover and Easter celebrated around the same time? Because Jesus was crucified on the day of Passover.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Jesus was crucified so that death would *pass over* us. While the Jews trusted in the blood of a slain lamb to protect them from the death angel, we can trust in the blood of Jesus to gain us entrance into Heaven. It is no wonder why the Apostle Paul calls Jesus “our Passover” (I Corinthians 5:7).

Three days after the Passover, the Jews held a festival in which they offered to God a single sheaf of wheat called “the firstfruits.” It is no coincidence that three days after His death, Jesus arose from the grave. He became, as Paul wrote, “the firstfruits” of all who would rise from the dead (I Corinthians 15:20), signifying his victory over death itself.

(2) *The Feast of Pentecost.* The Feast of Pentecost was held fifty days after the Passover celebration.<sup>19</sup> It commemorated the gathering of the new harvest. As such, the Jews were instructed to offer up two loaves of bread as an offering of gratitude to God for the bountiful season.

There is a Christian celebration of Pentecost. Pentecost Sunday is held fifty days after Easter. This holiday commemorates not the ingathering of wheat, but the ingathering of souls!

Forty days after His resurrection, just before He returned into Heaven, Jesus instructed His disciples to wait in Jerusalem for the “Father’s promise” (Acts 1:4). Ten days later, on the exact day of Pentecost, Jesus fulfilled His promise and gave them the “Father’s promise” — the gift of the Holy Spirit. On that day, the Holy Spirit empowered the disciples to carry on the work of Christ, and the Christian Church was born.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, a fearful man named Peter preached a sermon so bold and convicting that 3,000 people joined the Church (Acts 2:1–41). Jesus said that “it is best for you that I go away [to Heaven] . . . for I will send [the Holy Spirit] to you” (John 16:7). Pentecost reminds us that Jesus returned to Heaven and, as He promised, gave the Holy Spirit to His church. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Church can now fulfill its mission to gather souls back to God.

(3) *The Feast of Tabernacles*. In the last of the three annual feasts, the entire nation would build shelters (called *booths* or *tabernacles*) out of boughs and branches. Then, the people would dwell in these shelters for seven days. God describes the ceremony’s meaning in verse 43:

“The purpose for this is to remind the people of Israel, generation after generation, that I rescued you from Egypt, and caused you to live in shelters.”

Over time, Tabernacles came to exemplify the Jews extended journey in the wilderness — a journey that lasted forty years. Each year the people built these shelters, they

were reminded of their humble journey and how God sustained them throughout.

The Feast of Tabernacles illustrates two aspects of the story of Jesus. First, Jesus spent thirty-plus years “tabernacling” among us. According to John 1:14, “Christ became a human being and lived here on earth” (literally, “*tabernacled* among us”). He “pitched His tent,” if you will, and lived with us in the humble shelter called a human body. Because of this, He can both relate to us and show compassion for us.

The other aspect of Jesus’ story is yet to be fulfilled. The Bible teaches us that Jesus will someday return to Earth. Notice how Tabernacles occurs some six months after the other feasts? This may well imply that, a long time after Jesus’ death, resurrection and ascension into Heaven, we can anticipate His return to Earth. It is interesting that the time of Tabernacles began with the blowing of trumpets. Jesus told us that His return will be announced by the sound of the trumpet:

“And then at last the signal of my [Jesus’] coming will appear. . . . And I shall send forth my angels with the sound of a mighty trumpet.” (Matthew 24:30–31)

### *Are Christmas and Easter Enough?*

For the Jew, the holy days of Leviticus were a time of solemn worship before God. They encapsulated the Jewish faith into a tangible form. Their full intent, though, was to paint a vivid picture of the story of Jesus.

Today, holidays such as Christmas and Easter commemorate the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Sure, most will go to church on these days. Yet, for many

God is all but forgotten the rest of the year. Could this possibly please our Lord?

Something strikes me in Leviticus 23. While God does in fact announce the annual festivals, he parenthetically reminds the Jews that his weekly celebration, the Sabbath, is not to be forgotten:

“These are in addition to your Sabbaths — the seventh day of every week — which are always days of solemn rest in every home, times for assembling to worship, and for resting from the normal business of the week.” (Leviticus 23:3)

The fourth commandment is simply “Remember to observe the Sabbath as a holy day” (Exodus 20:8). The Jewish Sabbath is Saturday, but the Christian Sabbath is Sunday, the day Jesus arose. It seems that the great feasts helped the Jewish nation celebrate God. The Sabbath, though, was a weekly reminder that God wanted to be a part of their everyday lives.

Christmas and Easter are intended to be times to remember who Jesus is and what He did for us. Yet, Sunday should remind us that God wants to be near to us every day of our lives. He wants us to walk with Him more than two days a year. He wants us every day, and going to church each week reminds us of this.

Are Christmas and Easter good enough? Maybe so — if you happen to be Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny. But for God, the only day that suffices is *every* day. Why not start it right on Sunday?

*Dear God, I want to honor You not only on Christmas and Easter. I want to honor You every day. So, I plan to make church a priority to start my week right and focus upon You. Amen.*



## God %#!&%\$# !

(Leviticus 24:1–23)

“[My father] called me Jesus Christ. Often he turned to me and said, ‘Jesus Christ!’”

— *Bill Cosby, Fatherhood*

“And tell the people of Israel that anyone who curses his God must pay the penalty: he must die. All the congregation shall stone him; this law applies to the foreigner as well as to the Israelite who blasphemes the name of Jehovah. He must die.”

— *Leviticus 24:15–16*

**G**od’s last name isn’t Dammit. Jesus’ last name isn’t Christmas. And His middle initial isn’t H.

Have you ever noticed how often we use the name of God in our daily conversation? Or, to be more exact, how we misuse the name of God? Whether at the theaters, at the workplace, or just about anywhere, listen closely and you will probably hear someone speak God’s name “in vain.”

It seems that we make it our habit to use God’s name in vain. You don’t need to hang out at a shoddy bar or backstreet alley to hear a few *GD* or *JC* bombs. So prevalent is the misuse of God’s name that we even use sanitized versions such as *goshdarnnit*, *dagnabbit*, and *doggonnit*. True, these are certainly more palatable, but nevertheless they find their origin in the misuse of the name of God.

Has it ever occurred to you that people rarely, if ever, use terms such as *Buddha Dammit* or *Mohammed Christmas*? Instead, our culture seems content to misuse only the name

of the God of the Bible. This is despite the well-known fact that the third commandment explicitly tells us to “not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain (Exodus 20:7, KJV).”

Why do we so commonly misuse the name of God? I suspect it’s because we humans tend to do the very things that God tells us *not* to do.

In Leviticus 24, we learn that God wasn’t too keen on people misusing His name. In this passage, we find His law against those who, as it states, “blaspheme the name of God”:

“Out in the camp one day, a young man whose mother was an Israelite and whose father was an Egyptian, got into a fight with one of the men of Israel. During the fight the Egyptian man’s son cursed God [literally ‘blasphemed the Name’], and was brought to Moses for judgment. (His mother’s name was Shelomith, daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan.) He was put in jail until the Lord would indicate what to do with him.

“And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Take him outside the camp and tell all who heard him to lay their hands upon his head; then all the people are to execute him by stoning. And tell the people of Israel that anyone who curses his God must pay the penalty: he must die. All the congregation shall stone him; this law applies to the foreigner as well as to the Israelite who blasphemes the name of Jehovah. He must die.’” (Leviticus 24:10–16)

To blaspheme simply means “to curse” or “to swear.” It is similar to how many of us *curse* or *swear* by misusing

God's name. The man who blasphemed the name of God was put to death by stoning. As Exodus 20:7 reads, "The Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name." The story places an emphasis on the fact that this man was a half-Jew — he had an Israelite mother and Egyptian father. This reminds us that this law is for all people — not just Jews and Christians. As God said, "Whether an alien or native-born, when he blasphemes the Name, he must be put to death" (v. 16).

Can you imagine what it would be like if God still enforced this policy in our modern culture? What if every one who spoke God's name in vain was sent to the electric chair? I suspect that we would be facing national extinction!

Despite this well-known commandment, many of us misuse God's name on a daily basis. This is 180 degrees from what God has told us to do. God tells us to keep His name holy. The word "holy" essentially means "to put aside for a special use." Like clothing used only for special occasions, God wants us to treat His name as something special.

Holiness is the very nature of God. God even instructs us to "be holy, for I am holy" (Leviticus 11:45). At the start of Leviticus 24, there is a description of how the priest must administer the items found in the Temple. Two words resound to us as we read this passage. These words are *pure* and *holy*:

"The lamps on the *pure* gold lampstand before the LORD must be tended continually . . . the table of *pure* gold before the LORD. . . . Along each row put some *pure* incense. . . . Aaron and his sons, who are to eat it in a *holy* place, because it is a most *holy* part. . . ." (vv. 4, 6, 7, 9, NKJV, italics mine)

God is a pure and holy God. This is His nature, His character. It is also the character that He wants to cultivate in us, His people. When we misuse the name of God, we in essence forget how holy He is, and in turn demonstrate a very unholy attitude.

In verse 11, see how the man “cursed God.” In the original Hebrew, this phrase is simply “blasphemed the Name.” The early Jewish culture took very seriously the commandment to not speak God’s name in vain. In fact, the strictest of Jews never even *pronounced* the name of God for fear of breaking this commandment. They were so serious about this that the written name of God in the Old Testament cannot even be pronounced! The Hebrew name for God is written as *YHWH*. Today, theologians pronounce this word as “Yahweh” or “Jehovah.” When the early Jews (and even some contemporary orthodox Jews) read the word *YHWH*, they would instead insert the phrase “the Name.” In this way, they would never insult God by misusing His name. As such, they would read the third commandment in this manner: “Thou shalt not take the name of the Name in vain.” Kind of clunky, but the people would get the point.

People used to be utterly terrified of misusing the name of God. Today, we use God’s name as if He were a common criminal instead of the creator of the Universe! If we were living in the Old Testament days, most of us would probably not make it past age seven.

You have probably misused God’s name at some point, and are probably past the age of seven. Fortunately, we live in a day where God is closer than you think, and Jesus assures us that our “blasphemies” can be forgiven.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus spoke these words:

“I solemnly declare that any sin of man can be forgiven, even blasphemy against me; but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit can never be forgiven. It is an eternal sin.” (Mark 3:28–9)

Jesus tells us that blaspheming against Him can be forgiven. Since Jesus is God, we can say that misusing God’s (or Christ’s) name today is a forgivable sin. So far, so good. But, Jesus doesn’t take us totally off the hook. He goes on to say that when we blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, we can *never* be forgiven. Now we have a problem.

If you and I want to make it into Heaven, we’d better know what this “blasphemy against the Holy Spirit” really is. Is it misusing the name of God? Is it speaking bad behind God’s back? (As if He doesn’t hear us!) What is this eternal, damning, unforgivable sin?

Christians often refer to the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit as the “unpardonable sin.” It is considered the one sin that can never be forgiven. People who take Jesus’ words seriously are often fearful of committing this act. If they have ever blasphemed the Holy Spirit, then all hope of eternal life is lost. They are, as the verse reads, guilty of an “eternal sin.” Some of us may fear that we have done this very act. Maybe every time we have taken God’s name in vain, we have committed the unpardonable sin. Maybe when we have scoffed at God, we have committed the unpardonable sin. If either of these is so, I’m afraid that most of us are doomed for eternity!

Well, the fact that you are even *concerned* about this is evidence that you need not fear. You see, Jesus tells us that blaspheming the Holy Spirit is unforgivable. Yet, he never really calls it an *unpardonable* sin. I for one do not believe there is an unpardonable sin. I see nothing in the Bible that suggests that there is any one sin that Jesus cannot

forgive. I especially cannot imagine that God would hold us eternally accountable for a sin that may have been committed in a fit of rage or a moment of frustration. For the 98.6 percent of us who have ever spoken God's name in vain, there is still hope!

Let me share a story from when I was around twelve years old. I was an avid bowler who was on the verge of the greatest game of my life. After nine frames, I was approaching the first 200 game of my young career. All I needed to do was knock down a handful of pins and the glory was mine. As I approached the tenth and final frame, I began to feel the mounting pressure of the moment. With my heart pounding and my hands sweating, I fired my first shot. To my dismay, the shot rolled wide right — right, that is, into the gutter! As I stared at the lane in disbelief, I knew I had one more chance to redeem myself. So, I pulled myself together and approached the lane for my final shot. I reared back with all I could muster and fired my final shot. My mouth dropped with anguish as the shot again rolled straight into the gutter! There it was — my moment of glory was vanquished in a moment. My twelve years of life had met a bitter end.

I remember the ride home. I quietly sulked in the passenger's seat, stewing inside over the tragic events that had just occurred. We arrived at the house, and my mom parked the car and left me alone as she exited for the front door. I remained in the car, apparently angry with the entire world. With no one left to hear, I decided to take matters up with the one who must have caused this whole matter — God. He was the one, I figured, that messed up the whole thing. How dare He cause me to roll two gutter balls in the final frame! In a moment of intense preteen anger (remember those days?), I did something that I will never forget. I looked up to Heaven and gave God — this

is no lie — the bird! Not just one bird, but a two-handed, double-fisted bird! I had, in effect, cursed God!

Had I not blasphemed God? If so, was this the “unpardonable sin”? Was I now destined for Hell?

To be sure, I certainly committed a very ugly sin. But I truly believe that this sin was, and still is, forgivable.

Jesus tells us that certain sins will be forgiven. One of these sins is when we blaspheme Him. What, then, is the difference between blaspheming Jesus (a forgivable act) and blaspheming the Holy Spirit (something that isn’t forgivable)? It is when we blaspheme against Jesus, we are speaking evil of His name. When we blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, we are essentially rejecting God.

When the Holy Spirit speaks to our heart, He is trying to draw us to the God who is closer than we think. He is patiently wooing us to God. To blaspheme the Holy Spirit means that we reject this call. We say “No” to the loving invitation to join God’s family. When Jesus warned against blaspheming the Holy Spirit, He was warning us not to reject the call of His Spirit. If we do so, we are committing an act that has no forgiveness.

There is no unpardonable *sin*. There is, though, an unpardonable *heart*. The heart that rejects the wooing of the Holy Spirit can never find forgiveness. It is, as Jesus put it, an eternal sin.

In the Old Testament, when one cursed God, he was stoned to death. Today, if we reject the Holy Spirit’s prodding upon our hearts, we basically stone ourselves.

Maybe your conversation is peppered with *GDs* and *JCs*. Maybe you need to clean up your act and stop taking the Lord’s name in vain. As important as this is, there is something even more important. While you may stop blaspheming God’s name, you really need to stop blaspheming against the call of His Holy Spirit.

When the Spirit calls, I hope you respond. If not, then you are speaking the most vile “God %#!&%\$#” that any one can say.

*God, I commit to never blaspheme Your name, and to respond to the call of Your Holy Spirit to follow Your Son, Jesus Christ.  
Amen.*

## *A Time to Proclaim Liberty*

(Leviticus 25:1–55)

“Freedom is not America's gift to the world.  
It is God's gift to humanity.”  
— *President George W. Bush*

“For the fiftieth year shall be holy, a time to proclaim liberty throughout the land to all enslaved debtors, and a time for the canceling of all public and private debts.”  
— *Leviticus 25:10*

In Roland Joffe's *The Mission*, Robert DeNiro portrays a seventeenth-century slave trader named Rodrigo Mendoza who converts to Christianity. After his conversion, Mendoza joins a Jesuit priest to the lands of South America to minister to the same tribes in which he once hunted. As an act of penitence, Mendoza climbs the mountains of South America with a heavy load of pots and pans bagged and tied to his back.

In one gripping scene, the company of missionaries climbs to the top of a mountain and meet squarely with the tribesmen. One native spots Mendoza and recognizes him as the one who hunted his people. The native then races toward him with machete in hand, presumably to exact revenge on his persecutor.

A tumbling sound is heard trailing down the mountainside. It is not, though, Mr. Mendoza's head. It is the load of pots and pans that lay heavy upon his back.

In one swift act, Mendoza is offered forgiveness and freedom by those he has offended.

What is it like to be suddenly and completely forgiven? What is it like to be imprisoned for years, then to wake up one day to find that you are free?

Many an ancient Jew knew this feeling. This was due, in part, to a celebration known as the Year of Jubilee.

The Year of Jubilee, as described in Leviticus 25, was a year of forgiveness and freedom. It was a year, held only once every fifty years, whereby all debts were forgiven, and all slaves were freed. It was a year whereby those in debt and in slavery could gain a fresh, clean start.

“For the fiftieth year [the Year of Jubilee] shall be holy, a time to proclaim liberty throughout the land to all enslaved debtors, and a time for the canceling of all public and private debts.” (Leviticus 25:10)

The Hebrew word for *jubilee* can be translated as a trumpet sound, an alarm, a shout, or many other words that speak of celebration. In this way, it maintains our modern definition of a great, festive occasion. And this is for good reason. The Year of Jubilee was a year of celebration. It was even announced by a series of trumpet blasts. I can picture people dancing in the streets celebrating their release from the debt and bondage that virtually destroyed theirs and their families’ lives. It was a time of gaining a fresh start in life.

Today, Jesus has fulfilled the true meaning of the Jubilee. His death and resurrection have secured for us forgiveness of sins and freedom from our old way of life. As Michael Card sings of Jesus in his anthem to the Jubilee:

“In His voice we hear a trumpet sound  
That tells us we are free  
He is the incarnation  
Of the Year of Jubilee”<sup>20</sup>

The Year of Jubilee brought about forgiveness of debt and freedom from slavery. Yet, Jesus, the personification

of this great celebration, did more than just secure these rights in the physical realm. His forgiveness and freedom reach much deeper, down to the depths of a person's soul, and last beyond our days on earth to extend to eternity in Heaven.

When we walk with God, we understand the forgiveness and freedom granted by Jesus. The Year of Jubilee foreshadowed this incredible truth.

### *A Time of Forgiveness*

In the days of Leviticus, it was common for people to sell family property in times of financial duress. In the Year of Jubilee, all land was returned to their original owners at a reduced cost. The repurchase price was based upon the prior fifty years. If the property was owned for several years prior to the Jubilee, it was repurchased for a very small amount. If the property was owned for only a few years, the repurchase price was slightly less than the original price. In effect, land was not really sold, but leased, for up to fifty years.<sup>21</sup>

This law accomplished a few things. It eliminated a potential caste system whereby a few "slum lords" could rule an entire city. (This reminds me of Mr. Potter in *It's a Wonderful Life*.) Also, it ensured that financial hardship did not propagate to succeeding generations. Children and grandchildren had access to an inheritance that would otherwise be left to another family.

Can you imagine the effect that such a law could have upon our modern culture? Think of all the people who lost their homes due to gambling, bad investments, lack of work, or any other bad situation. Imagine if their children and grandchildren received these homes back at the Year of Jubilee. Would there continue to be families poverty-

stricken from generation to generation? Would we have the “slums” we have today? This is a foreign concept to us, but it was a way of life for ancient Israel.

This time of forgiveness of debts was inaugurated by the blowing of trumpets on none other than the Day of Atonement. We have already seen how the Day of Atonement looked ahead to Jesus’ atonement upon the Cross. In the same way, this incredible year signifies what Jesus’ atoning death accomplished for us. It is for all an opportunity to receive forgiveness and freedom from our greatest debt to God — the debt of sin.

Jesus watched as a crowd of angry men threw the young woman to the ground. She had been caught in the act of adultery (where was the guy?), and the penalty according to the Law of Moses was death by stoning (Leviticus 20:10). Jesus calmly doodled on the ground as the mob grabbed stones and prepared to execute judgment. As the mob held up their stones, Jesus looked into their eyes and replied:

“All right, hurl the stones at her until she dies. But only he who never sinned may throw the first.”  
(John 8:7)

The Apostle John records how, one by one, the men dropped their stones to the ground and walked away. It’s amazing how we can be so angry at another’s sins, yet forget that we are sinners as well. Now, Jesus revealed the ugly hearts of these men, and they left in shame. The only ones who remained were Jesus and the accused woman. Jesus looked at her and gently asked whether any of her accusers remained. The woman simply replied, “No, sir.” To this Jesus stated some of the most powerful words ever spoken:

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“Neither do I. Go and sin no more.” (John 8:11)

What a remarkable statement. Jesus did not condone the woman’s sin. He admonished her to sin no more. Yet, in just a few simple words, Jesus gave to this woman complete and unconditional forgiveness! No one was left to accuse her, and He, the only one worthy to throw a stone, would not either. Jesus was to this woman the personification of the Jubilee.

My wife and I bought our first house with help from our parents. Each gave us a substantial loan toward the down payment. A few years into the loan, we received a wonderful surprise. My wife’s father, for her birthday gift, forgave the balance of the loan. It was an incredible relief to each of us to no longer be burdened by the debt. It was also a great demonstration of her father’s love for us to do such an act.

This was how the Jewish debtor must have felt on the Jubilee. It is also, though, what the sinner experiences when Jesus offers forgiveness for our debt of sin. In one of His parables, Jesus spoke of the Father as one who forgives us of “all that tremendous debt” (Matthew 18:32). For us, the Year of Jubilee need not be fifty years down the road. It is available this very moment.

### *A Time of Freedom*

I remember vividly the voice of Bay Area radio personality Gary Radnich announcing the horrific news. It was almost 6:30 A.M. on the West Coast. I was driving to our morning men’s Bible study, trying to perk myself up in the early hour, wondering how late I would arrive this time. Suddenly, everything seemed to come to a dead halt. I just learned that jet airliners had struck the Twin Towers

in New York City. I remember the shock wave that went through by body, wondering how something so heinous could ever happen. I thought about the possibility of 50,000 people losing their lives. My mind wandered back to four months prior, when my family stood atop the East Tower, gazing upon the vast expanse of our most storied city. I wondered how I could tell my then seven-year-old daughter that the same buildings that she stood upon were now reduced to rubble. I wondered how she could process this death and destruction without completely losing her young innocence.

I also wondered if our nation had forever lost its freedom.

I trust that anyone old enough to process September 11, 2001 could recall in vivid detail just where and when they learned of the news that changed the world. Before 9/11, America considered herself to be immune from the fear and violence that gripped much of the world. Now, we entered a realm where our most treasured possession — freedom — was in doubt.

President Bush, in his 2002 State of the Union address, stated these words:

“While the price of freedom and security is high, it is never too high. Whatever it costs to defend our country, we will pay.”<sup>22</sup>

What is the price of freedom? Is there any cost too high to ensure that our nation’s freedom is not lost?

In the days of Leviticus, a man or woman in a dire financial fix could sell themselves into slavery as payment for debt or for income purposes.<sup>23</sup> According to Exodus 21:2, a Hebrew slave would be released seven years after his enslavement. Additionally, the man or woman could

instead be set free at the Year of Jubilee. Up to this time, the slave could buy himself back at a reduced price according to the time served. When either the seventh year or the Year of Jubilee, was up, the slave was set free at no cost.

Jesus offers to us freedom, but not necessarily political or economic freedom. He offers freedom from sin and Hell. This freedom, though free, is not cheap. While we often try to “buy” our freedom by good deeds and church attendance, these are hardly enough to pay the price. Only Jesus’ sacrifice upon the Cross could relieve such a debt. The only requirement on our part is the simple act of faith.

“Being saved is a gift; if a person could earn it by being good, then it wouldn’t be free — but it is! It is *given* to those who do *not* work for it. For God declares sinners to be good in his sight if they have faith in Christ to save them from God’s wrath.”  
(Romans 4:4–5)

So, the freedom Jesus offers is, in fact, free. There is no price on our part, except to express faith in Christ. The cost, though, is incredibly high.

Prior to the Year of Jubilee, a man sold into slavery could be bought back by a near relative, or even himself if possible:

“[The slave] may be redeemed by one of his brothers, his uncle, his nephew, or anyone else who is a near relative. He may also redeem himself if he can find the money. The price of his freedom shall be in proportion to the number of years left before the Year of Jubilee.” (Leviticus 25:48–50)

Note the word “redeemed.” This is precisely the word used for how Jesus bought us back from our spiritual slavery. As the Apostle Peter wrote:

“For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were *redeemed* from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.” (I Peter 1:18–19, NIV, italics mine)

When you enter a checkout line in the grocery store, it’s a good habit to have your coupons ready for redemption. That way, when you pay for your goods, you can reduce your debt by *redeeming* the coupons for cash. Jesus’ blood, shall we say, is the ultimate redemption slip! When we approach the “checkout line” at the Pearly Gates of Heaven, the attending clerk will ask us how we will pay for our entry. All we need to do is pull out a slip that reads, “Paid in full by the Blood of Jesus,” and we can pass through. Of course, it probably won’t be exactly as I described, but you get the idea. Our deeds cannot pay the price for our freedom. Only the blood of Jesus is satisfactory to release us from the bonds of slavery. As Jesus Himself said, “If the Son sets you free, you will indeed be free” (John 8:36).

### ***Sound the Trumpets!***

The inscription on the Liberty Bell reads:

“PROCLAIM LIBERTY THROUGHOUT ALL THE  
LAND UNTO ALL THE INHABITANTS THEREOF.  
LEV. XXV10”

This is a direct quote from Leviticus 25:10. When the Liberty Bell was rung, it reminded the people of their hard-fought freedom. When the trumpets of the Jubilee were blown, it proclaimed to the land that the day of liberation was here.

Our forefathers saw the Jubilee as a symbol of the freedom won for this great nation. Yet, many also recognized that freedom was not just political, but spiritual as well. To be free spiritually, one also needed to be forgiven. The Jubilee exemplified this twofold necessity of forgiveness and freedom. Jesus personified it.

We don't need to wait fifty years for our liberty. Jesus offers it to us today:

“Right now God is willing to welcome you. Today he is ready to save you.” (II Corinthians 6:2)

*Dear God, I thank You for Your offer of forgiveness and freedom. I thank You that Your offer is available today, and I gladly accept it. Amen.*



## *Let's Make a Deal*

(Leviticus 26:1–27:34)

“When a person makes a special vow . . .”  
— *Leviticus 27:1*

“If you obey all of my commandments . . .”  
— *Leviticus 26:3*

**H**ave you ever tried to make a bargain with God?

I can't count the number of times I said, “Lord, when I am finished with this difficult time in my life, I promise to serve you more.” It is a somewhat watered-down way of saying, “God, get me out of this mess and I'll be a better Christian!”

Just about everybody in life has at some point tried to bargain with God. It's typical of our kind that whenever we face a situation that is out of our control, we go to God with some sort of deal that, hopefully, will move Him to act on our behalf.

In the movie *The End*, Burt Reynolds plays a terminally ill patient who decides to end it all by committing suicide in the ocean. After he swims out of safe waters, he comes to his senses and decides that he wants to live. Realizing that the shore is a bit out of his reach, he begins to bargain with God for his life:

“God, I promise to obey the Ten Commandments . . .  
Oh no, I don't remember them all.”

Then, he comes up with a more practical plan: “Lord, if you get me out of this, I'll give you eighty percent of all I have.”

As he approaches closer to shore, his bargain becomes a little less generous: “Lord, if you help me get to this shore alive, I’ll give you ten percent of all my earnings.”

Finally, once out of harm’s way, he declares, “Lord, let’s just forget about what I said before. I think I can make it from here on my own.”

Bargaining with God is nothing new. Even Abraham, affectionately known as the father of the Jews, thought he could sway the hand of God with a little wheeling and dealing. After God swore He would punish the proverbial cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (which was the home of Abraham’s nephew, Lot), Abraham chimed in with a bargain:

“Suppose you find fifty godly people there within the city—will you destroy it, and not spare it for their sakes?” (Genesis 18:24)

God graciously agreed to this bargain. But Abraham, knowing that God would be hard pressed to find fifty godly people, continued to wheel and deal:

“Since I have begun, let me go on and speak further to the Lord, though I am but dust and ashes. *Suppose there are only forty-five?* Will you destroy the city for lack of five?” (Genesis 18:27–28)

Again, God accepted Abraham’s bid. Yet, shrewd ol’ Abraham wasn’t finished. To be safe (knowing the type of people who lived in these cities), Abraham continued to bargain with God:

*“Suppose there are only forty?”*

*“Suppose only thirty are found there?”*

*“Suppose there are only twenty?*

*“Suppose there are only ten found?”* (Genesis 18:29–32)

At this point, Abraham figured he had got the better of God, so he stopped. Unfortunately, he should have continued. When God finished counting, He couldn't even find ten godly people!

Most of us have at some point tried to bargain with God. Maybe you made a deal with God to secure an answer to prayer. Possibly you offered to stay married if God would change your spouse's attitude. Or maybe you offered to give a portion of your income if God would increase your business.

In the final chapters of Leviticus, God instructs Moses on the two ways people typically try to walk with God. On one side, we have the way of obedience. This is the way that says, “God, I will obey.” On the other side, we have the way of vows, or shall we say, the way of bargaining. This is the way that says, “God, I will obey, *if . . .*”

The way of obedience, in chapter 26, is God's plan for those who would walk with Him. Here, we discover the beauty of walking with God in obedience. He promises to us things such as peace, provision, satisfaction, victory and, most importantly, His presence (26:3–13). These wonderful verses culminate with this promise:

*“I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be my people.”* (Leviticus 26:12, italics mine)

When we walk with God in obedience, God promises to walk with *us*! For those who have experienced this intimate relationship with God, there is simply nothing more satisfying. As a former-preacher-turned-atheist named

Charles Templeton stated about his past relationship with Jesus:

“ . . . he is the most important human being who has ever existed . . . And if I may put it this way . . . *I . . . miss . . . him!*”<sup>24</sup>

The way of bargaining, found in chapter 27, is a completely different route. Instead of doing things God’s way, the bargain maker tries to sway God to have things done his own way. This person never truly understands the intimacy God wants to have with him. Instead, he spends his life trying to manipulate God’s hand to ensure he gets things done his way.

Remember when Monty Hall hosted the popular game show *Let’s Make a Deal*? Mr. Hall would offer someone cash in lieu of getting what’s behind door number two. That’s kind of how we bargain with God. We don’t want to face the unknown, nor the consequences of our actions, nor even the harsh realities of things out of our control. So, we offer God something in return for *not* choosing door number two. We say things like, “God, if you spare my child, I’ll become a preacher,” or “Lord, if I land this job, then I’ll start going to church.” True, God sometimes sees your heart and accepts your bargain. But what if He doesn’t? What if He rejects your offer and makes you face door number two?

This is why walking with God is not about wheeling and dealing, but about obedience. Whether or not things go as we desire, we are instructed to live a life of obedience to God. This is the path where God promises us, “I will walk among you.”

## *Okay God, How About . . .*

In Leviticus 27, we find how people sometimes made a promise to God by way of a vow. As the initial verses read:

“The Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell the people of Israel that when a person makes a special vow to give himself to the Lord, he shall give these payments instead: A man from the age of twenty to sixty shall pay twenty-five dollars.’” (Leviticus 27:1–3)

From here onward, we read of how a person could “buy off” their vow by varying degrees of payments. In general, a man’s value was greater than a woman’s; the adults more valuable than the children; the aged were valued somewhere in between. Before anyone goes into a PC tizzy, this does not imply that men are more valuable than women, or adults than children, and so on. We know this is not the case because of the nature of the valuation. The valuation was not based upon human worth, but upon one’s work value in the tabernacle. You see, the vow is not just a promise to do one thing or another, but a promise to serve in the tabernacle alongside the priests. It’s kind of like becoming a monk or a Jesuit priest. One’s entire life would be devoted to serving God in the tabernacle. Since women, children and the aged were not employed much in these duties, their work value was reduced.

Since God made it clear that the priesthood belonged to the Levites, no one outside the priesthood could really fulfill this vow. God therefore made provision for the people to do the next best thing: buy off their vow. Other things, such as animals, land, and crops could be offered for the service of the tabernacle (and bought back at an inflated

price, if necessary)<sup>25</sup>, but not people. Their personal vows could only be fulfilled by monetary payment.

Most of the time, people who vowed themselves for the work of the tabernacle “bought off” their vow. There were occasional exceptions, most notably the young prophet named Samuel. His mother, Hannah, wanted a child so bad that she made a vow to God. Her vow to God was simply, “Give me a son, then I will give him back to you [to live in the tabernacle]” (I Samuel 1:11). Essentially, Hannah made a deal with God. In this case, God made good on His end and gave Hannah a boy. To her credit, Hannah then offered her son to live in the tabernacle with Eli, the priest. No payment was made for the child, and Samuel became a famed prophet of Israel.

Typically, though, this vow was not literally fulfilled. It was paid off with money. You could essentially say that a person was “buying off God.”

I wonder how often we try to “buy off God.” Whenever we try to make a deal with God, we are saying, “God, I don’t know how to trust you on this one. So, I’ll give you this or that so that you might give me what I desire.” Sometimes, God sees our heart and grants us our request. Often, though, I think God is disappointed by our bargaining, and wishes for us to think more highly of Him. “If they only would trust Me,” I imagine Him thinking, “then they wouldn’t need to bargain with Me at all.”

When an ancient Jew made a vow to God, it was considered a very sacred and serious act. The Old Testament tells us:

“The person making the vow must do exactly as he has promised.” (Numbers 30:2)

“The Lord demands that you promptly fulfill your vows; it is a sin if you don’t.” (Deuteronomy 23:21)

Making a vow was so serious that it would be better to not vow at all than to break a vow (Deuteronomy 23:22). Today, we often make a vow more on the order of Burt Reynolds — we’ll make good as long as we are in trouble. Yet, as soon as things look brighter . . .

Jesus understood the serious nature of a vow. He considered them so sacred that he essentially told us to eliminate them altogether:

“Again the law of Moses says, ‘You shall not break your vows to God, but must fulfill them all.’ But I say: Don’t make any vows! And even to say, ‘By heavens!’ is a sacred vow to God, for the heavens are God’s throne. And if you say ‘By the earth!’ it is a sacred vow, for the earth is his footstool. And don’t swear ‘By Jerusalem!’ for Jerusalem is the capital of the great King. Don’t even swear ‘By my head!’ for you can’t turn one hair white or black. Say just a simple ‘Yes, I will’ or ‘No, I won’t.’ Your word is enough. *To strengthen your promise with a vow shows that something is wrong.*” (Matthew 5:33–37, italics mine)

Imagine if we took Jesus completely at His word and eliminated all forms of vows. We would never say, “I swear to God!” or “On my mother’s grave!” We would not even state vows at a wedding. The only thing that would count is “Yes” and “No.” Our words would speak for themselves. We wouldn’t need any other thing to back them up.

Of course, Jesus was not concerned about marital traditions or slang words. What He was really concerned

about was why we make vows in the first place. If we are trying to make a deal with God, Jesus says to you, "Don't bargain with God. Either tell God, 'Yes, I will' or 'No, I won't.' That's all He's really asking of you."

So, bargaining is not very pleasing to God. What God truly desires is obedience. He is looking for those who will say to Him, "Yes, I will."

### *Please Respond by Saying, "I Do"*

My wife and I wrote our wedding vows. I remember the thought put into those few yet meaningful words. I remember distinctly how we wanted our vows to reflect both our love for one another and our love for God. We wanted to place our marriage in the hands of our Heavenly Father, and our wedding vows would be a reflection of this.

Yet, if you ask me what those vows were, I'd have to refer you to our wedding video.

I don't remember exactly what my wife and I vowed on our wedding day. I do very much remember two words that I spoke that have been the basis for my commitment to her over the years. They were the simple words, "I do."

As far as wedding vows go, they hardly match up against the Old Testament standard that says, "Fulfill your vows or else!" Just a quick glance at the high divorce rate tells us that people don't take their vows very seriously. But, according to Jesus, it is not the vows that count so much as those simple words, "I do." It's these words that reflect Jesus' statement, "Yes, I will." It's two simple words that say, "I will make you as my partner for life. I will be true to you. I will never leave you." These are the words that I remember. And they are the only words I need.

In Leviticus 26, God gave Israel essentially two options in life. One was to say, “Yes, I will.” This is called *obedience*. As God said:

“If you obey all my commandments . . .” (Leviticus 26:3)

The next ten verses reveal quite an assortment of blessings to those who obey God. The best thing, as we already saw, is that God will walk alongside us.

The other option God gave us was to say, “No, I won’t.” This is known affectionately as *disobedience*:

“But if you will not listen to me or obey me, but reject my laws, this is what I will do to you. . . .” (Leviticus 26:14–16)

It took ten verses for God to explain His blessings. It takes twenty-four verses to explain His judgment. Throughout, we read such words as “I will punish,” “I will break,” and “I will scatter.” It’s not a pretty picture. Viewed from more contemporary lenses, one might say that disobedience removes us from God’s blessings. Without God’s blessings, we’re kind of on our own.

In speaking about obedience, Jesus said:

“I will only reveal myself to those who *love me and obey me*. The Father will love them too, and we will come to them and *live with them*. Anyone who doesn’t obey me doesn’t love me. And remember, I am not making up this answer to your question! It is the answer given by the Father who sent me.” (John 14:23, italics mine).

Here we go again. If we disobey, we're missing out on God's best for our lives. Yet, if we obey, we have the promise that God will "live with us," or, shall we say, walk with us. Our walk with God is a love relationship that is revealed in our obedience to Him. There is no other way. There is no bargaining or dealing needed. As the Apostle Peter barked at Simon the Sorcerer who wanted to buy God's blessings: "Your money perish with you for thinking God's gifts can be bought!" (Acts 8:20).

### *Let's Make a REAL Deal*

So you really want to bargain with God? Since God is so eager to have a relationship with you, He is willing to make this deal. And when God says, "Let's make a deal," it's one I suggest you jump on immediately. Here's the deal: If you follow and obey His Son Jesus, He will walk with you. If you ask me, it's a pretty darn good bargain. In fact, you get to walk alongside God today *and* for eternity. How could anyone pass this one up?

And there is nothing behind door number two that can even come close.

*Dear God, if it's a deal You want, then I'm in. For my end of the deal, I'll obey Your Son, Jesus Christ. I look forward to Your end of the deal — to walk with me for now and eternity. Thank You for Your wonderful bargain! Amen.*

## *God Is Closer Than You Think*

**T**he Book of Leviticus is about a faraway God. Here we find a God who is hardly approachable, who demands we follow tedious and exacting rules and executes terrible punishments to those to miss the mark in the slightest degree.

Yet, we also see that Leviticus is about a God who is very near to us. This is because Leviticus is really a veiled story of Jesus Christ. The bloody and messy sacrifices pointed to the day that Jesus would die for our sins. The “fire from heaven” foreshadowed a time when Jesus would become the lightning rod of God’s wrath. The scapegoat encouraged us that Jesus would carry the weight of our sins.

Yes, Leviticus is a book about a faraway God. Add Jesus to the equation, though, and God becomes closer than we think.

Our lives kind of reflect this same pattern. God is far away, unapproachable, and dangles over our heads the fear of eternal punishment for our many sins. We either try to follow exacting rules to appease an angry God or ignore them altogether and hope that, somehow, God will sort things out for us in the end. Yet, when Jesus enters the complicated equation of our lives, something truly wonderful happens. God comes near. He is no longer unapproachable but right next to us — in fact, He lives *in* us! He no longer requires exacting rules and regulations but simply tells us to love Him and love others. Then, we no longer live in fear of an unknown eternity but instead wait anxiously for the day when we will forever dwell with Him in Heaven.

Today, you may be asking yourself, "Where is God?" My answer to you is this: God is closer than you think! He is wherever you are, waiting patiently for you to call upon Him and respond to His offer to walk with Him both now and forever. He is not waiting for you to simply change your sinful ways or fix your broken life. Instead, He is wanting you to allow *Him* to help you change yourself and your situation.

Where is God? He is right here, right now. So what are you going to do about this?

If you are tired of trying to live this crazy thing called life your own way, let me invite you to allow Jesus to help you do life right. Are you ready to allow Jesus to take charge and satisfy your deep hunger inside? Are you willing to allow Jesus to change your course and steer you toward the road that leads to God?

If this is you, then pray this simple prayer with me. There is nothing magical about these words. It is your heart that matters to God. Pray this prayer from your heart and believe God will change your life today!

*Heavenly Father, I know that I am a sinner. I know that I cannot do this thing alone. I need Your Son, Jesus Christ, to walk alongside me to help me live this crazy thing called "life." I believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died for my sins. I accept His sacrifice on my behalf, and ask that He would cleanse me from all my sins. I choose this day to follow You by following Jesus. I no longer will live life on my own. I instead choose to make Jesus the Lord of my life. Take this broken life and make it all that You intended it to be. Thank You, God, for saving my soul. Amen.*

Did you pray this prayer and mean it? Do you really want Jesus to be the one in charge? If so, then let me

congratulate you as a new member of the Kingdom of Heaven! You have just made the most important choice in life: the choice to follow Jesus. From this moment forward, your life has been placed in the hands of Almighty God. There is no safer place in Heaven or Earth than this.

For you, my friend, God is no longer far away. God is near to you, *and you know it!* He is no longer the faraway God of Leviticus. You know He is the God who lives in you by His Spirit and will be with you forever. As the Apostle John wrote, you “know you have eternal life” (I John 5:13).

You have discovered that Jesus is the way to God. Now, you will discover firsthand what it means to walk with God. Wherever you are, know that God is right there with you. Talk to Him. Listen to Him. Discover new things about Him as you read the Bible. Learn to love Him as you love others. As the Bible tells us, it’s a “fresh, new, life-giving way” (Hebrews 10:20). It starts today, and you have eternity to master it.

Always remember, my friend, that you no longer have to live life alone. You no longer need to ask, “Where is God?” This is because God is closer. . . .

Okay, you get the picture.



## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The story takes place somewhere around 1400 to 1500 B.C.
- <sup>2</sup> Moses may have very well written Leviticus, along with the rest of what scholars call the *Pentateuch* (the first five books of the Bible). This follows the implied teachings of Jewish scholars and even Jesus. Yet, since Moses' death is recorded in the last of these five books, it may be more accurate to say that Moses wrote the main content, but others edited the works into their final form.
- <sup>3</sup> The title *Leviticus* is taken from the name of the *Levites*, who were part of the priestly sect of Israel. Their job was to administer the religious duties that God dictated to Moses. All these instructions were given while the Israelites camped at Mount Sinai (see Leviticus 27:34), where God delivered the famous Ten Commandments.
- <sup>4</sup> As in each offering, the first section discusses the offering in relation to the offerer himself; the second describes the offering in relation to the attending priest.
- <sup>5</sup> The Tabernacle (or Tent) was a makeshift "church" where the most holy religious duties were performed.
- <sup>6</sup> Luke 8:48
- <sup>7</sup> Luke 8:49
- <sup>8</sup> Luke 8:54–55
- <sup>9</sup> See Luke 5:12–14
- <sup>10</sup> From "We're Not Gonna Take It," by Pete Townshend
- <sup>11</sup> *Webster's II New Riverside University Dictionary* (The Riverside Publishing Company, 1984)
- <sup>12</sup> Leviticus 11:44–45, 19:2, 20:7
- <sup>13</sup> Interestingly, polygamy is not condemned. In fact, it is assumed to be part of life. This was an act of leniency given by God for a culture that was completely void of sexual restraint. In the New Testament, we begin to see how God's true intent for sex was a monogamous relationship between husband and wife. (See I

Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:6.)

<sup>14</sup> From “For Who He Really Is,” by Steven Curtis Chapman

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>16</sup> “They Don’t Make Preachers Like Him Anymore,” Episode 236 of *The Jeffersons*.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>18</sup> Many scholars teach that Jesus died at precisely the time that the ceremonial lamb was slain for the Passover celebration. If this is true, it adds greater meaning to John the Baptist’s words that Jesus is “the Lamb of God who takes away the world’s sin!” (John 1:29).

<sup>19</sup> *Pentecost* literally means ‘fifty.’

<sup>20</sup> From “Jubilee,” by Michael Card

<sup>21</sup> In the case of land purchased within city limits, the original owner had only one year to buy back the land. This appears to be due to the nature of such property. Land within city walls was typically intended for commerce. Land in the fields was for personal use and livelihood.

<sup>22</sup> President George W. Bush, *State of the Union Address*, January 29, 2002

<sup>23</sup> The concept of slavery in the Bible is a sticky one. Two things should be briefly mentioned. First, slaves were to be treated kindly, like hired servants. Also, slavery is not condoned in the New Testament. It is only addressed to ensure owners did not mistreat their servants. This is an example of how God would sometimes excuse cultural evils and instead impose rules to help change the way people viewed them.

<sup>24</sup> Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Zondervan Publishing House), p. 18

<sup>25</sup> Note that certain things, such as the firstborn among animals (27:26), previously devoted items (27:28), condemned people (27:29), and a tenth of all produce (27:30) could not be included in a vow. This is because these already belonged to God and would be meaningless in the context of a vow.