

Leviticus Bible Study #29

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 24:1-23

1 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, **2** “Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil from beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly. **3** Outside the veil of the testimony, in the tent of meeting, Aaron shall arrange it from evening to morning before the Lord regularly. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. **4** He shall arrange the lamps on the lampstand of pure gold before the Lord regularly.

5 “You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. **6** And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before the Lord. **7** And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the Lord. **8** Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the Lord regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. **9** And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the Lord's food offerings, a perpetual due.”

10 Now an Israelite woman's son, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel. And the Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel fought in the camp, **11** and the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the Name, and cursed. Then they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan. **12** And they put him in custody, till the will of the Lord should be clear to them.

13 Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, **14** “Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him. **15** And speak to the people of Israel, saying, Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. **16** Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.

17 “Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. **18** Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life. **19** If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, **20** fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. **21** Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, and whoever kills a person shall be put to death. **22** You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the Lord your God.” **23** So Moses spoke to the people of Israel, and they brought out of the camp the one who had cursed and stoned him with stones. Thus the people of Israel did as the Lord commanded Moses.

Introduction

There is ample evidence that the book of Leviticus was written in “real time.” That is to say, Moses wrote the text in piecemeal fashion, adding to the original scroll as he had occasion. Whenever a new subject is introduced with a variation on the phrase “The Lord spoke to Moses,” we may safely assume that there was some amount of *time* between the previous passage and the current one. The previous chapter discussing the Israelite liturgical calendar began with “The Lord spoke to Moses” and ends with “Thus Moses declared to the people of Israel the appointed feasts of the Lord;” the chapter has such a conclusion to show that it was a self-contained passage addressing a single topic. Then our Lord speaks to Moses at another time and begins to discuss different commands. This episodic style of writing shows us that Leviticus was written in a chronological sequence, as opposed to the prophet sitting down and writing what was on his mind.

Bolstering this chronological and sequential style of writing is the presence of case law interruptions. We see an element of this in the seventeenth chapter, wherein God institutes a temporary ban on private slaughter to curb the trend of the “goat party” in Israel sacrificing to goat demons.¹ Yet with that passage, the case law decision was in immediate response to confusion over the use of a scapegoat on the Day of Atonement. Here in the twenty fourth chapter, we have a clear reflection of the way these interruptions reflect Moses' writing style. As he begins relating the regulations concerning the Tabernacle lampstand and the showbread, his discourse is disrupted by a crisis among the people: public conflict, blasphemy, and allegations of injury. From there, our Lord institutes the *lex talionis* to direct outcomes for private damages, and institutes the death penalty for blasphemy. An unrelated topic *inserts* itself into the legal narrative suddenly enough that the subsequent precedent has to be written down for future generations.

Vs.1-4

1 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, **2** “Command the people of Israel to bring you pure oil from beaten olives for the lamp, that a light may be kept burning regularly. **3** Outside the veil of the testimony, in the tent of meeting, Aaron shall arrange it from evening to morning before the Lord regularly. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations. **4** He shall arrange the lamps on the lampstand of pure gold before the Lord regularly.

The lampstand serves two purposes. First, it is a practical part of the ministry, as Aaron and Moses require light when meeting with God in the tent of meeting. The future factors in to that need for lighting as well, since the priests were the ones tasked with teaching the Law; if they are spending all day making offerings at the altar and inspecting people for uncleanness, then night is the only time in which any of them can hope to study, prepare messages, etc.

The other reason, shown later in Scripture, is that a lampstand is a show of congregational belonging to the Lord. In Revelation, St. John's meeting with Christ includes a vision of seven lampstands, each one representing one of the seven churches to whom the Apostle is tasked with writing epistles.² If a congregation is faithful, then the Holy Spirit continues to preserve, guide, and help them. If a congregation is unfaithful, then the lampstand assigned to that congregation is removed:³ in no longer belonging to our Lord, the spiritual direction and help once afforded to them is no longer present. This symbolism is present with the lampstand of Israel, which is treated as a single congregation before our Lord. In effect, they were the only church in the world. It is necessary only in the evening, as this relationship is expressed with the fires of the altar during the day; but together, they present a constant reminder of the covenant God established with His people.

Vs.5-9

5 “You shall take fine flour and bake twelve loaves from it; two tenths of an ephah shall be in each loaf. **6** And you shall set them in two piles, six in a pile, on the table of pure gold before the Lord. **7** And you shall put pure frankincense on each pile, that it may go with the bread as a memorial portion as a food offering to the Lord. **8** Every Sabbath day Aaron shall arrange it before the Lord regularly; it is from the people of Israel as a covenant forever. **9** And it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the Lord's food offerings, a perpetual due.”

“Do this in remembrance of Me.”⁴ When Christ said these words while holding up the bread during the Last Supper, one wonders whether the Apostles understood the connection between these

1 Leviticus 17:1-7

2 Revelation 1:20

3 Revelation 2:5

4 Luke 22:19

words and the bread of the Presence at the Tabernacle. The same way the bread was present before the Lord for memorial, with twelve loaves representing the twelve tribes, so too is the bread which we lift up at Communion a memorial which also has a presence with it: the Body of Christ. The bread is reserved for the priests alone, who take loaves for themselves once a week; this restriction carries over into the New Covenant, as only the universal priesthood of Christians are able to partake in Communion.⁵ Still, there is a key difference between the showbread and the Eucharist which it foreshadows. Moses writes that the showbread is an offering before the Lord, one which remains in His presence for a week at a time; Communion on the other hand is not described in sacrificial language in the New Testament – rather than man offering something to God, the Sacrament of the Altar as we know it is truly God offering Himself to man.

Vs.10-16

10 Now an Israelite woman's son, whose father was an Egyptian, went out among the people of Israel. And the Israelite woman's son and a man of Israel fought in the camp, **11** and the Israelite woman's son blasphemed the Name, and cursed. Then they brought him to Moses. His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan. **12** And they put him in custody, till the will of the Lord should be clear to them.

13 Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, **14** “Bring out of the camp the one who cursed, and let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him. **15** And speak to the people of Israel, saying, Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. **16** Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner as well as the native, when he blasphemes the Name, shall be put to death.

Presumably, Moses would have continued discussing the Tabernacle furnishings in a way that would continue foreshadowing the Gospel. But then an interruption occurred, seemingly providentially. A fight broke out between an Israelite and a man whose father was an Egyptian. While we do not know what started the fight, Moses recounts that it ended with the half-Egyptian blaspheming God and cursing. It was already determined that cursing was a morally negative act, as Moses records the punishment for cursing one's parents to be death.⁶ Here however, it appears that the half-Egyptian blasphemed by invoking God's Name over the course of the fight. He may have intended to curse the man with whom he quarreled, but it was such a heinous curse that it was as though he cursed God Himself. The act so offended the people that they brought him to Moses. The punishment is death.

The reason for the death penalty is hinted at with the man's origins. Moses mentions his mother by name, but not his Egyptian father; it was likely this father who taught the man how to levy curses in the first place. For him to use God's Name in such a pagan fashion is offensive syncretism in the highest degree, similar to the pagan use of unauthorized fire that Nadab and Abihu employed. Unlike that incident though, God instructs the *people* to stone the blasphemer to death, instead of breaking out with His own wrath on them. By involving a group of people to participate in the execution, it is no longer just a matter of public witness and warning: the people are involved in the death, policing one another to reinforce the piety of the congregation to obeying the Second Commandment.⁷

Taking God's Name in vain is not merely a matter of using His Name as though it were a swear word. Our God has “thicker skin” than that, or else the entire world would be consumed. Though that is definitely a bad thing to do, here the *misuse* of the Divine Name is especially condemned. A childish moment of immaturity may see someone saying that God is unfair or that He doesn't care about people; such petulant insults to our Lord's character are disciplined and argued against, but they are not capital offenses. Malachi writes against this sort of sin, not with a threat of death but with patient

⁵ 1 Peter 2:9

⁶ Leviticus 20:9

⁷ “You shall not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain.” Luther rightly explains in the catechisms that this includes a ban on using God's Name for magical rituals and cursing, as this passage teaches.

argumentation.⁸ The half-Egyptian, on the other hand, represents the intentional misuse of the Divine Name for sorcery, which threatens to inspire similar acts of malice and heresy if left unpunished. Speaking falsely of our Lord to the point of advocating for flatly evil doctrines, false doctrines or wicked practices leads to a corruption of the people and land; under the Old Covenant, it must be quashed as swiftly as possible.

Vs.17-23

17 “Whoever takes a human life shall surely be put to death. **18** Whoever takes an animal's life shall make it good, life for life. **19** If anyone injures his neighbor, as he has done it shall be done to him, **20** fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; whatever injury he has given a person shall be given to him. **21** Whoever kills an animal shall make it good, and whoever kills a person shall be put to death. **22** You shall have the same rule for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the Lord your God.” **23** So Moses spoke to the people of Israel, and they brought out of the camp the one who had cursed and stoned him with stones. Thus the people of Israel did as the Lord commanded Moses.

Before recounting the death of the blasphemer, God gives the Israelites the *Lex Talionis*, or Law of Retaliation. The punishment for any given crime is made to fit the offense in terms of severity. Of course, the text assumes that these are lives taken or injuries inflicted *unjustly*; God is not demanding that the Aaronic priests offer restitution of an animal for every animal sacrifice they perform, and nor is He demanding that Israelite soldiers be put to death for participating in war for the people. But if a murder occurs, the murderer must be put to death. If a man kills someone's animal by accident or malice, he must have one of his taken away as well. A man who assaults another man must be beaten himself. The Law also applies to standard fist fights as well, in that the practice of mutual unarmed combat is not prohibited but must include a restoration for the losing party afterward.⁹

In the same way the “goat demons” passage gives us clues as to the nature of the people's misunderstanding of the Day of Atonement, here too we see clues as to the nature of the half-Egyptian's offense. The two men got into a fight, and it appears that the son of the Egyptian was injured. As a form of vengeance, he decided to level a curse at the one who injured him. As the text proscribes the death penalty for native and sojourner alike, it appears that his “defense” was in claiming that his Egyptian father rendered him separate from Israel and thus not bound to their Laws. The same way the prohibition on private slaughter mitigates the false offerings being made to “goat demons,” here the restatement of the *Lex Talionis* seems to be meant to prevent anyone else getting desperate enough to call down blasphemous curses; they are to entrust God to obtain justice for them by the provided means. Meanwhile, the man who called down the curse must still die for his pagan crime, and so the people obey Moses' command to stone him to death.

⁸ Cf. Malachi 2:17-3:5

⁹ A restatement of Exodus 21:18-19