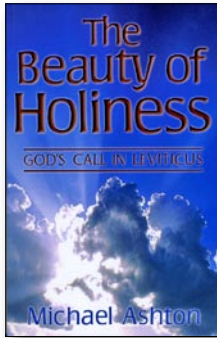


# Lessons from the Law for today (1)

John Nicholls



***The Beauty of Holiness,***  
**Michael Ashton.**

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**T**HE BOOK OF Leviticus does not readily spring to mind as a source of exhortation and comfort, and yet Brother Michael Ashton's book *The Beauty of Holiness* manages to bring out of this ostensibly severe scripture both of these qualities. Other brethren have expounded Leviticus from different standpoints<sup>1</sup> and made valuable contributions to our appreciation of the book. In a fairly short 184-page volume containing twenty-three chapters the author has distilled the essence of this book about the holiness of God and how we can approach Him.

The substance of the book appeared first of all as monthly instalments in the *Christadelphian* magazine, and these were much appreciated by the reviewer at the time. The book has both a subject and a Scripture index, and a boxed summary at the end of most of the chapters. In his Preface the author writes, "Leviticus . . . in common with all of the law . . . is a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ and to provide a firm foundation for faith . . . The theme of holiness in the Book of Leviticus emphasises the differences between God and man . . . Yet God wishes to dwell amongst His people so that they will be sanctified".

## The holy God

The first chapter shows that the laws in this book were given to Israel in Mount Sinai in the first month of the second year after the people were delivered from Egypt. It is from Leviticus that we get the much quoted words, "thou shalt love

thy neighbour as thyself: I am the LORD" (19:18; cf. Mt. 19:19, etc.). The author states, "Love of the Holy God, and love of one's neighbour as a consequence of love for God, become the twin pillars on which the whole of God's law is based, making it 'the royal law' as James describes it (James 2:8)" (p. 6).

Noting that there are just three historical events in Leviticus, all related to the subject of holiness, in the next chapter the author considers the various words used for holiness in the book. Not surprisingly, the main word for 'holy', along with its associated terms, occurs 152 times. The main point made in this chapter, however, is the difference between the Almighty, Who is holy, and man, who is unclean and unholy. The message of Leviticus is that God wants men and women to be holy like Him, and points forward by implication and by type to "that holy thing" (Lk. 1:35) through whom alone true holiness is possible.

Israel sinned grievously by making the golden calf, yet God wanted them to make a sanctuary "that I may dwell among them" (Ex. 25:8). He did not want to be distant from them because of their sin, but to be in their midst, in the heart of their camp. The pillar of cloud over the tabernacle was a constant evidence of God's presence, and running throughout the Law there is that constant reminder, "I am the LORD your God". Brother Michael draws out the clear exhortation that, though we have no visible tokens as Israel did, God is with us too, in our midst.

The role of the priests in teaching the people and offering many of their sacrifices is next considered. Brother Ashton says this about the two priests Nadab and Abihu: "The failure of Nadab and Abihu was also prophetic . . . The intrinsic weakness and certain failure of the Levitical

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1. R. Roberts, *The Law of Moses*, The Christadelphian; W. F. Barling, *Law and Grace*, The Christadelphian; H. P. Mansfield, *Leviticus*, in the *Christadelphian Expositor* series, Logos Publications; J. Martin, *The Schoolmaster*, Christadelphian Scripture Study Service, 2005.

priesthood was therefore evident right from the beginning, and the thoughtful Israelite would doubtless ask what he was to do if fellowship with God was dependent on sacrifice and mediation, when it was so apparent that the mediators were fatally flawed!" (p. 24).

### Lessons from the offerings

The chapter entitled "Sacrifice and offering" (ch. 5) begins the detailed consideration of the various offerings. It notes differences in the pattern of offerings made by the priests and those made by the people, and then gives these comments about the order in which sacrifices were to be offered:

"If more than one sacrifice was involved, no deviation was permitted from the following order:

1. Sin offering
2. Trespass offering
3. Burnt offering
4. Peace offering

} Cereal and drink offering

"The reason for this rigid order is apparent once we acknowledge man's needs when he approaches before God. Man's greatest problem is sin; and God's greatest gift is the gift of salvation through the sacrifice of His Son. Our sins need covering . . . Forgiveness of sins, wonderful though it is, is only the first step in a process of binding man back to God. 'He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins' (1 John 1:9) only when we confess them . . . This is acknowledged in the trespass offering . . . Even confessing his sin and trying to mend his future ways were only early steps on the Israelite's road back to God. His Father looked for him to dedicate and commit *all* his future life to God's will, and this was marked by bringing a burnt offering . . . Then, and only then, could a sacrifice be made for a peace offering . . . man cannot share fellowship with God when he remains deep in sin" ( pp. 28-29).

Some good comments follow on the cereal and drink offerings.

The next chapter, "Thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin" (ch. 6), is one of the best in the whole book. The author points out that there were no offerings for sins such as "'adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like' (Galatians 5:19-21)" (p. 37). The Law made no provision for the habitual or deliberate sinner. David's sin

over Bathsheba and Uriah needed forgiveness from God, hence his prayer in Psalm 51: "Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of Thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions" (v. 1). Something better than the Law could offer was being sought for here.

The detail of the sin offering is instructive, however, and Brother Michael points out that different offerings were required from different classes of people. This chapter has a useful summary table at the end that brings out the main teaching of the sin offering.

"Forgive us our trespasses" comes next. The author says, "Certainly, to commit a trespass is to commit a sin; but while all trespasses are sin, not all sins are trespasses. When a trespass is committed, there is always another party involved, or some damage occurs" (p. 43). Only a ram could be offered for trespasses, and the reasons and implications of this are discussed. In the repayment of loss or damage, twenty per cent had to be added by the trespasser. Trespasses against God are considered, but importantly the lesson of forgiveness, not found in Leviticus, is bought out by the author: "The loving and merciful example of our Heavenly Father and of His Son should encourage today's disciples to act graciously towards those who trespass against them" (pp. 49-50).

The chapter about the burnt offering is called "Present your bodies a living sacrifice" (ch. 8) and is another excellent chapter. Noah expressed his gratitude for his salvation by presenting burnt offerings. The burnt offering was completely consumed, was without blemish and the body parts had to be carefully washed, all suggesting the offering of a whole life to the Almighty. Hebrews 4:12 shows that the cleansing and penetrating qualities of the Word of God enable believers to make their lives a burnt offering. Pre-eminently, Christ's life is the pattern of the burnt offering, to be crowned in the resurrection by the total consumption of sin's flesh and inheritance of incorruptibility and immortality.

The peace offerings, dealt with in chapter 9, were fellowship offerings, part of which could be eaten by the officiating priest. Hebrews 13:15 seems to suggest that they were connected with praise and thanksgiving. In Leviticus 23:19 they are associated with the feast of Pentecost. Male and female animals, and also leavened and unleavened bread, are also allowed with these offerings. In Christ, God's salvation is held out to

all nations, and the peace offerings are a shadow of these good things to be fulfilled in Christ.

Chapter 10, "My meat is to do His will", is about the meat (cereal) offerings and drink offerings. The similarity and differences with the sin offering made by the very poorest Israelites is discussed interestingly, and also the relationship with the jealousy offering and the shewbread. Salt was also added to these offerings, and the symbolism of this in the New Testament is brought out in a nice exhortation.

### **The work of the priests**

The consecration of Aaron and his sons is described in Leviticus 8 and 9. It took one week and was a process that is full of instruction and exhortation for us. Through God's good guidance, Moses acted as a priest before Aaron was finally prepared, pointing forward to the better priesthood of our Lord. Chapter 10 of Leviticus records the presumptuous sin of Nadab and Abihu, for which they paid with the loss of their lives. "Strange fire" (v. 1) is not explained in Scripture, and Brother Michael offers a list of six possible errors before God committed by these two men.

Before the inaugural week was finished, another mistake was made, by Aaron's other sons, Eleazar and Ithamar. The history of Israel showed many other descendants of Aaron who committed errors, and this all pointed to the need for the incorruptible priesthood of Jesus our Saviour.

### **Dietary laws, issues from the body and leprosy**

Chapter 13 of Brother Michael's book is about clean and unclean meats. He sets out four suggestions as to the meaning of the clean and unclean creatures, and quotes Leviticus 20:24-26, making the comment:

"This key to understanding the emphasis on clean and unclean meats—that it is primarily to do with differences between people and not with any real or perceived differences between animals—is repeated in the New Testament when Peter receives instruction from God about the acceptability of Gentile converts. The vision he saw of a great sheet containing animals that the law of Moses defined as both clean and unclean was understood by Peter to teach him not to 'call any *man* [whom God had cleansed] common or unclean' (Acts 10:28)" (p. 92).

The author goes on to say:

"The overall theme of Leviticus 11–15, therefore, is man's inherent sinfulness, and how he needs to put himself right with God Who is utterly holy. The information in these chapters confirms that holiness must be an everyday pursuit; it is not limited to occasions of formal worship, or when priests are present to minister on a person's behalf . . . This could not be expressed more forcefully than by impressing on the people of Israel the need to think about God's holiness every time they partook of food" (pp. 93-94).

Leviticus 15 is about bodily discharges, with particular emphasis on sexual discharges, both normal and abnormal, and the reasons for the different laws for males and females. Brother Ashton writes in chapter 14 of his book, "Each aspect of the law relating to defilement in chapters 12 and 15 emphasises the hereditary nature of man's susceptibility to sin" (p. 102). In the summary box at the end of this chapter he notes, "A mother was unclean twice as long after giving birth to a girl, than if she bore a boy, because baby girls are potential mothers who can give birth to another sinful generation". The chapter itself ends with a lovely consideration of the woman with an issue of blood who was healed by the Lord. She understood that only through the birth of God's child (1 Tim. 2:15) could she be saved and have fellowship with the Father.

We conclude this first part of our review with comments on the chapter "Leprosy and sin" (ch. 15). This disease could be found in people, garments and buildings, and the features of the disease in Leviticus 12 and 13 paint "a very graphic picture, not only of the disease, but of the fundamental problem of sin" (p. 107). This is another splendid chapter, full of exhortation, concluding with an appreciation of the healing work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Aaronic priests could only observe, record and monitor the progress of the disease, but "could not effect any cure whatsoever" (p. 114). Jesus cleansed lepers with a touch, because he identified completely with those he came to save. He touches us, and if we are pliable to his teaching he can cleanse our hearts and minds, because he first was "touched with the feeling of our infirmities . . . yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15).

[\(To be concluded\)](#)