Exodus and Leviticus

Today we will try our best to look at Exodus and Leviticus. As we begin Exodus, the interconnection with the end of Genesis is very clear. What we have at the beginning of Exodus is a short summary of what we saw at the end of Genesis of the various family groups that went down into Egypt. We pick up with Joseph, that he died, but that the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied. We are supposed to get the echo of Eden there and the image of multiplication. The land was filled with them, and that is a good thing. That is what God wants. We see that God’s promise to Abraham is outstanding in regard to the land. We think about that as the Exodus community.

Notice how this story picks up in Exodus 2:23, saying, “During this long period the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out. God heard their groaning, and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob and so God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them.” We see a very strong connection there. We know about the promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, because we are to read Exodus canonically. We are to hear Exodus in relation to Genesis. We see this very strongly in Exodus 13. If you recall, the book of Genesis ends with this strong sense of motivation that one of the key purposes pastorally for the book of Genesis in terms of its original audience was to motivate the Exodus community to keep going. They were not to go back to Egypt but to go into the land that the Lord was giving them. We see those final journeys of Joseph and his family back to Canaan to bury Jacob. We end Genesis with this oath to Joseph that he will not be buried in Egypt but that he too will be brought into the land that God will give them. We see in Exodus 13:19 of the story that “Moses took the bones of Joseph because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, ‘God will surely come to your aide, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place.’” The interlacing of Exodus and Genesis is quite intentional. We are to read and hear Exodus in relation to the story that is already underway.

If we back up for just a moment, we see that in Exodus 1, “A new king who did not know about Joseph came to power in Egypt.” This idea of a new king probably indicates a new dynasty and a new family of kings. The son of his father would know about Joseph. This idea of a new king indicates something bigger, a new dynasty. The middle kingdom of Egypt was a time of peace and stability. It was a time of trade with the Levant. At the end of the period of the middle kingdom, Egypt, for the very first time, became ruled by a foreign power. This was around 1700 BC. For about 150 years the Hicsos people, a Semitic people, ruled Egypt. It was perhaps during this time that Joseph rose to preeminence. After this we have a new Egypt and a new dynasty. Ahmose I in 1550 BC defeated the Hicsos and renewed Egyptian rule. Perhaps this is the time frame that we are at in terms of the beginning of the oppression of the Hebrews in Egypt.

There are various disputes about dating the Exodus, and there is a need to put a few things together. In Exodus 1:11 it says, “So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They were to help build these cities for Pharaoh, so they built Pithom and Raamses as store cities for Pharaoh.” The name “Raamses” factors in here in that the rise of Raamses II as pharaoh in Egypt was not until around 1279 BC. The question is whether Raamses as a city was built only after Raamses became pharaoh, or was the name Raamses used prior to the thirteenth century BC? If it came to prominence so much so that a pharaoh was named Raamses, then it had a broad cultural significance before the rise of that pharaoh. The name of Raamses and the city that is mentioned in Exodus 1:11 is one piece of evidence that has to be accounted for as we try to factor in a date for the Exodus.
We also have some other passages in the Old Testament that reference these matters. First Kings 6 mentions about 480 years from the Exodus to the building of the temple. If the building of the temple under Solomon was around 960 BC, then this date of 1446 BC takes those numbers fairly directly and straightforward. Later we have to factor in how numbers are used by particular authors, whether they are trying to be exact or general. The number 480 does lend itself to 12 generations if you take generations as 40 years. You have to consider that as a possibility as well. The numbers could be more general or symbolic in relation to a generation, for example. Also we know numbers like 70 are factored in as an important number in terms of the exile. This is because 70 means that the punishment will be completely decimating to a particular generation. You will go past the lifespan of the existing generation if a judgment will last 70 years. The point is not necessarily an exact number. We have to understand, situation by situation, the intent of the numbers. An earlier date of 1446 BC for the exodus fits fairly well with this reference in 1 Kings 6:1. But in terms of the name Raamses and the building of the city of Raamses, we would have to say that “Raamses” is used earlier, before the rise of Raamses II in 1279 BC.

Then we have the reference of 300 years to Jephtha, and the time of the judges is about 1100 BC. If you think of David at 1000 BC, the judges were about 100 years before that, ending with Samuel and the rise of David’s house. Then 300 years is approximately right in terms of a 1400 BC type of date. Again this is an approximate date. We have these biblical references that we have to deal with in terms of understanding the dating of the Exodus.

We also have some archeological evidence. Merneptah’s Stele is a big piece of rock that was found. What the ancient people would do is carve around the rock and oftentimes draw pictures of the battle of armies conquering other peoples. They would say something about it. Pharaoh Merneptah was around 1209 BC. It celebrates his victory and mentions his subrogation of the people of Israel. It mentions the people of Israel, but the question is whether they are described as a nation or a people. If they are not described as a nation but as a people or even an ethnic group, then perhaps they are new to the area. That would argue for a later date for the Exodus. But if they are sizeable and substantial enough to be mentioned on the stele, then perhaps they had been there for some time. If Merneptah was 1209 BC and they had been there for 200 years, then perhaps they had been there for some time.

There are different ways to interpret the evidence. There are the two dates that are associated with the Exodus: 1446 BC or around 1275 BC. There are reasons why those dates are focused on in terms of accounting for these biblical references and Merneptah’s Stele. If the Exodus was later, in 1275 BC, it would have been under Raamses II, and in some ways that is a popular notion. If it was earlier, in 1446 BC, then it was under Thutmose III. That is a sense of the dating at the time of the Exodus.

What we see already at the end of Exodus 2 and in chapter 3 in the encounter of the bush that is not consumed is that, time and again, the motivation for God’s action is His promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In addition to Exodus 2:24, which we already read, turn to Exodus 3 and the encounter that we have with Moses’ call to be God’s instrument to confront Pharaoh and His call for the release of His people. What is interesting is how much God says “my people.” It is repeated several times. Exodus 3:7 says, “I have seen the misery of my people. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers.” Verse 10 says, “So now I am sending you, Moses, to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” Of course Moses says, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh?” You have to understand that Pharaoh was the most powerful person in the world. That is the sense of what is going on here. You do not even enter into his presence without permission, much less demand anything of him. A dramatic confrontation is set up. God responds by trying to comfort and support Moses. Finally Moses is convinced to go ahead and do what God asks him to do. It all has to do with the Lord’s name, and what
it means is essential for understanding the power and the advocacy of how God brings this about. He says in Exodus 3:12, “I will be with you and this will be a sign to you that I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt you will worship God on this mountain.”

This is an important verse for several reasons. First, it underscores one of the key functions for the book of Exodus. One of the key pastoral functions is to say to the Exodus community, “Moses is your guy. Listen to him. You should listen to him, because I have called him. I am the one who sent him back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh. He is my guy, and he is for you.” In the outline for the book of Exodus, time and time again we see Moses’ leadership and the authority of Moses’ leadership in speaking on behalf of God. Moses acts as a deliverer on behalf of God, establishes the covenant on behalf of God, and establishes the place of worship and the tabernacle at Sinai. Right here in Exodus 3 you have a foreshadowing of all three of those important functions for the book of Exodus. Moses will be the deliverer. He will be the spokesman and the covenant establisher. And He will be the one who establishes the tabernacle at this place and sets the regulations for worship and what that will mean for this community. Those three key things are what the whole book of Exodus is about. In many ways we see them in seed form right here in Exodus 3:12.

Exodus 3:15 says, “God said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites, “The LORD […] sent me to you.” He uses the word Yahweh here in Hebrew. We know it is a word play on yihyeh, which is the verb “to be” in Hebrew. There is a lot of discussion about this. Is it “I am who I am,” “I will be who I will be,” or is it more causal, “I will cause to be what I will cause to be”? There are two really important aspects to this name that come out in Exodus 3 and 6. We have already seen the first part right here in Exodus 3:12, “I will be with you.” God’s being has to do with God’s presence—“I will be with you.”

Look at Exodus 6:2 where we see, “God also said to Moses, ‘I am the LORD [Yahweh]. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob as God Almighty [El Shaddai], but by my name the LORD [Yahweh] I did not make myself known to them. I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan where they lived as aliens. Moreover I have heard the groanings and I have remembered my covenant.’” Here we have a direct reminder of the land promise. This notion of remembering is not just calling to mind. It is the idea of taking up in order to act on. Verse 6 continues, “Therefore say to the Israelites, ‘I am the LORD [Yahweh], and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with mighty acts of judgment I will take you as my own people. I will be your God and then you will know that I am the LORD [Yahweh] your God who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land that I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I will give it to you.’” We get a sense that comes out real clearly in chapter 6 where the name Yahweh is repeated again and again. Not only does it have to do with God’s presence, “I will be with you,” but it also has to do with God’s power, “I will cause to be. I will bring it about. I am with you to deliver you.” The two keys to understanding Yahweh and the word play on yihyeh, the verb “to be” in Hebrew, are presence and power. God’s presence is with you, and God’s power is for you on your behalf.

We see this emphasized again and again in the pervasive presence throughout Exodus. There are many references to the notion of seeing and hearing. The plagues are about seeing and hearing what God will do on your behalf. The passage through the sea is for the people to stand and see the deliverance and what God will do. When God brings them to Sinai He says, “You have seen what I have done to the Egyptians.” Yahweh, the redeeming God, is also the creator God. He is the One who is active in the world He has made. He is present in the world He has made. He is king in the world that He has made. There are no other gods. The challenge of the Egyptian gods, the challenge of Pharaoh as a superpower and a son of the gods, so to speak, is the conflict and drama of the book of Exodus.
In Exodus 8 we see this repeated in the challenge of Pharaoh regarding the plagues. When Pharaoh refuses, Moses says, “It will be as you say so that you may know there is no one like the LORD our God. The frogs will leave you and your houses, your officials and your people, and they will remain only in the Nile.” Pharaoh has asked for relief. It is interesting that Moses asks for the Israelites to be freed, and Pharaoh says no. Then the plagues come and Pharaoh asks for relief. Moses and Moses’ God make it so. You can see the confrontation here.

Exodus 3:12 is a good memory verse for this chapter. There are a couple of other verses that are equally as important, but this verse is helpful in that it explains those three aspects of what Exodus is about. Moses is deliverer, God’s spokesman and covenant maker, and the one who regulates the tabernacle and who gives regulations for worship. We have God’s deliverance from Israel led by Moses is Exodus 1 through 18, God’s covenant with Israel mediated by Moses in Exodus 19 through 24, and God’s dwelling among Israel established by Moses in Exodus 25 through 40. The focus on Moses is quite intentional.

Let us turn to Exodus 4 and look briefly at this pattern of the plagues. We see a pattern of how it will go, and each one goes this way. Exodus 4:21 says, “The Lord said to Moses, ‘When you return to Egypt see that you perform before Pharaoh all the wonders I have given you the power to do. But I will harden his heart so that he will not let the people go. Then say to Pharaoh, “This is what the LORD says, ‘Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, “Let my son go so that he may worship me.” But you refused to let him go, so I will kill your firstborn son.”’” Here at the beginning of the confrontation about the plagues we are told where this story is going. The last plague is the death of the firstborn. We are also told something very important about the identity of Israel: “my firstborn.” “You are my people, you are my son.” What we see in this encounter is a preview of what will happen. “Go to Pharaoh and say, ‘I will do this if you do not.’” Then we have the enactment of those consequences, oftentimes with the staff. “And the Lord makes this so.” The narrator confirms this.

For example, look at Exodus 7:15, which is about the plague of blood: “Go to Pharaoh in the morning as he goes out to the water.” Verse 17 reads, “This is what the LORD says, ‘By this you will know that I am the LORD.’ With the staff that is in my hand I will strike the water of the Nile, and it will be changed into blood. The fish in the Nile will die, the river will stick, the Egyptians will not be able to drink the water.” We have a notification that scholars sometimes call the recognition formula: “You will know that I am the LORD.” You will recognize who I really am. Verse 19 goes on, “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Tell Aaron, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt.’” The pattern is one of “Go to Pharaoh and say,” then “I will do this if you refuse,” then “stretch out your staff.” Then we read, “The Lord did this.” Exodus 7:20-21 says, “Aaron did just as the Lord had commanded. He raised his staff in the presence of Pharaoh and his officials and struck the water of the Nile, and all the water was changed into blood.” We have the re-narration of exactly what the Lord said would happen. That repetition is important, because God is in charge of the story. Things do not go the way Pharaoh says they will go; they go the way Yahweh says they will go. That is indicated by the repetition over and over again.

Then we have Pharaoh beginning to summon Moses and Aaron. Sometimes he requests relief. Sometimes he requests prayer, and sometimes he promises release with conditions. There are not any conditions that will be accepted, though. Moses prays and the plague stops, but then the pattern is that Pharaoh’s heart hardens again. That is the pattern of the plagues, and the pattern is to show that the gods of Egypt are not in charge of the Nile. Pharaoh is thought to give life to the Nile, and the rising and the fall of the Nile gives life to Egypt and makes it possible for Egypt to be the primary breadbasket of the
ancient Near East. All of this is to the credit of Egypt’s gods. That is not true, though; as it turns out, those are not gods at all. Yahweh, Israel’s God, is the One who made everything. He is really the Lord, and they will know this.

In the pattern of the plagues we confront various gods and pestilences that the gods of Egypt control. There is a definite progression here. Changing the dust into gnats is the first plague that the magicians cannot mirror in some way. Then we begin to see that Israel’s God distinguishes between Goshen and where Jacob’s family lives and the other places of Egypt. God begins to set apart this area, and the plagues do not come on to Goshen. We see that Pharaoh’s officials turn against him in terms of advising him. That is pretty bold, and you should not ever do that if you are an official of Pharaoh. Later what had been the pattern that was well established in Exodus 7 disappears. With the darkness there is no warning or confrontation. The pattern is interrupted, and now Pharaoh does not have the benefit of warning and confrontation. Then the death of the firstborn leads right into Exodus 12, which is a chapter you must know. What happens in chapter 12 is the Passover. It is the night of Israel’s deliverance and the night of the last plague.

Exodus 7 through 11 is about the plagues, and in chapter 12 we have the regulations for the Passover: Slaughter a one-year-old lamb without defect; bring the blood into the basin; take a hyssop branch and apply the blood to doorposts; roast and eat the meat, and burn the leftovers; eat with bitter herbs and unleavened bread; keep no yeast in the house for seven days of the feast. This will be picked up and explained further as a part of one of the most important worship celebrations of Israel in its liturgical calendar in Leviticus and Deuteronomy in terms of the Feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover.

Let us talk about how the people of Israel leave and which way they travel. There is a lot of discussion about this. Turn to Exodus 13, where we have an important beginning in terms of the consecration of the firstborn. The firstborn male belongs to God because he is the one who was saved at the Passover. The firstborn of Egypt were killed. It is a teaching moment: “Today we leave and we go to the land that God swore to give us, a land flowing with milk and honey.” That metaphor is similar to the metaphor of ambrosia, which is food for the gods. A land flowing with milk and honey is a garden for the gods. There is a notion of the kings of the ancient Near East having gardens. We have heard about the gardens of Babylon. There is a notion of the Garden of Eden and of its location with regard to the location of this land that God promises to give, and the parameters are given in Genesis 17. We are to get the connection between Eden and Canaan in where the Lord brings them. “But on this day that you eat unleavened bread tell your son, ‘I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.’ This observance is like a sign on your hand, a reminder on your forehead that the law of the Lord is to be on your lips. For the Lord brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand. You must keep this ordinance of Passover at the appointed time year after year.”

Exodus 13:14 says, “In days to come when your son says, ‘What does this mean?’ say to him, ‘With a mighty hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go the LORD killed every firstborn in Egypt, both man and animal. And this is why I sacrifice to the LORD the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons. It will be like a sign on your hand, a symbol on your forehead.’” The Passover becomes central to the reenactment in worship of what God did for them. It establishes the basis for covenant faithfulness. “We do this not to obey a code but to recognize what God did for us.” That prelude is so important to understand that before we get the Ten Commandments, the book of the covenant, and the various laws, we get instructions for worship in Passover. This is because of what the Lord did for us.
As we think about the crossing of the Red Sea, we need to speak momentarily about possible routes of the Exodus. At the end of Exodus 13 it says, “God led the people around the desert road toward the Red Sea.” “Red Sea” is the translation from the Septuagint, and it is what we are familiar with. The Yam Suf of Hebrew is translated “Reed Sea.” There are three basic options of travel. The northern route is the most direct option, but verse 17 says, “Pharaoh let the people go. God did not let them go on the road through the Philistine country though it was shorter.” Verse 17 tells us explicitly that they did not go that way. The Via Maris would have been the shortest route, and it is the way of the sea straight into the Levant. It goes straight through the great Philistine cities and countries. It also would have been the most logical place for Egyptian fortifications in terms of their own outposts and armies.

Another route was the central route in relation to the land of Midian, which is mentioned in Exodus 3:1 in terms of where Moses went. This central route and the way it came about as an option arises out of the influence of modernity on biblical scholarship. There is a naturalistic way of explaining some of these things like the Red Sea crossing. This region is known for volcanic activity. Some of these naturalistic explanations help to establish this particular view. The traditional view of the Exodus is the southern route. The belief is that Mount Sinai is Jebel Musa, where Saint Catherine’s Monastery is. This notion of coming down into the Sinai Peninsula is the traditional view.

Sinai is where they would be encamped for quite some time. As we look at the geographic progression of the book of Exodus, it is not insignificant to note that we have Israel in Egypt through Exodus 12. Israel is in the desert from Exodus 12 through 18, and from Exodus 19 all the way to Numbers 10 Israel is at Mount Sinai. From a geographic perspective, Sinai dominates the whole of the Pentateuch. It is dominated by Israel encamped at Sinai. That is significant and important because an important transformation takes place while Israel is instructed at Sinai. One of the oldest sections perhaps that we have in the entire Bible is the song of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15, “I will sing to the Lord for he is highly exalted. The horse and his rider he has hurled into the sea. The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God and I will praise him, my father’s God and I will exalt him. Yahweh is a warrior; the LORD is his name. Pharaoh’s chariots and his army he hurled into the sea. The deep waters have covered them, and they sank to the bottom of the depths like a stone.” There we have perhaps one of the oldest portions of Scripture, in Exodus 15.

Look at Exodus 19 when they come to Sinai. We see here an important passage that will be echoed at the beginning of the Ten Commandments. Verse 4 says, “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant then out of all the nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites.” This is a tremendous summary of the entire Pentateuch, which is this story of God’s deliverance and promise to a particular people. Through that family He would bless the entire Earth, and it takes a particular form. It takes the form of a nation and a constitution. We see at Sinai that the family and tribes of Jacob are transformed into a nation-state. They are given a polity and a constitution. The Sinaitic covenant is constitutive, and it brings about a new reality. It is almost like a marriage ceremony when the pastor says, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.” That speech act changes things. This speech act, the giving of the Law, changes things. It builds on something that is already true. It builds on the promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but it constitutes them as a people with a legal framework and a polity. God is their king.

Just as Moses took the cosmogonies and polemically engaged them with the origin of the creator God, he worked in a similar way to create the shape of the law. He took up other literary forms from the
ancient Near East, called treaties, to create the constitutional shape of the law. He used those forms that would be understandable to the peoples. Treaties are primarily made between kings. We have these different elements that we can see in terms of an historical prologue and stipulations. There are provisions for protection and rereading of this treaty. There is a list of witnesses, and there are sanctions in the treaty in the curses and the blessings. This will become more prominent in Deuteronomy, where it is followed much more closely.

One thing that is important to note is that some people want to stick the Sinaitic covenant in one particular treaty form, and that is the suzerain vassal treaty. Suzerain is a word that means “great king,” and vassal means “lesser king, subject to a suzerain.” This form here is taken from Hittite suzerain-vassal treaties. As I mentioned before when we talked about the covenants in Genesis 12, 15, and 17, we see similarities, especially in Genesis 15, to what is called a royal land grant treaty. We have different kinds of treaties. A royal land grant treaty is similar to what we see in Genesis 15 and 2 Samuel 7, and it focuses on what the great king will do for you. He will give you this land. God gives them a new land; that is still part of the framework. A suzerain-vassal treaty focuses more on what the lesser countries have to do for the great king in order to stay in his good graces and benefit from his military protection. A suzerain vassal treaty focuses on obligation. The land grant treaty focuses on benefit and gifts. Both types of treaties are important for understanding the Sinaitic covenant and the covenants of the Bible. It is not all grant, and it is not all obligation, but it rather is both.

It is important to understand the order of the law. We saw in Exodus 19 and with the beginnings of Passover before we get the law code that it is very important to understand that God establishes this relationship first. The law is not to establish the relationship. The law is given to a people whom He has already covenanted Himself with, a people whom He has already redeemed. The way the law code itself begins in Exodus 20 is “I am Yahweh your God.” The name Yahweh carries a lot of freight. It means, “I am with you. I am powerful on your behalf. I am your redeemer who brought you out of Egypt and out of the land of slavery.” That is said, and then He says, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Israel is now a state with the full implications of a covenantal form that articulated this relationship of the Lord as their great king, according the Lord supreme authority. The Decalogue, or “the ten words,” was a summary of certain fundamental kinds of behavior required or prohibited on the authority of God by whose grace and power Israel exists as a people.

What we see in Exodus 19 through 24 is a good example of these different literary forms that Moses takes up, both treaty and legal forms. We see what is called apodictic law and what is called case law. With apodictic law we have more of a sense of principle. It is stated, “You shall do this” or “You shall not do that.” There is no particular punishment associated with it. What we see with case law in Exodus 20 through 24, sometimes called the book of the covenant, are good examples of how these principles of “the ten words” are applied to specific situations. These are very culturally contextualized situations, and you have a different form for that. Instead of the “you shall/you shall not” form it is stated, “If you do this, then you will be punished this way.” It is an if/then format in the case law, and it is much more specific about what the consequences will be. Those situations also oftentimes apply these principles. We will see in Deuteronomy how the stipulations of the Ten Commandments themselves are then fleshed out in all these different situations when the people are about to go into the land.

Notice if we read through the book of the covenant one of the things that we see is that there are laws protecting slaves, aliens, widows, and orphans. Let us talk about why those laws are there. God says, “You are to be my holy people.” Exodus 23:9 is a good example of something that is interlaced throughout. These laws are routed, like all of the laws, in God’s deliverance of Israel. “Do not oppress an alien. You yourselves know how it feels to be aliens. You were aliens in Egypt.” Essentially God
says, “You are not to mistreat slaves and aliens, because you were slaves and because I brought you out of that sort of oppression. Therefore do not participate in such oppression yourselves.”

We will say more about what it means to be a holy people in Leviticus, which is the focus of Leviticus. In terms of Exodus 24, we have the covenantal meal at the end of the chapter. The Lord invites Aaron and his family and the 70 elders of Israel and fulfills what He talked about in Exodus 3:12, which says, “It will be a sign that I have done this for you, that I am the One who sent you to Pharaoh. You will worship me on this mountain.” Time and again the motivation of Moses of why Pharaoh should release the Hebrews was so that they could go “worship their God on this mountain.” Exodus 24 is a high point and a fulfillment of these statements. They come together, and this is the picture of full communion with God. They worship God by eating together. We see in Exodus 24:9, “Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu and seventy elders of Israel went up and saw the God of Israel. Under his feet was something like a pavement made of sapphire, clear as the sky itself. But God did not raise his hand against these leaders. They saw God, and they ate and they drank. The Lord said, ‘Come up to me on the mountain and stay here, and I will give you the tablets of stone with the law and commands I have written for their instruction.’” In Exodus 24 we have a picture that will be central to the spirituality of Israel.

We will come back to that in Leviticus, but this picture is central to the spirituality of Israel and the Sinaitic covenant. The goal is of full communion and that God, this holy God, will dwell with you and among you. The book of Leviticus is about how that will be possible. How is it that an unholy people can live and survive living with a holy God? There has to be a way to repair breeches in the covenant. There has to be a way to maintain that covenant relationship in some way. That is what the book of Leviticus is about.

Before we get to Leviticus, we have something traumatic that happens. The provisions of this dwelling place are given in Exodus 25, but before it can be built there is idolatry. While Moses is up on the mountain, Israel gets impatient. They make another god and say that this is the god that brought them out of Egypt. We have a fundamental fracture and rupture of this covenant relationship. The first and most important commandment is “You shall have no other gods before me,” and the second one is like it, “Do not make any graven images.” The very starting place of this covenant relationship stops before it starts. This new nation, before it can even get going, disintegrates before it begins. From a cultic, religious, and spiritual standpoint it deteriorates. Exodus 33 and 34 are extraordinary because Moses intercedes. God offers for Moses to make a nation out of Moses. He says in Exodus 32:9, “I have seen this people. They are stiff necked. Leave me alone that my anger can burn against them that I might destroy them, and I will make you into a great nation.’ But Moses sought the favor of the Lord his God and he said, ‘Why should your anger burn against your people whom you brought out of Egypt with great power, to kill them in the mountains, to wipe them off the face of the earth? Turn from your fierce anger. Relent; remember your servants Abraham, Isaac, and Israel to whom you swore by your own self, “I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars.”’ Remember God’s earlier emphasis, “My people, my people.” The basis of Moses’ intercession has nothing to do with Moses. It has everything to do with God’s promise. He comes and intercedes on behalf of Israel.

Moses then comes down the mountain, throws down the tablets, and says in Exodus 32:26, “Whoever is for the LORD come to me.” And all the Levites rally to him, but that day thousands die. Verse 31 says, “What a great sin these people have committed. They have made themselves gods of gold. But now please forgive their sin, but do not blot me out of the book that you have written.” In Exodus 33 God says, “Okay,” but He says, “I will not go with you.” But that is God’s name, “I will be with you.” Moses understands that and says, “We cannot go without you.” So he continues his intercession and his priestly intervention and mediation. The Lord will go with them. What we see here is the covenant given and the
covenant renewed. The tabernacle instructions are given, but when the tabernacle is reengaged toward the end of Exodus there is repetition. All the instructions earlier are followed in detail later. The very last thing that we read in Exodus 40 is extraordinary. Exodus 39:32 says, “So all the work on the tabernacle was completed. Israel did everything just as the LORD commanded.” Exodus 40:16 says, “Moses did everything just as the LORD commanded.” The very end of Exodus, verse 34, reads, “The cloud covered the tent of meeting and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory filled the tabernacle. In all the travels of the Israelites whenever the cloud would lift the tabernacle would set out, but if the cloud did not lift they did not set out. The cloud of the LORD was over the tabernacle day and night in the sight of all Israel during all of its travels.”

The goal is the presence of God in our midst, communion and fellowship with God, and eating with this God. Yet the people are not holy. There has to be a way of mediating this relationship, and that is what we will come to next in Leviticus. Before we start Leviticus, let us answer a few questions.

God is really involved with His people, and He really does get mad at us. He is not the prime mover or the force. He really is engaged with us. That means that our actions, behavior, heart, and affections really do matter. Our covenant responsibility is really important. God is responsive to our prayers. It is a misreading of the Westminster Confession of Faith to become fatalists. That is not Calvinism. What the Confession talks about is how the sovereign God uses secondary means. We have these Aristotelian categories in the Confession, and it is helpful to think about it that way though it does not answer all the questions. We do not have access to God’s hidden wisdom. God is going to do what He will do, but He will do it through people and in history. The prayers and the actions of people really are important, and they matter. He ordains secondary means—that is the way the Confession talks about it.

The way we can see this happening in the life of Israel and the church is in the life of Judas. He really does miss out. He really suffers loss, and yet whatever he chose to do has to do with what God’s plan was as well. But Judas had to be replaced. Someone else came in. Someone else got the blessing. For all of us, we have a choice, and our choices matter. Inasmuch as we are faithful as responsible covenant partners we get in on the good stuff and the story. We get in on the blessing, and we get to be blessed as an agent of grace and blessing to others. We are in the story whatever we choose, but we can also be on the curse side. We can also be part of that side of the story. Does God change His mind? That is one way to look at it. You might want to know if God’s interaction with Moses is genuine, and it absolutely is.

Some have suggested that God chose before the foundation of the world that He really was going to relent, and His threat to Moses to destroy the people was just a charade. That is not the right way to understand that. God knew what He would do, and He also ordained secondary means of Moses’ pastoral intercession to bring about His plan. The dilemma is that God is both the playwright and an actor in the play. We are involved in the story. We get ourselves in knots when we want access to the decree, which is in eternity. We do not have that access. Our best bet is to respond to what we know of God genuinely. Our affections, actions, and knowledge are a viable and important part of the story. Our prayers matter, and they really do change things. God ordains secondary means, so let us get praying!

Let us talk about Leviticus for a few minutes and get started. The first thing that we want to mention is that the book of Leviticus has to do with Levites. This book is primarily addressed to the priestly leadership of Israel, and it gives them their job description. The goal of the covenant is to really live as a people of a holy God. Yet it is very clear from the golden calf incident, from the very inception of the Exodus, that we are a sinful people. We have it in our DNA, and we know we are a sinful people. We are an idolatrous and stiff-necked people. That phrase that God uses of His people is carried through.
The prophets pick up on it. Given that that is our character, how in the world will we live in the presence of this holy God and survive? The answer is that there must be priestly mediation, and there must be substitutions. That is what Leviticus is about. It is a call to be a holy people. And it underscores the need for forgiveness and how forgiveness is obtained. The goal is holiness. “Be holy for I am holy,” is a refrain in Leviticus, and that is the memory verse for this book. The need is for forgiveness. Leviticus should be understood as guidance for how the covenantal relationship is to be preserved and maintained. The importance of Leviticus can be seen again with the geographic idea. From Exodus 19 to Numbers 10, Israel is encamped at the foot of Sinai. There it gets important instructions about its own worship life.

The memory verse is Leviticus 11:45, “I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God. Therefore be holy because I am holy.” You have an incredible summary there. “Be holy because I am holy.” This picks up on the job description of Israel to be a holy priesthood and a holy nation. We see Israel living and worshiping in the presence of the Lord and before Him as He requires. To be a holy people does not mean to be perfect because we have seen that that is not who we are. Given that we are sinful, what is so incredible about Leviticus is that it reveals that in the very law of God is the gracious gift of a means of forgiveness. The means of grace are front and center in Leviticus.

A wonderful way of understanding Leviticus is the sacramental representation of how forgiveness happens. It happens through representatives, and it happens through substitutes. It happens because, first, God passed over the firstborn. Second, “You are an idolatrous stiff-necked people, and in order for you to survive my presence in your midst and live as a holy people there has to be a way to maintain and repair this covenant relationship. There has to be a way to maintain and repair relationships between one another when you wrong each other.” That is what we have: the means of grace and forgiveness in the very law. This radical discontinuity between law and grace does not work in terms of a true understanding of Leviticus because we have these means of grace.

Let me give you the purpose in outline of Leviticus. It explains God’s provision of substitutionary atonement through priestly representatives who makes forgiveness and restitution possible so that Israel can dwell with her God. Leviticus 1 through 7 is about the sacrifices that Yahweh requires. Chapters 8 through 10 are the provisions for the priestly representatives. The next division is hard, because chapters 11 through 15 crescendo in chapter 16. Chapter 16 is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Chapters 11 through 15 are all of these distinctions between clean and unclean. This includes everything from the kind of clothes you wear to keeping your house clean, to how long after you touch a dead body before you can go to the temple or tabernacle. It also includes how long after your menstrual cycle or sexual relations you have to wait to go to the temple. All of these issues are covered, including clean and unclean foods.

All of these regulations show that every single aspect of our lives, from eating to sexual relationships to making our clothes, is done in the presence of the Lord and before the Lord. Therefore we must be aware of that. It is done to distinguish this people as God’s people and a holy people. All these regulations about clean and unclean crescendo in the Day of Atonement. When you come and start the year after Rosh Hashanah and the blowing of the trumpets to start the new year, the first thing is the Day of Atonement. That is where we begin, because once a year, even if you are a leper or a cripple and cannot come to worship, you are forgiven. You are atoned for once a year: “You are my people.” This division in Leviticus is a difficult one, but chapters 16 through 27 talk about what it means to live as a holy nation.
Before we go, I want to leave us with how these sacrifices work. I want to say a word about the spiritual significance and the progress of how the spirituality of the Pentateuch works. Remember my comments on Exodus 24. Exodus 24 is the goal. That is the picture of God walking in the garden. “I will walk with you, and you will be my people.” We see that language again in Leviticus 26, “I will walk among you. I will dwell among you in the tabernacle, in the temple.” The sacrifices have to work in a certain way. We have two categories of sin: unintentional sin and premeditated sin, also known as high-handed sin. The daily consecration, the burnt offering, deals with any unintentional sin. It is a voluntary act of worship that makes atonement for unintentional sin. The worshiper slaughters the sacrifice. With intentional sin, if you intentionally steal from your neighbor, then you must make sin and guilt offerings. We have to deal with these. That involves three things: confession, restitution, and the sin and the guilt offerings.

In other words, there is an important order here. You do the sin and guilt offerings with restitution and confession, and then you do the burnt offering for consecration to deal with unintentional sin. Then you get to the goal, which is the fellowship and peace offerings. The fellowship offering is the one where you get to eat with God. It is the picture of Exodus 24. It is the picture that most informs, perhaps, our understanding of the Lord’s Supper. We commune with God after confession, restitution, and assurance of pardon through the good news of the Gospel and the sacrifice of Christ. Christ is not just our Passover, but we come, in communion, and eat in fellowship with God. That is why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10 and 11 that this is our participation in the bread and the cup. The translation is *koinonia*, our fellowship in the cup and the bread. There is a particular order to the sacrifices. The consecration and the burnt offering were daily, but in order to do that you first had to deal with any intentional sin, which is confession, restitution, and the sin and guilt offering. Then you could make the consecration or burnt offering, and then the fellowship and peace offering. You can see how that makes sense.

We will stop there, and we will come back next time and finish Leviticus and go on to Numbers and Deuteronomy.