The Sum of It All

"I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt, to be your God; you shall be holy, for I am holy" **(Leviticus 11:45)**.

Week 7, Day 1

LEVITICUS 14–15; PSALM 36

Rabbis taught that the command for holiness had both a positive and a negative aspect. The positive is the Imitation of God. The negative means withdrawing from that which is impure and abominable. So Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair said, "Heedfulness leads to cleanness; cleanness to purity; purity to holiness; holiness to humility; humility to dread of sin; dread of sin to saintliness; saintliness to the possession of the Holy Spirit." Such, surely, is the mood of these chapters. Their lengthy, patient list of regulations having to do with leprous diseases and with bodily discharges should be seen as the efforts of a people to avoid anything that might defile them. And they remind us again that there is often a close link between physical and spiritual defiling.

So many of the conditions of temporary uncleanness were "until the evening" **(15:18, 19, 21, and so on)**. For the Hebrews, the new day began when the sun went down. Persons who had been unclean for a day could retire at night with a sense of purity; they began their new day at sunset with a sense of freshness and peace. When the Apostle said, "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" **(Ephesians 4:26)**, he was working on the same principle. The mind and spirit, as much as the body, ought to be clean as we begin a new day by entering the sleep that will have so much to do with how the following morning will be experienced.

PRAYER: I want all of my person—body, mind, and spirit—to be clean in your holy sight, that I may truly please you. Amen.

We'd do well to remember, in the spirit of Leviticus, that there is often a tie between physical and spiritual defiling. List some examples from your experience or observation.

Week 7, Day 2

LEVITICUS 16–18

What does the grandeur of the Day of Atonement have do with the food we eat or with our sexual relations? A very great deal, if we take our walk with God seriously. The way this passage moves from the sublimely spiritual to what we might consider cultic and then to the physical dramatizes how the Jewish Law **(and our continuing faith)** sees life as a whole. The line between the sacred and the secular is not so sharp as our logic might want to make it.
The most fascinating creature in the atonement experience is the scapegoat, Azazel. The sins of the people are laid on it, and it is led out "into the wilderness." The scene reminds me of **Psalm 103:12**, when the psalmist notes that God has removed our transgressions "as far as the east is from the west," and also of the New Testament writer who, in probable reference to this ceremony, says that Jesus "suffered outside the city gate" **(Hebrews 13:12)**.
The code of sexual conduct is specifically to be other than what "they do in the land of Egypt . . . **[and]** in the land of Canaan" **(18:3)**. The conduct of those peoples caused the land to be "defiled" so that at last its inhabitants would be "vomited out" **(18:25)**. The people of Israel were to have a different standard because of their relationship to God and their regard for the bodies God had given them. No doubt much of the popular culture of our time **(which can easily engulf us)** is equally repugnant to God's standards.
PRAYER: Jesus, Savior, I lay on you the burdens of shame I cannot bear; take them far from me, I pray; to your glory. Amen.

What connection do you see between the instructions for the Day of Atonement and the ensuing prohibitions against the eating or drinking of blood?

Week 7, Day 3

LEVITICUS 19–21; PSALM 37

As we said before, to be holy is to be different from those around us. But it is very difficult to live in the midst of a culture without taking on much of its style and standards. **Chapters 19** and 20 deal with that problem. Some of the issues may sound trivial to us, but for the Israelites they were marks of distinction; if they became too much like their neighbors in these matters, they might easily slip over into their patterns of ethical conduct, too.
Other laws are fascinating for their practical social sensitivity. When reaping a harvest, leave some for the poor and the alien **(19:9-10)**—perhaps the only time Israelites were asked to be careless in their work! "You shall not keep for yourself the wages of a laborer until morning" **(19:13)**. Why not? Because in an economy of day laborers, many lived from one day's pay to the next, and if the wages were held back, a family was left hungry for the night. Do not "revile the deaf or put a stumbling block before the blind" **(19:14)**; that is, don't take advantage of

someone's limitations. In judgment, "you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great" **(19:15)**—a standard we still find it hard to fulfill even in a modern legal system. And "rise before the aged, and defer to the old" **(19:32)**.
And the basis for all these commands: Because "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" **(19:36)**.
PRAYER: You have brought me from my own kind of bondage, gracious Lord, so I gladly acknowledge your right to my devotion. Amen.

List five or six of the highly practical laws in **Leviticus 19**.

Week 7, Day 4

LEVITICUS 22–24

Every day is sacred in its own right, but we need special occasions in the calendars of our lives that give a lift to life and that help to center our focus. The several festivals performed that function for Israel. For while there were many laws that reminded them of their differentness, these festivals gave a certain beauty and glory to their role.
Three of the celebrations had to do with nature. The Israelites were an agricultural people, so it was natural for their lives to revolve around seedtime and harvest. Most of us aren't as conscious of our dependence on nature, because we live more removed from its rhythms; but now and then an earthquake, a flood, or a tornado reminds us that as surely as ever we are dependent on nature.
Only the Day of Atonement called for fasting; other festivals were in a more celebrative mood. Several were intended to remind the people of the power of God in their nation's history and of the loyalty that was therefore owed to God. The Festival of Booths, in particular, recalled that they had lived in booths when they escaped from the land of Egypt.
But while these occasions came scattered through the year as annual events, there was always the seventh day of the week with its sabbath. As one Jewish philosopher said, "More than Israel kept the sabbath, the sabbath has kept Israel." It is God's gift of rest and dignity for those who will receive and observe it.
PRAYER: Thank you, Lord, for days of rest, awe, and laughter. Amen.

Six holy celebrations, besides the sabbath, are described in **Leviticus 23**. What qualities or characteristics do they have in common?

Week 7, Day 5

LEVITICUS 25–27

If the sabbath is a gift to us, it is meant also to be a gift to nature. Every seventh year the land was to lie fallow. Whatever came of the unpruned vine or the untended field could be eaten, but there was to be a rest for the land. Here was a simple method of soil conservation long before it became a science. And here was a reminder of our obligation to nature. The land is blessed or cursed according to the quality of our stewardship. In a sense, the land is helpless beneath us; we determine its fate. But it will have the last word. If we do not treat it with care, it will get the really last word.

As we noticed earlier, seven was one of the significant numbers for the Hebrew people. After seven sevens of years, there would be a year of jubilee. "It shall be holy to you: you shall eat only what the field itself produces" **(25:12)**. More than that, there shall be a reordering of the economy: Debts will be canceled, and those who have sold themselves or their families into slavery will be set free.

What a festival! "You shall have the trumpet sounded loud" **(25:9)** to announce the beginning of this year. Charles Wesley wrote a hymn around this chapter, applying it to our redemption in Christ.

"Ye who have sold for nought
your heritage above
shall have it back unbought,
the gift of Jesus' love:
The year of jubilee is come!
The year of jubilee is come!
Return, ye ransomed sinners, home."

PRAYER: Help me to make this year, this very year, a jubilee of glad and holy living; and help me to share it well with others. Amen.

It is often said that the Old Testament historians wrote like prophets and the prophets like historians. Find a section in today's Scripture where the writer of Leviticus sounds like a prophet.

Week 7, Day 6

NUMBERS 1–3; PSALM 38

The Book of Numbers gets its title from the first census of Israel, which is contained here. If it were titled for its most significant event, however, a cynic might well call it the Book of Retreat,

because it is in Numbers that we read the sad story of the Israelites coming within reach of their land of promise, then retreating into their fears. But more of that later.

There is a sense of family lineage among many ancient peoples that we in America seem to have lost until recently. The Israelites are told to make a census in clans, by ancestral houses, so the people will know their origins. I think this was also part of a movement to establish their pride. A people who have lived in slavery for over four centuries need to know that they have proud roots of heritage.

What we mentioned earlier about Joseph is now established: Joseph is phased out, and his descendants are named through Ephraim and Manasseh **(1:32-35)**. The tribe of Levi shall not be enrolled but shall have responsibility for the tabernacle **(1:48-53)**.

The people are set up in orderly fashion, with three tribes to north, south, east, and west. At the center of the encampment is the tribe of Levi with the tent of meeting. The place of worship is at the center of life. The Levites have their role "as substitutes for all the firstborn among the Israelites . . . ; and the Levites shall be mine. I am the LORD" **(3:45)**.

PRAYER: Let me be a Levite, Lord, remembering that whatever I have and whatever I gain is yours, as I am; in Jesus' name. Amen.

List some of the duties of the Levites related to their care of the Tabernacle.

Week 7, Day 7

NUMBERS 4–6

Clergy sometimes complain that they have to do all sorts of routine tasks unrelated to preaching and pastoral care. If so, they are in the biblical tradition. Part of the calling of the Levites was to assemble and disassemble the tabernacle as the Israelites moved from place to place. It wasn't glamorous work, but it was essential; and from the scriptural point of view it was holy—like cooking a church supper.

The process for settling a marital suspicion is known as trial by ordeal. It was to be used in instances when suspicion was felt but there was no evidence. In a male-dominated culture, it was probably a woman's best defense against a jealous husband.

Chapter 6 is a bright spot in this book. One admires the nazirites for their desire to dedicate themselves to a special pursuit of God. It is the kind of commitment some make during Lent. It's easy to discredit such acts as meaningless or superficial; but if they are performed earnestly, they have a positive effect. God honors the seeking heart, and probably the discipline is good for our character.

The blessing with which this chapter ends is a good model not only for benedictions but for our general lifestyle. These beautiful words sent persons on their way under the glow of faith and hope. In a world where people seem so easily to curse and damn others, we ought to be ones who bless. Thus, in some measure, we help God's kingdom to come.

PRAYER: Help me this day to bring blessing to someone by a word of love and grace, spoken in your name and in your Spirit. Amen.

How and where are nazirite principles preserved in the church today?

Prayer Time
Here are some days of celebration in my life for which I want to give thanks:

Here are some people who, to my knowledge, don't have too many reasons to celebrate. I will pray daily for them:

How the Drama Develops LEVITICUS 14—NUMBERS 6
The drama of life is lived out in daily **(indeed, momentary)** encounters—encounters with God, with humankind, with nature, and with the secret places of our own souls. Some of these encounters are of such proportions that everyone recognizes them as crucial and life-changing. Those are the ones around which poets and novelists weave their plots. Most of our encounters are so routine, however, that we hardly notice them. Yet these encounters, in total, are the material, ultimately, from which the full drama is made. The so-called life-changing events are usually only the routine come to full fruition.
So the Hebrew law pays a great deal of attention to the routine. There are regulations for harvesting the fields to be sure there is provision for the poor **(Leviticus 19:9-10)**, and for the way day laborers are paid to protect them against insensitive abuse by those who might not understand the degree of their poverty **(19:13)**. Grudges are a way of life for some people and at times a test of character for all of us—trivial, yes, but significant in the fabric of our lives; so the Law deals with them **(19:17)**. And always there is the reminder that these laws come from the One who brought the Israelites "out of the land of Egypt" **(19:36)**. The Source of the laws has a claim on their lives because they owe their freedom to him.
But lest routine sound dull, let me hasten to note that Leviticus presented a way of life that was highlighted by a series of recurring holy days. The people celebrated! Sometimes it was in occasions of awe, as with the Day of Atonement. But more often there were events of gladness, such as the harvest festivals and the new year. These events must surely have taught the people that life is more than an assignment to be fulfilled; it is a gladness to be exulted.
Celebrations are part of the plot line of life and of eternity. We are creatures with birthdays, anniversaries, memories. Our handling of our days is influenced by the blessed interruption of

special days; without such special days we would quickly become less than human. Perhaps, in a sense, celebrations are reminiscent of the Eden we have lost and a prodding toward the heaven we seek.

When the Israelites remembered where they had come from, they knew there was reason to celebrate. If you sometimes feel Leviticus is dull, ponder this wonderful sentence: "I am the LORD your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be their slaves no more; I have broken the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect" **(26:13)**. The sabbath—the weekly festival—reminded them they were no longer slaves. Slaves must work at all times at their owner's bidding; the sabbath reminded the people that we are not slaves to our work; we can "walk erect."

The quality of blessing seems to appear in these books of the Pentateuch in unlikely places. Numbers begins with the census data that gives it its name, then moves into issues of law and priestly procedure, when—almost out of the blue, it seems—there is a blessing: "The LORD bless you and keep you" **(Numbers 6:24-26)**.

In a world where there is so much cursing, both spoken and implied, Israel walked under a blessing. And so should we.

Seeing Life Through Scripture

I wonder how our culture would handle the rules laid out in **Leviticus 25**. There is first of all a law that ought to gladden our ecology-conscious age: Each seventh year, the people were to let the land rest. It was a simple, sound system of soil conservation; but people would obey it only if they were free of the grasping nature that wants to get as much as it can as soon as it can.

The law of the year of jubilee is even more challenging. It required that debts be canceled in the fiftieth year, that land be restored to the original owner or his or her descendants, and that slaves be set free. I'm not sure I can defend this system for our economic society; but when I acknowledge that perhaps it is unrealistic, a nagging voice reminds me that our present system doesn't work too well either.

I will confess readily that laws such as these wouldn't work unless a society began with the conviction that the land and its resources belong not to us but to God. The writer of Leviticus is very clear: "The land shall not be sold in perpetuity, for the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants" **(25:23)**. And in truth, these laws were noted in Israel itself more in the violation than in the observance—and it was because the people found it hard to remember **(as we do)** that the land is the Lord's; we are tenants here. Perhaps if we understood that better, we would treat the environment with greater care.

Kalas, E. J. **(2016)**. The Grand Sweep: 365 Days From Genesis Through Revelation. Abingdon Press.

TEPHILLAH
APOSTOLIC CENTRE
The Place Where Prayer Prevails