

"INTRODUCTION TO LEVITICUS"

(**THE MESSAGE**)

(Eugene Peterson)

One of the stubbornly enduring habits of the human race is to insist on domesticating God. We are determined to tame him, to reduce him to a size that fits conveniently our plans and ambitions and tastes.

Our Scriptures are even more stubborn in telling us we can't do it. God cannot fit into our plans; we must fit into his. We can't use God—God is not a tool or appliance or credit card.

"Holy" is the word that sets God apart and above our attempts to enlist him in our wish-fulfillment fantasies or our utopian schemes for making our mark in the world. Holy means that God is alive on God's terms, alive in a way that exceeds our experience and imagination. Holy refers to life burning with an intense purity that transforms everything it touches into itself.

Because the core of all living as God, and God is a holy God, we require much teaching and long training for a living in response to God as he is and not as we want him to be. The book of Leviticus is a kind of extended time-out for instruction, a detailed and meticulous preparation for living "holy" in a culture that doesn't have the faintest idea what "holy" is. It is a narrative pause: Our ancestors are on their way, having been saved out of Egypt, to settle in the land of Canaan. They will soon be picking their way through a minefield of gods and goddesses designed to appeal to our god-fantasies—god-fantasies that will in fact cripple or kill us. "give us what we want when we want it on our terms." What is God fantasies in fact do is cripple or kill us. Leviticus is start on the "much teaching and Long training" that continues to be adapted and reworked in every country and culture where God is forming a saved people to live as he created them to live—holy as he is holy.

The first thing that strikes us as we read Leviticus in this light is that God is actually present with us; nothing in us, our relationships, or our environment is left out. The second thing is that God provides a way (sacrifices and feasts and Sabbaths) to bring everything into his holy presence—an awesome thing. And like ancient Israel, we stand in his presence at every moment (Psalm 139). Our Lord is not dwelling in a tent or house in our neighborhood. But he makes his habitation in us in among us as believers and says, "I am holy; you be holy" (1 Peter 1:16, citing Leviticus 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:7).

Once we realize this, the seemingly endless details and instructions of Leviticus become signposts of good cares about the details of our lives, willing everything in and around us into the transformation that St. Paul elsewhere commends:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you:
Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out (Romans 12:1-2).

