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Leviticus—Theme of Holiness, Worship

Leviticus centers around the concept of the holiness of God, and how an unholy people can acceptably approach Him and then remain in continued fellowship.

Other Helpful links

The Way to Wholeness by Ray Steadman

<http://pbc.org/dp/stedman/leviticus/index.html>

Online Messages and helps

http://preceptaustin.org/leviticus_commentaries.htm

Daily Bible Study

Thursday, April 6, 2006



Passage for today: **Leviticus 18-19**

Quick Notes

- “I am the Lord” appears twenty-one times in chapters 18 and 19. This tells us that the authority and basis of these moral commands come from who God is—His nature—His person. (See Rom. 12:2.)

Questions to Ponder

Who are they not to be like in the area of sexual morals? (what two people groups) How does this apply to us today?

Why is it key that we see that God’s person and nature are the basis of these commands?

What general areas of life are covered in chapter 19? (there are at least six mentioned) How does this apply to us?

Daily Bible Study

Friday, April 7, 2006



Passage for today: **Leviticus 20**

Quick Notes

- The ominous phrase “put to death” is found nine times in this chapter, for “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

Questions to Ponder

What sins are guilty of capital punishment before God? What is it that you and I should learn about this?

God shows the consequences of their sins here, why?

What will the “land” do to them, if they do not follow this? How does this apply to us today? (See Ephesians 5:5)

Daily Bible Study

Saturday, April 8, 2006



Passage for today: **Leviticus 21-22**

Quick Notes

Privilege always brings responsibility. James 3:1

Questions to Ponder

Why are the regulations for Priests so strict. How might some of these things be seen as spiritual applications today for us?

God specifically shows their sacrifices must be without defect. Why?

How does this apply to our lives, service & giving today?

Sunday April 9th thru Sunday the 16th is Passover week!

As we do each year, we want to mark these days out and seek to follow the events of that final week of Christ—often called “Holy Week”.

Therefore we are pausing on our study in Leviticus during these days and resume on Monday the 17th.

We will cover Leviticus 18-27 on Wednesday April 19th.

Daily Bible Study

Monday, April 17, 2006



Passage for today: **Leviticus 23**

Quick Notes

The Hebrew calendar was organized around a series of sevens. The seventh day of the week was the Sabbath. They celebrated seven annual feasts, three of which occurred in the seventh month. The seventh year was their Sabbatical Year, and after forty-nine years (seven times seven), they celebrated the Year of Jubilee.

Questions to Ponder

Map out what the calendar year would be like for the Jews, if possible.

What are the lessons for us as we see Christ?

What are the practical lessons for our lives and years?

Consider what it would have been like each year to take these times during the year to focus on the Lord. How would that have been helpful? How should that impact our lives?

Daily Bible Study

Tuesday, April 18, 2006



Passage for today: **Leviticus 24-25**

Quick Notes

Questions to Ponder

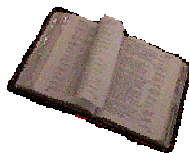
Three important responsibilities “before the Lord” (vv. 3, 6, 8) are given in this chapter 24—what are they?

What do these three things picture in our lives today?

As we look at the laws of redemption in chapter 25—what are the reasons these laws are given? What are the benefits?

Daily Bible Study

Wednesday, April 19, 2006



Passage for today: **Leviticus 26-27**

Quick Notes

God used the word covenant eight times in chapter 26

Questions to Ponder

Look at the requirements and promises of this covenant in chap 26—
what are the lessons in this for us?

We see a picture of God's discipline in chap 26. There is increasing
discipline if Israel doesn't respond. Picture this like a parent dealing
with kids. What do you learn?

This is an interesting chapter to end the book of Leviticus on, why?
How does it fit with the whole of the book?

Leviticus 18– Morality

Sex is a wonderful gift of God to the human family. We need to continually keep this in mind—it was His idea! Sin has so marred and messed up this area that at times, we can almost look at the whole thing as bad. It is not so—it is a wonderful thing—in its bounds.

It is an old illustration—but it works for me. It is like a fire. In a fireplace—a fire is a wonderful, warm, inviting and rich thing (excluding the allergies :)) But take that same fire, and place it on the living room couch—it is now destructive. God created sex, it is His idea and it is good—but in the bounds He created for it. Outside that—it becomes destructive.

When it is used according to His will, it is creative and brings rich blessing. Used apart from His will, sex is destructive and brings tragic consequences. Illicit sex defiles the persons involved (vv. 20–30), whole nations (v. 24) and the land itself (vv. 25, 27).

Leviticus 18:22 says clearly, “You shall not lie with a male as with a woman. It is an abomination.” “Abomination” means “disgusting or revolting”. The Bible is not ambiguous here. There is no confusion on this issue. Homosexuality is not merely a sin, but an abomination in the sight of the Lord. God loves the sinner, and that includes the homosexual, but He hates the sin. If a homosexual wants to know God he or she has to repent of their sinful lifestyle.

No Divination

Leviticus 19:26 forbids any form of divination. Divination is any attempt to link up with the spiritual realm through means apart from direct communication with God or His Word.

Christian, it is vital that you understand that Ouiji boards, horoscopes, palm-readers, new age channelers, séances, crystal balls, imaging, psychic healing – are all elements of the occult and forbidden by God! Adding to that, if you participate in these practices, and you invite Satan to use his deceptions on you. Understand that God is telling us that this is bad for us, bad for us spiritually .

God's Feasts

In Leviticus 23:1-2 God begins His description of the feasts this way: *"The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'The feasts of the LORD, which you shall proclaim to be holy convocations, these are My feasts.'"*

The Hebrew word translated "feast" means "appointment". These were God's appointments with His people. God blocked out His calendar for them, and He expects His people to block out their calendar for Him.

This is good advice for us all. We need to pull out our calendars, and set aside time to spend with God – a weekly Sabbath—meaningful holiday celebrations - timely getaways spiritual retreats – even an annual Bible conference.

God says to Moses, "these are My feasts." I just can't get past those words "My feasts" - these are His—what He has for us. These are not man's things—but God's.

Today we use the term "holidays" - the combination of two English words, "holy" and "days". But "holidays" were originally "holy days" – days marked holy, or set aside for the worship of God, and celebration of His works. It is sad...but for most, holidays are anything but holy-days. They are times often for departing from the Lord.

The problem with our Sabbaths and holidays are how we spend them. We go to Disney World, or Six Flags, or a ball game – and when we come home we're more exhausted than before we went. A trip to Six Flags is not exactly a holy convocation. Or we take our Sabbaths, and do work of another sort – we labor in the yard, or toil over our car, or remodel the bathroom. We find other ways to stress out. Verse 3 tells us the Sabbath is to be set aside for "solemn", or serious rest. The Sabbath is not a day for inactivity - just do something that rejuvenates, rather than drains.

We as Gentile believers no longer celebrate the same feast days as the Old Testament Hebrews, nevertheless we can learn from the principles. We need to set aside weekly and annual intervals to rest, refresh and refocus spiritually.

Let's quickly consider the Seven Feasts of the Lord

1st Feast—the Passover

Time period—Nisan 14 - March/April

In Exodus 12, on the eve of their exit from Egypt, God gave Moses directions for how to celebrate Passover. The festivities revolved around a meal...they ate bitter herbs reminding them of their years of Egyptian bondage. Roasted lamb recalled the lamb's blood that had been spread on the doorposts and thresholds of the house. The sought to remember where they had come from, what had taken place to make them the people of God that they were. Unleavened bread spoke of the faith of the Hebrews in God's promise. The Passover is celebrated in the month of Nisan - the first month of a new year. It symbolized a new start for the nation.

Yet, the foreshadow here is wonderful! The Passover foreshadowed the Cross of Christ. In fact, it was exactly during the Passover feast that Jesus died on the Cross—fulfilling the picture in this feast. Jesus was crucified on Nisan 14th, or Passover. In 1Corinthians 5:7 Paul writes, “For *indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us.*” Jesus is our Passover lamb. When His blood is spread on the doorposts and threshold of our hearts the judgment of God passes over, and we're delivered from our sin.

As NT Christians, we don't observe the Passover as the Jews did, but the fascinating thing is that the Communion celebration that Jesus gave us in the NT has its roots deeply in the Passover. The better you understand the Passover, the better you will understand all that Communion is supposed to be.

2nd Feast—Unleavened Bread

Nisan 15-21– March/April

The Feast of Unleavened bread took place in conjunction with the Passover. It was celebrated for seven days following the Passover.

This feast foreshadowed what the Cross accomplished for us—sin being paid for. Leaven is always a type of sin in the Bible and to have unleavened bread—is a picture of no sin. For the Christian, this is how God sees us—because of the Cross—Jesus our Passover Lamb.

3rd Feast—Firstfruits

Nisan 17 - March/April

On the day after the Sabbath - following the Passover – the priest brought the initial yield of the barley harvest and offered it to God. This was the people’s way of saying thanks to God for providing their needs. This is what we do when we tithe our income. We give back to God the firstfruits of what He’s given to us.

The priest made his offering in an interesting way... elsewhere it’s called a “wave offering” or “heave offering”. He waved a bundle up and down, then side to side – a vertical and horizontal motion – in essence, drawing the cross. The wave offering was a picture of Jesus...of the cross, of what the Cross produced.

But it gets better than that—Jesus was resurrected on the day following the Sabbath, after the Passover – or on the day of Firstfruits—the day of the Feast of First fruits. Jesus fulfilled this feast by being the first to rise from the dead...the first fruits of many more to come, because of Him.

This is why 1 Corinthians 15:23 calls Jesus the “firstfruits” of the resurrection. Jesus was the initial yield of God’s resurrection harvest. He was the first to overcome death, and inherit an incorruptible body.

4th Feast—Weeks (Pentecost)

Sivan 6 - May/June

Leviticus 23:16 says, “*Count fifty days to the day after the seventh Sabbath; then you shall offer a new grain offering to the LORD.*”

The Greek word for “fifty” is “Pentecost”, which is why this Feast is called “Pentecost” in the New Testament.

This feast celebrated the end of the spring harvest. This time the priest brought two loaves of grain to the Lord – and unlike at Passover, the loaves were baked with leaven. Jewish tradition says the giving of the Law to Moses occurred 50 days after the Feast of Firstfruits, so its anniversary was also celebrated at Pentecost.

It's interesting, in the same year Jesus fulfilled the Passover, and Feast of Firstfruits – He also fulfilled the symbolism in the Feast of Weeks. It was at Pentecost that the Holy Spirit was poured out on the Church, and a harvest of souls begun. On that day God, the Lawgiver, began to write His law in the hearts of men. And two loaves were presented to God – Jews and Gentiles. Unleavened loaves, in fact - God accepted them even though stained with sin.

5th Feast—Trumpets

Tishri 1 - September/October

Today the Jews call the Feast of Trumpets, “Rosh Hashanah” or “the head of the year”. Today it is celebrated as the Jewish New Year. Before their exodus from Egypt the Jewish year began in Tishri, and for civil purposes they maintained that distinction. Nisan was the first month of the year for religious purposes. Tishri was the first month for secular purposes.

On the Feast of Trumpets the priest sounded his shophar, or ram's horn, and the blast called the workers out of the fields up to the Tabernacle, for a holy convocation. The Feast of Trumpets marked the end of the fall harvest.

Since the spring feasts were all prophetic of the first coming of Christ, it appears that the fall feasts speak of His second coming! During the summer months there are no feasts. And prophetically that may be where we are now. God is working with the Church, not Israel – for the Hebrews it's summer - but the Scripture is clear, at the end of the year, He'll return to Israel and accomplish His purposes.

How will God's end times work begin... with a trumpet blast. 1 Thessalonians 4:16 tells us a trumpet will sound and the dead in Christ will rise... the last days begins with the rapture of the Church.

Remember the Feast of Trumpets – the priest blows the shophar to call the workers out the fields. The harvest is over. It sounds like the rapture. No man knows the day or the hour, but I always go through Rosh Hashanah with a little extra anticipation.

6th Feast Day of Atonement

Tishri 10 - September/October

On this day the sacrifices and rituals discussed in chapter 16 took place. This was the one day of the year the High Priest could enter the inner sanctum of the Tabernacle, where the glory of God was visibly manifested. It was there he sprinkled blood on the lid of the Ark, or mercyseat. When he exited he laid his hands on the head of the scapegoat, and confessed the sins of the people. Then the goat was led off into the wilderness. It never returned.

This is all a vivid demonstration that God had not only forgiven, but forgotten their sin.

The Day of Atonement is referred to by the Jews as “Yom Kippur”. In Hebrew “Yom” means “day”, and “Kippur” means “covering or atonement” – this was the day the sin of the nation Israel was covered for another year. The individual Hebrews observed the day in a serious, somber fashion. This was a day of confession and repentance.

Jesus is the fulfillment of this feast. In 1 John 2:2 He’s called our “propitiation”, or “mercyseat”. He is also the scapegoat. Confess your sin, and trust Jesus as your Lord and Savior and God will not only forgive your sin, but He’ll forget it once and for all.

God wanted the Jews to use the day to cultivate a heart of repentance. It was a day to humble themselves. It was a reminder of their need for a sacrifice. But over the years the Jews did just the opposite. They use the day’s rituals as a substitute for a sacrifice. They believe all their fasting and afflicting is itself payment for their sin. They’ll even use the day to remind God of their good works. How tragic.

On the Day of Atonement the High Priest came out of the Holy of Holies and appeared to the people to let them know the sacrifice had been accepted. This is what happens when Jesus returns to the earth at the end of the Great Tribulation. The High Priest leaves the Holy of Holies and shows Himself to the nation. This Feast will be fulfilled prophetically at His second coming.

7th Feast—Tabernacles

Tishri 15-22 - September/October

This was a fun feast. Verse 40 commands the Hebrews, “you shall rejoice before the Lord your God seven days.” For a week the people lived outdoors in tents.

The Feast of Tabernacles was a celebration of God’s provision in the wilderness. God provided them manna in the morning, and quail at night. For 40 years their sandals never wore out. God gave them victory over their enemies. He even brought water from the rock, and quenched the thirst of the people.

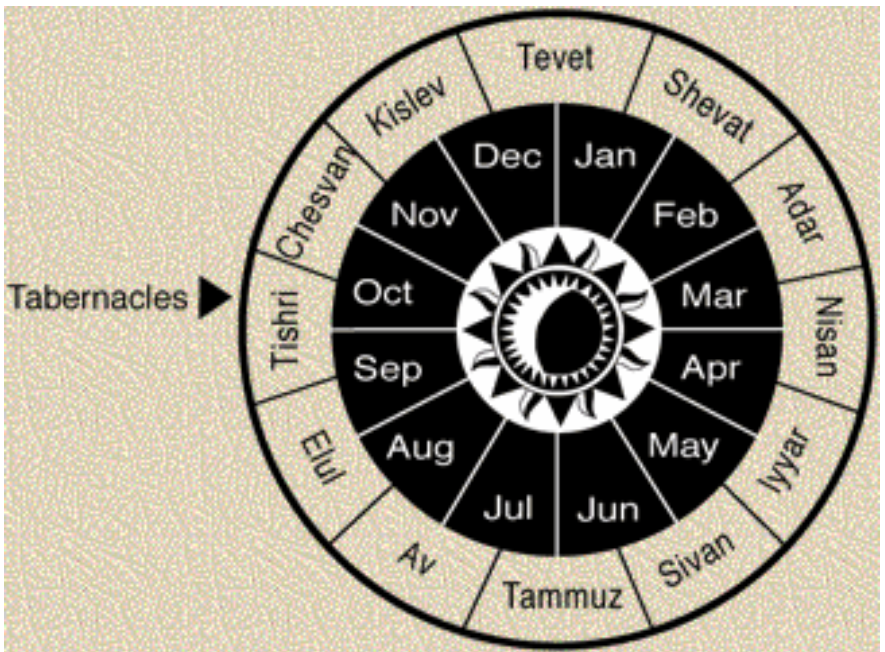
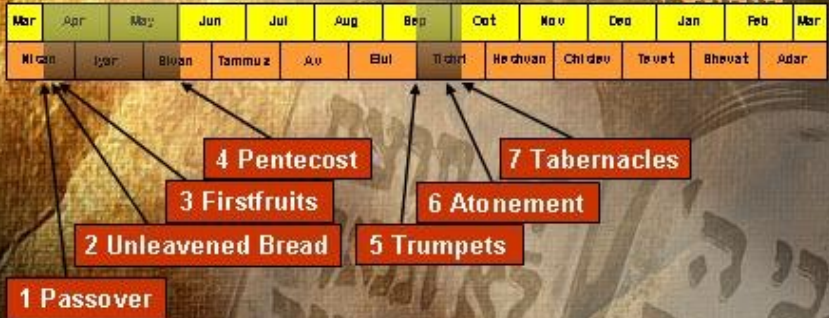
The Feast of Tabernacles is prophetic of the Kingdom Age, or the Millennium where God will supernaturally provide for His people just as He did in the wilderness. The Millennial Kingdom will be a period of great rejoicing.

In fact, Zechariah 14:16 teaches us that during Christ’s thousand year reign all the nations will come up to Jerusalem once a year to worship the King and keep what feast?... the Feast of Tabernacles.

Maybe it is simple enough to see as we survey these feasts—but they are all pictures of Christ. Each feast shows a facet of His work in saving us. Truly it is worth understanding the depth of these pictures—to see Christ more and more fully.

Church Age?

LEVITICUS
23
THE SEVEN
FEASTS



The Jubilee Year

The concept of a year of Jubilee is unparalleled in history. It was uniquely Hebrew, but it was ingenious. Verse 10 describes its chief feature, all debts will be paid, and all properties will be returned.

When the Hebrews entered the promised land God portioned out the land to each of the twelve tribes. The land belonged to God, but He loaned a parcel to each family in Israel. Of course, from time to time land was sold or bought – when it was put up for collateral on loan, and a man couldn't pay his debts, the land would be lost. But the loss was never permanent – for in the year of Jubilee all land returned to its original occupant. That's why whenever a land transaction came down its value was determined by the number of years to the Jubilee.

Another practice in ancient Israel was slavery. People think of slavery as cruel, but not among the Jews. When a person couldn't pay his debts, instead of filing bankruptcy, he was allowed to work them off by becoming a slave to his creditor. But in the year of Jubilee his debts were canceled, and he became a free man. Think of the practical impact of this law. In everyone's lifetime they would live through a Jubilee. Their debts were canceled. It gave them a second chance.

If family land had been lost through a relative's slothfulness they were able to get it back, and begin again. It still paid to be industrious. A man was always able to better his financial position through hard work, but it also provided a way to even out some inequities, and restore to everyone a real opportunity to get ahead.

As clever a welfare system as the Jubilee was its real significance is prophetic. Think about it, the original and ultimate owner of this world is God. But God gave dominion over it to man. We in turn lost it to Satan. Three times in the Gospel of John, Satan is referred to as "the ruler of this world". But one day God will celebrate the Jubilee, and all the land will revert back to its original owner.

Today, Satan may control this earth, but it doesn't belong to Him. When Jesus returns, Satan will be evicted, and the world will return to its rightful owner. When Jesus returns all debts will be canceled, the slaves will be freed, and all property will return to its rightful owner. Come quickly, Lord Jesus!

Leviticus 19:16, 17 (Morning and Evening) By Charles Spurgeon

"Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people . . . Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbour, and not suffer sin upon him. " - Leviticus 19:16, 17

Tale-bearing emits a threefold poison; for it injures the teller, the hearer, and the person concerning whom the tale is told. Whether the report be true or false, we are by this precept of God's Word forbidden to spread it.

The reputations of the Lord's people should be very precious in our sight, and we should count it shame to help the devil to dishonor the Church and the name of the Lord. Some tongues need a bridle rather than a spur. Many glory in pulling down their brethren, as if thereby they raised themselves. Noah's wise sons cast a mantle over their father, and he who exposed him earned a fearful curse. We may ourselves one of these dark days need forbearance and silence from our brethren, let us render it cheerfully to those who require it now. Be this our family rule, and our personal bond-SPEAK EVIL OF NO MAN.

The Holy Spirit, however, permits us to censure sin, and prescribes the way in which we are to do it. It must be done by rebuking our brother to his face, not by railing behind his back. This course is manly, brotherly, Christlike, and under God's blessing will be useful. Does the flesh shrink from it? Then we must lay the greater stress upon our conscience, and keep ourselves to the work, lest by suffering sin upon our friend we become ourselves partakers of it. Hundreds have been saved from gross sins by the timely, wise, affectionate warnings of faithful ministers and brethren. Our Lord Jesus has set us a gracious example of how to deal with erring friends in his warning given to Peter, the prayer with which he preceded it, and the gentle way in which he bore with Peter's boastful denial that he needed such a caution.

Leviticus 19:36 (Morning and Evening)

By Charles Spurgeon

“Just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin, shall ye have.” — Leviticus 19:36

Weights, and scales, and measures were to be all according to the standard of justice. Surely no Christian man will need to be reminded of this in his business, for if righteousness were banished from all the world beside, it should find a shelter in believing hearts. There are, however, other balances which weigh moral and spiritual things, and these often need examining. We will call in the officer to-night.

The balances in which we weigh our own and other men's characters, are they quite accurate? Do we not turn our own ounces of goodness into pounds, and other persons' bushels of excellence into pecks? See to weights and measures here, Christian.

The scales in which we measure our trials and troubles, are they according to standard? Paul, who had more to suffer than we have, called his afflictions light, and yet we often consider ours to be heavy—surely something must be amiss with the weights! We must see to this matter, lest we get reported to the court above for unjust dealing.

Those weights with which we measure our doctrinal belief, are they quite fair? The doctrines of grace should have the same weight with us as the precepts of the word, no more and no less; but it is to be feared that with many one scale or the other is unfairly weighted. It is a grand matter to give just measure in truth. Christian, be careful here. Those measures in which we estimate our obligations and responsibilities look rather small. When a rich man gives no more to the cause of God than the poor contribute, is that a just ephah and a just hin? When ministers are half starved, is that honest dealing? When the poor are despised, while ungodly rich men are held in admiration, is that a just balance?

Reader, we might lengthen the list, but we prefer to leave it as your evening's work to find out and destroy all unrighteous balances, weights, and measures.

The Right to Holy Things

By Charles Spurgeon

“But if the priest buy any soul with his money, he shall eat of it and he that is born in his house they shall eat of his meat.”—Leviticus 22:11

STRANGERS, sojourners, and servants upon hire were not to eat of holy things. It is so in spiritual matters still. But two classes were free at the sacred table, those who were bought with the priest's money, and those who were born into the priest's house. Bought and born, these were the two indisputable proofs of a right to holy things.

Bought. Our great High Priest has bought with a price all those who put their trust in Him. They are His absolute property, altogether the Lord's. Not for what they are in themselves, but for their owner's sake, they are admitted into the same privileges which He Himself enjoys, and “they shall eat of his meat.” He has meat to eat which worldlings know not of. “Because ye belong to Christ,” therefore shall ye share with your Lord.

Born. This is an equally sure way to privilege; if born in the Priest's house, we take our place with the rest of the family. Regeneration makes us fellow-heirs, and of the same body; and, therefore, the peace, the joy, the glory which the Father has given to Christ, Christ has given to us. Redemption and regeneration have given us a double claim to the divine permit of this promise.

PROMISES, PROMISES, PROMISES

Leviticus 27

by Ray C. Stedman

We have come to that wondrous time when we will finish the book of Leviticus. I almost feel like standing and singing Auld Lang Syne, for it seems as if we are leaving an old friend. I have grown to love this old book in a new and fresh way as we have been working through it these many weeks together and seeing the marvelous pictures by which God teaches us, as his children in the kindergarten of faith, the lessons that he has for us. This book has come to be of rich meaning to me, more than ever before, and I hope that is true for you also.

In the twenty-seventh chapter God, most appropriately, ends his instructions to his people with a word about vows to him. Whether you call them vows or resolutions or determinations or promises, they are all in the same category and God has certain instructions for us about them which it is important that we understand.

This latter section of Leviticus is dealing with human behavior. The book began with instruction and revelation to us about our basic humanity, our basic human needs. Then it told us God's provision to meet those needs. Finally it moved into this area of the behavior expected of us on the basis of the provision God has made. It is appropriate, therefore, that it should end by dealing with the promises that we make to God in response to what he has done for us.

These promises, as you well know from your own experience, are made in times of danger, or in moments of strong desire, or sometimes out of gratitude and thanksgiving as God has blessed our hearts. If you have ever said, "Lord, if you'll just do such-and-such, then I'll do such-and-such for you," then you will be very interested in what this chapter has to say.

I must point out immediately that in all the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments alike, God never commands a vow. Vows are never mandatory, never obligatory, upon the people of God. You don't have to promise God anything in order to get something from

him. God is a Giver. He delights in giving; that is his nature. "Every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change," James tells us (James 1:17 RSV). Because God is a God of love, he delights in giving. John Oxenham says,

Love ever lives
and ever stands with open hands
and while it lives, it gives
for this is love's prerogative
to give and give and give.

God is always giving, and there is nothing that you need from God which, in order to obtain, you must promise him something in return. All this is voluntary on your part.

And yet it is significant that there is something innate in human beings which makes us want to vow, to promise new resolutions or determinations to God. So God recognizes that tendency and makes room for it, and he gives us instructions about it. You remember that when he left home Jacob made a vow in an attempt to bargain with God. There are records in the Scriptures of many others who made various vows before God. This is certainly something with which we all identify. And what the Scriptures everywhere also teach is that once you make a vow, God expects you to fulfill it. If you turn to the next book in the Bible, Numbers, and look at Chapter 30 you will see how clearly that is stated in the opening verses:

Moses said to the heads of the tribes of the people of Israel, "This is what the Lord has commanded. When a man vows a vow to the Lord, or swears an oath to bind himself by a pledge, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth." (Numbers 30:1-2 RSV)

He doesn't have to make the vow. But once he makes it, God expects him to keep it. There are various passages which remind us of that fact. Proverbs says, "It is better never to vow, than to make a vow and not pay it." So God does expect us to fulfill the promises we make to him during the course of our life.

There are several categories of vows listed in this chapter. We are not going to get involved with the details of them because they

largely apply to the then prevailing conditions of the nation Israel in their relationship with God. But the principles behind them are of permanent application, and with these we will be concerned.

The first category is those vows made concerning persons, Verses 1-8:

The LORD said to Moses, "Say to the people of Israel, When a man makes a special vow of persons to the LORD at your valuation, then your valuation of a male from twenty years old up to sixty years old shall be fifty shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary. [That was a considerable amount, a very high valuation.] If the person is a female, your valuation shall be thirty shekels. If the person is from five years old up to twenty years old, your valuation shall be for a male twenty shekels, and for a female ten shekels. If the person is from a month old up to five years old, your valuation shall be for a male five shekels of silver, and for a female your valuation shall be three shekels of silver. And if the person is sixty years old and upward, then your valuation for a male shall be fifteen shekels, and for a female ten shekels. And if a man is too poor to pay your valuation, then he shall bring the person before the priest, and the priest shall value him; according to the ability of him who vowed the priest shall value him." (Leviticus 27:1-8 RSV)

There are several items which require comment in that passage:

First of all, you will notice that the nature of this vow is that it was made about persons, either about the individual who made the vow himself, or often it was a vow made out of desire for the benefit of someone else a parent, a child, a servant, or a friend. As we all know, there are times when we become concerned about someone and tend to pray, "Lord, if you'll just do such-and-such for this person, then I'll do something for you. I'll invest to an unusual degree in your work." What it amounts to here is that in Israel they were saying to God, "I'll support the work of the priesthood and give above and beyond what I ordinarily would give if you'll just benefit or bless or help so-and-so."

When a promise of this nature was made there was a scale of values predetermined by God which Moses was to transmit and from which he was not free to deviate in any degree. If the person in

question were a certain age and sex then there was an amount set for him or her, and that had to be paid if the blessing was received. God gave careful instructions to his people regarding this kind of promise.

From the Women's Liberation point of view, Moses here is a male chauvinist pig, for this scale of values differs between the male and the female. But we must remind ourselves that this is not at all an assessment of the worth of the persons before God. In both the Old and the New Testaments, there are clear statements that men and women are of equal value and standing as persons before God. As Paul says in Galatians, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female..." All distinctions, including sex, are wiped out when we are standing in the presence of God and our worth to him is being evaluated.

Rather, this is a reckoning of the opportunity for service before men. Differences of age and sex, in Israel, made for varying opportunities to serve and thus for different values. That is what is recognized here -- the obligation of service which could be rendered to the priesthood to further its outreach and strengthen its ministry within the nation of Israel, on the basis of the person who received the benefit, who was blessed.

It is clear from Verse 8 that other people are involved: "And if a man is too poor to pay your valuation, then he shall bring the person [about whom he made this vow] before the priest, and the priest shall value him."

Note that he was not to bring him to Moses, but to the priest. That indicates that there are two kinds of vows. You see, provision was made here in Verse 8 for inability to pay. Moses is always the representative of the throne, the government, the way of God, while the priest is always the representative of the grace and mercy of God, the tender character of his love.

If a man were bargaining with God on a legalistic basis: "I'll do this for you, if you'll do that for me," then he had to pay the full price. There was no way that he could get out of it. Moses could not lessen or change the price in any way. God demanded full deliverance of what was promised.

On the spiritual level, of course, this applies to us. If we promise God certain things in moments of danger, or if we try to bargain with him, try to get him to work for us, God expects us to pay to the full exactly what we promise. But if a man recognized that he didn't have what it took, that he was too poor to pay the price, he could still offer a promise to God out of thanksgiving and gratitude, but the priest, the representative of God's grace, would enter the picture and, in a sense, intercede on his behalf and establish a valuation he could meet.

This is a beautiful picture of those vows and promises we make not to bargain with God but to express to him our thanksgiving for all that he has been to us. When our hearts are melted by grace and we stand awed in his presence and say, "Lord, here I am, take me," or "Here are my children, Lord, take them and use them as you like," these are vows made on a gracious basis, and God promises to meet any attendant need himself. What the people of God cannot gain by the Law they can have by grace and, as the New Testament puts it, "exceeding abundantly above all they could ask or think..." (Ephesians 3:20 KJV). That is the way God always operates in grace.

The rest of the chapter is simply detailed instruction as to how these vows could be paid. We will not take time to read it -- you can do so at your leisure.

Verses 14-15 specify that houses could be dedicated to God in payment of a vow. Verses 16-25 provide for the dedication of land, in connection with the year of jubilee, when all land had to return to its original owner, regardless of who was using it at the time, because God held absolute title to the entire land. In Verses 26-34 certain things were excluded as payment of vows: For instance, the firstlings of animals could not be used to pay a vow because God had said, "Every firstborn person or animal that opens the womb shall be mine..." (Exodus 13:2). Therefore that could not be used to pay a vow because it already belonged to God. Then there were devoted things which could not be used, Verse 28:

"But no devoted thing that a man devotes to the LORD, or anything that he has, whether of man or beast, or of his inherited field, shall be sold or redeemed; every devoted thing is most holy to the LORD." (Leviticus 27:28 RSV)

In Israel it was possible to take a child or a servant or an animal and devote that person or animal for the entire span of his life to the service of God. Hannah did this with her son Samuel (1 Samuel 1:1-28). Even before he was born she promised him to God. And when her boy grew old enough she took him to the temple and gave him to God to be used in the service there. Samuel the prophet grew up in the temple as a devoted thing unto God.

Finally, Verses 29-33, no condemned person could be used to pay a vow, because he belonged to God already. Nor could tithes be used to pay a vow, because they also belonged to the LORD already.

All the detail of this chapter, of course, is speaking to us. And we must ask the question, What do vows mean to us? What is the function of vows in our lives? For it is impossible not to make vows. Every time we deal with God we tend, in some sense, to make a vow or a promise. On one hand, the flesh within us wants to bargain with God. We have all felt this way. We have all wanted to say to God, whether we've actually said it or not, "Lord, I want this so badly. If you'll just do this for me, I'll do something for you." We tend to come to God on that legalistic, bargaining basis. And when we come on that basis God says, "All right, whatever you say. But remember, you are going to have to fulfill it!"

A few years ago a young man came up to me after a service. He was rather nervous and very disturbed, and he said, "I want to tell you a story." So I sat down with him and he told me, "Two years ago I was in Vietnam. Our company was pinned down under an enemy barrage. I was in an exposed position, bullets were whistling over my head, shrapnel was exploding all around me, and I was scared stiff. I was sure I would not get out of there alive. I prayed and cried out to God [the young man was already a Christian], 'Lord, I know what you want: you want me to enter the ministry. If you'll get me back safely, I'll go to school and start training for it.' And God answered that prayer and brought me back safely."

Then he said that the minute he got out of the Army he went into business and started making money. He put the vow in the back of his mind. "But," he said, "you know, an amazing thing has happened. At first I made lots of money. I was a success. I almost forgot this promise I had made, and I thought God had forgotten it.

But strange things have been happening recently. Despite the general success of my type of business, despite the favorable conditions for business, despite everything I can do, I've been gradually losing money. In very odd ways my business has been falling apart, and, just yesterday, I lost the whole thing. I know what God is saying to me. He has taken me at my word. He has taken my business away, and I know what I've got to do. I just wanted you to hear the story. I don't need any advice; I know what God wants me to do."

He enrolled in seminary the next day and today he is in the ministry. God holds us to that kind of legalistic bargaining.

But, on the other hand, if we come to God, and say, "Lord, you have done so tremendously much for me! My heart is so moved that I just want to promise you this, and this, out of my life. But I don't know how to pay it. I know that I won't be able to do that myself, and so I look to you, Lord, to help me fulfill it." That kind of promise God loves, and he will pick us up and make the performance of that vow richer and fuller than we could ever have dreamed, fulfilling it "exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think..." (Ephesians 3:20 KJV). You see, God uses our vows to stretch us, to bring us out.

Have you ever noticed how often our hymns reflect promises or vows we make as the people of God? Yesterday I was in Oakland listening to a talk by Dr. Charles Allen, pastor of the huge, 10,000-member First Methodist Church of Houston, Texas. He told of an experience he had recently, when he was conducting a morning worship service, and, right in the middle of singing a hymn, he broke into loud laughter. His wife rebuked him afterward. She said, "I was embarrassed that you would break out in laughter like that right in the middle of a song, for no reason at all." "Well," he said, "I couldn't help it. We were singing 'Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee,' and I noticed the words of the third verse: 'Take my silver and my gold, Not a mite would I withhold.' It suddenly struck me, with all the millionaires sitting in the congregation, what if God would answer that prayer right then? Some of them would be very upset and angry with him. I've been encouraging them to give their silver and gold for a long time, but they've not been willing. But now they're singing, 'Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold.'"

I often think, as we sing hymns, of Jesus' admonition that we will have to give an account for every idle word that we utter. We ought not to sing hymns without meaning what we say. I don't know if you watch me, but sometimes when we are singing a hymn and I see what the words are, I shut up! Because I'm not ready to say that yet, and I know that God is listening. Hymns are not just to fill in the time, nor to give you a chance to stand after you have been sitting awhile. They are a way of saying something to God.

So what are vows? They are a way God has of drawing us along toward maturity and of claiming his rightful ownership of us.

If you read this passage through carefully you will see that in every case, whether it is persons or animals or houses or lands or whatever being pledged, ultimate title, absolute right, belongs to God. Ownership was vested in God. It is all his. We sing it sometimes in our offertory hymn:

We give Thee but Thine own,
Whate'er the gift may be:
All that we have is Thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from Thee.

That is true. That is the meaning of the words carved in the wall behind this platform: "You are not your own; You are bought with a price," 1 Corinthians 6:19-20). If you belong to God then you are already his. And vows and promises are ways he has of fulfilling that fact and leading us into its realization. Sometimes we make rash promises, as Jephthah did, and give God things that we wouldn't ordinarily, because we want something from him. And then he holds us to it, and leads us along. The young man I mentioned probably would never have gone to seminary if he had not made that vow in the heat of conflict in Vietnam. God used that vow to fulfill his purpose in that man's life.

God also uses the promises we make when our hearts are moved and stirred to thanksgiving. We offer ourselves to him and he takes us at our word and claims us and thus establishes his right in our life.

A woman said to me the other day, "I know I don't have too many

years left (she had had cancer, and an operation had given her a reprieve for awhile), but I promised the Lord that I would give the remaining years of my life to him in a way I never have before. I'll be available for whatever he wants me to do." God was using that vow to fulfill her life and to bring her along to the place where he could claim his rightful inheritance in her. This is the way God deals with us.

Last night I was listening to a talk by Howard Butt, Jr., an articulate layman from Corpus Christi, Texas. He said that God deals with so many people as if they were apples. He seems to take them like eating a whole apple with one bite. But he felt that he was more like an onion -- God kept taking him layer by layer. I identify with that. I think that this is way God has dealt with me. And he uses these promises, these moment of intense gratitude, these feelings of deep devotion, when we offer God our lives. Remember the plaque that you sometimes see hanging on a wall:

Only one life
T'will soon be past
Only what's done
For Christ will last.

God uses these promises to remind us of that fact. I like to change that last line and say, "Only what Christ does in me will last." Only that part of my life which I give back to him will I have throughout eternity. That which I keep for myself will never make it beyond the grave. But that which I give back to him, whatever it is, I will have throughout all the ages of eternity.

I'm tempted to close this service with a time of giving ourselves to God. And yet I'm not impressed with public demonstrations like that. I think God is not much impressed with them either, because we tend to think that was the moment we gave ourselves to him, and then we forget it. What impresses God is when we give ourselves to him in the daily course of events. The book of Leviticus is closing at exactly the point to which Paul brings us in Romans 12:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God which is your reasonable service. And be not conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind... (Romans 12:1-2a KJV).

That is reasonable for you as a human -- to present your body. And the word means "keep on presenting." The presentation God is impressed with is: perhaps this afternoon at home, when your children irritate you or your wife does something you don't like, or your husband is a grouch, and you are tempted to say something sharp and caustic but instead you stop and you yield yourself not as an instrument of unrighteousness unto sin but of righteousness unto God. Instead of saying something sharp and cutting you say something encouraging and helpful, something which changes the situation. "Soft words drive away wrath, but sharpness produces strife." That is the kind of presentation God is talking about.

In the closing pages of the book we are brought face to face with those moments when we want to say to God, "Lord, here is my life. Here I am; I give it to you. And here are my children; I give them to you. My friendships -- whatever -- Lord, here they are. I want you to have them, to possess them. And even though I struggle with you, please take them anyway, and help me to fulfill my promises to you in the day to day, moment by moment living of my life." In such a moment you can simply stand quietly before God and say whatever you want to say to him about your life. He already owns it! What a joy it is to take that which is his inheritance in the saints -- your life and mine -- and return it to him and say, "Lord here is your inheritance: claim it for yourself." You can read again those verses from Romans 12 while you say to him whatever he lays upon your heart:

I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good, and acceptable, and perfect. (Romans 12:1-2 RSV)

Prayer:

Our Father, we don't want to come to you like Jacob, bargaining with you, or like Jephthah, making rash promises we cannot fulfill or that would hurt ourselves or someone else terribly if we did fulfill them. We want to come trusting your love and grace, Father, returning to you what is rightfully yours. Keep us from robbing you, Lord Jesus, of your rightful inheritance. Help us give back to you that which properly belongs to you -- all that we are, our very lives. We do it in your name. Amen.

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