

LEVITICUS -- LESSON 8  
CHAPTERS 21-22  
THE TRUE CHARACTER OF THE PRIESTS AND  
SACRED OBLIGATIONS

**Topic**

- □ I. The law set a high standard of holiness for the ordinary folks; it set an even higher standard for the priests who ministered in the presence of the Lord.
  - □ A. The people had to meet a high standard because they were called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Ex. 19:5-6.
  - □ B. The priests, who were selected to be spiritual leaders, were obligated to demonstrate the Lord's holiness to the congregation.
    - □ 1. By establishing physical and spiritual qualifications and conduct of the priests, God claimed the totality of their lives.
    - □ 2. The priesthood was not an occupation, but a life.
- □ II. Chapter 21.
  - □ A. The three main subjects addressed in chapter 21 are funerals, marriages, physical qualifications.
    - □ 1. The chapter provides a better understanding of dealing with the problem of death in the eternal program of God, and reveals a great deal of what God intended for the institution of marriage.
    - □ 2. Those set apart for spiritual leadership could not defile themselves by mourning for the dead or by entering unholy marriages, and were disqualified from service if they had serious physical defects and, if unclean or unqualified, were barred from offering and eating sacrificial food.
    - □ 3. Those set apart for spiritual leadership, like the sacrifices, had to be without spot or blemish.
  - □ B. The arrangement of the chapter is:
    - □ 1. Requirements for ordinary priests about funerals and marriages -- vv. 1-9.
    - □ 2. Requirements for the high priest about funerals and marriages -- vv. 10-15.
    - □ 3. Requirements for all Levites on qualifications for service -- vv. 16-24.
- □ III. Discussion.
  - □ A. Those who minister before the Lord must maintain the hope of the covenant in times of bereavement (vv. 1-6; 10-12).
    - □ 1. The death of a relative.
      - □ a. The priests had to avoid the defilement arising from contact with a dead person and with the funeral unless it was the death of a very close relative.
        - □ 1. In Israel death was originally connected with the curse between those separated from God (Gen. 3:19).
        - □ 2. The barrier between life and death was such that contact with the dead brought uncleanness (Num. 19:11-22).

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- □3. The priest was to remain separate from the rituals related to death, even the mourning for the dead.
- □b. Verse 4 is a difficult verse.
- □1. Translations of the verse.
  - □a. A literal translation is "He shall not be defiled, a lord (*baal*), among his people."
    - □1) The word *baal* is also used for husband; thus, the literal translation may refer to the priest as the "chief man," *i.e.*, the head of his house, or as a husband, the head of his family.
    - □2) This leads to three possible translations, or interpretations, of the verse.
      - □a) The priest is not to mourn the death of household servants.
      - □b) The priest is not to mourn the death of his wife.
      - □c) The priest is not to mourn the death of those related by marriage, *i.e.*, not related by blood (the wife is considered a "blood relative based on Gen. 2:21-24).
  - □b. This is reflected in the translations.
    - □1) He shall not mourn the death of his wife (a wife is not listed in vv. 2-3).
      - □a) He shall not make himself unclean as a husband among his people and so profane himself. (Lev 21:4 ESV)
      - □b) He shall not defile himself as a husband among his people and so profane himself. (Lev 21:4 RSV)
    - □2) A priest shall not mourn the death of one not a close relative
      - □a) He shall not defile himself as a relative by marriage among his people, and so profane himself. (Lev 21:4 NAS)
      - □b) He is not to make himself unclean for those related to him by marriage and so defile himself. (Lev 21:4 CSB)
      - □c) He must not make himself unclean for people related to him by marriage, and so defile himself. (Lev 21:4 NIV)
    - □3) A priest shall not defile himself by mourning the death of servants in his household.
      - □a) A master priest doth not defile himself among his people -- to pollute himself; (Lev 21:4 YLT)
      - □b) He shall not defile himself, being a chief man among his people, to profane himself. (Lev 21:4 ASV)
      - □c) But he shall not defile himself, being a chief man among his people, to profane himself. (Lev 21:4 KJV)
      - □d) Otherwise he shall not defile himself, being a chief man among his people, to profane himself. (Lev 21:4 NKJ)
- □2. Interpretations of the verse.

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- □ a. It is inconceivable that God would prohibit a priest from mourning the loss of one who is the closest of all in the world -- his wife.
  - □ 1) If that is the case, why is she not listed among those in vv. 2-3?
  - □ 2) Could it be because she is in fact not "kin," but is identical with the priest in that they are "one"?
- □ b. The second translation of the verse (not mourn for those not blood relatives, such as in-laws and the wives near kin) seems to be a forced interpretation.
  - □ 1) It must be construed to exclude the wife who can only be considered a blood relative under Gen. 2:21-24.
  - □ 2) But why would it be necessary to have a specific prohibition relative to non-blood relations when God has already prohibited mourning at all except for "near kin?"
- □ c. This leaves us with the third understanding -- the priest shall not mourn for household servants who serve in his house.
- □ c. Mourning rituals must also be avoided.
  - □ 1. This included shaving the head (probably above the forehead (Deut. 14:1), shaving the edges of the beard, and cutting the body.
  - □ 2. These all reflected mourning practices current in Canaan (Lev. 19:27).
  - □ 3. Not only did such rituals show the priest mourning the dead, but they involved mutilation of the body and possibly suggested pagan veneration of the dead.
- □ 2. The second part of the same passage deals with the same laws applied to the High Priest -- the priest who is greater than his brother. (vv. 10-12).
  - □ a. Since he was the closest to the Lord his standard was the highest.
  - □ b. He had had the anointing oil poured on his head; therefore, he could not uncover his head or tear his garments.
  - □ c. He could not go near a dead body, even of his father or mother, and thereby become unclean (v. 11).
  - □ d. He could not leave the sanctuary because he had been dedicated to its service.
  - □ e. His obligations to God surpass his obligations to his family.
- □ 3. God put very high standards on those who represented him to the people.
  - □ a. The people had to be reminded of the holiness and the hope of their covenant even in times of bereavement.
  - □ b. After all, God was the God of the living; he created life, he preserved life, and he would restore it.
  - □ c. The priests, of all people, could not weep and mourn as the world mourns.
  - □ d. For them to do so made the covenant profane.
- □ 4. In the N.T., Jesus, by his death and resurrection, has taken the sting out of death. 1 Cor. 15:55.
  - □ a. In his earthly ministry Jesus put things in proper perspective, telling his disciples to "let the dead bury the dead" (Luke 9:60).

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- □ b. Death is still a time of sadness for those who remain, but the resurrection assures us that believers who die do not die in vain (1 Cor. 15:16-20).
- □ c. Death should not be a time of great lamentation and grief, because, for the believer, "to die is gain" (Phil 1:21).
- □ d. Therefore, Christians are not to "weep as others who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13).
- □ e. When Christ returns, he will bring with him all of the blessed who have died in the him (Rev. 14:13; 1 Thess. 4:14).
- □ B. Those who minister before the Lord must represent the purity of the covenant in their marriages.
  - □ 1. The second part of chapter 21 gives regulations for the marriages of the priests.
    - □ a. Ordinary priests are considered in vv. 7-9.
    - □ b. The High Priest is addressed in vv. 13-15.
  - □ 2. The priests could not marry a woman defiled by prostitution or one who had been divorced.
    - □ a. Some translations divide the first two words to read "a woman who is a prostitute or defiled" because a woman might be sexually defiled in ways other than by prostitution.
    - □ b. At any rate, the ruling prohibited the priest from marrying a woman who had been with another man or other men illegitimately or who had ended a marriage by divorce.
    - □ c. A woman who had been defiled by prostitution or who was divorced could never be certain of the origin of her child, which was of primal importance because the priestly office was hereditary.
    - □ d. Faithful Israel sought holiness and purity in marriage, and that necessarily ruled out any defilement by previous sexual relations.
    - □ e. As religious leaders, the priests exemplified for the people what marriage was intended to be: one man and one woman producing godly offspring (Mal. 2:15-16).
  - □ 3. Leviticus 21:9 contains a parenthesis concerning another case of defilement through sexual activity.
    - □ a. If the daughter of a priest became a prostitute, she profaned her father.
    - □ b. To purge this defilement from the land, the law called for the penalty of burning.
      - □ 1. Burning may have been the means of death, but more likely refers to burning the body after the death penalty was carried out.
      - □ 2. Burning the body was symbolic: it cleansed the camp of this defilement by removing the remains.
  - □ 4. If marriage was important for the ordinary priest, it was even more so for the High Priest (vv. 13-15).
    - □ a. He could marry only a virgin from his own people -- an Israelite.

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- □ b. The text then lists the women he could not marry:
  - □ 1. a widow;
  - □ 2. a divorced woman;
  - □ 3. a woman defiled by prostitution.
- □ c. To marry such a woman made his children common or profane and was unacceptable because the office of the High Priest was hereditary.
- □ d. While the NT has no hereditary priestly office, still the marriage of an elder in the church must still be exemplary (1 Tim. 3:2; cf. 1 Tim. 3:11 re the wives of deacons).
  - □ 1. The sanctity of marriage has always been of great importance in the household of faith because scripture compares it to the covenant that we have with the Lord.
  - □ 2. Paul drew of this imagery when he told the Corinthians that he has espoused them "to one husband, to Christ, ...as a pure virgin" (2 Cor. 11:2).
- □ C. Those who minister before the Lord must be approved to perform their duties -- vv. 16-23.
  - □ 1. The priests had to be whole, without defects or blemishes.
    - □ a. The disqualifying defects are: blind, lame, disfigured or deformed, crippled foot or hand, hunchback or dwarf, eye defect, festering or running sores, damaged testicles (vv. 18-20).
    - □ b. Their entire physical condition had to display the perfection of God's creation, just as the sacrifices had to be the best of the animal world.
  - □ 2. Disqualified priests still participated in other priestly functions and could still eat the portions given them in the sanctuary; they just could not serve as sacrificing priests in the Holy Place.
    - □ a. These laws concerned the requirements for those entering the actual presence of God with the sacrificial blood.
    - □ b. The restrictions demonstrated that physical defects, illness, and disease were incompatible with the holiness of God.
  - □ 3. There are no such requirements for the priesthood today, whether you apply it to church leaders, as in the temple, or to the church as a royal priesthood.
  - □ 4. The cultic laws required physical wholeness for temple worship because it foreshadowed the actual going into glory into the very presence of God.
- □ IV. Chapter 22 -- Instructions for the Priestly Life.
  - □ A. Those who minister before the Lord must remain pure if they are to lead corporate worship (vv. 1-16).
    - □ 1. The final section of this unit warns against priests' eating the bread or sacrificial meat while they were defiled by ceremonial uncleanness.
      - □ a. Vv. 4-5 detail the standard types of uncleanness.

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- □ b. The priests were human; they had times of uncleanness like everyone else, and in uncleanness barred common worshippers from the sanctuary, it certainly barred priests as well.
- □ 2. Beginning in v. 10 the text rules on who may eat of the holy food in the sanctuary.
  - □ a. Anyone outside the priestly family, any guest of the priests, and any hired hands are prohibited from eating.
  - □ b. V. 11 permits those whom the priest might have acquired as slaves or those born in his house to eat.
  - □ c. It then adds that if a daughter married an outsider she could not eat, unless through widowhood or divorce she returned to the fathers house (vv. 12-13).
  - □ d. If people ate the holy food by mistake they had to bring the reparation offering (vv. 14-15).
- □ 3. This section began with the general instruction that the priests had to treat the sacred offerings with respect so that they did not profane the holy name (v. 2).
  - □ a. The sanctity of the divine name then was the motivation for their obedience.
  - □ b. The name of the Lord is the Lord himself -- all that he is known to be through his attributes.
  - □ c. When the priests were set apart to serve the Lord in all the aspects of the life of the community, they were essentially called to preserve the faith in all its purity and holiness.
- □ 4. How did the people profane the name of the Lord?
  - □ a. By disobedience.
  - □ b. Likewise today when people fail to prepare their hearts for worship by examining themselves, then they are treating the Lord as unimportant and his table as if it were an ordinary meal.
  - □ c. People also profane the Lord when they give to God less than their best or when they use the gifts God has given them for purely secular purposes.
- □ 5. Lessons:
  - □ a. The New Testament teaches that today believers in Christ are a kingdom of priests.
    - □ 1. As a kingdom of priests today we serve under a greater High Priest, Jesus Christ.
    - □ 2. Even though Israel was also formed to be a kingdom of priests, just as our High Priest of the new covenant is better than the Aaronic priests, the function of today's kingdom of priests is on a higher level in regard to both the revelation that we enjoy and the spiritual enlightenment that we enjoy, including the access into the heavenly (Eph. 1:3).
  - □ b. From this kingdom of priests God has chosen some to be leaders -- elders, deacons, evangelists, and teachers.

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- □ 1. Those who are spiritual leaders must live on a higher level of spirituality and obedience.
- □ 2. There is no ruling against mourning, but leaders must reflect the hope of the faith in their mourning.
- □ 3. The instructions on marriage are no different for leaders than for others, but their marriage must be exemplary.
- □ 4. There is no restriction on people with physical defects serving as a leader, but spiritual defects disqualify them.
- □ 5. There are no cultic purity laws under the New Covenant, but there is a standard of righteousness and holiness in the way worship is conducted so that it will bring glory to the Lord.
- □ B. Pleasing God in worship (vv. 17-23).
  - □ 1. The last half of chapter 22 logically follows the first half.
    - □ a. If the priests had to exemplify the holiness of the Lord in their lives, they surely had to safeguard holiness in the service as well, and that meant offering sacrifices that were acceptable to God.
    - □ b. The link between the last section of rules for the priests and this section of rules for the sacrifices is underscored by "I am the Lord (21:12; 22:2, 3, 8, 30, 31, 33).
    - □ c. This repeated declaration forms a stamp of authority, making compliance an absolute necessity.
  - □ 2. Instructions for worship.
    - □ a. Faithful worshipers approach God with acceptable sacrifices (vv. 17-28).
      - □ 1. Everything in the first section is written to safeguard the appropriateness of the sacrifices.
        - □ a. The animals to be offered were to be without blemish (vv. 21-24).
        - □ b. For the optional sacrifices, minor blemishes were permitted (v. 23).
        - □ c. The point is that both priests and sacrifices had to be acceptable to God; they had to be perfect.
        - □ d. To make atonement or to offer praise to the holy God who was perfect and blameless, one had to bring the best sacrifices possible.
        - □ e. This emphasis is reiterated in the theology of the New Testament, not only for believers who bring their gifts to God, but in the fulfillment of the typology that portrays Christ as the blameless, spotless Lamb of God.
        - □ f. An innocent, pure, healthy victim had to be offered for guilty, impure, and diseased sinners.
        - □ g. The standard of a perfect sacrifice is basic in Christianity.
      - □ 2. The second safeguard in the chapter is for the animal's benefit (vv. 26-28).
        - □ a. The people had to wait before sacrificing the young animal, both to insure that it was living and for humanitarian purposes (See also Deut. 22:6).

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- □ b. People may have started taking animals at a young age because it was easier for them to be without defect; additionally, the younger they were the less care they required.
- □ c. These laws are variously understood, from prohibiting pagan practices to preventing cruelty and other outrages against nature.
- □ d. They may also have been to preserve animal stock since constantly depleting flocks and herds could lead to the destruction of part of God's creation.
- □ e. Some simply comment that while God requires generous giving, he does not require foolish giving.
- □ b. Faithful worshipers ensure that spiritual service is offered to the Lord alone (vv. 29-30).
  - □ 1. As the worshipers brought their sacrifices as thank offerings to the Lord, they had to make sure that they were consumed there on the grounds.
  - □ 2. This communal meal was never to be confused with a common meal.
  - □ 3. What was given to God was for God's purpose and use; it therefore had to retain the spontaneity of freshness of its occasion.
- □ c. Faithful worshipers comply with the requirements of the holy God who sanctifies (vv. 31-33).
  - □ 1. This final section calls for obedience to the commands.
  - □ 2. The description of the Lord as "Sanctifier" and "Redeemer" shows clear motivations to offer acceptable sacrifices.
  - □ 3. The faith of Israel was centered in a person, the Lord, who redeemed them and sanctified them.
  - □ 4. He deserved all of their obedience.
- □ 3. Concluding observations.
  - □ a. Those who worship the redeeming, sanctifying Lord God must come into his presence with acceptable offerings.
  - □ b. The redeemed and sanctified worshiper will bring other gifts of homage to the Lord, and what we bring must certainly meet the standards God gave Israel -- only the best could be given to God (See 2 Cor. 8-9; Phil. 4:10-20; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 13:15-16).
  - □ c. It is interesting to note that the only damaged or broken sacrifice that people can offer to God is themselves; without a broken and contrite heart, forgiveness is not available, and without forgiveness no other gift to God will be acceptable.