

Swearing & Stoning

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back then to the book of Leviticus in chapter 24. And we can read again at verse 15.

Speak to the people of Israel, saying, Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death.

All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner, as well as the native, when he blasphemes the name, shall be put to death.

You're probably thinking by now, what a strange text and what a strange chapter.

And in many ways that is very true. This particular section of Leviticus is one of the few parts of Leviticus where there is a narrative, an actual story, rather than simply the enunciation of many, many laws.

[1 : 23] And Leviticus is, of course, primarily known as the book of the law. And you would have noticed, as we sang, that all our psalms are connected with the observing of the law.

But in order to understand, perhaps, exactly what happens here, and how it happens, we have to put ourselves a little bit in the place of the children of Israel at this particular time.

Where are they? They are in the wilderness of Sinai. They are still camped in front of Mount Sinai.

And they have been here approximately at this time somewhere between six and eight months. They will continue to be here for almost a full year.

Before the Lord, the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud, again, signals to them that it is time to move the camp.

[2 : 35] We don't often realise that they were there that long. And sometimes that should bring us to think, in the amazing way that God provided for them, in what was a barren, barren wilderness.

You remember how God had provided manna, and how he had brought water out of the rock, and so on. And to feed over a million people at a time, that was quite a miraculous thing.

There was probably about a million and a half there all together. The figures that are given are normally figures that are given to the head count of the men.

And if you take into account women and children, and you take also into account what we come across in this particular chapter, those who followed them, who were not necessarily pure descendants of the children of Israelite.

Which is the case that we have here, an Israelite woman's son, in verse 10, whose father was an Egyptian. And one of the things that it shows us very clearly, is that the children of Israel, when they left Egypt, they didn't leave by themselves.

[3 : 54] There were many others who went with them. We tend to forget that. At no point are we told how many. But we are told again and again.

And you see it here, emphasised in verse 22. You shall have the same rule for the sojourner. That is, the person who dwells with you, who is not a direct descendant of the children of Israel, or who might be, as in this case, a mixture.

I was going to say a half-breed. I was going to say a half-breed, but that's not a very nice word to use for them. Mixed race. And for the native, for I am the Lord, your God.

And God will make clear again and again, that the laws that apply to Israel apply to every single person who is with them on this journey.

Now you have to bear in mind that what had left Egypt was a rabble of slaves.

[4 : 57] That's exactly what they were. They were a rabble of slaves who had been in slavery under Pharaoh for a good number of years. It's not exactly clear when they became slaves in the 400 odd years that they stayed in Egypt.

From the time of Joseph onwards, when a new dynasty comes into Egypt, the actual pharaohs of the time were defeated by the Hiskos, which was an Assyrian tribe that moved in.

And the kingdom was fractured into two halves. And the northern half, where the children of Israel dwelt in Goshen, it was there that they were then forced into slavery and to build the various treasure cities and probably the pyramids and other things.

But again, that's another part of the story altogether. But by the time they come out of Israel, there is no organization whatsoever, sorry, out of Egypt, there is no organization whatsoever among them.

Moses and Aaron are the spokespeople for them at the beginning, but it is not clear anywhere as they leave Egypt whether there is an organization of tribes, of families, of peoples, etc.

[6 : 20] They have certainly obeyed the Passover, they have obeyed what Moses has told them through God, but when they come out and when they reach Sinai, they are still a disordered rabble of people.

And it is at Sinai that God's purpose is then opened up to. And this is something that you see throughout Scripture.

God is a God of order. From chaos, He brings order all the way through Scripture. And He brings order to the people.

First of all, as you follow through the book of Exodus, when we reach Sinai, the first order that is put in place is a spiritual order. It is then that the instructions are given.

You remember the Ten Commandments being given. And then come the instructions after that for the tabernacle, for the worship, for the high priests. And then as we reach into the book of Leviticus, we go from the spiritual to the social.

[7 : 31] And in Leviticus, a great number of the laws that are given are laws that rule, or are supposed to rule, society. The way in which we behave to those round about us.

And in the chapters prior to this, there are laws, various laws about illnesses, and laws about sexual morality, and so on.

And that is probably what makes Leviticus, for many of us, an extremely boring book to read. We find it extremely boring to study all these different laws about leprosy, and this, that, and the next thing, and so on.

But nevertheless, there is a purpose in this. God has a purpose. He knows very well something that the children of Israel don't know.

He knows that for the next 40 years, they will be wandering in the desert as he guides them. Because of their disobedience. You remember the disobedience when they reach the border of the land of Canaan, the promised land, and the spies bring back the report that they do not want to go in and to fight with the people there to take the land.

[8 : 52] And you remember as a result of that, that God makes them to wander through the desert for 40 years until that generation completely dies out, with the exception of two.

And that is Caleb and Joshua, who are the only two who are permitted to enter the promised land of the original group who left Egypt.

And this is the picture, in a sense, that we get in this chapter as well. If I were to sort of follow the procedure that your esteemed minister uses, I would call this The Lamp, The Loaves, and The Loudmouth.

A little bit of alliteration to remember there. And it seems very curious, does it not, that in the middle of all these various laws and things, suddenly we come across this punishment for blasphemy.

The beginning of the chapter, the lamp, this is this lampstand that is in the holy place, in the tabernacle.

[10 : 02] An instruction is given, Moses is given an instruction from God there, that the lamp is to be continually maintained, day and night. This is the menorah, the Jewish lampstand, the one that we so often see with the various branches, etc.

The seven lamps on it, one for each day of the week. But all the lamp was to be lit and to be kept lit 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

And you can see here at the beginning, in verse 3, that this is a job that Aaron has particularly. Aaron shall arrange it from evening to morning before the Lord regularly.

It is a daily thing. And it seems to have been the high priest that this was part of his duty. Remember, of course, that in the Holy of Holies and in the holy place in the tabernacle, there was no daylight.

There were no windows. So there was no light that entered into it because of the curtains at the door and so on and the coverings on the top. The only way of seeing anything inside was through the lamp that was given from this lampstand.

[11 : 20] And of course, the lampstand signifies God's presence at all times. that God is a light to his people, day and night, morning and evening, every single day.

It's a daily thing. There is no change. He shall arrange the lamps on the lampstand of pure gold before the Lord regularly.

And you see with the table again that it is a table of pure gold. Everything that was in the Holy of Holies and in the holy place was made of pure gold.

And if you go back and as you look at the instructions that are given for the priests, for the tabernacle, for the clothing of the priests, there is one theme that connects them all the time.

And the pure gold is a symbol of it. You remember that the Holy of Holies is covered. The boards are covered with gold. The Ark of the Covenant is made of gold.

[12 : 26] The cherubim are made of gold. And what was the significance of that? As you work out from the interior of the tabernacle to the outside, you go from gold to baser metals.

You go from gold to silver and so on. And at the centre of the worship of Israel is the theme of holiness to the Lord. It's there all the way through, symbolically, in everything, all the instruments of the tabernacle, in everything that he made, but even more specifically than that.

You remember the bonnets of the high priest, what he had to wear when he went into the Holy of Holies once a year on the Day of Atonement. It said on the top of it, in Exodus 39 and verse 30, it said, holiness to the Lord.

holiness to the Lord. And it's curious, is it not, that as we see the first piece of this being every single day, the lamps, that then we come to something, the loaves, that is to be replaced once a week.

More commonly, perhaps known, is the table of showbread. That here, the twelve loaves and two piles, six in a pile, on a table of pure gold before the Lord.

[14 : 04] The twelve loaves signified the twelve tribes. Although, none of the loaves as such were indicated for a particular tribe, the number again was for the twelve tribes.

They were an offering of the bread of the presence for the twelve tribes before the Lord. You remember, of course, that we see this on the breastplate of the high priest as well.

You remember the stones, the twelve jewels on the breastplate, each one with the name of a tribe there. And this is, you shall put pure frankincense on each pie.

If you remember, the last time I was here, we saw frankincense with the wise men, frankincense and myrrh. Here it is again, frankincense on top of the bread.

Excuse me. And later on, of course, they have to burn this frankincense as an incense to the Lord, a sweet-smelling savour before they eat the bread.

[15 : 10] The priests, Aaron and his sons, you see that in verse 9, it shall be for Aaron and his sons, and they shall eat it in a holy place, since it is for him a most holy portion out of the Lord's food offerings, a perpetual Jew.

And one of the things that we must always remember here is the way that God provides for his people. The Levites, the priests, and the Levites, all the priests would come from the tribe of Levi, are all provided for through the offerings of the people.

Through the burnt offerings, the peace offerings, the meat offerings, the wave offerings, etc., etc. Now, I don't have time to go through every single one of these offerings and what they meant.

You can have a look at that yourself. But it is quite curious if you think, a million and a half people at least camped here in the desert in Sinai.

And yet they had, look at the number of animals that they took with them from Egypt. They have sheep and goats and oxen and they have turtle doves and various other things.

[16 : 27] And it would seem from the provision of the manna that they did not eat any of these animals themselves except for the priests. Now, I might be quite wrong about that.

There are various opinions, but that's my opinion on it. It seems that they were not allowed to eat any of the animals except for what was specifically offered and burnt offerings etc.

and so on. They were to subsist on what God had provided for them, that is, the manna from heaven, God's provision for them, so that they would remember at all times that they were dependent on God.

How often do you and I remember that we are dependent on God? So often we think we are dependent on our own abilities, our own provision, our own this, our self this, self that, etc.

and so on. But we should remember that every single day we are dependent on what God provides for us. How does Paul put it when he's in Athens?

[17 : 42] he says, in him we live and move and have our being. There is nowhere else from which these things are provided for us.

God provides them in common grace to the great majority of people, but he provides specifically to his people in certain ways.

and here you see two provisions. You see a daily provision represented by the lamps of his light and his presence and a weekly provision represented by the bread, the showbread.

you remember David eating of it later on of course and being criticised etc. and Jesus speaking about it later on as well. But I want particularly to focus on this third section of the chapter.

It's a section that seems in a sense to have nothing to do with what's gone before. In fact many commentators think what on earth has this particular piece about blasphemy got to do with any of the laws that are here before.

[18 : 53] There's only one other incident similar to this and we find it in the book of Numbers where in Numbers 15 we find something very similar. A man doesn't say whether he's a man of Israel or a sort of mixed race person or whatever he was but he's caught gathering wood for a fire on the Sabbath.

And again the punishment is exactly the same. Now we're not told here what the origin of the quarrel that this man had with the other man is.

The son of an Israel woman whose father was an Egyptian went out among the people of Israel. And that would seem to tell us from the very beginning that there were mixed marriages before they left Egypt.

But somehow the people there seemed to have married Egyptians perhaps men and women and therefore there was a mixture a mixed race group of people who followed the children of Israel the true born Hebrews if I can put it that way when they left Egypt.

They were in a sense I suppose what we would call proselytes that is those who worshipped the God of Israel and who had perhaps been converted to the Jewish faith although it's a bit early to be speaking about the Jewish faith at this time.

[20 : 25] But this man is here among them. We don't know how old he is we're not told but this seems to be shortly after this is only six or seven months after they've left Egypt so it seems he was quite a young man by the look of it.

And somehow there's a quarrel between him and a man of Israel and it's inside the camp.

They fought in the camp. Now it seems at this stage that the exact strict layout of the various tribes in the camp had not yet been given.

It's a few further chapters on before we get to that where the order of the tribes and the way that they pitched their tents round the tabernacle and their divisions which was regulated exactly by God that that not had yet been given.

And therefore it would seem that they may well have been just pitched anywhere at this stage. and we're given this background. His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri of the tribe of Dan.

[21 : 36] Now it's very unusual that we are given that detail. Why are we given that detail? And again sometimes we just don't know the answer as to why some of these details are actually given.

But it's a peculiar thing if you follow the history of the tribe of Dan that very often the tribe of Dan is the first tribe to be mentioned where Israel is led into idolatry and into sin.

You see later towards the end of the book of Judges, it is from the tribe of Dan when they're settled in the north of the promised land that idolatry first begins to spread.

And if you look in the book of Revelation at the number of the tribes that are given, you remember the 1244,000, 12,000 from each tribe.

Which tribe is missing? The tribe of Dan. And it seems that somehow the tribe of Dan is singled out again and again in scripture as an example of what should not happen rather than what should.

[22 : 56] And this is this man's descent. His mother's name was Shelomith, the daughter of Dibri, of the tribe of Dan. His father's name is not mentioned.

Curiously enough, in the Jewish Targum, that is like the Jewish commentary on the Old Testament books, the rabbis state that this was the Egyptian that Moses had killed.

You remember when Moses killed the Egyptian which caused him to flee from Egypt for the period of 40 years in the wilderness with Jethro, his father-in-law, and so on, that this was the son of that particular Egyptian.

Now, whether that's true or not, who knows. Scripture doesn't mention it, but it's the Jewish animals. What did they fight about?

We have no idea. It may well have been that this mixed race character thought he wasn't getting a fair deal compared with the children of Israel.

[24 : 01] It may have been for a totally different reason altogether. It may just simply have been a personal dispute between the two. Scripture doesn't mention who started the fight.

Scripture doesn't mention who won it. But what Scripture mentions is the fact that in the course of the fight, he blasphemed the name and cursed.

Verse 11. Blasphemed the name. Now, what was the name? The name, of course, was the name Jehovah, Yahweh, the name that was so holy that the Jews would not mention it.

And you remember that this was the name by which the Lord had showed himself to Moses in the burning bush. Who shall I say sends me? I am that I am.

I am. The name that the Jews would never mention. And you see this even through to the time of Christ. When Jesus makes his I am statements, I am the way, the truth, and the life, etc.

[25 : 13] And so on. The Jews regarded as blasphemy because he is taking the name of the Lord, which should not be spoken. He is taking it in vain, making himself equal to God.

What exactly the blasphemy here was, the cursing that he did, this half Egyptianite person, whatever he said, we don't know.

We're not told. It may have been a moment of anger. He may have done it deliberately because he wished particularly to insult the person he was fighting against.

He may have done it even in resentment for the way that he was treated compared to the others. Who knows? We could speculate quite a lot on what the reason for the fight actually was.

But whatever he says, he is heard by the others who are round about. And they recognise immediately that what he has done is breaking the third commandment.

[26 : 29] remember Moses and the commandments, the tables of the law, coming down from the mountain, Sinai breaking the first lot and having to go back up later on and so on.

What does this commandment say? Exodus 20 in verse 7 says, Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. For the Lord will not hold him guiltless that takes his name in vain.

That's the commandment. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. And somehow this man has done exactly that.

He has taken the name of the Lord in vain. And those around have a problem here. What do they do with him? Verse 12, they put him in custody till the will of the law should be clear to them.

And this is a problem for them, obviously, because they have had no clear instruction from God through Moses on how this is to be punished.

- [27 : 42] The commandment has been given not to do it. But there has been no instruction on the punishment. And they would also have another question in their minds as well.
- Is the same punishment to be meted out to a person who is half Hebrew, half Egyptian, as it is to a full bloodied member of the children of Israel?
- In other words, if you put it a different way, should the people of God have the same punishment as someone who is not part of the people of God, but just a mere adherent, if I can put it like that.
- And I hope none of the adherents feel offended by me putting it that way. What does wisdom tell them to do? Consult God.
- They put him in custody. They held him in some kind of prison or custody till the will of the Lord should be clear to them. That's exactly the same thing as they have to do with the man in number 15 who was gathering firewood on the Sabbath, who had broken the Sabbath.
- [28 : 54] What is God's will? No commandment, no law has been given as to how to deal with this situation. You see, we have to bear in mind that this is a theocracy, not a democracy.
- A theocracy. That is, it is a kingdom ruled by theos, God. Therefore, there is no such thing as crime and punishment in terms of laws being given yet.
- Any sin against God is, in fact, a crime. And any crime, in the same way, is a sin. That's why if you look at all the laws that have gone before this, the social laws, each one of them is a sin against the God, the breaking of them, is a sin against the God who has given these laws.
- And therefore the question is, what do we do? what punishment is due to this particular person? So when they bring him to Moses, Moses then consults with God.
- In the holy place, the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Bring out of the camp the one who cursed. Let all who heard him lay their hands on his head, and let all the congregation stone him.
- [30 : 30] And speak to the people of Israel, saying, Whoever curses his God shall bear his sin. Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death.
- Isn't that exactly what they accused Jesus of doing as well? The same thing, blasphemy. All the congregation shall stone him. The sojourner, as well as the native, when he blasphemes the name, shall be put to death.
- And then you get a series of various laws of what's to be done in the course of murder. Whoever takes a human life shall truly be put to death, and so on, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, etc., etc.
- But then verse 22 makes it so clear to us. You shall have the same law for the sojourner and for the native, for I am the Lord, your God.
- God's justice is to be applied equally to everyone. Whether he is a member of the people, the covenant people of God, or simply an adherent, simply a follower of it.
- [31 : 47] Now, that is quite solemn when we come to think of it, and we see the solemn result of this. Moses spoke to the people of Israel, and they brought out of the camp the one who had cursed, and stoned them with stones.
- Now, it wouldn't have been that the one and a half million people came along and each one threw a stone, but a selective number, probably of the elders of Israel, would have been the ones who would have carried out this execution.
- And you and I might think, you know, that's, what a severe punishment that is. For cursing the name of God, he is stoned to death.

For gathering sticks, firewood on a Sunday, he is stoned to death. I wonder what would happen if we applied those laws today.

How many times in your daily walk with people round about, and perhaps even it happens to yourself, do you take the name of the Lord in vain?

[33 : 02] One of the commonest hashtags on Facebook, OMG. Oh my God. How often do you hear people saying it?

I don't know if you've ever watched any of these silly videos where a guy who is dressed as a bushman, etc., and pretends to be a tree in the street, and then suddenly jumps out in front of people.

And 99 times out of 100, what do people say? Oh my God. It's the standard expression that seems to be used.

Never mind of course how often the name of Christ is taken and used in vain in people's daily walk. What would happen if God insisted on the full justice of his law now?

The sojourner, as well as the native, when he blasphemes the name, shall be put to death. How many would be left and storn away tomorrow if this law was actually put into practice?

[34 : 14] Or anywhere else? Of course that raises another question of who would put it into practice, but that's a different thing altogether. But the principle is there, and we have completely forgotten, have we not?

Even now, you watch television nowadays and you can't get away from this. The name of the Lord is taken in vain all the time. We don't see it as very serious.

In fact, society regards it as trivial nowadays. It's just one of these things you say, and just one of these things that very often you say when you react involuntarily without perhaps realising what you're saying.

Isn't that a warning to us, to watch our mouth at all times? It is so difficult to control our mouth.

But imagine if we were still under the law, what right God would have to exercise his justice upon us.

[35 : 21] But aren't you glad you see that you are no longer under the law? That Christ came to redeem us from the curse of the law, as Paul would say, by what?

By fulfilling the law. And because he fulfilled the law and was able to die on the cross to satisfy God's justice, then you and I have forgiveness for these kind of sins that we often commit involuntarily.

things that would be. I wonder what your involuntary reaction would be if somebody jumped out at you tonight somewhere and startled you.

What would you actually say? And it may well be that involuntarily you would simply come out with the, oh my God.

It wouldn't surprise me because it's so common in society that we pay little or no attention to it. But there is a warning here for us that we should pay attention to these things.

[36 : 37] That God's law is given not because we are able to keep it but because of the one who was able to keep it.

But that does not take away your responsibility and my responsibility to strive for personal holiness each and every day.

That's what most of the law that's been given up to now is all about. It's about holiness to the Lord. And you remember that later on that we're told that without holiness none shall see God.

So how do you and I if we are in this unholy state how are we able to come to see God? Of course you know the answer to that.

These people didn't. They had the promises they had the promises of Messiah to come but it wouldn't be for another 1,500 years or more until our Lord actually comes and that he is able to fulfil the law by putting himself in your place and in my place to die the cursed death of the cross.

[37 : 57] You see as scripture tells us you and I sin each and every day in thought word and deed. As the psalmist puts it if God were to mark iniquity if each one of our sins was to be punished with the severity with which God sees it you see that's the problem that we have so often we perceive from a human viewpoint but we forget that God looks from a holy viewpoint how often how often do we forget the standard of God's holiness we try with our own personal holiness but yet we fall so short of the holiness of God and it's so probable that you and I will understand very little of that that even the most mature believer will understand very little of that until we go to glory until we go to heaven and it is there even although we are undergoing the process of sanctification through this life little by little

I believe that there will be so much that we have to learn in heaven about holiness God's holiness our own redeemed fully sanctified holiness totally different I think in many ways to the way that we imagine it John speaks about it in detail in the book of revelation and again you can look at that yourself but it should draw our attention as should this chapter and the chapter in which in numbers 21 sorry numbers 15 where the man gathering wound on the sabbath undergoes the same punishment no clear law had been given God states a law stoning death how does Paul put it later on he says the wages of sin is death and that is why of course death came into the world through the fall of Adam and

Eve and of course that death is the last enemy that has to be crushed you and I know each one of us knows that we are heading towards death that that is appointment that all of us will keep but we have very little perception of how God perceives each and every sin as meriting the full wrath and justice of God some people say well I don't like to think about that I prefer to think on the forgiveness that there is in the blood of Christ certainly but you can't have one without the other you can't have one without the other it's because Jesus satisfies God's perfect justice and perfect obedience that you and I have forgiveness for our sins for all our sins even the ones that we don't think are very seriously what's the lesson there are lots of lessons be careful what you say think before you speak there are so many things of course that we can put like that and how difficult it is sometimes how our emotions control us sometimes as they probably did this half

Egyptian when he said whatever he said but nevertheless the Lord will not hold him guiltless take his name in vain so next time you hear those around you those in your home even those at work those in school taking the Lord's name in vain what will you do will you just ignore it or will you say something to the person or the people who are actually doing that they may look at you very strangely in fact they may say so what but nevertheless it is a principle that you and I should take seriously that we should call out the taking of the Lord's name in vain because it has become so common nowadays that nobody pays any attention to it and yet the penalty it is a sin a sin one sin for which the penalty is death you notice that there is no mercy for this

Egyptian Jesus speaks later on when he says that those who disobeyed the law of Moses with two or three witnesses were put to death because of the law but what comes with Jesus grace mercy and truth the mercy and the justice of God is not so apparent here what's apparent is the justice but it's there as a lesson for the people of God that we must be not only careful in our own behaviour but that we should also be ready to stand up for the principles of the word of God to those round about us may the Lord bless these meditations on his word let us pray our father in heaven we thank you this evening for your word how difficult it is for us to understand sometimes some of the things that we read or to think that they are all over severe and yet when we come face to face with the holiness and the justice of God that none of us can stand before you but we thank you for the one who could for the one who came and took our sin upon himself we thank you for the blood that cleanses from all sin be with us now this evening as we conclude our pardon our sins through

[44 : 34] Jesus Christ our Lord Amen Let us conclude by singing verses in Psalm 50 the first version the short meter version of the Psalm Psalm 50 on page 277 from verse 16 down to verse 19 and 20 but to the wicked man God saith my laws and truth shouldst thou declare how darest thou take my covenant in thy mouth saith thou instruction hast which should thy ways direct saith my words behind thy back thou cast and dost reject when thou a thief didst see with him thou didst consent with the vile adulterers partake on thou went thou givest thy mouth to ill thy tongue deceit doth shame thou sitst against thy brother's speech thy mother's son does shame and there we see another catalogue of the way that we ignore

God's love amen OH studies may oust candidate but to Until I wake it's mine Oh, share my lostorn guilty I show far away But death still Might have not been My God Disturbish With My■■■■■ ■osta Thy Wordskten

Shall create Thou Check of the street church when nobody did see with him thou disposed and with the light of the partake upon the wend thou give thy mouth to hell thy tongue be seen thou pray thou spit stuck against thy brothers be thy mother son that came grace of the

Lord Jesus Christ the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all now and forever Amen name Thanks