

LIVING IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Leviticus 24–25

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Our Scripture today is Leviticus 24 and 25. Chapter 24 is a relatively short chapter. It speaks of really two things. First the components of the furniture that was placed in the holy place of the Old Testament tabernacle. Then it also deals with an incidence of blasphemy by a young man in the Israelite community. Chapter 25 presents to us teaching on the Old Testament Sabbath Year and the Year of Jubilee. These chapters speak to us about living in the presence of God.

When we remove ourselves through sin from our Father's presence, the Father has a longing to be in our presence and has a longing for us to be in His presence that is every bit as powerful as a parent feels for an absent child.

Paul as a believer writing to the Philippians talks about how he wanted to be in their presence. He says in the absence he has them in his heart.

God our Father deeply loves us and wants us to be in His presence. Leviticus 24–25 talks about this matter of being in His presence and how to be in His presence and end the separation that is between us and God.

I. One way of being in His presence, Leviticus 24 talks about is being in the presence of God through worship, verses 1–9.

Verses 2,5: “Command the Israelites to bring you clear oil of pressed olives for the light so the lamps may be kept burning continually...Take fine flour and bake twelve loaves of bread, using two-tenths of an ephah for each loaf” (NIV).

The center of the encampment of Israel, as it moves through the wilderness, was the tabernacle, the portable tent of worship. It was 45 feet long and 15 feet wide and divided into two rooms—

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the Holy of Holies (that contained the ark of the covenant) that was 15 feet by 15 feet, a cube.

Then the Holy Place that had three articles of furniture—an altar of incense, a lampstand, and a table of the bread of the Presence. All the articles of furniture were immensely symbolic.

Leviticus 24 is talking about two of the articles of furniture in the Holy Place—the lampstand and the table of the bread of the Presence.

The average citizen could never enter this worship center. Only the priest could go into the Holy Place. They went in in the morning and in the evening to tend the incense on the altar of incense and the restock the oil. The high priest could only go into the Holy of Holies once a year. Yet the events within this tent were branded upon the collected consciousness of every Israelite.

Although not every Israelite could go into that tent, what happened in that tent through the teaching of Scripture was meant to be branded upon the consciousness of every citizen. It had a deep symbolic meaning.

Continually in the Holy Place was an ever-present light where the lamp was kept burning continually, symbolically reminding Israel that of all the nations in the world, they were the nation which God had revealed Himself to, that they no longer walk in darkness for God is light and God has lighted up their way with the understanding of His person and nature. And they of all people in the world knew the true identity of God who had been made real to them through their experience of being led up out of slavery.

That idea, that knowledge that God is light was something that they were to carry to the nations so that the other nations would know the true nature of God. The continually burning menorah in the Holy Place was simply a visual reminder that in their presence God is light.

I think of the Israelite sleeping in his tent in the wilderness. Maybe he was wrestling with some problem. Something that was approaching the level of a personal disaster in his life. In the midst

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of a sleepless evening, in the dark hours, he could think, “There is a light that is burning in the Holy Place. God will light up this darkness that is happening to me personally.” The psalmist said it well and I think he could have been referring to this idea of the light kept burning continually “He will not let your foot be moved. He who keeps you will not slumber. He who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep” (Psalm 121:3–4).

God is our light, the continual burning presence in our lives. When Jesus comes into life He tells us that He is the light of the world, our ever-present source of revelation and knowledge.

Another item in the Holy Place that spoke of being in the presence of God is the showbread. It literally means “bread of the faith,” bread that is set before the presence of God. There was a gold table and the loaves were set here. Each loaf represented a tribe of the Children of Israel. The showbread (or the “bread of the faith,” or the “bread of the Presence”) was placed in the tabernacle by the priest on the Sabbath and it was left there for a week. At the end of the week the priest took it out and he and other priests could eat the bread. This is the bread that David got in 1 Samuel when he was fleeing from Saul.

The significance of it in the Holy Place was that bread is the stuff that keeps life going. It represents several things. One loaf representing each tribe of Israel, the results of the labor of each tribe is symbolically set before God meaning that what we do in life is always before God. He sees that and accepts that.

But I think on a more powerful level what this bread of the Presence meant is that God is our provider and our sustainer. This bread of the Presence sitting in the Holy Place was a reminder to Israel that God always provides for and sustains His people. The continual presence of the bread of the Presence was a symbolic reminder that God provides.

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Jesus when He came said, “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35). He is the one who provides and sustains.

There was another article of equipment in the holy place. It’s not described in Leviticus 24 but it’s found in Exodus 30 and 37. It’s the ever-present altar of incense. Incense, when it’s used in the Old Testament and the New Testament, stood for prayer. It’s symbolic of the wafting of prayer before the presence of God. The Psalmist said in 141:2 “Let my prayer be set before Thee as incense.” And Revelation 5:8, “The twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb... with golden bowls of incense which are the prayers of the saints.” Israel was also to know that prayer was to continually ascend to the presence of God.

What does it mean to be in the presence of God through worship? It means that the person then or us now as we approach the Scripture is to know that in every dark and reflecting life situation God is light. And God intends to reveal His light to us when there is total darkness and we do not know which way to go. Through this symbolism of light God is saying, “I will show you the way, I will give you light.” In every life need where we have run out of provision, whether it’s material or psychological or spiritual, in every need for life He has promised to be the bread of our life, our provider and our sustainer. In every moment of our life our prayer is before God and Christ the intercessor also prays for us in the heavens. Light, bread, and incense remind us of our nearness to God through worship and how God brings Himself to our consciousness through these symbols.

II. Another way of being in the presence of God, seen in Leviticus 24, is through reverence, verses 10–23, a test case of someone blaspheming the name of the Lord.

The eventual penalty for that would be stoning.

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What is being taught through this particular passage is a reverence for God's name and God's character. Here a young man has a deep seated irreverence for God. He is dealt with in the Old Testament fashion.

In the New Testament we learn that there is a sin which is unto death. A sin, which cannot be forgiven, and it is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. What this is in the New Testament is a continual saying no in your life towards Jesus Christ. Only the Spirit of God can bear witness to Jesus Christ. If we continue to say no to Him we're saying in effect, "I don't believe You died for my sins. I don't believe You are the Lamb of God."

III. A third way of being in the presence of God as seen in Leviticus 25 is through trust.

There are two focus points for Leviticus 25. The first is rather short, verses 1–7, teaching on the Sabbath Year. Then the other is the Year of Jubilee and the teaching there begins with verse 8 and runs to the end of the chapter.

A. The Sabbath Year, every seventh year, the land was to rest. It was not to be farmed. The seed was not to be sown. There were not to be the rigors of a harvest. Whatever grew naturally you could go out and pick up and that was it. The land was to lie fallow. It was sort of God's "land reclamation program." God had in mind to give the land rest so the land wouldn't wear out with continual crops being grown upon it without rest. It not only provided the rest for the land but it provided rest for people because for that whole year it as sort of like a vacation. Most of these people were agricultural people. That year they could pretty much take the year off. All the hard work of sowing and harvesting was replaced with just going out in the fields and getting what you need.

Furthermore, God provided that in the sixth year they'd have a double harvest anyway so they wouldn't have to work that hard in the seventh year. They'd have enough left over.

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This was a real test of trust in God that He would provide enough in the sixth year to survive the seventh year without a crop. It was a faith builder. It was God saying to His people, “Every seventh year you’re going to relive the trust in Me that the people who came out of Egypt experienced. Just like they had to depend upon Me for manna, you’re going to have to depend upon Me that I’m going to supply and make all the crops sufficient.”

B. But that wasn’t the only way that God tested them in terms of trust. The Year of Jubilee was to be a time of tremendous trust in God, verses 8–55. The year of liberty of jubilee began on the Day of Atonement at the end of the forty-ninth year. The forty-ninth year would be a Sabbath Year. Then the forty-ninth year would be followed by another year in which there would be no sowing of seed and no harvesting of crops. Two years the land would lie fallow. The basic idea behind the Year of Jubilee was that every fifty years there would be economic and social change in the country. All land would be returned to its original owner. And all indentured Israelites (Israelites who had sold themselves to be slaves or servants for a period of time) would have their freedom.

Every tribe had land that was given to it when they moved into Canaan. It was tribal land, permanent possession of that tribe. One of the significant things about this was that God was viewed as the owner of the land. God simply “leased” the land out to Israel, He leased a portion to each tribe. But no one was ever to think that they owned anything. That’s good for today too. We tend to hold things too closely and forget that it’s really God that holds everything we have. It’s all God’s and we’re simply the tenants of the land. But time would go along and one family maybe wouldn’t work as hard as others and even though they had the same amount of land they’d run into trouble and have a lot of debts pile up. In order to take care of these debts they would sell a portion of the land off. God’s will is that never should the land be permanently sold

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off. If it was, it was in effect sold by lease. The price of the land would be calculated by how many years till the Year of Jubilee. If it was the first year after the last Year of Jubilee then the land could sell for more because there were forty-nine years to go in the lease. But if it was only five years away from jubilee the land couldn't be sold for that much because the lease to another party was up at the end of those five years.

If a person was in such debt that they'd sell their services as well, they'd sign a contract. The contract would be for however long it was till jubilee. Except they had the right for any time they got more money to buy back their land or to get their own services back. If they got the money they could buy out before jubilee. They could always get their land back, they could always get their freedom if they could come up with the money. Everything goes back to the original owner.

Why did God create a system like this in the Old Testament? Several reasons. God wanted to protect the ruin of debtors. To the poor man He wanted to give assurance, the poor man who maybe had to sell his land or contract himself off for labor. He wanted to give that man assurance that his children would have a new start in life. Put some hope in that poor family.

The second thing God wanted to do was severely restrict greed. Without this law, the land returning to its original owner, you get a group of rich landowners who, in the words of Isaiah, "add field to field and house to house," and bottle everything up so eventually there's only a small, rich, landed class and everybody else is serfs—permanently. It was a move on God's part to severely restrict greed. The Year of Jubilee was never jubilee to the greedy. They had to let go.

It was to teach true ownership. All land is God's and therefore it could only be kept for a period of time if you had bought it from another person.

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Another reason was to give each generation an equitable chance. There was no reward and no penalty for the unborn generation. Each generation had a chance of starting new.

Also it promoted peaceful change without revolution twice each century. The dynamic that God has built into society means the society can renew itself every fifty years without a political revolution of some kind. Ingenious and totally unparalleled in anything in the Semitic world, this is God's idea for keeping people in the land and keeping them excited about their future and prospects for hope.

The sad thing is, the Year of Jubilee was never kept. The Sabbath Year was never kept. No one sufficiently trusted in God to keep the Sabbath Year, to let the cops lie fallow and no one sufficiently trusted in God to have the Year of Jubilee. The writer of Chronicles as he ends 2 Chronicles and the people of God are going off to captivity in Babylon says you're going to be in captivity seventy years. That will make up for years you missed. The land will lie fallow seventy years in a row because you didn't trust Me.

The implications of the Year of Jubilee for us are threefold. Social implications for the Christians is that God is concerned with justice in society. That's clear from the Year of Jubilee. He's deeply concerned about justice in society. He's concerned how we treat the poor. How we treat the elderly. How we treat the handicapped. How we treat the alien. All of that is of tremendous concern to God.

Another application from the Year of Jubilee is of a personal nature. God is concerned with whether or not we trust Him. I think the area of trust not only extends to spiritual matters, the area of trust extends to material matters and financial matters. The Israelite had to trust God to provide for him in the seventh year or the Year of Jubilee. He was never tested.

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Some people believe that how they handle their finances has nothing to do with God at all, that God's only concerned with the spiritual realm. That's really not true. How do we handle our finances—do we treat them as sacred property of God who can give us instructions on them? If we will commit to God the care of our finances and if we will put Him first in our finances we will also be learning to live in His presence through trust. He promised the Israelites if they would trust Him in this matter He would give them security, Leviticus 25:18: “Follow my decrees and be careful to obey my laws, and you will live safely in the land” (NIV). He promised them sufficiency as well: “The land will yield its fruit, and you will eat your fill and live there in safety” (verse 19, NIV).

A third application for the Year of Jubilee is prophetic. Jesus in Luke 4:18–19 quotes from Isaiah 61, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners” (NIV). In the original language, this is the same liberty spoken of in Leviticus 25:10. Jesus announces at the beginning of His ministry that He has come to proclaim the Year of Jubilee, that He promises the release of the captives, and all of those that sold themselves out for a period of time are now to be set free under His administration. With Jesus the Year of Jubilee is not a calendar year of 365 days. It is a whole era of time where He is setting persons free, setting us free from the captivity of our sin and our human nature, completing that work of jubilee at His return when He restores all things to their original function.

When Christ comes again there will be a full realization of jubilee. That's why James in chapter 5 advises people who are going through social suffering, “Be patient brothers until the Lord's coming.” And Peter writes in 2 Peter 3, “In keeping with His promise we look forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of righteousness.” The Year of Jubilee is a kind of a tip off to

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the fact that Jesus Christ the liberator is moving into life and setting us free. And Jesus the liberator at His return will set all things free and release creation itself from the bondage to which it now belongs.

Living in the presence of God through worship, through reverence, through trust, through worship. We're reminded in doubt moments of quiet contemplative meditation that God is our life, God is our sustenance and we are on the heart of God through the continual intercession of Jesus Christ who ever intercedes for us in the presence of God the Father.

Is the Lord your light? Is the Lord your sustainer? Are you conscious of the fact that you are on the heart of God through the prayers of Jesus Christ? In the presence of God through reverence. Bringing our life into an agreement with the Lord. Bringing our life into agreement with Jesus, with accepting and receiving Him for who He really is. And living in the presence of God through trust—"Lord am I really trusting You with my life? Am I really trusting You with my finances? Am I trusting You with my job? Am I trusting You with my home? Am I trusting You with my children? I want to live in Your presence through trust."

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we thank You for these words of Scripture, which bring us renewal and hope. We ask today as we're in Your presence that we could live before You in such a way that we would not fail to keep Your word for us. How sad it would be, Lord, to go through life not living by Your promises and wind up never knowing the joy of full commitment to You. Never knowing what it means to really trust You. Never knowing what it means to lay something down and commit to You and believe that You're sufficient for it. Lord, we give You our needs and our fears, the things we want to clutch onto and hold for ourselves because we're afraid to release them. We give them to You that we might thereby trust You and believe in You. We thank You

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Lord that You are our constant light, our constant bread, our constant prayer. We praise You and we bless You. In Your name. Amen.