

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 2

### EXODUS 32:1-34:35

#### THE BACKGROUND

The Lord delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and led the new nation to Mount Sinai. There He offered to enter into covenant with them. The basic stipulations He placed on them were the Ten Commandments.

The people of Israel agreed to the covenant between the Lord and themselves, but they immediately violated its stipulations. Moses delayed in returning from Mount Sinai (Ex. 32:1). His delay discouraged the people. So Aaron led them in making and worshiping a golden calf. When Moses witnessed their sin, he smashed the two stone tablets the Lord had given him (32:19). However, when the Lord threatened to destroy the people, Moses interceded with Him on their behalf.

The covenant was renewed as a result of Moses' intercession. The Lord instructed Moses to cut two new tablets of stone. Then the Lord permitted Moses to glimpse His glory. When Moses came down from the mountain, his face glowed because he had been speaking with the Lord. Because his radiant face alarmed the people, Moses wore a veil after he had relayed to the Israelites what the Lord commanded until He went to speak with the Lord again (34:29-35).

#### 1. FILLING THE VOID (EXODUS 32:1-4)

**Verse 1:** *When the people saw that Moses delayed in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who will go before us because this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt—we don't know what has happened to him!"*

After the establishment of the covenant between the Lord and Israel, the Lord summoned Moses. Therefore Moses climbed Mount Sinai and vanished in the cloud that obscured the mountain peak. He remained away from the Israelite camp for 40 days and 40 nights (Ex. 24:18). The people became restless. Finally the congregation gathered around Aaron and demanded that he take action. The verb rendered gathered around can mean they assembled around Aaron or it can likewise mean they gathered against Aaron. In this latter case the idea is that of an achieved unity in opposition to Aaron. The idea may be that the people assembled around Aaron in a hostile mob. If this idea is the

sense, it may explain why Aaron so readily acquiesced to their demands.

Aaron had accompanied Moses during the encounters with Pharaoh. The two brothers had continued to serve as leaders of the Israelites during their travel to the present location. The people's statement "we don't know what has happened to" Moses may indicate a lack of concern for his welfare. Despite everything he had accomplished, they called him this Moses, as if he were a total stranger. Their emphasis appears to be on their lack of information rather than on the fate of their leader. In addition, their statement discloses their assumption in the absence of facts. Moses was over 80 years of age and the fire and smoke suggested some major natural disturbance. The most logical explanation for his prolonged absence was that he had lost his life somewhere on the steep rock of the mountain. If so, leadership fell on Aaron's shoulders.

The crowd petitioned Aaron to make them a god who would go before them. The Lord had defeated the Egyptians and delivered the Israelites out of slavery. He had parted the sea and drowned the Egyptian army. He had furnished food and water in the desolate wilderness. He had given His people victory over the Amalekites. He had guided them with a pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire. He had revealed His presence in the sounds and sights of Mount Sinai. Yet the people preferred to follow something fabricated by human hands. They quickly abandoned their covenant with the Lord. The Lord repeatedly declared He had brought Israel out of Egypt (19:4; 20:2; 29:46). However, the people here credited Moses with this achievement.

**Verse 2:** *Then Aaron replied to them, "Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters and bring them to me."*

Confronted by the demands of a discontented population, Aaron made no protest. Rather than assume leadership, he submitted to the will of the majority. He instructed the people to remove their golden rings from their ears and bring them to him. This jewelry probably was similar to that of the Egyptians. Such trinkets were fastened to the pierced lobes of a person's ears.

**Verse 3:** *So all the people took off the gold rings that were on their ears and brought them to Aaron.*

Having learned that Aaron would accommodate their desires, the people quickly obeyed his instructions. Aaron

had been relegated to a craftsman. The man chosen to represent the Lord as high priest before the people had condescended to substituting human superstition for Divine revelation and the work of his hands for the providence of the Lord. Furthermore, since gold would be needed in building the tabernacle, his actions were a misappropriation of the Lord's provision.

**Verse 4:** *He took the gold from their hands, fashioned it with an engraving tool, and made it into an image of a calf. Then they said, "Israel, this is your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!"*

Aaron took the gold jewelry and began work. He fashioned the precious metal into the shape of a bull calf. This idol would have been familiar to the Israelites. It was a common image in the region at that time in history. The Egyptian god Apis was represented by a bull. The cult animal of the Canaanite god Baal also was the bull, which symbolized his power and fertility. When Aaron completed his work, he presented the golden calf to the people. They responded by saying, "Israel, this is your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt." Aaron proclaimed a feast to the Lord (32:5). This proclamation insinuated the Israelites were not worshiping an Egyptian or Canaanite deity. Rather, they identified the calf with the Lord their God. However, the Lord specifically prohibited such images (20:3-7). Therefore the people had broken the Second Commandment and thereby nullified their covenant with the Lord. Furthermore, the fabrication of an idol so contradicted the nature of the Lord that they also broke the First Commandment.

#### 2. MAKING THINGS RIGHT (EXODUS 32:30-34)

When Moses returned to the camp and saw the sin of the people, he smashed the stone tablets in anger (32:19). He destroyed the golden calf and called the people to decide for or against the Lord. Aaron had sought to combine the worship of the Lord with the image of a calf. Moses made the sharpest distinction possible.

**Verse 30:** *The following day Moses said to the people, "You have committed a great sin. Now I will go up to the LORD; perhaps I will be able to pay for your sin."*

In the wake of the violence Moses addressed the Israelites on the following day. The word you is emphatic or emphasized; the people were responsible for committing a great sin. The Second of the Ten Commandments

forewarned of punishment for making idols (20:5). In the Book of the Covenant, the Lord prohibited making images of gold or silver (20:23). Worshiping idols was a serious offense. Moses admitted that the gravity of the Israelites' behavior might imply Divine judgment was not over. Therefore he would approach the Lord on behalf of the people. The verb rendered pay often has been translated "make atonement." The Hebrew word is from the same root as the noun meaning "mercy seat." Moses desired to persuade the Lord to forgive the people. The word perhaps indicated the uncertainty in Moses' mind concerning his success. Moses correctly realized the Israelites' needed to acknowledge their sin and to receive the Lord's forgiveness. However, the plan Moses proposed was his plan, not the Lord's plan.

**Verse 31:** *So Moses returned to the LORD and said, "Oh, this people has committed a great sin; they have made for themselves a god of gold."*

Moses returned to plead with the Lord for his people. His candor reflected his sincerity. He did not offer excuses but immediately acknowledged the people's wrongdoing. His language did not soften the serious nature of their sin. It was clear and specific. The people had violated one of the basic stipulations of their covenant with the Lord. Moses sought the Lord's forgiveness for them. He was concerned for his people.

**Verse 32:** *Now if You would only forgive their sin. But if not, please erase me from the book You have written."*

As Moses prayed he imagined the Lord might not grant his petition. If the Lord did not forgive the Israelites, Moses requested, "Please erase me from the book You have written." The Old Testament refers to a record God keeps of those who are part of His people. Being erased from the book may simply refer to one's death, leaving the list of the living. Thus Moses may have been expressing his desire to die himself if the Lord refused to spare the Israelites. Moses' words also may imply he was willing to give his own life if the Lord would spare the people. Others interpret the verse to mean Moses was willing to give up his own eternal life if the Lord would not forgive the people's sin.

**Verse 33:** *The LORD replied to Moses: "Whoever has sinned against Me I will erase from My book."*

The Lord's response stressed individual responsibility. Only the person committing the sin would be punished for that sin. Moses was not permitted to substitute himself

for the Israelites. Only Jesus' death has the capability of removing sin. The Lord's statement also makes clear that sin will be punished. He does not ignore violations of His requirements for right living.

**Verse 34:** *Now go, lead the people to the place I told you about; see, My angel will go before you. But on the day I settle accounts, I will hold them accountable for their sin."*

Moses was told to return to the task to which the Lord had first called him (3:10). The Lord's angel would continue to go before him. However, the Lord's determination to proceed with His plan did not mean judgment was averted. The Lord assured Moses that in His time, He would punish the people for their sin. The Scripture states the Lord inflicted a plague on the people of Israel because of what they did with the calf (32:35). This plague, whatever its nature, was an immediate punishment. The latter part of verse 34 hints at a future time when the people will reap even more severe consequences for abandoning their covenant with the Lord.

### 3. A GOD WHO FORGIVES (EX. 34:6-9)

The Lord commanded Moses to cut two new tablets of stone for a renewal of the broken covenant. Moses was then to climb Mount Sinai alone and meet with the Lord.

**Verse 6:** *Yahweh—Yahweh is a compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in faithful love and truth,*

When Moses returned up the mountain, the Lord responded by revealing more about His nature to Moses. The visible manifestation of the Lord's presence in the cloud was secondary to the verbal self-portrait of the character of the Lord God. The Lord described Himself as compassionate and gracious. The term translated *compassionate* is related to the Hebrew word for *womb*. It describes the deep love of superior being for an inferior being. This bond of love is like that which exists between a mother and her child. The term *gracious* comes from a root word meaning "to show favor." Together the two terms illustrate the Lord's nature to love people and show them favor.

The phrase *slow to anger* literally means "long-nosed." It probably was derived from the impression that a person's nose dilates or flares when he or she becomes angry. In reference to the Lord, the phrase refers to the fact that He is not easily provoked. Rather He is exceedingly patient. The Lord also is rich in faithful love and truth. *Faithful love* is a steadfast love that resulted in covenant fidelity. The term

*truth* also contains the sense of being reliable or trustworthy. Thus Exodus 34:6 emphasizes the Lord's nature as a God of grace.

**Verse 7:** *maintaining faithful love to a thousand generations, forgiving wrongdoing, rebellion, and sin. But He will not leave the guilty unpunished, bringing the consequences of the fathers' wrongdoing on the children and grandchildren to the third and fourth generation.*

This verse's language reminded the listener of the Lord's earlier prohibition against idols and His warning about violating it (20:4-6). A thousand generations indicates the Lord's grace is unlimited. One aspect of the His nature is His readiness to forgive. The term translated forgiving here literally means "to lift up." It has the sense of carrying sin away. The magnitude of Divine forgiveness is projected by three distinct terms for sin. Wrongdoing is a derivative of a verb meaning "to twist." The term denotes actions and attitudes that are a distortion of the Lord's will. Rebellion indicates actions and attitudes that are a deliberate rejection of the Lord's will. Sin means "missing the mark." It denotes actions or attitudes that fall short of the Lord's will. Together these terms comprehensively depict evil. The Lord wants to remove sin completely from individuals.

The Lord completely forgives every sin committed by those who turn to Him (see 1 John 1:9). However, the sinner must confess guilt and seek forgiveness. Those who refuse the Lord's offer of forgiveness certainly will be punished. The reference to the third and fourth generation had a twofold sense. First, it provided a graphic comparison of the Lord's response to humanity. He desired to forgive to *a thousand generations*, a phrase that suggests no limits. In contrast the Lord limited the effect of evil to four generations, a small number by comparison. Second, those who commit sins frequently influence the people around them. In the ancient world three and four generations often lived together. Thus the reference also concerned the influence a person's deeds have on those with whom that person lives. The self-description of the Lord God recorded in Exodus 34:6-7 became central to the Old Testament understanding of the Lord.

**Verse 8:** *Moses immediately bowed down to the ground and worshiped.*

Moses' immediate response to the Lord's revelation was to worship the Lord. Confronted with the revelation of the Lord's presence and power, humanity falls down and worships. Isaiah responded with overwhelming awe to his vi-

sion of the Lord's throne (Isa. 6:5). Ezekiel fell facedown during his vision of the Lord's glory (Ezek. 1:28). In each case those to whom the Lord had revealed Himself moved forward with a renewed understanding of His nature.

**Verse 9:** *Then he said, "My Lord, if I have indeed found favor in Your sight, my Lord, please go with us. Even though this is a stiff-necked people, forgive our wrongdoing and sin, and accept us as Your own possession."*

Moses proceeded once more to intercede on behalf of the Israelites. He admitted the people did not deserve the Lord's mercy. His reference to their wrongdoing and sin echoed the Lord's own words (Ex. 34:7). Hence Moses asked for their forgiveness based on the Lord's nature, not the Israelites' merit. The reference to Your own possession calls to mind the Lord's original invitation to enter into covenant with the people of Israel (19:5).

The Lord agreed to renew His covenant with the people of Israel. He promised to reveal even greater truths about Himself. Because of what He would do, not only would the Israelites come to know more about Him but also the entire world would learn that Yahweh is God.

The Lord revealed to Moses that He is compassionate, gracious, patient, loving, and merciful; yet He does not ignore people's wrongdoing. We can be thankful the Lord is compassionate and gracious, loving us although we sometimes falter in faith and forgiving us when we repent.

The Lord gave Moses clear instructions to eradicate the existing population of Canaan. This edict to destroy the various inhabitants must be understood in terms of religion, not ethnicity. The people were to be punished because of the gods they served, not because of who their ancestors were. Indeed, those such as Rahab, who abandoned their pagan religion and turned to the one true God, were spared.

When the people of Israel entered Canaan, they were to worship the Lord in accordance with the laws He gave them at Sinai. These included both the Ten Commandments and the Book of the Covenant. They were to worship the Lord exclusively, without any hint of pagan rituals.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 9

### EXODUS 35:1-40:38

#### THE BACKGROUND

Beaten down by slavery and oppression, the descendants of Jacob cried out to the Lord for deliverance. The Lord answered by sending an 80-year-old fugitive named Moses to Pharaoh to demand the Israelites' freedom. In a series of dramatic judgments, the Lord freed a vast multitude of people. In this process, the Lord revealed the significance of His personal name Yahweh (see Ex. 3:14-15; 6:2-7). This revelation was an invitation to intimate personal relationship with Him.

The Lord defined the relationship He desired by making a covenant with the people of Israel. This relationship presupposed the Israelites' worship of the Lord alone. To facilitate that worship, the Lord God provided a detailed plan for a place of worship. He also established a hereditary priesthood to implement the worship.

However, before Moses could descend from Mount Sinai with the stone tablets containing the Ten Commandments, the people of Israel violated the covenant terms and constructed a golden calf as an object of worship. This violation resulted in Divine judgment and the deaths of several thousand rebellious Israelites. Nevertheless, the Lord offered to renew the covenant. His offer was a wonderful example of His grace.

Therefore Moses assembled the congregation and gave them instructions concerning a place of worship. They responded by giving more than was needed to build the items the Lord commanded. Many offered their talents for the actual construction. Bezalel and Oholiab supervised the volunteers. When they were finished, the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

Chapters 35–40 of Exodus repeat much of the same material covered in chapters 25–31. In the earlier chapters the Lord gave instructions concerning the construction of the tabernacle and its contents. In the latter chapters Moses recorded the actual construction of the place of worship. Thus the latter chapters show the fulfillment of the Lord's commands. They also show that Moses conveyed the Lord's words accurately to the builders.

#### 1. WILL YOU SHOW UP EMPTY HANDED (EXODUS 35:4-9)?

Before proceeding with construction of a place of worship, the Lord emphasized the critical relationship between obedience and worship. Disobedience is an act that elevates human desire above Divine will. Worship, by definition, is an acknowledgment of the Lord's worthiness and authority. Thus disobedience is the antithesis of worship. Genuine worship demands obedience.

Not surprisingly, before the Israelites began the actual construction of a place for worship, the Lord summarized the content of the Commandment that would come to be most identifiable with worship. The Fourth Commandment (Ex. 20:8-11) laid out the covenant demands for the Sabbath. Those demands were recapped in Exodus 35:2-3 and the death penalty was prescribed for violations. Lest there be any misunderstanding of what constituted labor, one of the most minuscule tasks supplied an example. Even a task as simple as lighting a fire within one's home constituted a violation of the Fourth Commandment (35:3).

**Verse 4:** *Then Moses said to the entire Israelite community, "This is what the LORD has commanded:*

Moses convened an assembly of the entire Israelite community. His action stressed the importance of the orders he was about to issue to the people. Furthermore he was careful to specify that he did not act on his own initiative. He served merely as an instrument through whom the Lord would speak to the congregation. The instructions the people were summoned to carry out came from the Lord, not Moses. The phrase *the entire Israelite community* indicated every person was invited to participate (see 25:2).

The verb commanded indicates the One commanding has the power and authority to issue orders. Here LORD denotes that His covenant name *Yahweh* occurs in the Hebrew text. Taken together, the proper name and the verb emphasize the Lord's status as the superior party in the covenant relationship.

**Verse 5:** *Take up an offering for the LORD among you. Let everyone whose heart is willing bring this as the LORD's offering: gold, silver, and bronze;*

The initial action for implementing the Lord's design for a place of worship was to collect an offering from those assembled. Only those whose heart is willing were to give. In ancient Israelite thought, the heart was the seat of human volition. The Israelites observed that whenever

an individual made a significant decision, that person felt pressure in the chest at or near the location of the heart. Therefore the Israelites associated life-changing decisions as being made in the heart. Modern medical science has confirmed this phenomenon. The stress of making such judgments affects the cardiovascular system. The blood pressure and heart rate increase.

The offering was to be voluntary, not compulsory. Only those individuals who wanted to give to this project were to do so. Nevertheless, whether the Lord asks or commands becomes immaterial when a believer's primary desire is to please Him. Giving willingly and generously pleases the Lord (see 2 Cor. 9:7).

The request specified items that would be used in the construction of the tabernacle. The list began with precious metals. The gold primarily would be used in constructing the interior furnishings. Its extreme malleability and casting quality made it ideal for these objects. The silver would become bases for the tabernacle posts. Silver was rarer than gold at that time and thus was more valuable. Its limited use in the design of the tabernacle likely was because of its scarcity. Bronze is an alloy of copper and tin. It would be used to make various bases, utensils, and furnishing of the courtyard. These metals likely came from the jewelry the Egyptians gave the Israelites when they departed (Ex. 12:35-36).

**Verse 6:** *blue, purple, and scarlet yarn; fine linen and goat hair;*

The list of suitable items for the offering continued with colored yarn, fine linen, and goat hair. These items were the raw materials for fabric from which the curtains for the tabernacle and the garments for the priests were to be made. No doubt the Israelite flocks provided the hair, but the cloth probably also came from the spoils of the people's Egyptian neighbors.

**Verse 7:** *ram skins dyed red and manatee skins; acacia wood;*

The vast flocks of the people again supplied an easy source for ram skins. The manatee (or dugong) was indigenous to the Red Sea. The Israelites hunted them for their hides. The thousands of people crossing the Sinai wilderness likely needed some kind of shelter. The Israelites had lived in houses in Egypt. Although their ancestors had been nomads, it is unlikely the generation leaving Egypt centuries later had sufficient tents for their migra-

tion to Canaan. Tents could be made from animal skins or woven goat hair. So hunting manatees may already have been taking place long before the people reached Mount Sinai. At any rate skins from rams and manatees provided a waterproof covering for the tabernacle.

Acacia trees were abundant in the region. The wood of these trees would be fashioned into the structure for the tabernacle and various of its furnishings. In addition to making poles and stakes for their tents, the wood provided firewood for cooking meals and staying warm at night. So the Lord was asking for a material that everyone had access to collecting and giving. The Lord's people should make the mundane and ordinary available for His use as well as valuable and rare possessions.

**Verse 8:** *oil for the light; spices for the anointing oil and for the fragrant incense;*

After the tabernacle was completed, it was to be utilized for worship. Thus items necessary for the daily operation of the worship center also were included in the Lord's list. The lampstand needed oil in order to provide light. Anointing oil would be needed for religious ceremonies. Incense would be used for the altar inside the tabernacle's holy place. Oil was made from olives. Incense was a compound of various aromatic spices. These items were agricultural products and hence not readily available in the Sinai Peninsula. Consequently they likely had been acquired in Egypt prior to the exodus.

**Verse 9:** *and onyx with gemstones to mount on the ephod and breastpiece.*

The precious stones likely came from the Egyptian jewelry. The Lord's list presented wide opportunity for people to participate. Some items simply required one to transfer possession to those charged with constructing the place of worship. Other items required a person to make a special effort to acquire. Some items were priceless treasures. Others were common resources. Some had been received as gifts. Others were the product of one's daily occupation. But everyone could participate (35:21). The church should operate in similar fashion so that everyone has a part in its ministry. All giving to the Lord's work—offered willingly and generously—pleases God.

After the items that were needed were enumerated, the Lord called for skilled craftsmen to volunteer to turn the raw materials into the specified items. Metalsmiths, weavers, artisans, and carpenters were needed. When the assembly

was over, the people responded. Both men and women brought gifts. Both men and women offered their skills. They gave willingly and generously.

## 2. WE'VE ALL GOT SOMETHING TO SHARE (EXODUS 35:30–36:1).

**Verse 30:** *Moses then said to the Israelites: "Look, the LORD has appointed by name Bezalel son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah.*

Every construction project requires organization if the raw materials are to be transformed into the architect's design. In this case the Lord was the Architect. He had given Moses plans for His design of the tabernacle and its furnishings. The contributions of the people provided the raw materials to build these items. Skilled men and women had volunteered to work on the project. But someone was needed to supervise this labor force and oversee the project to ensure it met the specifications and design the Lord had set forth. Moses identified Bezalel [BEHZ uh lehl] as this individual. Moses' statement was in accordance with the Lord's instructions in Exodus 31:2. Bezalel's genealogy identifies him as coming from the tribe of Judah. When his work was finished, setting up and taking down the tabernacle and its furnishings, transporting them, and conducting worship would be restricted to those from the tribe of Levi. While that restriction defined the role of the priesthood and Levites, the involvement of all tribes in the tabernacle's construction emphasized it as a place of worship for all of the Lord's people.

**Verse 31:** *He has filled him with God's Spirit, with wisdom, understanding, and ability in every kind of craft*

Moses laid out Bezalel's qualifications for the task he had been assigned. First, he was filled . . . with God's Spirit. He was totally yielded to God. Consequently the Lord would guide and empower him in every detail for the work he would undertake. This description was Bezalel's primary qualification. All others were subservient to this single qualification.

Second, Bezalel was filled with wisdom. In the Old Testament wisdom can denote at least three basic meanings. One of these is philosophical: "What is the meaning of life?" The Book of Job exemplifies this meaning. A second meaning concerns skills for living. The Book of Proverbs was written to help people succeed and find happiness in life by living in harmony with the

orderliness of God's created world. A third meaning concerns skill or craftsmanship. Bezalel illustrates its existence. Simply stated, wisdom is an appropriate use of knowledge. So here the idea is that Bezalel possessed skills such as carpentry, casting, or carving. However, the emphasis focuses on the application of these skills. His products were quality items.

Third, Bezalel was filled with understanding. This term points to Bezalel's intellectual judgment. He could discern between that which was good and that which was not. He had the ability to evaluate situations and reach the best conclusion or solution.

Finally, Bezalel was filled with a broad range of skills. He was not merely a craftsman who worked with a single material. He was trained and experienced in various crafts. These crafts are listed in the verses that follow.

**Verse 32:** *to design artistic works in gold, silver, and bronze,*

Bezalel was capable of working in all three metals that were to be used in the tabernacle. Each metal has its own unique properties and therefore must be treated differently. Bronze was a hard alloy and so shapes must be cast using molten metal. Gold and silver could either be cast in similar fashion or shaped easily by beating them with a hammer.

**Verse 33:** *to cut gemstones for mounting, and to carve wood for work in every kind of artistic craft.*

Bezalel likewise was skilled in cutting various gems. This work was highly sensitive. One must know precisely where to place the chisel point or the stone could be ruined with a single tap of the jeweler's hammer.

Bezalel's third skill was in working with wood. The implication is that he could fashion and use wood in a variety of ways. He could carve a figure as a piece of artwork or for use as a master in molding metal. But likewise he knew how to cut boards and connect them to build a frame or a box.

All three of these skills took years of training and practice to master. Almost certainly Bezalel had acquired them as a slave in Egypt. What once he did out of obligation to his slave masters, he would do out of devotion to his God in building the tabernacle. The Lord can use skills people have acquired as a result of study, training, and experience for His purposes if His people will be submissive to His leadership.

**Verse 34:** *He has also given both him and Oholiab son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan, the ability to teach others.*

The Lord provided Bezalel with help. He would share responsibility with Oholiab [oh HOH lih ab]. Exodus 31:6 may imply Oholiab was Bezalel's assistant; whereas here he seems to be a partner. Herein is an important principle in serving the Lord. Working together under the Lord's leadership is more significant than the human hierarchy of management. The Lord's nature is such that if two individuals are totally yielded to Him, they always will achieve His goals. In contrast one human leader not yielded to the Lord can misdirect many who obey this leader's commands.

**Verse 35:** *He has filled them with skill to do all the work of a gem cutter; a designer; an embroiderer in blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and fine linen; and a weaver. They can do every kind of craft and design artistic designs.*

Together these two men had every skill necessary to construct the tabernacle. They could have built the entire facility without help. However, this action would have necessitated an extremely long time schedule before the tabernacle's completion and would have left the Lord's covenant people without a place of worship for an unduly long period. Furthermore such a plan would have denied the people additional opportunity to participate in the project. However, both Bezalel and Oholiab also had the ability to teach others. Thus they could employ volunteers and still expect quality workmanship.

**Chapter 36. Verse 1:** *Bezalel, Oholiab, and all the skilled people are to work based on everything the LORD has commanded. The LORD has given them wisdom and understanding to know how to do all the work of constructing the sanctuary."*

The skills and talents of Bezalel, Oholiab, and everyone else involved in the construction of the tabernacle came from the Lord. He likewise enabled each person to apply that skill and talent toward the construction project. The design for the worship facility also came from the Lord. The Lord God alone directed what they did. Moses identified two skilled craftsmen whom the Lord had selected to lead in the production of items for the tabernacle.

Moses summoned the workers and gave to them the contributions that he had collected and work on the tabernacle began. As the work progressed, the various trade workers

realized they had more materials than they needed. The craftsmen independently came to Moses and informed him of this situation. Consequently Moses issued an announcement that no more materials were needed. Thereafter the people ceased their contributions.

### **3. GO IF I SEND THEE (EXODUS 40:12-15).**

Having completed everything according to the Lord's instructions, Moses once again received instructions from the Lord. The Lord told him when and how to erect the tabernacle. As soon as everything was put in place, all of the items were to be consecrated for use. The ceremony involved anointing the objects in much the same manner the priests would be consecrated.

**Verse 12:** *"Then bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance to the tent of meeting and wash them with water.*

The Lord instructed Moses to set apart Aaron and his sons to serve the Lord as priests. This statement is an authorization to carry out the instructions given in Exodus 29. The actual ceremony is reported in Leviticus 8.

The actions stated here emphasize that holiness comes from a right relationship with the Lord. The washing with water was symbolic of purification and so portrayed preparation to serve a holy God. Before one can serve the Lord properly, ungodly traits and habits must be removed.

**Verse 13:** *Clothe Aaron with the holy garments, anoint him, and consecrate him, so that he can serve Me as a priest.*

Once Aaron was washed, he was to put on the sacred garments. Then he was ready to be installed into the priesthood. Anointing the priests with oil came next in the ceremony. This act signified the Lord's power was present with that person to enable him to carry out the duties of his office. It was a reminder that holiness cannot be achieved by human effort. It is a work of the Lord.

The verb **consecrate** means to be set apart for the Lord's use. It is the verbal form of the noun *holy*. To be consecrated to the Lord implied taking on certain characteristics or qualities of the Lord. In Israel this mandate to be holy like the Lord was not only for priests, it was the standard for everyone (Lev. 11:45). Jesus later would teach a similar concept: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). While we as Christians are not yet all the Lord wants us to be, we must never settle for any goal that is less. The believer's life is a journey to be holy.

God's gift of the Holy Spirit is His promise that ultimately we will be like Christ.

**Verse 14:** *Have his sons come forward and clothe them in tunics.*

Not only was Aaron to be consecrated as a priest, his sons were to serve as well. Therefore they needed to be set apart for their service in the priesthood. Every believer has a role of service he or she can perform for the Lord. While most kinds of service are not associated with a formal ceremony of consecration, all service requires commitment and reliance on the Lord to carry it out.

**Verse 15:** *Anoint them just as you anointed their father, so that they may also serve Me as priests. Their anointing will serve to inaugurate a permanent priesthood for them throughout their generations."*

The ceremony would inaugurate Aaron's family to a permanent priesthood. The idea of *permanent* was strongly connected to the duration of the Sinai covenant. It was a commitment that as long as the Sinai covenant remained in effect, the priests would come from Aaron's family. However, Jesus has instituted a new and better covenant. Under this new covenant He has established Himself as an eternal High Priest. The New Testament traces His priesthood to a more ancient line, that of Melchizedek (Heb. 5:10). Furthermore Jesus has appointed all His followers to the priesthood (1 Pet. 2:9). Nevertheless, the Lord still calls some believers to lifelong vocational ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). All believers need to be open to His call for such service and after prayerful consideration to gladly obey if the Lord desires them to be set apart in this manner. However, regardless of whether the call is to serve the Lord in lifelong vocational ministry or to perform a specific task for a prescribed period, we all need to serve the Lord freely and wholeheartedly throughout our lives.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 16

### LEVITICUS 1:1-16:34

#### THE BACKGROUND

The Book of Exodus combines narratives of the exodus from Egypt with Israel's legal code. The Lord was responsible for both. He terminated the Egyptian slavery of the Israelites and led them to Mount Sinai. There He revealed the behavior He expected from His people and provided them instructions for building a place of worship.

Leviticus consists of a continuation of the material in Exodus. However, the Book of Leviticus has a conspicuously different character. Its laws expand God's expectation of Israelite behavior. Whereas previous laws focused on maintaining a covenant relationship with God, the laws in Leviticus focus on the imitation of certain characteristics of God in the Israelites. This emphasis is found in the command to be holy. Holiness is an attribute of God. It denotes His moral perfection. This lofty goal for His people is rooted in Divine forgiveness along with their making restitution for sins.

The sacrificial system and the laws associated with it were designed to teach the Israelites the principles for maintaining a right relationship with God and with each other. While certain laws no longer apply, the principles they reveal remain valid today (1 Pet. 1:13-16). However, whereas the sacrifices could only teach about Divine forgiveness, the sacrificial death of Jesus effectively removes human sin (Heb. 10:1-10).

The material in this lesson divides into two conspicuous sections. Chapters 1–10 of Leviticus deal with the sacrificial system and the priesthood that oversees it. Chapters 11–16 concentrate on sustaining the sacred relationship with God by removing that which defiles humanity. This maintenance may be accomplished either by avoiding certain things or activities or by completing an appropriate action.

#### 1. OWN UP (LEVITICUS 5:1, 4-5).

**Chapter 5, Verse 1:** *“When someone sins in any of these ways: If he has seen, heard, or known about something he has witnessed, and did not respond to a public call to testify, he is guilty.*

Scholars hold differing opinions about what is the subject of Leviticus 5:1-13. The words when someone sins

clearly mark a new section. However, whether this section belongs with verses that precede it or with those that follow is unclear. Some believe these verses are a continuation of the laws governing the sin offering. Others identify them with the restitution offering. The strong similarities between the sin offering and the restitution offering may make the division a moot point. The primary distinction is that the latter includes restitution for the offense. Otherwise the two offerings are very similar.

The Hebrew word translated *sins* is more comprehensive and serious than our contemporary perception. The Hebrew word means “to miss the mark.” It describes an archer shooting an arrow at a bull's eye, but the arrow fails to reach the target. Thus in the Old Testament sin is falling short of God's expectation for one's life. It includes failing to do what is right or unintentionally doing wrong. Right and wrong are not subjective but are firmly fixed by God. Hence any deviation from God's design for one's life is sin and brings one into conflict with God's sovereign will. Several examples of wrongdoing provide an interesting synopsis of the term.

The first example listed is withholding evidence in a legal trial. This action interfered with the process of justice and could result in an erroneous verdict. Touching that which was ceremonially unclean also was a serious offense. Debating the triviality of this offense misses the point. The primary message conveyed by the sacrificial system is that God removes human sin. Nothing is too insignificant or too great to be forgiven by God. Jesus' sacrifice covered the entire spectrum of human wrongdoing.

**Verse 4:** *Or if someone swears rashly to do what is good or evil—concerning anything a person may speak rashly in an oath—without being aware of it, but later recognizes it, he incurs guilt in such an instance.*

Taking an oath rashly is wrong. It brings obligations to the person making the oath. In each case the attachment of guilt implies punishment is due.

**Verse 5:** *If someone incurs guilt in one of these cases, he is to confess he has committed that sin.*

The Hebrew word rendered confess conveys the acknowledgment of wrongdoing. The idea is that the deed is revealed rather than hidden. Confession is always to be made to God although we may need to confess to others as well. While hiding something from God is impossible, a harmonious relationship with God is equally impossible

without admitting guilt. Divine forgiveness only comes after confession.

In setting forth the sin offering regulations, the Lord revealed several examples of wrongdoing and charged people who committed such sins to confess their wrongdoing. If we offend or damage others by our actions or inactions, we take a first step in doing right by owning up to our wrongdoing.

#### 2. THE SALVE OF CONFESSION (LEVITICUS 5:14-16)

**Verse 14:** *Then the LORD spoke to Moses:*

The fifth offering is the restitution offering. The primary distinction between the restitution and the sin offerings is the matter of compensation. The Lord demanded that reparation be made as well as making an offering to Him. This reparation could become costly, depending on the damage done.

**Verse 15:** *“If someone offends by sinning unintentionally in regard to any of the LORD's holy things, he must bring his restitution offering to the LORD: an unblemished ram from the flock by your valuation in silver shekels, according to the sanctuary shekel, as a restitution offering.*

Moses began the list of deeds that required giving a restitution offering with violations within the religious sphere. The phrase offends by sinning unintentionally indicates no malice or planning was involved. The guilty party may not have known the act was wrong at the time or may have committed it unintentionally. The phrase the LORD's holy things specifies the action involved sacred objects or holy places. The person's sins may have included such offenses as eating bread designated for the table of showbread or a portion of meat belonging to the priests. A man may have entered the courtyard of the tabernacle without realizing he had defiled himself earlier in the day. Whatever the act might have been, it was an act of infidelity against the Lord.

Since this particular violation of God's law was against God Himself, the restitution must be made to God. Since the tabernacle represented God's presence, restitution was made there to the LORD.

**Verse 16:** *He must make restitution for his sin regarding any holy thing, adding a fifth of its value to it, and give it to the priest. Then the priest will make atonement on his behalf with the ram of the restitution offering, and he will be forgiven.*

The restitution went beyond merely replacing the value

of the loss. It added a fine in the amount of a fifth, or 20 percent, the value of the loss. The verb rendered make atonement literally means “to cover” or “to conceal.” The offense brought separation between God and the offender. The offering covered the wrong so the damaged relationship might be restored. The sin then would be forgiven. This covering involved the intercession of a third party. The priest made the atonement on behalf of the guilty party, a foreshadowing of Christ’s priesthood.

All five sacrifices find their ultimate fulfillment in Christ’s gracious atoning sacrifice (see Eph. 1:7; 1 John 1:9). Through His atoning death we can experience forgiveness and right relationship with God. Furthermore, Christ’s sacrifice can do what the sacrificial system could not do. It is comprehensive, in that it covers deliberate rebellion against God as well as unintentional sin. Rather than being a symbolic ritual, it in reality removes sin and transforms the nature of the sinner.

### 3. BE WILLING TO GO THERE (LEVITICUS 6:1-7).

#### Chapter 6. Verse 1: *The LORD spoke to Moses:*

The repetition of the phrase the LORD spoke to Moses again indicates the verses that follow address a new topic. Whereas Leviticus 5:14-19 concerned unintentional sins, Leviticus 6:1-7 deals with deliberately taking advantage of a neighbor in order to increase one’s own wealth.

**Verse 2:** *“When someone sins and offends the LORD by deceiving his neighbor in regard to a deposit, a security, or a robbery; or defrauds his neighbor;*

The term neighbor likely denotes another member of the covenant community. Thus the victim was in a covenant relationship with God. Taking advantage of that person directly offended the Lord Himself. Jesus expanded the definition of the term *neighbor* to include even the most despised outsider (Luke 10:29-37).

Israel’s covenant with the Lord was to dictate the people’s behavior. The covenant covered both behavior aimed at God specifically and conduct toward other individuals. In God’s eyes, wronging others was equally as offensive as violations in the religious sphere. Verses 2-3 list behaviors that God deemed sinful.

The specific behavior is fraud in regards to personal property. All property, whether land or possessions, belongs to the Lord. People acquire material things only because God, the rightful Owner, permits it. A person in real-

ity is God’s steward of the possession. Therefore, stealing another’s material goods is an offense against God.

**Verse 3:** *or finds something lost and lies about it; or swears falsely about any of the sinful things a person may do—*

An additional scenario is stated. A person finds an item that a neighbor has lost and fails to return it. When confronted, rather than returning the item in question, the person lies. Therefore the sin involves not only misappropriating God’s property, it is compounded by a loss of integrity. The sanctity of one’s word is fundamental to the covenant relationship.

**Verse 4:** *once he has sinned and acknowledged his guilt—he must return what he stole or defrauded, or the deposit entrusted to him, or the lost item he found,*

Whenever the truth is revealed it is possible to restore the relationships damaged by deceit and dishonesty. The one who cheated his neighbor must accept responsibility for his or her actions. Then restitution must be made, either by returning the item or if returning it is not possible, by giving the monetary equivalent. For example, if a tool was taken, it was to be returned. However, if a sheep was taken and eaten, the market value of the animal must be paid.

Behind this legislation is the concept that people living in covenant with God have an obligation to God to take care of each other. Using someone’s misfortune to increase one’s own wealth is prohibited. An Israelite might loan money to another Israelite. He had the right to require collateral for the loan. However, his motivation should be to help the borrower out of an economic crisis, not to make a profit. It should be remembered that Israelites only borrowed out of necessity—often to prevent starvation not to improve their personal lifestyle.

**Verse 5:** *or anything else about which he swore falsely. He must make full restitution for it and add a fifth of its value to it. He is to pay it to its owner on the day he acknowledges his guilt.*

In addition to returning the stolen property, 20 percent of its value must be given to the legitimate owner. The restitution was to be completed immediately. Acknowledging guilt was not sufficient. Accepting responsibility also included restoring the damaged relationship with the injured person.

**Verses 6-7:** *Then he must bring his restitution offering to the LORD: an unblemished ram from the flock, accord-*

*ing to your valuation, as a restitution offering to the priest. In this way the priest will make atonement on his behalf before the LORD, and he will be forgiven for anything he may have done to incur guilt.”*

Our society seeks to deny guilt in order to avoid lawsuits. Such duplicity neglects an important reality. A person cannot dupe God. God knows everything and therefore is always aware of the actual situation. The Israelites understood that God knew the truth. They recognized that deceit also damaged the guilty person’s fellowship with God. Therefore, not only must the relationship between people be restored, the relationship with God must be mended (see Matt. 5:23-24).

The Lord directed that any person who willfully deceives or defrauds a neighbor or gives false testimony about a neighbor must offer a guilt offering and make restitution to the injured party. We show our determination to do right when we seek not only to be forgiven of our wrongdoing but also to make restitution for losses or damages we’ve caused.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 23

### LEVITICUS 17:1-22:33

#### THE BACKGROUND

Leviticus 17–27 is commonly called the Holiness Code. The section derives its name from the repetition of the phrase “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (see Lev. 19:2). Chapters 17–26 present laws for holy living, whereas chapter 27 is an appendix dealing with paying vows and tithes.

Holiness is a state of existence. The Hebrew word for *holy* seems to be derived from a verb meaning “to separate.” Thus holiness denotes those people and things that God has separated from the rest of the world to serve Him. This fact does not imply these people and things exist in isolation. Rather implicit in the separation is a change in nature that distinguishes that which is holy from everything else. Consequently such individuals and objects are to be in conformity with God’s characteristics.

The content of this week’s background passage begins with worship practices associated with the tabernacle. At the center of these practices was sacrifice. Therefore additional insight for proper sacrifices is provided. Central to the offering of sacrifice was the priesthood. Thus a significant portion of the passage pertains to laws governing the priests. However, the sacrificial system involved all the people, not just the priests. It was representative of the covenant relationship between the people and God. God is equally concerned with life outside the place of worship. This reality was true in ancient Israel and it is true in contemporary America. Our daily lifestyle should flow naturally out of our worship experiences. Thus laws for life away from the tabernacle likewise are included.

#### 1. A LIFE APART (LEVITICUS 18:1-5)

**Verse 1:** *The LORD spoke to Moses:*

The statement the LORD spoke to Moses indicates this verse introduces new material. Whereas the overall topic remains holy living, the specific subject matter—pagan practices—is new. Furthermore, the verse reminds the reader that the origin of the material was not Moses. He merely recorded what God told him. Therefore the content of what follows could not be ignored. To modify it in any manner was to deliberately disobey the Lord God. The verses that follow presuppose a covenant relationship ex-

isted between God and those to whom He spoke.

**Verse 2:** *“Speak to the Israelites and tell them: I am the LORD your God.”*

The statement “I am the LORD your God” continues to accentuate the origin of these stipulations as God Himself. Furthermore, the statement contains a twofold implication. First, the stipulated behavior is derived out of the Lord’s nature. The use of the Lord’s covenant name indicated by the uppercase letters in *LORD* calls attention both to His Person and to His nature. Certain conduct is unacceptable to Him and always results in His judgment. Second, God was within His prerogative in demanding the Israelites conform to the stipulated behavior because they were in a covenant relationship with Him. They had agreed to abide by His rules before they entered into this relationship (Ex. 19:5-8).

**Verse 3:** *Do not follow the practices of the land of Egypt, where you used to live, or follow the practices of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. You must not follow their customs.*

God’s identification of Himself was followed by a stern warning. This warning pointed both to the past and to the future. Implicit between the two was the present.

The Israelites had dwelt in Egypt for centuries. During that time the people almost certainly gained some knowledge that would serve them well in their new home. However, much of Egyptian civilization was diametrically opposed to the commandments laid down by God as terms of Israel’s covenant with Him. The First Commandment prohibited any deity except Him. However, the Egyptian pantheon contained numerous gods and goddesses. The Second Commandment prohibited making idols. The people previously demonstrated their tendency to succumb to Egyptian influence in their worship when they made and worshiped a golden calf.

Time would reveal that the Israelites would be even more prone to follow the practices of the land of Canaan. The people would be especially vulnerable to the fertility cults that dominated Canaanite religion. The mixture of agriculture and sensuality appealed to the former slaves whose background was construction, not farming. Many Israelites accepted the indigenous population’s belief that a good harvest was dependent on both planting seeds in the field and having sex with a cultic prostitute. The repeated condemnation made by subsequent proph-

ets reveals the nation would struggle with this issue over the next millennium.

The warning echoes across the centuries to our own time. We can be led astray by ungodly influences from our past or new evils we may encounter in the future. God does not want us to withdraw from the world and only associate with other Christians. Neither does He want us to be overconfident in our ability to withstand temptation. He does want us to avoid worldly practices by living according to His commands.

**Verse 4:** *You are to practice My ordinances and you are to keep My statutes by following them; I am the LORD your God.*

The Hebrew word rendered ordinances is a derivative of a verb that means “to rule” or “to judge.” This noun could denote a verdict in a trial. It could also denote a code of laws. Here the context and the word’s use in combination with statutes indicate the latter sense. The word *statutes* comes from a verb that means “cutting” or “engraving” in stone. Thus the term implies a sense of permanence. Together the two words *statutes* and *ordinances* refer to the law of Moses. As such they represent the people’s responsibilities under the terms of their covenant with the Lord.

The word translated *practice* literally means “to do.” The word *keep* parallels *practice* and has the sense of observing. The word *following* means literally is “walking.” Walking frequently is a metaphor for one’s lifestyle. One’s lifestyle is determined by what a person does. The lifestyle of God’s people is to be determined not by duplicating what other people do but by doing what God says.

**Verse 5:** *Keep My statutes and ordinances; a person will live if he does them. I am the LORD.*

The Lord repeated His warning for the people to abide by the terms of their agreement with Him. They must be very careful to live according to God’s instructions. God’s statement that a person who does so will live does not imply that strict obedience results in individual longevity. Rather it emphasizes that the Lord’s commands whether regulating social, political, or religious life were designed to promote the stability and security of the covenant community. The people’s longevity as a nation was dependent on obedience to God’s commands. Furthermore, they enabled the individual to achieve maximum potential in life. God’s laws are for our benefit. He put them in

place to enable His people to fulfill His design for their lives. Therefore any lack of compliance can only result in living less than God intended.

God's assertion "I am the LORD" reiterated the emphasis on the covenant relationship that existed between Israel and Him. It stressed His right to determine how the people should live.

The Lord urged the Israelites to keep His holy ways and consequently avoid pagan practices. God's people are called to live by the Lord's standards rather than by the standards of worldly society and culture.

## 2. GOD IS QUITE CLEAR (LEVITICUS 18:20-26).

**Verse 20:** *You are not to have sexual intercourse with your neighbor's wife, defiling yourself with her.*

This verse applied the Seventh Commandment (Ex. 20:14). In matters of marriage and sexual purity Jesus called His followers to a higher standard than the Old Testament law. He went beyond the physical act and condemned the attitude that spawned the deed (Matt. 5:27-28). His standard requires being monogamous in marriage and maintaining sexual purity in one's thoughts as well as in one's actions.

**Verse 21:** *"You are not to make any of your children pass through the fire to Molech. Do not profane the name of your God; I am the LORD.*

Molech was a Hebrew name for an Ammonite god. It seems to have been a deliberate misvocalization of the Hebrew word for king. The word was formed by substituting the vowels of the Hebrew word for shame with the consonants of the Hebrew word for king. Thereby it expressed contempt for this horrendous idol. Child sacrifice was associated with the worship of Molech. The phrase pass through the fire connects this sacrifice to burning. Some scholars believe it implies children were tossed into a fire pit alive. Jewish rabbinic tradition claims children were placed within a hollow bronze statue that subsequently was heated by a fire burning below it. This action is murder in a most callous fashion. Sadly, later even the people of Israel occasionally practiced this ghastly ritual (Jer. 7:31).

Practices such as child sacrifice profane the name of God. The verb translated *profane* means to desecrate by misuse. The name of God designates God in His entirety with an emphasis on His character. Such treatment of

human life contradicts God's essential nature and is the antithesis of His demand for human behavior. It is tantamount to blasphemy by action rather than by speech. This point is driven home by the repetition of the assertion "I am the LORD." Abortion and euthanasia are as abhorrent practices in our time as child sacrifice was in that culture.

**Verse 22:** *You are not to sleep with a man as with a woman; it is detestable.*

This prohibition clearly forbids homosexuality. The word detestable conveys the idea that something is repugnant or abhorrent. It is much stronger than an expression of personal dislike. It is a warning that such behavior results in Divine judgment. Like adultery, it is a violation of God's design for human sexuality.

**Verse 23:** *You are not to have sexual intercourse with any animal, defiling yourself with it; a woman is not to present herself to an animal to mate with it; it is a perversion.*

Sexual relations with animals likewise were prohibited. Such behavior is called a perversion. This Hebrew word only occurs twice in the Old Testament. It means a reversal of the divinely intended order of things. Observe that intense terms of condemnation occur one after another in this passage. As a result they strengthen the overall concept that all such behavior is unacceptable to God. It clearly violates His purposes for creation. Those who practice sexual immorality and disregard for human life will incur God's judgment. Such actions have no place among God's people.

**Verse 24:** *"Do not defile yourselves by any of these practices, for the nations I am driving out before you have defiled themselves by all these things.*

God revealed the consequences of such unacceptable behavior. The nations that the Israelites were to annihilate had followed these practices. The looming destruction of these idolatrous peoples was God's judgment against their conduct. If the people of Israel duplicated the behavior of these nations, they would experience a similar fate. The laws set forth here were safeguards to protect the Israelites from the folly of following in the path of the condemned nations.

**Verse 25:** *The land has become defiled, so I am punishing it for its sin, and the land will vomit out its inhabitants.*

The phrase the land has become defiled accentuates sin's impact. People typically assume their wrong behavior hurts

only themselves. However, the Bible clearly indicates no one sins in a vacuum. Every action affects people around us for good or for evil. This verse reminds us our wrong actions touch the totality of creation. The wickedness of Canaan's inhabitants would result in their loss of lives and lands. Their moral pollution had made the land sick. Therefore it would vomit out its inhabitants. Vomiting is an extremely violent bodily reaction. Thus the term expresses the depth of Divine revulsion at such conduct.

**Verse 26:** *But you are to keep My statutes and ordinances. You must not commit any of these abominations—not the native or the foreigner who lives among you.*

The warning had been expressed in graphic fashion. Behavior has specific consequences, and the conduct of the Canaanites had permanent fatal consequences. Therefore the Israelites must avoid similar conduct if they were to remain in the land. The repetition of the consequences of unacceptable behavior emphasized the certainty of God's response to such behavior. Therefore the Israelites must never tolerate the existence of such conduct. If even a single individual practiced it, that person must be removed from the presence of God's people. An individual must never be allowed to influence anyone else to behave in such an intolerable manner (see Lev. 18:27-30).

The Lord commanded His people never to practice adultery or child sacrifice or to engage in perverted sexual activities, including homosexuality. God's people are to meet the highest ethical standards for sexual conduct.

## 3. TABOO IS TABOO (LEVITICUS 20:6-8).

The words recorded in Leviticus 20:1-8 reminded the people of the consequences of worshiping other gods or introducing evil practices into their lives. The Lord demanded absolute fidelity to His Person and His purposes. Whereas worshiping Molech illustrated infidelity to God's Person, sorcery violated His purposes. He designed humanity to live in a relationship with Him. In this relationship people are to depend on Him in all things. They must never resort to methods that directly oppose or compromise God's nature and revelation.

**Verse 6:** *"Whoever turns to mediums or spiritists and prostitutes himself with them, I will turn against that person and cut him off from his people.*

Leviticus 19:31 prohibited the practice of attempting

to communicate with the spirits of the dead, as well as any form of witchcraft or sorcery. God's people must depend on Him for guidance and power for living. Israel's pagan neighbors often relied on magical spells to placate malevolent spirits of the dead or to determine the future. Such superstitious notions still control people today. Individuals still seek direction through astrology or karma. Christians must be guided by the Holy Spirit. God sent Him into our lives for this very purpose (see Gal. 5:16-21).

Such practices prostitutes the person who accepts them. The Hebrew word denotes sexual immorality. It was one term for adultery in the Old Testament. Later prophets applied this metaphor to idolatry. Just as adultery was a capital crime in Israel, infidelity to the Lord was likewise a serious breach of Israel's covenant obligations. Hosea, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel applied this metaphor to the apostasy of their times.

**Verse 7:** *Consecrate yourselves and be holy, for I am the LORD your God.*

God's stern warning is followed by instructions for avoiding His wrath. The verb consecrate literally means "to make holy," that is to separate something to God for His use. Rather than be controlled by evil, God's people should come out of such behavior and dedicate themselves to His service.

**Verse 8:** *Keep My statutes and do them; I am the LORD who sets you apart.*

An important principle is set forth here. Every human effort to become holy is doomed to failure. We lack the ability to purify our lives and live completely for God. This setting apart is something only God can do. He stated, "I am the LORD who sets you apart." People sometimes say, "I am going to clean up my life and come to God." They never do, because they do not have the capacity to clean up their lives. Rather, a person needs to say, "I am going to come to God and allow Him to clean up my life."

The Lord declared the Israelites were not to consort with mediums but were to live holy lives because He had chosen the Israelites as His people. God's people show their commitment to live holy lives when they depend on the Holy Spirit and reject the practice of any form of sorcery.

## BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MAY 30

### LEVITICUS 23:1-27:34

#### THE BACKGROUND

Leviticus 17–27 is commonly called the Holiness Code. The Holiness Code takes its name from the repetition of God’s mandate, “Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy” (see Lev. 19:2). Chapters 17–26 present laws for holy living, whereas chapter 27 is an appendix dealing with paying vows and tithes.

These chapters include specific behaviors for various calendar dates. The holy days ranged from the weekly Sabbath to the Year of Jubilee, which occurred twice every century. Each of these special times required specific actions. The Israelites’ willingness to abide by these stipulations would be a factor in determining the people’s continued occupation of Canaan.

The Lord created the earth and everything it contains. Therefore it belongs to Him. As the Owner of the land, God had the right to determine who lived on it. As the Creator of its occupants, He had the right to decide on a code of conduct for them. The Canaanites failed to live according to God’s values. Therefore He evicted them from Canaan and gave their land to the Israelites. He demanded the Israelites give Him the honor due God. Furthermore He required them to treat each other in a manner appropriate to their relationship to Him. Their willingness to do so would determine if they would continue to live there.

#### 1. FREEDOM FOR ALL (LEVITICUS 25:10-12)

Chapter 25 of Leviticus set guidelines for a Sabbath Year every 7th year and a Year of Jubilee every 50th year. The chapter begins with the standard formula for introducing a new section, “The LORD spoke to Moses” (Lev. 25:1). What follows came from God. The chapter ends with the reminder that the Lord had redeemed Israel out of Egypt. Therefore His authority to impose these stipulations was His prerogative.

**Verse 10:** *You are to consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim freedom in the land for all its inhabitants. It will be your Jubilee, when each of you is to return to his property and each of you to his clan.*

Every 50 years was your Year of Jubilee. The personal pronoun indicates the designation was for the people’s benefit, not their detriment. The derivation of the term

*Jubilee* is unclear. It may come from a verb meaning “to bring forth.” Others connect it with a Phoenician word for “ram,” referring to a ram’s horn. The blowing of a horn on the Day of Atonement signaled the start of this celebration. During the Year of Jubilee property was to be returned to its original owner.

The proclamation of freedom points to the emancipation of slaves and the restoration of property. Both loss of property and loss of freedom generally resulted from extreme poverty and destitution. God previously provided for poor people with laws restricting harvesting the corners of fields and recovering fallen grain (Lev. 19:9-10). In some situations poverty became so bad that an individual was forced to take extreme steps just to survive. Therefore he sold his land. If he did not have land, he sold himself into slavery. In either case during the Year of Jubilee both he and his land was to revert to their original status.

Slavery was an accepted reality in the ancient world. The Old Testament neither condoned nor condemned the practice. Instead it established laws that greatly impeded its survival. Like other nations in the region, Israel allowed for the permanent enslavement of foreign peoples. But enslavement of Israelites was only to be temporary. The New Testament likewise was written in a culture in which slavery was practiced widely and commonly. However, the gospel of Jesus Christ contains within it the seeds of both spiritual and physical freedom (Luke 4:18-19; Philem. 15-16).

**Verse 11:** *The fiftieth year will be your Jubilee; you are not to sow, reap what grows by itself, or harvest its untended vines.*

The Year of Jubilee was treated as a Sabbath Year. The people were not permitted to harvest. Instead grains and fruits were left on the plants in the fields.

**Verse 12:** *It is to be holy to you because it is the Jubilee; you may only eat its produce directly from the field.*

Since the citizens of Israel were holy to the Lord, the Jubilee likewise was holy to them. This fact once again was a reminder that the Lord’s covenant stipulations always were for the people’s good. The prohibition against a regular harvest was not designed to allow food to rot in the fields. Rather it provided everyone, regardless of economic or social status, a supply of nutrition. Whenever people were hungry, they could enter the closest field for a meal.

As Christians, we need to tell others about the spiritual

freedom available in Christ. We can assist each other in enjoying God-given freedom. This assistance includes helping others learn how to get out and stay out from under the oppression of foolish debt. This burden easily can become a type of psychological and emotional slavery.

The Lord instructed the Israelites to celebrate the Year of Jubilee each 50th year, thus proclaiming freedom for all the people in the land. God’s people demonstrate they appreciate their God-given freedoms by working to help others enjoy those freedoms.

#### 2. BE FAIR (LEVITICUS 25:13-17)

**Verse 13:** *“In this Year of Jubilee, each of you will return to his property.”*

The subject of Divine ownership of the land permeates this chapter. When the Israelites entered Canaan, the Lord assigned tribes to specific territories. Such assignments did not imply that God prohibited private possession of property. Nor did the assignments eliminate buying and selling land. However, His actions did imply that such practices conform to God’s character and that the land remained subject to His dominion. God’s claim expressed itself in a unique aspect of the Year of Jubilee. Any property that had been transferred to new ownership during the previous 49 years was to revert to its original owner or his heirs. This reversion kept intact God’s allocation of the land to the various tribes.

**Verse 14:** *If you make a sale to your neighbor or a purchase from him, do not cheat one another.*

The stipulations of the Year of Jubilee served as protection for poor and weak members of society and hindered wealthy, powerful citizens from taking unfair advantage. The word cheat also means “to do someone wrong.” The idea involves taking advantage of someone else’s vulnerability. For example, an Israelite might sell property to a resident alien who was ignorant about Jubilee law. The seller could sell the property a few months prior to the start of Jubilee for an exorbitant price. Then before the buyer could use the land the seller would seize it back on the basis of the Jubilee laws. Because sales frequently occurred because of economic duress, a seller might be forced by circumstances to accept a less-than-equitable offer. The Lord expected the Israelites to refrain from using the Jubilee as an opportunity to cheat in the purchase or sale of property.

**Verses 15-16:** *You are to make the purchase from*

*your neighbor based on the number of years since the last Jubilee. He is to sell to you based on the number of remaining harvest years. You are to increase its price in proportion to a greater amount of years, and decrease its price in proportion to a lesser amount of years, because what he is selling to you is a number of harvests.*

The price of the land was determined by the number of years since the last Jubilee. This factor determined the length of time that the purchaser would have the land available for his use. If it only had been a year since the last Year of Jubilee, the buyer could expect to get 48 harvest seasons from the land. But if it had been 48 years, he would only get one season at best. Consequently, the price for the former would be significantly higher than for the latter.

**Verse 17:** *You are not to cheat one another, but fear your God, for I am the LORD your God.*

Instead of cheating each other, people were to fear God. This fear refers to living with the keen awareness of God's nearness and an understanding of who He is. The awesome realization that God is holy and humanity is sinful dominates this awareness. Here the commitment of individuals to God manifested itself in transactions such as buying and selling property.

The Lord expected the Israelites to refrain from using the Jubilee Year as an opportunity to cheat one another in the purchase or sale of properties. By refusing to cheat others and always treating them fairly, God's people exhibit their deep respect for the Lord, who is just and holy.

### **3. TAKE CARE OF WHAT YOU'VE GOT (LEVITICUS 25:18-22)**

**Verse 18:** *"You are to observe My statutes and ordinances and carefully observe them, so that you may live securely in the land.*

God's statutes and ordinances were recorded in written form by Moses. The people were to obey these laws in order to live securely in the land. God wanted Israel to understand that continued residence in Canaan would be contingent on the people's obedience. If they were unfaithful and ignored God's guidance, He would expel them.

**Verse 19:** *Then the land will yield its fruit, so that you can eat, be satisfied, and live securely in the land.*

If the people observed God's statutes and ordinances, God would ensure the land produced adequate harvests.

This statement did not guarantee every harvest would be abundant. Rather it promised the overall supply would be sufficient for the nation's survival and prosperity. There would still be shortages some years and surpluses in other years. However, if the people were obedient, they would not starve.

**Verse 20:** *If you wonder: "What will we eat in the seventh year if we don't sow or gather our produce?"*

Human nature tends to produce anxiety, especially concerning survival. The laws for Sabbath years contradicted human logic. Consequently, people inevitably would question the wisdom of obedience.

**Verse 21:** *I will appoint My blessing for you in the sixth year, so that it will produce a crop sufficient for three years.*

God promised to supply enough food for everyone to eat during the year the land lay fallow. He already had proved His capacity to do so. The people ate manna God had supplied them in the wilderness. They were already in the habit of gathering double portions of manna on the sixth day because no manna would be present on the seventh day. In verse 21 God revealed that the sixth year's harvest would provide sufficient food to last three years!

**Verse 22:** *When you sow in the eighth year, you will be eating from the previous harvest. You will be eating this until the ninth year when its harvest comes in.*

This promise not only implied an abundant harvest, it also revealed God's provision for the Year of Jubilee. Jubilee followed a Sabbath Year. Thus every 50 years there would be two consecutive Sabbath years! God promised the people that enough food would be available to supply their needs until the crop they planted the third year yielded its harvest. The people also could still eat whatever grew naturally off the land (25:6-7).

The Year of Jubilee required the Israelites to trust deeply in the Lord's providential care. The Lord promised He would bless the obedient Israelites with crops that could sustain them sufficiently throughout the Jubilee period. God's people show they have confidence the Lord will provide for them when they consistently obey His commands and manage wisely the blessings He gives.

### **4. AN ABUNDANCE OF THE HEART (LEVITICUS 25:35-38)**

Leviticus 25:23-38 covers specific legislation for the return of property during the Jubilee. These laws flowed out of the Lord's command to love one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18).

Whereas the Israelites likely understood this command as pertaining to members of the covenant community, Jesus clearly indicated His followers were obligated to extend mercy to anyone they meet (Luke 10:29-37).

**Verse 35:** *"If your brother becomes destitute and cannot sustain himself among you, you are to support him as a foreigner or temporary resident, so that he can continue to live among you.*

God does not promise individuals will never have difficult times in life. Part of God's provision for such crises is the help of His people. The term **brother** points to the family relationship that a covenant relationship with God establishes among His children.

**Verse 36:** *Do not profit or take interest from him, but fear your God and let your brother live among you.*

This verse connects to the previous command and forbids God's people from using the suffering of another member of the covenant community as an opportunity to improve one's own lot. Because of one's relationship with God, one has a certain responsibility to those in need.

**Verse 37:** *You are not to lend him your silver with interest or sell him your food for profit.*

The prohibition against charging interest here is not applicable to present-day financial institutions. The individuals with whom these commands are concerned would not qualify for loans today. They typically were destitute.

**Verse 38:** *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.*

The Lord continued to identify Himself by what He had done in the past and by what He would do in the future. The Lord commanded His people to extend kindness to fellow citizens who became impoverished, providing them support as needed and refusing to take advantage of them. God's people exhibit godly grace when they extend kindness by offering a helping hand to those who are destitute.