

Overview of the Bible 3 – ‘Worship the Lord in the splendour of holiness’: The Promised Land

Deuteronomy 12:1-7 / Psalm 96 / Hebrews 9:1-15 / John 4:5-26

Biblical books: Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth

Sunday Night in the City, Bethlehem, 3 April 2022

Pastor Thomas Pietsch

Tonight we continue our sermon series providing an overview of the whole Bible, so I will be preaching on the next six books of the Old Testament, from Leviticus to Ruth, and also the texts we’ve just heard read. Let’s pray: Lord God, sanctify us in the truth, your Word is truth.

Recap from last month

The previous sermon in this series, a month ago, was dedicated to the books of Genesis and Exodus. We saw how the first 11 books of Genesis concerned the creation and fall of humankind, made in the image of God, male and female. Then in chapter 12 and for the rest of Genesis, God chooses one particular man, Abraham and his descendants to be blessed, and so through him to bless all the families of the earth. By the book of Exodus, Abraham’s descendants are slaves in Egypt, but God calls Moses as their leader, who leads them from slavery under Pharaoh, into service to God at Mt Sinai. The first half of Exodus shows what Israel is not – Pharaoh’s possession (Exodus 1-18) – , while the second half shows what Israel is – God’s own holy people. Just as in our worship we first are led out of our sins by forgiveness in Christ, so that God can bestow on us again our true identity as holy people.



Overview of Today

So tonight we pick up with the people of Israel at Mount Sinai. We want to summarise the next six books of the Old Testament tonight, and I want to begin by drawing your attention to a map that will help us. The line in this map is the journey of Israel, which we take up tonight with Leviticus at Mt Sinai, then the journey to the Promised Land given in Numbers. Deuteronomy is set on the cusp of the Promised Land, with Joshua dedicated to Israel’s entry into the Promised Land. Judges and Ruth show Israel living in the Promised Land. So with that journey in mind, let’s turn to Leviticus.

Leviticus

Leviticus begins with the words “The Lord called Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting” (Leviticus 1:1). That word “from” is important because it reveals a problem. The tabernacle was the holy tent in which God had come to dwell among his people, which God

had instructed Israel to build in Exodus, and about which we hear this at the very end of the book of Exodus:

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of meeting because the cloud settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. (Exodus 40:34-35)

So while God's glory is now in the midst of Israel, there is a problem. God is so holy that his goodness and purity and justice is dangerous for an impure people like Israel. Exodus thus ends with Moses unable to enter this tabernacle, and Leviticus begins with God calling to Moses from the tent of meeting, because Moses couldn't enter in.

The whole book of Leviticus is dedicated to resolving this problem, showing how Israel can live in God's holy presence by having their impurity dealt with, so they can be clean, and then holy and so dwell with the holy God. This involves God giving Israel rituals so they can dwell in God's holy presence, then God giving priests who will be mediators between Israel and God, and God also providing ways in which Israel can maintain purity, and cleanse themselves from impurity.

Let's just look briefly at those three. First, one main kind of ritual given is to deal with the presence of sin. So in repentance for some sin, an Israelite could approach God with an animal sacrifice, confessing their own sin. Instead of destroying the sinner, God would grant them forgiveness with an animal dying in their place. Something like this had already happened in Genesis when God provided a ram to Abraham to die in place of his son Isaac. But now this ritual is available to all the people of Israel – showing both God's justice, that sin does have consequences, and God's grace, that their sins are now covered (Leviticus 1-7), in a way that Jesus' own death for us would fulfill, showing both God's justice and grace. Other rituals given in Leviticus relate to seven annual feasts that Israel would have (Leviticus 23-25), feasts that are somewhat mirrored in our own liturgical calendar with annual celebrations of Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, Ascension, Pentecost and other festivals.

Next, the priests. Leviticus shows Aaron and his sons ordained as priests, to enter into God's presence in the tabernacle on behalf of Israel, and also to bring God's blessing out to Israel. Indeed, at the end of our divine service we usually have the same blessing that Aaron used, the Aaronic blessing, indicated in Leviticus, but given properly in the next book, Numbers (Numbers 5:22-23, cf. Leviticus 9:23). God shows how the priests are to go about this holy work, and one episode in Leviticus 10 reveals how important it is that the priests follow God's Word and are obedient to it. In that episode, Aaron's two sons, just recently ordained, walk into God's presence while making up their own ritual, carrying unauthorized fire, and so disobeying the ritual set down by God. On the spot, they are consumed by God's holiness and die. It sounds strange, but it shows the paradox of living in the midst of God's holy presence, which is both pure goodness and incredibly dangerous to those who rebel and are unprepared.

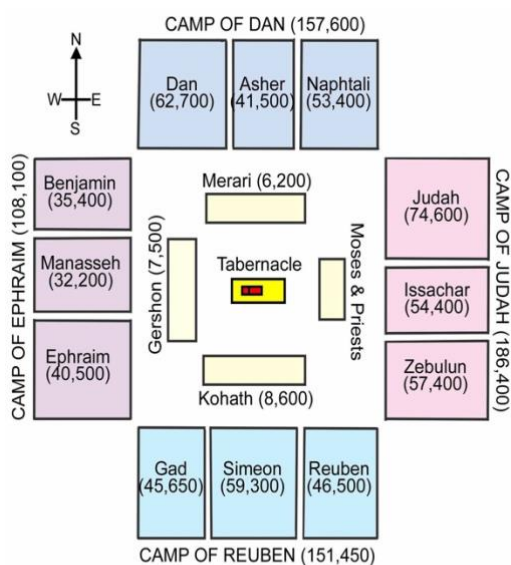
But it's not just the priests who are to live lives of obedience to God. Leviticus is also full of instructions for how all Israelites are to live lives of purity, and of what to do when they enter into a state of impurity. We can't go into it tonight, but the point is really to show how God's holiness was to infiltrate all parts of the lives of his people. It wasn't just something for the priests.

Among all the things in Leviticus, I want to mention one special festival that God gives, the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16-17). While Israelites could atone for their sins with an animal sacrifice, practically speaking there would be sins that would slip through the cracks, that would not be dealt with properly. So once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest was to take two goats, one of which would be sacrificed to atone for all of Israel's sins, the other of which was called the scapegoat – a phrase we still use today. The high priest would take this goat, confess the sins of Israel over the goat, and then it would be cast out into the wilderness, removing Israel's sin and its consequences, so they can live with God in peace. The New Testament book of Hebrews describes this very practice, as we heard in our reading (Hebrews 9:1-15). But it adds that now Christ Jesus has “entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption”. This annual repetition has been permanently fulfilled, not by the blood of an animal, but by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. What the Israelites could not even dream of has happened to us, with blood of Christ purifying our consciences, forgiving all of our sins, and making us holy. As Jesus put it to the woman at the well (John 4:5-26), the hour has now come “when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.” Not in the temple anymore. For Christian worship of the Father is now not tied to one place, but is rather in the Holy Spirit and in Truth, with Jesus Christ himself being our way, our truth, and our life (John 14:6).

But back to Leviticus and its project. The question is: Does it work? Do the rituals, priests, festivals, and purity laws enable Israel to live with the Holy God in their midst?

Numbers

Our answer comes in the first words of the next book, called Numbers. “The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting” (Numbers 1:1). While Leviticus began with God speaking to Moses from the tabernacle, now Moses can enter into the tabernacle, and God can speak to him within. Leviticus has worked!



Arrangement of the Camp of Israel
Numbers 2:1-3:39

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The book of Numbers continues, taking up the story of Israel's journey as they leave Mt Sinai after a one-year stay and head to the Promised Land. The book begins with a census of all the people, thus the name 'Numbers', and a description of how Israel's camp was to be ordered, all gathered around the tabernacle, with God's holy presence in their centre, with the priests and Levites as pictured in the distributed manuscript. Looking at the map, you can perhaps see why medieval Christian towns especially would seek to have their church in the middle, and their homes gathered around it. While physically we live more dispersed lives in our city, nevertheless at the heart of all we do and say, at the centre of who we are and were made to be, is the worship of God. And we bear the promise of heaven, where the multitude is gathered before the Lamb (Revelation 7:9).

So Israel is gathered around the tabernacle, but then in Numbers 10, the cloud of God's presence lifts from the tabernacle and starts to move. After a year at Mt Sinai, Israel is again on the move. Back in Exodus, God had instructed Moses to make the Ark of the Covenant which was to sit in the heart of the tabernacle, as the heart of God's presence. In the mercy seat on top of the Ark, in between two golden cherubim, God promised to speak to Israel. And in the design God gave, He included four rings on the corners that wooden poles could be put through to transport the Ark in a way that no one need ever touch the actual golden Ark, and so come into direct contact with the holiest place of God's presence. Finally now in Numbers, those rings and poles are put to use, as Israel sets out with this Ark of the Covenant leading the way into the wilderness (Numbers 10:33-6).

But if there's a central theme of Numbers, it's that things don't go smoothly because the people of Israel complain. They're hungry, they're thirsty, they even say they want to go back to Egypt, including Moses' own brother and sister, Aaron the priest and Miriam the prophetess. They'll take slavery if it means their appetites can be fulfilled. Listen to what they say:

"Oh that we had meat to eat!" [they say] "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt that cost nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at" (Numbers 11:4-6).

Funnily enough, they remember the garlic, but not the slavery.

About halfway to the Promised Land, God tells Moses to send twelve spies – one for each of the twelve tribes – to assess the situation in the Promised Land. When the spies return, 10 say the situation is impossible, and that the Canaanites who are living in the Promised Land will defeat Israel. Only two spies, Caleb and Joshua, say that Israel should proceed as God will save them. But the 10 spies win in the court of public opinion, and Israel are even about to stone Caleb and Joshua to death (Numbers 14:10) when Moses intercedes, and prays to God to have mercy on Israel. God does have mercy and remains faithful to his promises to Abraham, but not at the expense of his justice. So he gives these Israelites what they want – not to enter the Promised Land. Instead, they will wander 40 years in the desert, and die, before the next generation of Israelites, their children, will enter the Promised Land.

Numbers has other stories, like getting water from rock, like a bronze snake that heals those who look upon it, and even a talking donkey. And the stark contrast between Israel's grumbling and God's faithfulness made these stories ones that were repeated again and again through the Bible, including in the New Testament.

Deuteronomy

The next book, Deuteronomy, begins where Numbers left off. The wilderness generation has largely died off in their 40 years of wandering, and the next generation is on the edge of the Promised Land, ready to take it. While there was a lot of travelling in Numbers, Deuteronomy is a stationary book. It is presented as a long speech of Moses, given to the new generation on the cusp of the Promised Land, reminding them of what the people of Israel have been through and of the law that God has given them.

Indeed, the word 'Deuteronomy' means a 'Second Law' for Moses repeats many of the laws already given in Exodus and Leviticus, including the ten commandments, while also adding some others. In the opening speech, Moses appeals to this new generation to be more faithful than their parents. That generation had grumbled, rebelled, and rejected God's saving grace, even while God remained faithful. So Moses now gives a charge to the next generation, encapsulated in some famous verses, called the 'Shema':

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." (Deuteronomy 6:4-7)

This text encapsulates the whole book of Deuteronomy, because Moses is now looking out for the future generations of Israel, beyond the wilderness generation. From now on, Moses says, Israel is to worship God alone, for He alone is God, the One God. Israel is about to enter the Promised Land, Canaan, where the local Canaanites worship various false gods and idols, including abominable practices like child sacrifice. In our first reading tonight, from Deuteronomy 12, we heard of God's command to do away with false worship to false gods, and instead to draw near to the true God in true worship, laid down in God's Word: to worship the Lord in the splendour of holiness, in the one place, the Temple, where God's holy and forgiving presence would dwell. The Shema here also commands Israel to love the Lord God, and to pass this love and worship on to the next generations. Included in this, Deuteronomy also lists ways in which Israel can love each other, including things like a Sabbatical year every seven years where all debts are forgiven, so that there will be no underclasses among Israel (Deuteronomy 15). And just as Israel are to give 10% of their income to the Temple, every three years they're also to give 10% of their income to the poor (Leviticus 14:22-29). And it's from this practice, by the way, that today as Christians we often encourage each other to give 10% of our income to our parish, as well as contribute to other appeals for the poor in our community and beyond.

At the very end of Deuteronomy, Moses concludes his speech, warning Israel of the consequences of disobedience, and laying out to them the blessings of obedience. And then he blesses all of Israel, walks up to the top of a mountain, and dies (Deuteronomy 34). And so the book of Deuteronomy ends with the people of Israel on the verge of entering into the Promised Land.

Joshua

The next book, Joshua, continues the story. Joshua, one of the faithful spies, is the new leader. Before Moses had died, he appointed Joshua as his successor, telling him to "be strong and courageous" (Deuteronomy 31:7) as he leads Israel into the Promised Land, and faces the Canaanites who lived there, for "it is the Lord who goes before you." So while Joshua was the leader, really it was God who was in charge and thus Joshua could be courageous in light of the confidence of God's blessing.

And as the book of Joshua begins, immediately Joshua appears to be a new Moses. Like Moses, he tells Israel to obey the commands of God (Joshua 1). Like Moses, he sends spies into the Promised Land (Joshua 2). And then, echoing the crossing of the Red Sea, Joshua

leads the people through the Jordan river, whose waters part, and the priests carry the Ark of Covenant across first (Joshua 3-4).

After celebrating the Passover (Joshua 5:10-12), Joshua comes near to Jericho, a Canaanite city. And he runs into a mysterious stranger, a man with an unsheathed sword. “Are you for us, or for our adversaries?” Joshua asks him. And the response? “Neither, but I am the commander of the army of the Lord” (Joshua 5:13-15). This figure, who seems to be an angel, is making a key point for the whole of the book of Joshua. For the battle is not going to be Israel versus the Canaanites. Rather, this is God’s battle, with Israel merely playing the role of spectators or sometimes supporters. There’s a direct parallel here, by the way, with the spiritual warfare we too see in our lives. The battle is not me versus the demons in my life. Nor is it my battle that I ask God to support me in. Rather, St Paul can exclaim, “thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:57). The battle is God’s, the victory is Christ’s, and it’s a victory on his terms, not ours – thanks be to God.

The next session of Joshua fleshes this out. There are lots of battles in the book of Joshua, but I just want to focus on two that occur – the battles of Jericho and Ai – because they serve as a contrast to each other. At Jericho, Israel takes a passive approach. They let God’s presence in the Ark of the Covenant lead them around the city for six days. On the seventh day the priests blow the trumpets and the walls fall down. God does all the work, with Israel putting their trust in the Lord (Joshua 6). So the spiritual song “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho” doesn’t have the full story, which is that God really fought the battle. The next battle is at a place called Ai, where Israel takes a different approach. One of the Israelites loots from Jericho, and then lies about it, so that when Israel go into fight at Ai they are defeated. Only after they deal with the sin in their midst can they gain victory (Joshua 7-8). The point being that only in obedience and trust will Israel inherit the land.

While Israel engages in many battles, they don’t completely destroy the Canaanites, and rather establish themselves in the Promised Land with Canaanites living around them (Judges 1-2). In a way similar to the tribes gathered around the tabernacle in the book of Numbers, Joshua grants portions of land to the twelve tribes, and you can see a map of that division in the manuscript. The book then closes with Joshua giving a similar speech to Moses’ final speech, commending Israel to faithfulness to God and so blessings in the land, warning them of the consequences of unfaithfulness.



Judges

The book of Judges begins with the death of Joshua. The book is so named because the leaders of Israel after Joshua were called “judges” even though they don’t resemble our modern judges in a courtroom, and are more like tribal chieftains. And with the book of Judges, time moves more quickly, passing through leaders like Deborah, Gideon, Samson, and others, with a number of generations passing in the book.

We can’t go into each of the stories of these judges, some of which you may know, but the thrust of the book is how Israel descends into utter failure. Despite the warnings of Moses and Joshua, the Israelites disobey God, worship idols, and deal in violence and chaos. The first judges do an alright job, but they get worse, which leads at the end of the book to the corruption of Israel as a whole. The stories are often very dramatic. To take a couple examples, the judge Ehud kills an oppressing Moabite king by stabbing him while he is on the toilet (Judges 3). Then there’s the woman called Jael who kills her husband by driving a tent peg into his temple while he’s asleep (Judges 4). The worst of all is in Judges 19-21 where sexual abuse and violence leads to all out civil war. It’s very disturbing, but that’s the point. The book is not an endorsement by God of what is going on, but rather pointing out the helplessness of Israel, and their need for God, as well as paving the way for kings.

So the book of Judges concludes with a repeated phrase: “In those days Israel had no king and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” The stage is thus set for future books to tell of the beginning of Israel’s kings, and the restoration of order.

Ruth

Which brings us to our final book. The book of Ruth is a short book, set in a domestic context in Israel “in the days when the judges ruled” as the first verse puts it (Ruth 1:1). It’s a touching story, concerning the redemption of a poor Israelite widow, Naomi, and her Moabite daughter in law, Ruth, by an Israelite called Boaz of noble character (2:11). The wider point of the book is that Ruth and Boaz’s son is called Obed, Obed’s son is called Jesse, and Jesse’s son is David, the king Israel are waiting for. But even more than that, Christ Jesus himself is descended from this line. So in this domestic, even mundane story, God is at work, bringing about the salvation of the whole world.

Conclusion

Indeed this is true for all of the books we’ve looked at tonight. Despite Israel’s rebellion, God has remained faithful to all of his promises and remains in their midst in his holy and life-giving presence in the tabernacle. Despite Israel’s idolatry, God continually calls them, and us, again to his holy presence. In the battle between human disobedience and God’s mercy, the mercy of God always wins.

And may the peace of God that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Next Month...

1 May: 'Blessed is the man': The Kingdom of Israel

Biblical books: 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon

Texts for the Divine Service:

1 Samuel 16:1-13 / Psalm 1 / 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 / Luke 17:20-21

Recommended Pre-Reading:

- 1 Samuel 1-3 – The birth and calling of Samuel
- 1 Samuel 10 – Saul anointed King
- 1 Samuel 16 – David anointed King
- 2 Samuel 1 – David hears of Saul's death
- 2 Samuel 6 – The Ark of the Covenant brought to Jerusalem
- 2 Samuel 11-12 – David and Bathsheba
- 1 Kings 3 – Solomon and Wisdom
- 2 Chronicles 2-3 – Solomon builds the Temple
- Job 1-2 – The Testing of Job
- Job 38-42 – The Lord answers Job and Job's restoration
- Psalms 1-2
- Psalm 119
- Proverbs 1-3 – The blessings of Wisdom
- Proverbs 17 – A sample chapter of proverbs
- Ecclesiastes 1-2 – All is vanity
- Song of Solomon 1-2 – Solomon and his bride delight in each other

Recommended on YouTube:

- Search for 'The Bible Project 1 Samuel', and likewise for the other books