



## Leviticus - Chapter Twenty One

### VII Leviticus 18:1-22:33 - The Call to Holiness (continues)

#### Summary of Chapter Twenty One

Chapters 21-22 deal with the Lord's demand of holiness for the priests and the offerings. While priests have been ordained and are holy in terms of their office, that holiness is only an outward one; it does not necessarily mean that they have inner holiness of heart and conduct. More stringent regulations of holiness are required of the priests because they work directly with the holy objects of the sanctuary.

#### VII.d Leviticus 21:1-24 - The Holiness of Priests

Refer to the chapter summary above.

<sup>1</sup> The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: No one shall defile himself for a dead person among his relatives, <sup>2</sup> except for his nearest kin: his mother, his father, his son, his daughter, his brother; <sup>3</sup> likewise, for a virgin sister, close to him because she has had no husband, he may defile himself for her. <sup>4</sup> But he shall not defile himself as a husband among his people and so profane himself.

#### Leviticus 21:1-4

Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron. The priests came from a particular family of the tribe of Levi, the family of Aaron: <<*Then bring near to you your brother Aaron, and his sons with him, from among the Israelites, to serve me as priests – Aaron and Aaron's sons, Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar*>> (Exodus 28:1), and: <<*The towns of the descendants of Aaron – the priests – were thirteen in all, with their pasture lands*>> (Joshua 21:19). The priests,

because of their special responsibility to represent God before the people and the people before God, had a special call to holiness and ritualistic purity.

Only descendants of Aaron could serve in the Levitical priesthood. This law remained in force until the coming of the Messiah, who would then assume the role: <<Now if perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood – for the people received the law under this priesthood – what further need would there have been to speak of another priest arising according to the order of Melchizedek, rather than one according to the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well. Now the one of whom these things are spoken belonged to another tribe, from which no one has ever served at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, and in connection with that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. It is even more obvious when another priest arises, resembling Melchizedek, one who has become a priest, not through a legal requirement concerning physical descent, but through the power of an indestructible life. For it is attested of him, ‘You are a priest for ever, according to the order of Melchizedek’>> (Hebrews 7:11-17).

For a layperson, coming into contact with the dead, as in attending a funeral, brings about defilement, although it is allowed, as confirmed by Numbers Chapter 19. But ordinary priests are prohibited from coming into contact with the dead, except in the case of their nearest kin. For a ruling regarding high priests, refer to the comment made on vv.10-15.

The purpose behind these laws was to illustrate the purity and separation from sin that was to characterise the priest; a dead body is a picture of sin’s result in this world, especially in the way it rapidly decays. The prohibition regarding dead bodies was not just about touching a dead body, but even being in the same room as a dead body or walking over a grave or touching a tomb.

His virgin sister. While unmarried the sister would come under the care of the men in her familial household. The assumption is that, once she marries, she is not regarded as one of his closest relatives, but comes under the care of her husband and his clan; refer to Genesis 2:24.

<sup>5</sup> They shall not make bald spots upon their heads, or shave off the edges of their beards, or make any gashes in their flesh. <sup>6</sup> They shall be holy to their God, and not profane the name of their God; for they offer the Lord’s offerings by fire, the food of their God; therefore they shall be holy.

### Leviticus 21:5-6

Priests were prohibited from making bald spots upon their heads, shaving off the edges of their beards, or making cuts on their body, i.e. gashes in their flesh (19:27-28). These acts are pagan mourning and burial practices. The priests of Israel oversee the ceremonial worship of the people, and therefore, no Canaanite ritual is to penetrate the priestly system. Even in burial practices the priests are to be holy.

<sup>7</sup> They shall not marry a prostitute or a woman who has been defiled; neither shall they marry a woman divorced from her husband. For they are holy to their God, <sup>8</sup> and you shall treat them as holy, since they offer the food of your God; they shall be holy to you, for I the Lord, I who sanctify you, am holy. <sup>9</sup> When the daughter of a priest profanes herself through prostitution, she profanes her father; she shall be burned to death.

### Leviticus 21:7-9

The priest is required to be holy in the area of matrimony. He is to marry a woman of high moral character. She may not be a prostitute, because that is a defiling profession. He also is not to marry one who has been divorced. The text does not explain this latter prohibition; perhaps it acknowledges that even though divorce is allowed by the laws, a broken or failed marriage always carries an element of falling short of the creation ideal, and the priests are to embody the covenant ideal in their lives as well as their teaching, as confirmed by Malachi 2:1-9.

**Although not a legal requirement, it was common practice for priests especially to take a wife from the line of Aaron also, thus ensuring the wife was raised in a priest's home and their sons would be of a pure priestly line. This can be seen in the example of the parents of John the Baptist, although he never took up his right to become a priest: <<In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord>> (Luke 1:5-6).**

When the daughter of a priest profanes herself through prostitution, she profanes her father. The daughter of a priest had a special responsibility to be pure as well; although this would be covered under the general laws of Israel, special mention is made of it here to emphasise the point. The punishment, she shall be burned to death, is harsh and shows the importance of the priest's family remaining pure. As with other death sentences though, it was rarely carried out.

However, there would probably be severe sanctions against the priest and his family for their failure to obey the law.

<sup>10</sup> The priest who is exalted above his fellows, on whose head the anointing-oil has been poured and who has been consecrated to wear the vestments, shall not dishevel his hair, nor tear his vestments. <sup>11</sup> He shall not go where there is a dead body; he shall not defile himself even for his father or mother. <sup>12</sup> He shall not go outside the sanctuary and thus profane the sanctuary of his God; for the consecration of the anointing-oil of his God is upon him: I am the Lord. <sup>13</sup> He shall marry only a woman who is a virgin. <sup>14</sup> A widow, or a divorced woman, or a woman who has been defiled, a prostitute, these he shall not marry. He shall marry a virgin of his own kin, <sup>15</sup> that he may not profane his offspring among his kin; for I am the Lord; I sanctify him.

#### Leviticus 21:10-15

The priest who is exalted above his fellows. The high priest is subject to stricter holiness regulations than is the ordinary priest. Thus, whereas a common priest may marry a widow, the high priest must marry a virgin. Perhaps this rule is given to ensure that all the children in his home are his own. The high priest may not participate in any mourning or burial activities. This is to keep the high priest from uncleanness that he might otherwise bring into the inner parts of the sanctuary.

The high priest shall not dishevel his hair, nor tear his vestments. These were extreme signs of mourning for the dead. The high priest was not allowed to mourn in this extreme way for any dead person, even his father or mother. The high priest who tried Jesus sinned against this command at the trial of Jesus, in a dramatic display of horror that Jesus claimed to be God: <<*Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, 'He has blasphemed! Why do we still need witnesses? You have now heard his blasphemy'*>> (Matthew 26:65).

<sup>16</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>17</sup> Speak to Aaron and say: No one of your offspring throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the food of his God. <sup>18</sup> For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, one who is blind or lame, or one who has a mutilated face or a limb too long, <sup>19</sup> or one who has a broken foot or a broken hand, <sup>20</sup> or a hunchback, or a dwarf, or a man with a blemish in his eyes or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles.

### Leviticus 21:16-20

No priest who has a blemish may approach to offer sacrifices. The prohibition against those with physical defects was meant to point to the even more obvious need to be free from spiritual defect when coming before God. The same requirement applies to sacrificial animals. Both the priest and the animal are to exemplify holiness and completeness; refer also to 22:17-25.

<sup>21</sup> No descendant of Aaron the priest who has a blemish shall come near to offer the Lord's offerings by fire; since he has a blemish, he shall not come near to offer the food of his God. <sup>22</sup> He may eat the food of his God, of the most holy as well as of the holy. <sup>23</sup> But he shall not come near the curtain or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the Lord; I sanctify them. <sup>24</sup> Thus Moses spoke to Aaron and to his sons and to all the people of Israel.

### Leviticus 21:21-24

While the priests with physical defects cannot officiate in the priestly work, they are entitled to eat the divine food because of their lineage. Paul confirms this: <<*Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is sacrificed on the altar?*>> (1 Corinthians 9:13).

For I am the Lord; I sanctify them. Although them might refer to the priests with physical defects, the singular is used of such priests in vv.17-23a, and the analogy with v.15 suggests that them in v.23 refers to my sanctuaries, which immediately precedes it.