Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ,

It was July last year that we began our Leviticus sermon series. And since then, we have worked through the different kinds of offerings, the laws for the priests, the laws for worship, the clean and unclean laws, the laws for festivals, the moral and civil laws, the laws about preventing poverty, and the blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience in chapter 26. And I hope that our tour of Leviticus has helped us better understand this book, and especially to get a sense of the wretchedness of sin, and God’s amazing grace to us in the person and work of the Lord Jesus.

Well, today we come to the last chapter. And I am guessing that as we read this chapter, at least some of you will have thought, ‘What an odd way to end the book!’ If it had ended with chapter 26, with the covenant blessings and curses, that would make sense, but why end with what seems to be a rag-tag collection of rules about vows and dedications? Well, commentators love discussing this, but two explanations stand out from the rest:

1. The first is a difference between English literature and Hebrew literature. In English, you see, you typically put something at the end to emphasize it, but in Hebrew you put it **in the middle**. We heard this at our last Avondale Bible study in relation to the Psalms; many of the Psalms have the key verse in the middle of the Psalm. And Leviticus 26 is the middle of the last unit of Leviticus – chapters 25-27. Chapters 25 and 27 both discuss Jubilee and redemption provisions, and in the middle, we have God’s promises and warnings. So, the structure of these last three chapters emphasized chapter 26 for the original Hebrew readers.
2. And the second explanation is closely related. The whole premise of Leviticus is God’s promise to dwell among His people so long as they lived up to their obligations. So, God will be faithful to His promises, but will the people keep their promises? That’s what chapter 27 asks.

And it might help to say a bit more about this before we get into the details of chapter 27. One of the most important chapters of the Bible is **Romans 1**. And this is because Romans 1 explains unbelief. And in doing so, Romans 1 provides us with a picture of the world in the days of Leviticus. Back then, all the nations of the world had abandoned the true worship of God for the worship of idols, ancestors, animals, or the Sun, moon, and stars. There was human sacrifice and temple prostitution, and “*every kind of wickedness,*” says Romans 1. So, the whole world was in rebellion against God. But God picked one tiny nation, Israel, to be His covenant people; He would live with only them in covenant relationship. And so, for around 1500 years leading up to the coming of Jesus, if you wanted to find the true worship of God, you would find it only in Israel. But at this time in Israel’s history, the people were fresh out of pagan Egypt. So, they had to learn how to the people of God. And you can summarize what this meant with two words – true worship; Israel needed to learn true worship. And that is what Leviticus is all about; it is **God’s instruction manual for true worship**. And by true worship, we don’t mean just what songs to sing at Tabernacle service, but every aspect of life. Because God was totally devoted to His people, what He required of them was total devotion in every area of life. And total devotion came at a price. The full-time work of the priests and Levites, at the tabernacle and among the people, needed labour, money, and animals. And that is what chapter 27 is all about. **This is how the Lord’s people funded the Lord’s work**. So again, would the people keep their vows?

And as we have done many times in this sermon series, our two headings will be **explanation** and **instruction**; we want to understand the laws of chapter 27 and then see how they apply to us as the church of Jesus Christ today.

1. So, first of all, **Explanation**.
   1. Chapter 27 is about making vows. And apart from the Nazarite vow, which we shall refer to soon, the rest of the vows discussed in this chapter were entirely **voluntary**. Listen to Deuteronomy 23:21-23: “*If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin. But if you refrain from vowing, you will not be guilty of sin. You shall be careful to do what has passed your lips, for you have voluntarily vowed to the LORD your God what you have promised with your mouth*.” So, no one was required to make a vow, but if you did make one, you had to keep it.
   2. And we see examples of vows in Scripture, some good and some not so good.
      1. In **Genesis 28**, Jacob vowed to the Lord, If you protect me, I will give you a tenth of all that I have.
      2. In **Numbers**, we read that a man or woman could make a special Nazirite vow, which meant that for a set period of time, they were dedicated to the Lord and could not drink alcohol, cut their hair, or go near a dead body. But its was voluntary.
      3. In **Judges**, Jephthah vowed to sacrifice to the Lord whatever first came out of his house if he won a battle. And do you boys and girls remember what was the first thing to come out of his house? His daughter!
      4. In **1 Samuel**, we read about Elkanah who would take his whole family to the tabernacle every year “*to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and to pay his vow*.” And one time, when they were there, Elkanah’s wife, Hannah, vowed to the Lord that if he gave her a son, she would “*give him to the Lord all the days of his life*.”
      5. And in **Jonah**, we read about Jonah making a vow to the Lord, which he promised to pay if the Lord delivered him from the fish.
      6. So as part of their religious devotion and thankfulness to the Lord, it seems that it was a regular thing to make a vow to the Lord.
   3. And **four categories** of vow are explained in the chapter:
      1. The first has to do with **persons**, as we see in **verses 1-8**.
         1. So, rather than present a human sacrifice, which is what the pagan nations did, you vowed a person to the service of the Lord. And with this type of vow, you were offering **manual labour** or heavy lifting to the priests to assist them with their work.
            1. And if you think back to all that we have said about the numbers of animal sacrifices that happened each day, manual labour was much needed.
            2. And this also explains the different values assigned to the different persons in this section – obviously, a male in his prime could do more heavy lifting than a female or an older person or a child or infant.
         2. And these different values were given for two scenarios:
            1. The first is that while manual labour was helpful for the priests and Levites, so was **money**. So, you could vow a person’s service, and then, rather than that person actually serving, you could redeem, or ‘buy out,’ the vow, if you like, by paying the set price – 50 shekels for a young man, thirty for a young woman, etc. And it is believed that the daily wage back then was one shekel. So, this was a significant amount and was typically paid by wealthy!
            2. But the other scenario in view was when a person made a vow and then regretted doing so. Have you ever made a promise that you regretted making, or made a promise on the basis of something that you were sure would not happen, only for it to happen, and now you weren’t sure if you could do what you had promised? Well, it happened in Israel to. You can imagine someone making a vow if they are healed, when the illness seemed sure to end in death, or if their harvest is 10 times more than last year, when that seemed impossible, but healing or the 10 times harvest happened, and now they had to keep their word. And these were **vows** **made in public**, which is why they could be ‘enforced.’ Well, if this happened, if you made a rash vow, there was a significant cost to buy yourself out of the vow. And it’s like this with all of these vows as a fifth of the value of what had been vowed was added if a person chose to redeem it or ‘buy it out.’
            3. Now, just as an aside, this ‘buy out’ provision is why many commentators believe that Jephthah did not actually sacrifice his daughter; human sacrifice was abhorrent to the Lord and this law made it possible for him to redeem her. The problem with that interpretation though is that the whole point of Judges is that the knowledge of the law was so bad at that time in Israel’s history that all sorts of wickedness was going on. So, my own view is that Jephthah did sacrifice his daughter, as abhorrent as that would have been.
      2. The second category of vows was **animals**, as we see in **verses 9-13**.
         1. And if it was a clean animal that could be offered to the Lord, you could not ‘buy it back,’ is the message of **verse 9**; it had to be presented and sacrificed.
         2. And neither could you try and exchange it for an unclean animal. If you tried that, you would lose the clean animal and the unclean animal, as **verse 10** explains. And remember that these were vows heard by others, which is why people were held accountable for what they had vowed.
         3. But if you had vowed an unclean animal, which the priests could use as a farm animal or to sell, but later on changed your mind for some reason, then the priest had to value it and you paid an extra fifth on top of the value.
      3. The third category was **houses**, as we see in **verses 14-15**.
         1. So, if you were wealthy and thankful to the Lord and you had a ‘spare house,’ you could vow it to the Lord’s service, or redeem the house by paying its value, plus a fifth, to the priests.
      4. The fourth category was **land**, as we see in verses **16-25**.
         1. And if you remember our discussion about selling your land from chapter 25, you will remember that it was not the land itself that was sold but the value of the crops that the land could produce. So, you either donated all the crops until the next year of Jubilee, when the use of the land would come back to your family, or, if you wanted to redeem your land vow, the priest would calculate the value of the crops until Jubilee and add a fifth, which you would pay.
         2. **Verses 20-21** envision a scenario where a person vowed their land to the Lord, then regretted their decision, but could not afford to redeem it and sold it to someone else to try and get out of the vow. Well then, said the Lord, it could no longer be redeemed by the person who made the vow; when Jubilee came, it became the permanent property of the priests. But if it had been sold to someone else, who did not know that it had been dedicated to the Lord, they could benefit from the crops until Jubilee, and then it became priestly property.
         3. **Verses 22-24** are about land that had been bought and was thus not part of the inheritance of the person making the vow. But because this land would have belonged to another family’s inheritance, which they might choose to redeem at any time, a value was set straight away, so that the priests did not lose out.
      5. **Verses 26-29** are exceptions to the rules, if you like:
         1. The first set of rules is about **firstborn animals**. Now, every firstborn animal belonged to the Lord. We read that in Exodus 13. So, you were not allowed to vow a firstborn, because it already belonged to the Lord. But firstborn animals that were unclean could be redeemed or ‘bought back,’ provided you paid a fifth more than its value. And the priests were also allowed to sell those animals and the proceeds went to the temple treasury.
         2. The second set of exceptions is about persons or animals or land that a person had **devoted to the Lord**. If you vowed something, it was holy, but if it was devoted, it was ‘most holy,’ and therefore it could not be redeemed or bought back.
         3. And the last part of these exceptions, **verse 29**, concerns persons or things that had been ‘**devoted to destruction**.’
            1. For example, when **Jericho** was conquered, the Lord said that the city and all within it were “*devoted to destruction*” – same term. So, it would have been wrong for persons from Jericho or animals or houses to be vowed to the Lord; they had to be put to death or destroyed.
            2. And this rule is why **King Saul** had the kingdom stripped away from him. You might remember that King Saul was ordered to ‘*devote to destruction*,’ again, same term, the Amalekites and all that they had, including all their animals. But Saul chose to keep some of the animals and offer them as sacrifices, thinking that that would please the Lord. But it was a direct violation of this command.
            3. And it applied also to those who had committed capital crimes deserving death; they could not be redeemed or “*ransomed*,” as we see in **verse 29**, they had to be put to death.
      6. So, those were the laws for vows. In **Proverbs 20:25**, we read, “*It is a snare to say rashly, "It is holy," and to reflect only after making vows*.” And earlier we read from **Ecclesiastes 5**: “*When you vow a vow to God, do not delay paying it, for He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you vow. It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay*.” So, you kept your vow or you paid the vow price; those were the only two options for the people of Israel.

* 1. And that brings us to the last part of our explanation, which is the laws for **tithing** in **verses 30-33**. The word ‘tithe’ means 1/10th. So, from these verses and **Numbers 18** and **Deuteronomy 12 and 14**, we see that the people of Israel had to bring 1/10th of all their seed, grain, fruit, wine, oil, and crops, to the tabernacle and present it to the priests and Levites as their ‘wages.’ And if they wanted to redeem or ‘buy back’ some of the tithe, again, they had to add a fifth to its value. And they also had to present every tenth animal that was born to the priests and Levites. And these could not be redeemed or bought back. So vows and tithes were how the priests’ and Levites’ families were provided for and how the tabernacle and temple service could be maintained.

1. So, can you see why we have spoken about covenant life as total devotion? Whether it is firstborns or vows or tithes, following the Lord was costly! If you were in, you were *all* in! And that brings us to the **application** part of the sermon.
   1. And I want to start with one verse – **verse 29**: There we read, “*No one devoted, who is to be devoted for destruction from mankind, shall be ransomed; he shall surely be put to death*.” And when we talked about this verse, we said that no one devoted to destruction or guilty of a capital crime was to be redeemed or ransomed, they had to be put to death. And I hope you can see the gospel in this verse. When Jesus summarized the law, He said we must “*love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbour as ourselves*.” And the fact is that none of us come anywhere close to this standard. We are not law-keepers; we are law-breakers. We are not *totally* devoted to God. This is why **Romans 3:23** says, “*For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God*.” So, what do we deserve? **Ezekiel 18:20** says, “*The soul who sins shall die*.” **Romans 6:23** says, “*For the wages of sin is death*.” We deserve to be devoted to destruction; when we stand before God on Judgment Day, as we all will, we deserve to be condemned to an eternity in hell. But in **Galatians 3:13** we read, “*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us- for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree."*” And this is the good news of the gospel! Jesus Christ became the devoted to destruction one; He took all our sins on Himself and endured the curse in our place; He endured hell and died so that we could have eternal life. And this is why the rest of **Romans 6:23** is “*But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*.” So, before we think about any other implications from this chapter, this is the most important one. We cannot keep God’s law and deserve heaven; what we must do is repent of our sins and believe that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins. That is how we are saved; this is how we receive eternal life. And I hope that all of you have repented and believed. Have you?
   2. If you have, then **you will strive to live a life of total devotion**.
      1. So, you will strive to be a **vow-keeper**. You will recognize that our natural, sinful inclination is to look for ways to get out of the vows and promises that we have made, just as the people of Israel did. But because Christ is your Saviour and Lord, you will take your vows, whether they be marriage vows or membership vows or baptism vows or office-bearer vows, most seriously. And you will do this as part of your total devotion to Christ.
      2. But people also like to debate whether or not New Testament believers are **still commanded to tithe**.
         1. Well, in **Luke 11:42**, Jesus said to the Pharisees, “*For you tithe mint and rue and every herb, and neglect justice and the love of God. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others*.” So, He wasn’t saying, you don’t need to tithe your herbs anymore, because I am here; He was saying, tithing is good but so is pursuing justice and the love of God.
         2. And the point here is that there is no explicit undoing of the command to tithe anywhere in the New Testament.
         3. But we don’t want this to be a debate that might leave us thinking if we give a tenth, we have done enough. Earlier we read from Mark about the Lord Jesus commending the widow who *gave all that she had*. And **2 Corinthians 9:7** says that “*God loves a cheerful giver*.” And the Greek word translated as ‘cheerful’ literally means ‘hilarious.’ So, the idea is that God loves the one who is so thankful for all that he has in Christ that He gives amounts that others would be shocked by – what are you doing! But he or she is laughing with joy!
   3. Brothers and Sisters, our key point, as we draw our series in Leviticus to a close is that if you understand that you have been redeemed or ransomed from eternal condemnation, all because of Jesus and His perfection and His sacrifice, you will read Leviticus and the laws and regulations about true worship and separation from evil and caring for those in need and observing the Lord’s Day and keeping your vows and tithing, and say, Lord, all of this and more I want to do because I am so thankful for your grace to me in Christ!
      1. I recently listened to a talk called ‘**This is why people are leaving the church**.’
         1. And the key point was that Christ, as the Saviour and Lord of His people, demands total devotion from them. This is the *challenging adventure* of the Christian life; this is the *incredible journey* of becoming more and more like Christ in every area of life.
         2. But this is not the message being preached in so many churches. What it is selling instead is a shallow kind of happiness. The church says, you can live how you like, and you can pick what parts of the Bible you agree with or disagree with, and you can enjoy a nice ‘worship’ experience on Sunday morning. But there is no expectation that people grow in the knowledge of Christ, that they pour themselves out in His service, and one moral demand after another, especially in the realm of sexual purity, is being abandoned. In other words, people are leaving the church not because the church makes it too *hard* for them but because it makes it too *easy* for them.

And this is a tragedy because Leviticus points us to Christ as our *total* Saviour – our Prophet, our Priest, and our King. It reveals us to be lawbreakers and Christ to be the law-keeper. It sets Jesus before us as the Lamb of God who came to take away the sins of the world. And it invites us to repent of our sins and believe in Him, and to be those who are committed to the challenging adventure of living the life of *total* devotion.

Is this you? Do you want to grow in the knowledge of Christ, and pour yourself out in service, and willingly submit to His commands? It is the life that Christ Himself described as the abundant life; the challenging adventure of living the life of *total* devotion to your *total* Saviour! May Christ help us to live this life. Amen.