

# *Leviticus*

## *Lesson #15*

### *Of Priestly Perfection*

**(Leviticus 21: 1 – 22: 33)**

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# Review

**In Leviticus 11: 14 God says: *“Be holy, because I am holy.”* Leviticus 19 speaks of holiness, yet it is framed by chapters 18 and 20 that speak of sex, the three chapters forming one cohesive unit.**

**While providing guidelines for holy life in chapter 19, Leviticus 18 and 20 issue strict commands on sexual behavior within the family. In a very real way, chapters 18 and 20 protect women and children from the sexual abuse and personal degradation commonly experienced in a profoundly patriarchal, tribal culture.**

# Preview

**In Leviticus 6-7 we examined the role of the priest as mediator between the people and God, the one who stands in the gap of the tripartite cosmology of Scripture, presiding over the five great sacrifices.**

**In Leviticus 8-9 we witnessed the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests, and in Leviticus 10 we saw the punishment of Nadab and Abihu when they appeared before God, unbidden and unrepentant.**

**Now, in Leviticus 21-22 we learn of the high moral and ethical standards God expects of his priests.**



**Leviticus 21 & 22 form a single 2-part unit on “priestly perfection,” the standards expected of a priest.**

**Part 1: Sanctity of the Priesthood (21: 1-24)**

**Opening exhortation (1a)**

- 1. Corpse contamination (1b-6)**
- 2. Marriage purity (7-9)**
- 3. High priest’s standards (10-15)**
- 4. Physical requirements (16-23)**

**Closing exhortation (24)**

**Part 2: Purity of the Priesthood (22: 1-33)**

**Opening exhortation (1-2)**

- 5. On becoming “unclean” (3-9)**
- 6. On unauthorized persons (10-16)**
- 7. On unacceptable sacrifices (17-30)**

**Closing exhortation (31-33)**

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## Part 1: Opening exhortation (21: 1a)

“The Lord said to Moses: Speak to the priests, Aaron’s sons, and tell them . . .”

Notice that the audience has shifted back from the entire Israelite community to “Aaron and his sons.” The laws concerning the sanctity and purity of the priesthood refer, of course, only to the priests, not to the lay people.



**The Israelite priesthood was hereditary, limited to the descendants of Aaron. One could not aspire to be a priest, feel called to be a priest or study to be a priest; one was born a priest . . . or not.**

**This hereditary priesthood was unique in the ancient Near Eastern world.**

**In Egypt, for example, the priests were lay people, typically appointed by the king to serve on rotation for a month or so each year. Basically a political appointment, the priesthood in Egypt often became the prerogative of wealthy or influential families, continuing for many generations, or until a family fell out of favor with the king.**



***Egyptian priests preparing bulls for sacrificial slaughter.  
Temple of Karnak, Luxor, Egypt.***

***Photography by Ana Maria Vargas***

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Ideally, having a hereditary Israelite priesthood ensured stability, a deep learning of God's law passed down through the generations and a strict adherence to the holiness code, enforced by tradition and family honor.

Over time, however, the Israelite priesthood became as corrupt as any other powerful institution. At the time of Samuel (c. 1100 B.C.) we read:

*"Now the sons of Eli [the priest] were wicked; they had respect neither for the Lord nor for the priests' duties toward the people. When someone offered a sacrifice, the priest's servant would come with a three-pronged fork, while the meat was still boiling, and would thrust it into the basin, kettle, caldron, or pot. Whatever the fork brought up, the priest would take for himself. They treated all the Israelites who came to the sanctuary at Shiloh in this way."*

(1 Samuel 2: 12-14)

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***Flavius Josephus (A.D. 37-100)***

**And at the time of Jesus, Josephus writes in his *Antiquities* (18: 33-97) that the legitimate High Priest Annas was deposed in A.D. 15, and his more pliable son Eleazar was appointed in his place. Eleazar lasted two years. The Roman prefect Valerius Gratus then appointed Annas' son-in-law, Caiaphus as High Priest. Caiaphus served until A.D. 36, when the procounsul Vitellius deposed him.**



Hummm. It seems that any group in a sustained position of power ultimately becomes corrupt: hereditary kingship, entrenched clergy, career politicians . . . It seems especially true if the perceived source of that power is attributed to God.



I'm glad I'm a dog!

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## Part 1: Sanctity of the Priesthood (21: 1-24)

### Opening exhortation (1a)

#### **1. Corpse contamination (1b-6)**

#### **2. Marriage purity (7-9)**

#### **3. High priest's standards (10-15)**

#### **4. Physical requirements (16-23)**

### Closing exhortation (24)

## Part 2: Purity of the Priesthood (22: 1-33)

### Opening exhortation (1-2)

#### **5. On becoming "unclean" (3-9)**

#### **6. On unauthorized persons (10-16)**

#### **7. On unacceptable sacrifices (17-30)**

### Closing exhortation (31-33)

## Part 1: Corpse contamination (21: 1b-6)

“None of you shall make himself unclean for any dead person among his kindred, except for his nearest relatives, his mother or father, his son or daughter, his brother or his unmarried sister, who is of his own family while she remains single; for these he may make himself unclean. But as a husband among his kindred he shall not make himself unclean and thus profane himself.

The priests shall not make bald the crown of their head, nor shave the edges of their beard, nor lacerate their body. They shall be holy to their God, and shall not profane their God’s name, since they offer the oblations of the Lord, the food of their God; so they must be holy.”



*Mummified remains of Ramses II (1303-1213 B.C.)  
Egyptian Museum, Cairo.*

**Life/death is the basic dichotomy that underlies the entire book of Leviticus—and indeed, all of Scripture. The Egyptian culture in which the Israelites lived for nearly half a millennium viewed life through the prism of death and eternity. Egyptian religion firmly believed in the physical resurrection of**

**the body and eternal life beyond the grave. The pyramids were elaborate tombs in which the mummified corpse of the king, along with his important possessions, awaited resurrection, at which time he would lead his resurrected people into eternity. In ancient Egypt, much of life focused on virtuous living, a good death and the expectation of a joyous eternity. Many duties of an Egyptian priest involved embalming the dead and conducting elaborate funerary rites.**



**In a very important sense, much of Israelite theology, as expressed in Leviticus, stands in sharp contrast to the Egyptian paradigm. For an Egyptian, death is the doorway to a joyous eternity achieved by righteous deeds and a virtuous life, an eternity portrayed in countless Egyptian tombs, carvings and manuscripts such as the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.**

**Conversely, Israelite theology consistently emphasized present-day life, sacred in all its forms, as a gift from God, meant to be lived fully, celebrating and blessing each moment. For the Israelite, death was not a welcomed event, but the doorway to Sheol, a place of darkness where both the righteous and unrighteous go, a place cut off from life and from God. Consequently, Israelite priests shunned death in all its forms.**



**By definition, a priest is innately holy and should not come in contact with—or even be under the same roof as—a corpse. Consequently, the law effectively ruled out any funerary role for the priesthood:**

- A lay person may touch any corpse, but will remain unclean until evening, when he must wash his clothes and bathe;
- A priest may only touch a corpse if it is that of his mother or father, son or daughter, brother or unmarried sister—the most intimate of blood relatives, after which he must wash his clothes and bathe;
- A priest is forbidden the customary signs of mourning: cutting the hair or beard or lacerating himself.



**And we'll learn in 21: 10-12 that the High Priest may not touch any corpse—including that of his father or mother—nor may he mourn for them in any fashion.**

**At their death the High Priest must stay within the confines of the sanctuary, continuing to perform his duties.**



## Part 1: Sanctity of the Priesthood (21: 1-24)

### Opening exhortation (1a)

1. Corpse contamination (1b-6)
2. **Marriage purity (7-9)**
3. High priest's standards (10-15)
4. Physical requirements (16-23)

### Closing exhortation (24)

## Part 2: Purity of the Priesthood (22: 1-33)

### Opening exhortation (1-2)

5. On becoming "unclean" (3-9)
6. On unauthorized persons (10-16)
7. On unacceptable sacrifices (17-30)

### Closing exhortation (31-33)

**Part 1: Marriage purity**  
**(21: 7-9)**

“A priest shall not make marry **a woman debased by prostitution**, nor a woman who has been divorced by her husband; for the priest is holy to his God. Honor him as holy for he offers the food of your God; he shall be holy to you, because I, the Lord, am holy who makes you holy.”



- A priest is held to a higher standard of holiness than a lay person, as we saw in regard to corpse contamination. So, too, in regard to marriage.
- A priest shall not marry “a woman debased by prostitution,” or literally a “whore and degraded one”; that is, a promiscuous woman. Such is not the case for a lay person; however, if a lay person finds that his bride is not a virgin, for her deception she is put to death (not for her promiscuity).



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### Opening exhortation (1a)

1. Corpse contamination (1b-6)
2. Marriage purity (7-9)
3. **High priest's standards (10-15)**
4. Physical requirements (16-23)

### Closing exhortation (24)

## Part 2: Purity of the Priesthood (22: 1-33)

### Opening exhortation (1-2)

5. On becoming "unclean" (3-9)
6. On unauthorized persons (10-16)
7. On unacceptable sacrifices (17-30)

### Closing exhortation (31-33)

## Part 1: High Priest's standards (21: 10-15)

“The most exalted of priests [the High Priest], upon whose head the anointing oil has been poured and who has been ordained to wear the special vestments, shall not dishevel his hair or rend his garments, nor shall he go near any dead person. Not even for his father or mother may he thus become unclean; nor shall he leave the sanctuary and profane the sanctuary of his God, for the consecration of the anointing oil of his God is upon him. I am the Lord.

He shall marry only a woman who is a virgin. He shall not marry a widow or a woman who has been divorced or one who has been debased by prostitution, but only a virgin, taken from his kindred, he shall marry, so that he not profane his offspring among his kindred. I, the Lord, make him holy.”



**Here we move to the High Priest, for whom the standards are even higher.**

- The High Priest shall not go anywhere near a corpse, even that of his father or mother; he shall not mourn; and upon their death, he shall not even leave the sanctuary.
- The high Priest shall marry only a virgin taken from among his own kindred, thus ensuring the purity of his family line and the genetic purity of his office.



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### Opening exhortation (1a)

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### Closing exhortation (31-33)

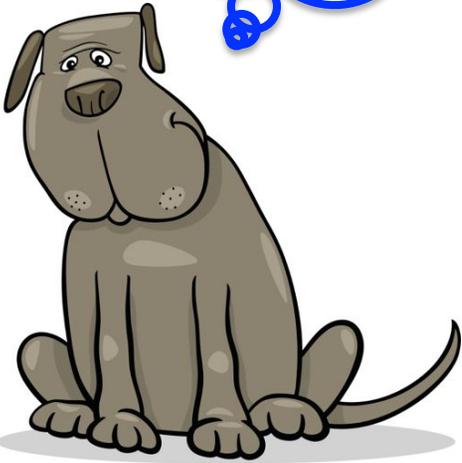
## Part 1: Physical requirements and Closing exhortation (21: 16-23)

“The Lord said to Moses: Say to Aaron: None of your descendants, throughout their generations, who has any blemish shall come forward to offer the food of his God. Anyone who has any of the following blemishes may not come forward: he who is blind or lame, or who has a split lip, or a limb too long, or a broken leg or arm, or who is a hunchback or dwarf or has a growth in the eye, or who is afflicted with sores, scabs, or crushed testicles. No descendant of Aaron the priest who has any such blemish may draw near to offer the oblations of the Lord; on account of his blemish he may not draw near to offer the food of his God. He may, however, eat the food of his God: of the most sacred as well as sacred offerings. Only, he may not enter through the veil nor draw near to the altar on account of his blemish; he shall not profane my sacred precincts, for it is I, the Lord, who make them holy.

Moses, therefore, told this to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites.”



I'm following along so far, but restricting people from serving fully as priests because of a physical defect seems a little over the top!



I have a friend who's a guide dog.

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***Ironically, Absalom's hair did him in. When Absalom went to war against his father, David's commanding general, Joab, hunted him down. Galloping through a forest, Absalom's hair caught in a pistachio tree, leaving him dangling helplessly. Joab killed him (2 Samuel 18: 9-18).***

**Such a position does offend modern sensibilities; nevertheless, the physical perfection required of a priest is shared by many ancient religions. It was true, as well, of potential kings:**

***“In all Israel there was no man more praised for his beauty than Absalom [David's son, heir the the throne], flawless from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. When he shaved his head—as he used to do at the end of every year, because his hair became too heavy for him—the hair weighed two hundred shekels [5 lbs.] according to the royal standard.”***

**(2 Samuel 14: 25)**



Michelangelo. *The Prophet Daniel* (fresco),  
c. 1508-1512.  
Sistine Chapel, Palace, Vatican City.

## And of royal attendants:

*“The king [Nebuchadnezzar] told Ashpenaz, his chief chamberlain, to bring in some of the Israelites, some of the royal line and of the nobility. They should be young men without any defect, handsome, proficient in wisdom, well informed, and insightful, such as could take their place in the king’s palace . . .”*

**(Daniel 1: 3-4)**

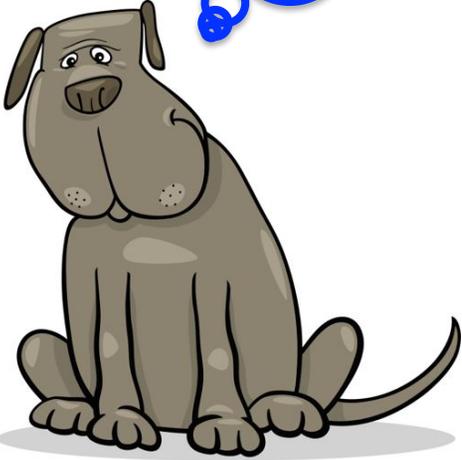


*Roosevelt sitting with Stalin and Churchill.*

**We expect as much of our own leaders, too. Could a person with a physical defect be elected President of the United States today? Consider how effectively FDR concealed his paralyzed legs during four terms in office or how Richard Nixon, with his deep-set eyes and dark “5 o’clock shadow,” appeared opposite JFK in the televised presidential debate of 1960.**



I would think moral defects  
would be more important  
than physical defects in  
allowing a priest to serve at  
the altar.



Me, too!

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**True. But the physical defects listed in 21: 17-23 are compiled specifically to match those of the visible physical defects for unacceptable sacrificial animals listed in 22: 22-24.**

**This is a matter of structural symmetry in the text, not a matter of inclusive criteria.**

**What's more, the "closing exhortation" addresses "all the Israelites," suggesting that both the High Priest and the priesthood as a whole are accountable to the entire community for the proper performance of their duties, as well as for their personal behavior.**



## **Part 1: Sanctity of the Priesthood (21: 1-24)**

### **Opening exhortation (1a)**

- 1. Corpse contamination (1b-6)**
- 2. Marriage purity (7-9)**
- 3. High priest's standards (10-15)**
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### **Closing exhortation (24)**

## **Part 2: Purity of the Priesthood (22: 1-33)**

### **Opening exhortation (1-2)**

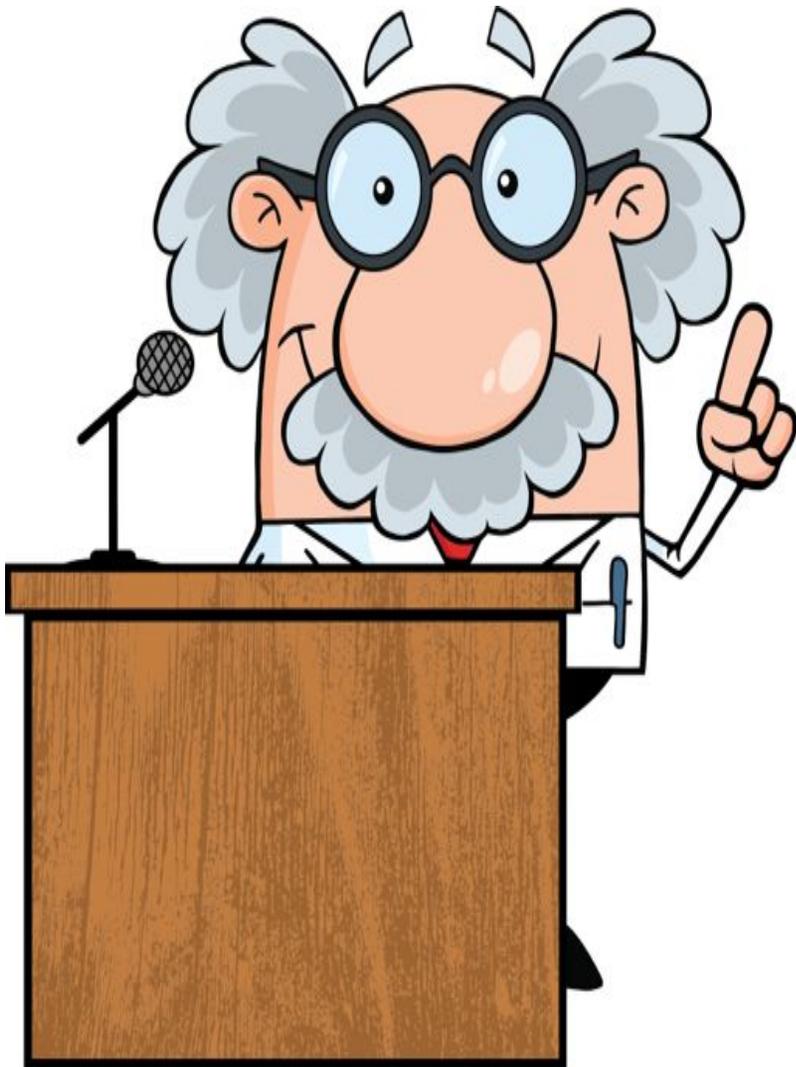
- 5. On becoming "unclean" (3-9)**
- 6. On unauthorized persons (10-16)**
- 7. On unacceptable sacrifices (17-30)**

### **Closing exhortation (31-33)**

## Part 2: Opening exhortation (22: 1-2)

“The Lord said to Moses: Tell Aaron and his sons to treat with respect the sacred offerings which the Israelites consecrate to me; otherwise they will profane my holy name. I am the Lord.”

As we observed at the start of this lesson, chapters 21 & 22 comprise a single 2-part unit on “priestly perfection,” the standards expected of a priest. Part 1 focused on the *sanctity* of the priesthood, Part 2 on the *purity* of the priesthood. The opening exhortation marks the shift in emphasis.



## **Part 1: Sanctity of the Priesthood (21: 1-24)**

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## **Part 2: Purity of the Priesthood (22: 1-33)**

### **Opening exhortation (1-2)**

- 5. On becoming "unclean" (3-9)**
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### **Closing exhortation (31-33)**

## Part 2: On becoming “unclean”

(22: 3-9)

“**Tell them [further]:** If any one of you, or of your descendants in any future generation, dares, while he is in a state of uncleanness, to **draw near** the sacred offerings which the Israelites consecrate to the Lord, such a one shall be cut off from my presence. I am the Lord.

No descendant of Aaron who is stricken with a **scaly infection**, or who suffers from a **genital discharge**, may eat of the sacred offerings, until he again becomes clean. Moreover, if anyone **touches a person who has become unclean** by contact with a corpse, or if anyone has had an **emission of semen**, or if anyone **touches any swarming creature** whose uncleanness, of whatever kind it may be, is contagious—the one who touches such as these shall be unclean until evening and may not eat of the sacred portions until he has first bathed his body in water. . .

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## Part 2: On becoming “unclean” (22: 3-9)

“Then when the sun sets, he shall be clean. Only then may he eat of the sacred offerings, for they are his food. He shall not make himself unclean by eating of any animal that has died of itself or has been killed by wild beasts. I am the Lord.

They shall keep my charge so that they will not bear the punishment in this matter and **die for their profanation**. I am the Lord who makes them holy.”



- “Tell them [further]: If any one of you . . .” The shift to the 2<sup>nd</sup> person indicates a direct address to the priests.
- “draw near . . .” Literally “encroaches,” which suggests an illegitimate approach, as with Nadab and Abihu.
- The list of 5 impurities is in descending order of severity.
- None of these impurities is long lasting.
- The penalty for a priest is much more severe than for a lay person.



**The priests who function in God's sacred space face far greater danger than lay people who engage God at a greater distance, as evidenced by Nadab and Abihu being incinerated for their bringing "unauthorized fire" before the Lord.**

**We might draw the analogy of people working in a hospital. Doctors who work inside an active Ebola Unit must take far greater precautions than doctors who work in a cancer clinic.**

**So, too, with priests, who have a much higher degree of accountability than lay people, as we learned in 4: 3-12.**



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## Part 2: Purity of the Priesthood (22: 1-33)

### Opening exhortation (1-2)

5. On becoming "unclean" (3-9)
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7. On unacceptable sacrifices (17-30)

### Closing exhortation (31-33)

## Part 2: On unauthorized persons (22: 10-16)

“Neither an unauthorized person nor a priest’s tenant or laborer may eat of any sacred offering. But a slave whom a priest acquires by purchase or who is born in his house may eat of his food. A priest’s daughter who is married to an unauthorized person may not eat of the sacred contributions. But if a priest’s daughter is widowed or divorced and having no children, returns to her father’s house, she may then eat of her father’s food as in her youth. No unauthorized person, however, may eat of it. If such a one eats of a sacred offering through inadvertence, that person shall make restitution to the priest for the sacred offering, with an increment of one fifth of the amount. The priests shall not allow the sacred offerings which the Israelites contribute to the Lord to be profaned, nor make them incur a penalty when they eat their sacred offerings. For I, the Lord, make them holy.”



- Only the priest and his immediate family may eat the sacred food presented at the altar.
- If his daughter marries someone outside of the priesthood, she is no longer permitted to eat the sacred food. If, however, she is widowed or divorced and moves back with her family, she is permitted to eat it.
- It would be understandable that an unauthorized person may inadvertently eat sacred food—a friend, visitor or worker, for example—and if that occurs, he or she shall make restitution.



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## Part 2: On unacceptable sacrifices (22: 17-30)

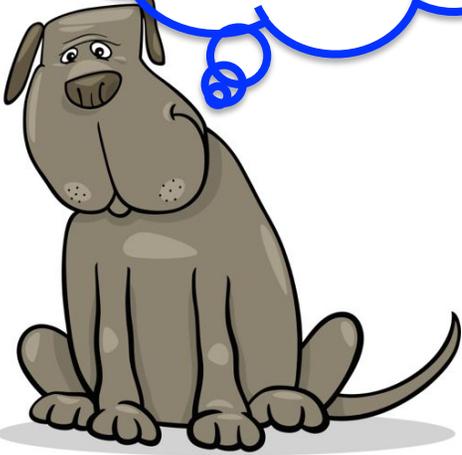
“The Lord said to Moses: Speak to Aaron and his sons and to all the Israelites, and tell them: When anyone of the house of Israel, or any alien residing in Israel, who presents an offering, brings a burnt offering as a votive offering or as a voluntary offering to the Lord, if it is to be acceptable for you, it must be an unblemished male of the herd, of the sheep or of the goats. You shall not offer one that has any blemish, for such a one would not be acceptable on your behalf. When anyone presents a communion sacrifice to the Lord from the herd or the flock in fulfillment of a vow, or as a voluntary offering, if it is to find acceptance, it must be unblemished; it shall not have any blemish . . .

## Part 2: On unacceptable sacrifices (22: 17-30)

“One that is blind or lame or maimed, or one that has running lesions or sores or scabs, you shall not offer to the Lord; do not put such an animal on the altar as an oblation to the Lord. An ox or a sheep that has a leg that is too long or is stunted you may indeed present as a voluntary offering, but it will not be acceptable as a votive offering. One that has its testicles bruised or crushed or torn out or cut off you shall not offer to the Lord. You shall neither do this in your own land nor receive from any foreigner any such animals to offer up as the food of your God; since they are deformed or blemished, they will not be acceptable on your behalf.”



A sacrificial animal must be unblemished, the same as a priest. The lists of defects are only those that are visible, and the lists are parallel!



Whoo, hoo! I was "fixed" as a puppy, so I can't be sacrificed!

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## Did people actually offer blemished animals as sacrifices? Yes, they did. Listen to the prophet Malachi:

*“A son honors his father,  
and a servant his master;  
If, then, I am a father,  
where is the honor due me?  
And if I am a master,  
where is the fear due me?  
So says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests,  
who disdain my name.  
But you ask, “How have we disdained your name?”  
By offering defiled food on my altar!  
You ask, “How have we defiled it?”  
By saying that the table of the Lord may be disdained!  
When you offer a blind animal for sacrifice,  
is there no wrong in that?  
When you offer a lame or sick animal,  
is there no wrong in that?  
Present it to your governor!  
Will he be pleased with you or show you favor?  
says the Lord of hosts.”*

(Malachi 1: 6-8)

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*Photography by Ana Maria Vargas*

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**Part 2: On unacceptable sacrifices, cont.  
(22: 26-30)**

“The Lord said to Moses: When an ox or a lamb or a goat is born, it shall remain with its mother for seven days; only from the eighth day onward will it be acceptable to be offered as an oblation to the Lord. You shall not slaughter an ox or a sheep on one and the same day with its young. Whenever you offer a thanksgiving sacrifice to the Lord, so offer it that it may be acceptable on your behalf; it must be eaten on the same day; none of it shall be left over until morning. I am the Lord.”



Mosheh ben Maimon (“Maimonides”), c. 1135-1204.

**Why this concern for newly-born animals and their mothers? The great Medieval rabbi, Maimonides, once again offers insight:**

*“Animals feel very great pain, there being no difference regarding this pain between man and other animals. For the love and tenderness of a mother for her child is not consequent upon reason, but upon the activity of the imaginative faculty, which is found in most animals just as it is found in man.”*

*Guide to the Perplexed, 3.48*



## **Part 1: Sanctity of the Priesthood (21: 1-24)**

### **Opening exhortation (1a)**

- 1. Corpse contamination (1b-6)**
- 2. Marriage purity (7-9)**
- 3. High priest's standards (10-15)**
- 4. Physical requirements (16-23)**

### **Closing exhortation (24)**

## **Part 2: Purity of the Priesthood (22: 1-33)**

### **Opening exhortation (1-2)**

- 5. On becoming "unclean" (3-9)**
- 6. On unauthorized persons (10-16)**
- 7. On unacceptable sacrifices (17-30)**

### **Closing exhortation (31-33)**

**Part 2: On unacceptable sacrifices, cont.**  
**(22: 26-30)**

“Be careful to observe my commandments, I am the Lord. Do not profane my holy name, that in the midst of the Israelites I may be hallowed, I, the Lord, make you holy, who led you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am the Lord.”

# Questions for discussion and thought

1. Why are priests held to a higher degree of accountability than their fellow Israelites?
2. Why must a priest be unblemished, as the sacrificial animals are unblemished?
3. Why is the High Priest held to an even higher degree of accountability than the priests themselves?
4. The prophets rail against the corrupt kings and priests. What caused both kings and priests to become corrupt?
5. Why would God not permit an animal to be sacrificed during its first 7 days of life, nor a mother and its baby to be sacrificed at the same time?

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