

Some extra help for understanding Leviticus...

Leviticus is such rough reading that many who start a Bible reading plan give up at this point. Perhaps it helps put the book in context to recall the promises of a new healthy, free life that God gave right after the Red Sea crossing. This book is a set of instructions on how to live that new healthy life, and its principles apply to us.

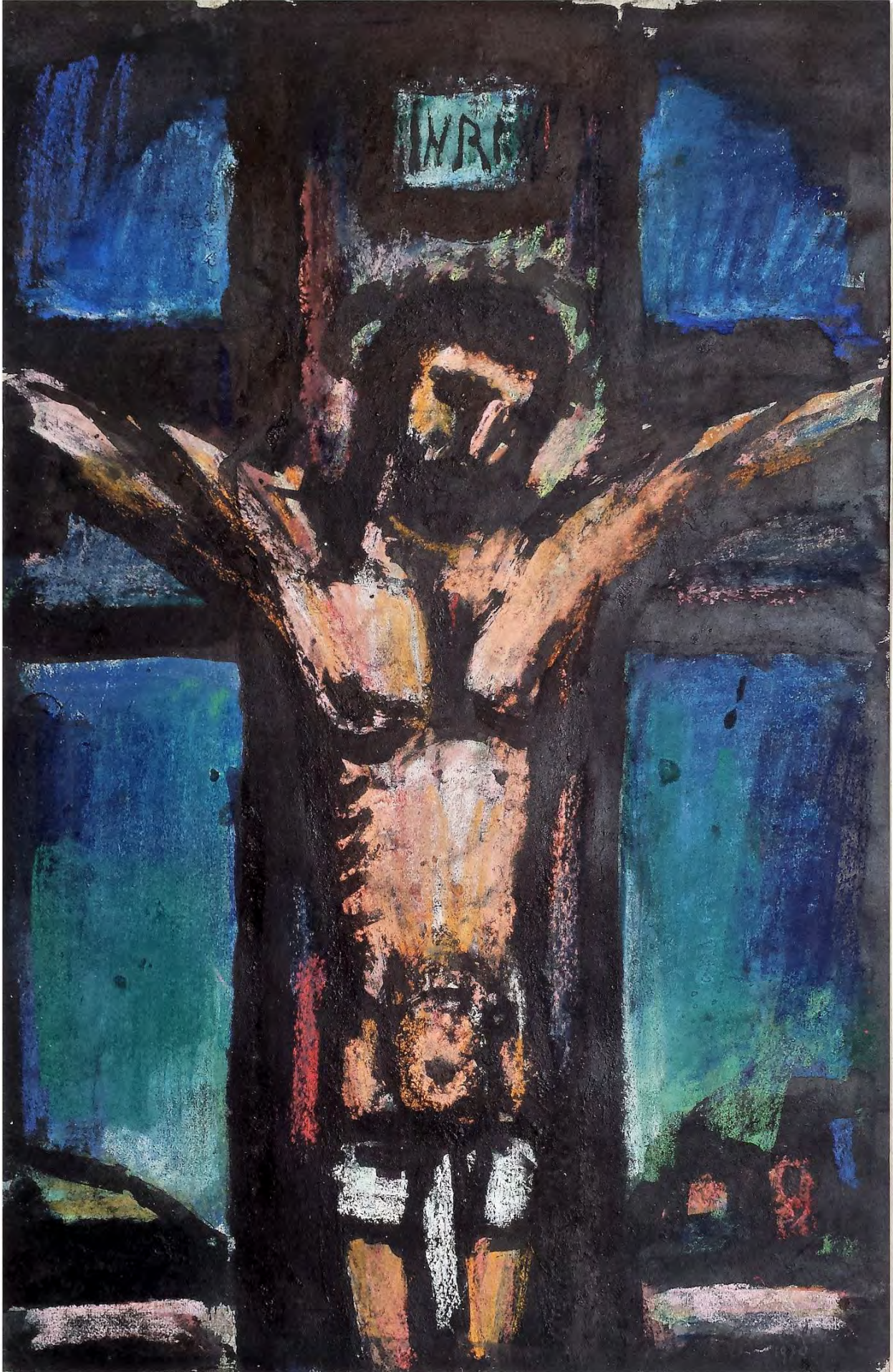
The first seven chapters deal with the sacrificial system that allows being reconciled to God and others, living with a clean, guilt-free conscience, and forgiveness. This provides the foundation for a healthy, holy life. Chapters 8-10 explain the priestly role, which for us today are the pastors of our Christian communities. A cautionary tale of spiritual leadership gone bad reminds us to be discerning about the spiritual leaders we follow. Chapter 11 deals with eating wisely and is an area where our culture sets unhealthy patterns, just as Egypt had set unhealthy patterns for the people. Eating well mattered for them and for us. Chapters 12-15 deal with relying on doctors (a role also played by the priests at that time) for healthy care after childbirth and for eliminating infection. Again, an admonition for us to rely appropriately on doctors and their knowledge. Chapter 16 is about the entire community seeking reconciliation with God. Traditionally our communities have engaged in a corporate confession of sin that recognizes the importance of this. Healthy meat, healthy sex, good ethics, dealing with crime and punishment, and healthy leadership are covered in chapters 17-20. Chapters 21-22 are about the need for holiness for priests in their own lives and in their work.

In chapter 23 we are introduced to the importance of being part of a spiritual community that celebrates together. The Eucharist, reverence for God, weekly rest, and sabbaticals are the focus of the next two chapters. A climactic summary of how following these instructions will lead to prosperity and health is contrasted with the warning that not following them will lead to disease and destruction. The final chapter addresses complete dedication to God.

In summary, the book gives us these principles for healthy lives: forgiveness and reconciliation, good pastoral care, good nutrition, doctors and their care, penitence in a community, avoiding social and physical contamination, celebrating as a community, the Eucharist, rest, and dedication to God.

These are beautiful and wise principles that can help us address suffering and illness. In addition, since we see Christ in all the scriptures, we see him here as well: he is the way to forgiveness and reconciliation, he is the best pastor, the source of good food, the wisest doctor, the reconciler, the way to true purity, the focus of our celebrations and worship, the one in whom we rest, and the source of all blessings. When we know him, dedicating our lives to him only makes sense!

Broken Body — Leviticus 1-3, Matthew 26:26



Georges Roualt, Crucifixion

Christ compared his broken body to the grain offerings which were part of many centuries of the sacrificial system. He compared his blood to the blood that was used as way of cleansing people to be able to enter into God's presence in worship. In this chapter we read the details of how the animals were cut apart and how bodies were torn before they were consumed in fire. In the same way, the crucifixion was an excruciating tearing apart of the body.

The sacrificial system demonstrated that God is merciful and forgiving. We see that everything and every action pointed to Christ. He was in every detail of where the sacrifices took place as we saw in the construction of the tabernacle. He was in the priests doing the work, and in the animals they sacrificed. He was in the blood that purified, the fire that consumed, the bread that was eaten, and the wine that was drunk. He was the forgiver of sins, the reconciler, and the one eating a shared meal of peace. Seen through Christ, these ancient and unfamiliar practices become beautiful symbols.

From these chapters we see that there is not just one meaning to sacrifice, but that there are many nuances: a gift, the giving of a life to sustain us, a substitute for us as sinners, eating together in peace, the reconciled community, and others. The first three offerings show us different aspects of the crucifixion:

<i>Whole burnt offering</i>	Christ gave himself to us in the death on the cross.
<i>Grain offering</i>	Christ offered his body broken for us.
<i>Peace offering</i>	Christ created a communion meal that brings peace.

These chapters offer detailed instructions to priests regarding how to do their jobs and so is a notoriously dull and off-putting part of scripture. It is repetitive, and it is fair to skim. It also provides occasion for meditation on Christ's body broken for us, and our frequent remembrance of this in the Eucharistic meal. We cannot meditate enough on the crucifixion and resurrection and its implications for our own lives that both suffer and rise up in power.

We benefit from recognizing that the peace offering foreshadows an important interpretation of what Christ's death on the cross accomplished. Paul explained in Colossians 1:20 that by Christ God reconciled everything to himself and made peace with everything in heaven and on earth. This vision of cosmic impact is then taken to the personal by saying that this includes us who were God's enemies.

Do I repeatedly apply Christ's sacrifice to the forgiveness of my sins?

Crown of Thorns—Leviticus 4-6, Matthew 26:27-28



Otto Dix, Ecce Homo

Christ made the comparison between his own blood and the sacrifices explained here. As sacrifice, Christ's blood was poured out and by being taken into the Most Holy Place, it opened the way for us to be reconciled to God. Christ's back was scourged with a lead-tipped whip, which resulted in profuse bleeding. Also, since blood vessels are close to the surface, scalp wounds bleed profusely, and the crown of thorns would have resulted in great quantities of blood on his face and body. This blood-soaked man became the fulfillment of every blood sacrifice.

In these chapters there is an emphasis on how sin is covered and cleansed by sacrifice:

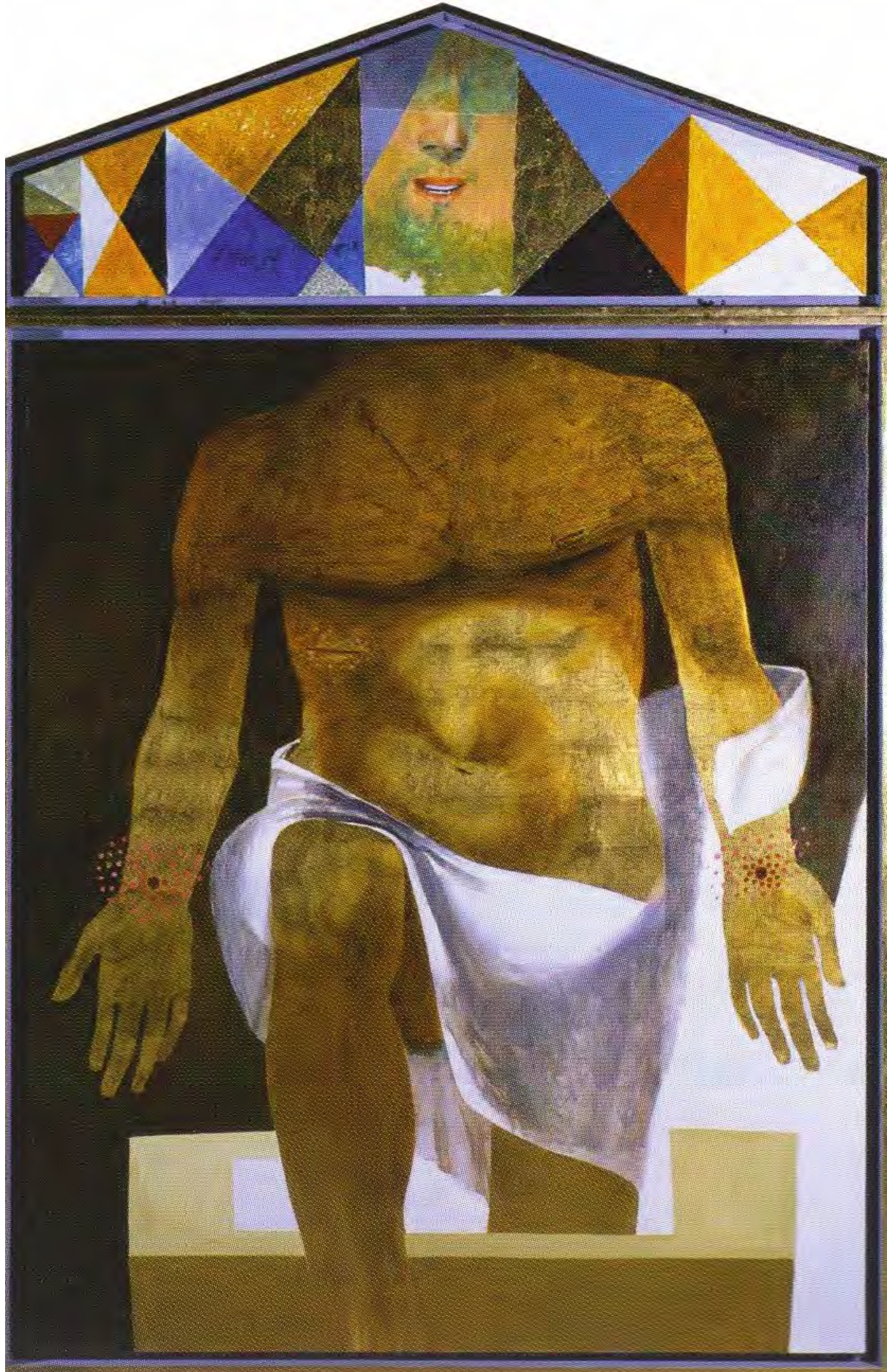
Absolution offering or sin offering — Unintentional sins are completely cleansed.
Compensation offering or guilt offering — Reconciliation with others.

Centuries of symbolic theater built an understanding of forgiveness of sin. At the right time, Christ came and fulfilled every aspect of this imagery, so we come to him in prayer and accept once more the completeness of his sacrifice. Anything we have done wrong can be transformed, and holding on to self-criticism is made pointless.

In trying to understand the symbolism of the sacrificial system, we make a serious mistake if we forget that God the Father and Christ are one and the same being. If not, we can suppose that Christ bears our punishment from a wrathful God. But because they are One, we realize that God himself is the sacrifice, taking the sin on himself and destroying it. What is burned is sin, so it no longer is in the way of a reconciled relationship. What a relief to know that our sin is destroyed, non-existent, every time we come to God to confess it. This opens us up to live a guilt-free life that is full of gratitude.

Have I accepted that Christ's sacrificial death covers all my sins?

The Third Day — Leviticus 7, Matthew 17:22-23



Arcabas, Resurrection

Christ repeatedly prophesied that he would die and rise on the third day. The third day of resurrection occurs symbolically in the sacrificial system, and symbolically in many other stories. For example, it was on the third day after Passover that the Israelites were completely delivered from Pharaoh.

Sacrifices were not to be used after the third day—they were obsolete. While this brings to mind a practical avoidance of food poisoning in a time without refrigeration, it symbolically brings to mind the end of all sacrifices by Christ's resurrection on the third day.

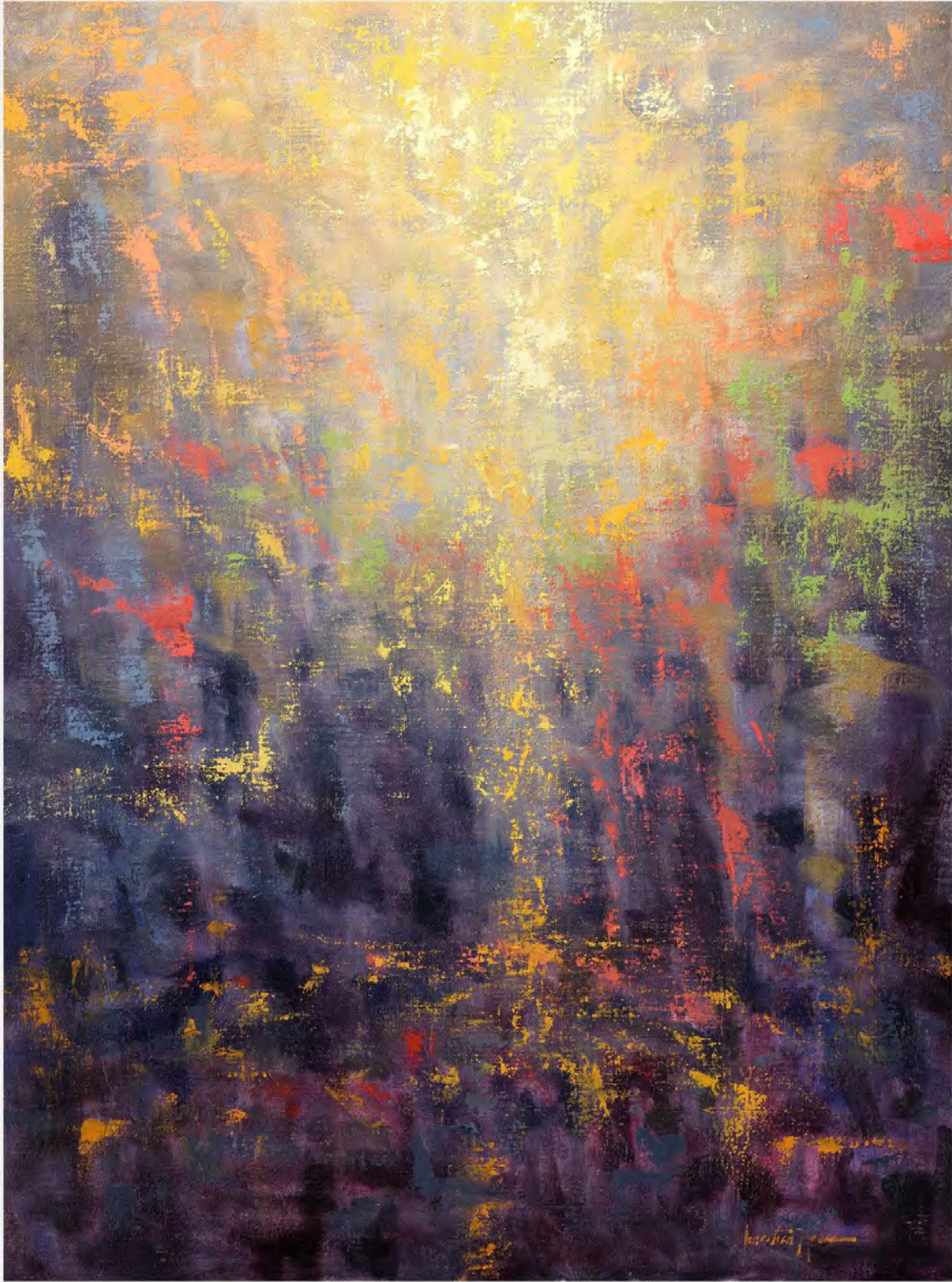
Forty years after Christ's death, the Temple was destroyed and the sacrificial system came to an end. Without a tabernacle or Temple these laws could not literally be carried out, and Judaism adapted to that reality, making these symbols of spiritual offerings. From the New Testament we see that we are to offer our own bodies as a living sacrifice. We are crucified with Christ and now live in his resurrection life.

On a practical level, what does it mean to me to live as one sacrificed and resurrected? We are warned that ongoing suffering is to be expected. Mourning with those who mourn. Caring for those who hurt. When we mourn and hurt, we need to keep hungering for righteousness.

The third day, Resurrection Sunday, is a day of great joy, a day that foreshadows the final triumph when there will be no more sorrow, no more suffering, and no more death. We are called to live with that "third day" perspective, always looking for hints of resurrection.

Do I maintain a hopeful "third day" mentality, even when sacrifice and suffering are part of my life?

Image of the Priest — Leviticus 8-9, Hebrews 8:6-7



OIL ON LINEN 24X 32"

"ENTER IN"

JONATHAN HOWE

Aaron became the first high priest, and Hebrews tells us that though Christ has this same role, his is far higher and better since it involves going into heaven itself. God's glorious presence affirmed Aaron and his sons in these new roles, and the people shouted with joy.

It is in John's gospel that we see Christ presented to us as a priest. There is no birth story, but the identity of Christ with God the creator is followed by the announcement that he is like a tabernacle among the people, the place where priests brought people into relationship with God. In John there are more stories and events centered in the temple than in the other gospels, and in the passion narratives we have the most references to the fact that these events are occurring at Passover, the time of the sacrifice of the lamb.

In John Christ gave them the priestly role of offering forgiveness as bearers of God's presence through the Holy Spirit within them. In our taking up our roles as priests in the world, listening to the confessions of others and sharing the forgiveness of Christ is part of our ministry. The listener role needed in the world is infinite—we can be priests almost anytime and anywhere if we remember that.

The people gathered in the Lord's presence, but then were promised that "the glorious presence of the Lord" would appear. When it did, the people experienced great joy. When we have dutifully gathered in a congregation, sometimes something more transcendent and experiential gives us a sense of the glorious. This experience cannot be demanded, but we need to have open hearts.

After the consecration, a point was made that their work began on the eighth day. The symbolism is that this was the day of the resurrection, the first day of the new creation. We must not forget that we are living in a world made new and that we will see it complete some day. In the midst of any suffering, we always live in hope, knowing that creation started over when Christ rose from the dead.

Am I living out my priestly role, knowing it is life-giving and full of God's glorious presence?

Priests who Failed — Leviticus 10, Hebrews 12:27-29



German School, Colored Woodcut

The death of disobedient priests contrasts with Christ's death as a perfectly obedient priest. The sons of Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, were to take incense into the tabernacle, but when they added it on top of coals of fire, an explosion killed them. Carelessness and fire do not mix, and carelessness and serving God do not mix well either.

Fire had been a positive sign of God's presence when they were ordained in the previous chapter. Here, however, the dangerous quality of fire that we know so well took their lives. Even today one can find news stories of fires killing people which were started by carelessness with incense.

This is one of a number of stories where a leader representing God—prophet, priest, or king—is held to higher standards than others and removed from their position when they fail. Spiritual leadership is demanding and the New Testament warns that teachers are judged strictly. God did not even allow Aaron to grieve, demanding that his position take priority over his personal relationships.

This story warns us not to tamper with what is holy, but to humbly recognize God's holiness in our world, and to seek to become holy ourselves through the work of Christ and the Spirit. It also should make us cautious about desiring positions of spiritual leadership; it is a serious responsibility. If we have such a position, it reminds us to exercise it with humility and wisdom.

Have I experienced failures which have been explosively corrected in my work as a priest in the world?

Eating right — Leviticus 11, Matthew 15:10-11



Sieger Köder, Last Supper

Christ took the dietary system and transfigured it into the spiritual ways we defile ourselves in what we say and do. He explained that it is what comes from within us that is the problem. With this instruction he transfigured rules about food into the call to holiness they always symbolized. Despite any restrictions, the underlying reminder is that God provides our food.

The same principle received emphasis for the apostle Peter in a vision of unclean animals which was applied to breaking down the barrier with Gentiles. Christ's redemption of all superseded the past.

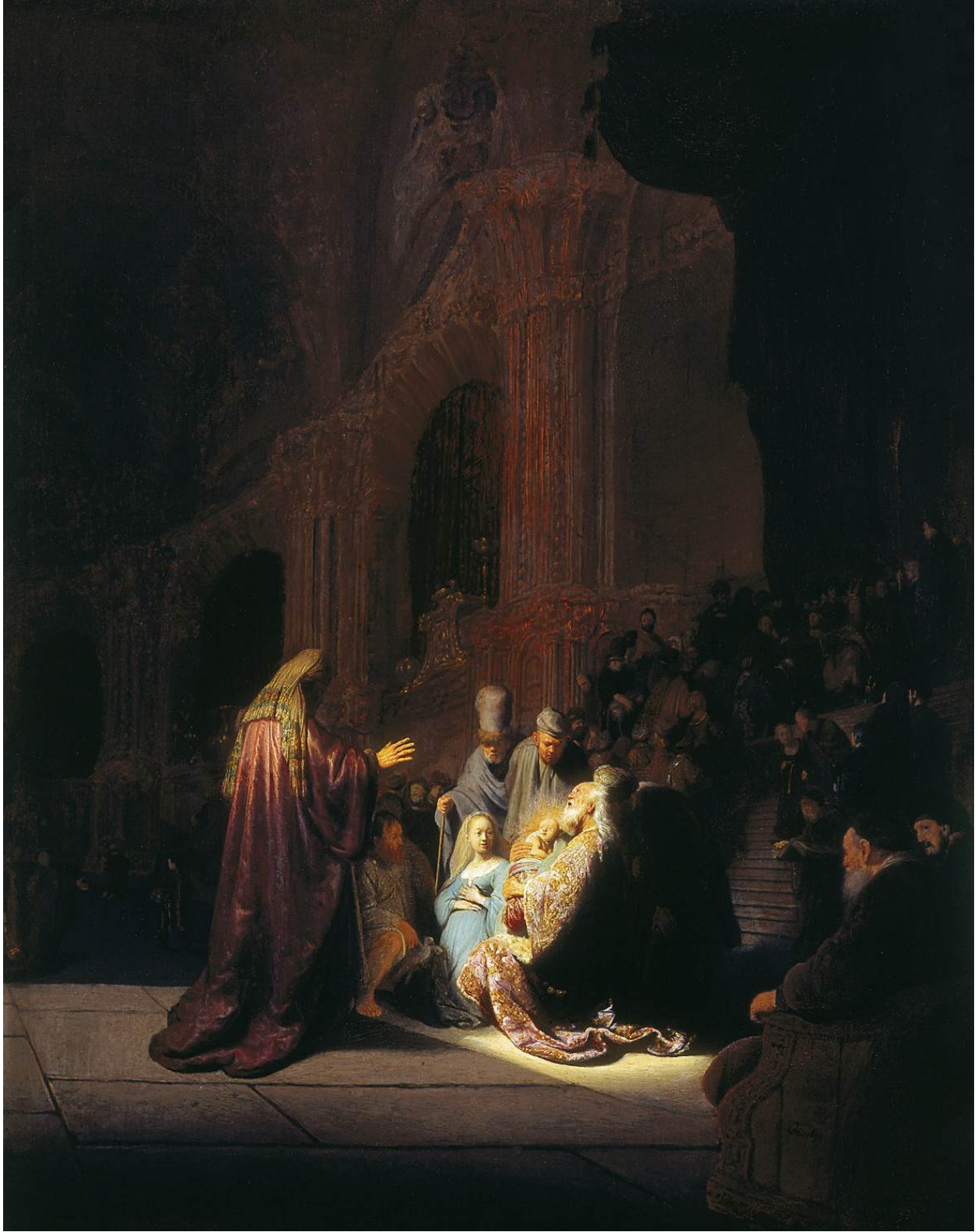
If you look at the food list you will see, that with the exception of pork and some shellfish, our culture tends to agree with what one does not eat. Refrigeration has made these things safer, but disease is still possible.

Good nutrition teaches us how to eat. Unfortunately, we can become legalistic or rebel against what we knew is best for good health. The principle to eat and drink to God's glory makes sense. Rachel Stone wrote *Eat with Joy: Redeeming God's Gift of Food* which beautifully addresses many of the complexes we currently have around food. She shares that we can learn to receive food as God's good gift, bless others with it, and celebrate community life through food.

In our time there is so much information available on healthy lifestyles, including exercise, reducing stress and a good diet, that with God's help we can do this. We can ask God to help us glorify him in our habits regarding food, exercise, sleep, and stress management.

Am I conscious of choosing food in line with honoring God?

Purification after Birth — Leviticus 12, Luke 2:25-32



Rembrandt van Rijn, Presentation of Jesus in the Temple

Christ's parents fulfilled the post-birth requirements laid out in this chapter. The miracle of any birth is thus tied to the miraculous incarnation of God as man through birth. After circumcision on the eighth day, the family went to the Temple on the fortieth day and took a purification offering. In this context we have the encounter of Jesus with two prophets who recognized him as Messiah, Simeon and Anna, both deeply spiritual people.

At this moment of recognition of the Messiah, Simeon said "I've seen the Savior." This supernatural recognition of the anointed one in an infant reminds us that every family is a Holy Family, every baby an image of the Christ Child. We thus approach birth and life with profound reverence, whatever the circumstances.

Simeon also foresaw the suffering that son and mother would go through at the cross. He said a sword would go through her heart. For every mother dedicating a child to God, there is unknown suffering that can await the child. Mary's example shows us that we are to feel their suffering; we are not expected to heroically or stoically be above it.

Our dedication of our children may take place differently today, but is just as meaningfully a sign that we realize that ultimately they do not belong to us, they belong to God. We are to learn to love them completely, but hold them loosely. They belong in God's hands.

Do I see all children with great reverence and treasure each infant I can hold?

Leprosy Healed — Leviticus 13, Luke 5:12-13



Jesus Mafa, Healing of the ten lepers

Leprosy symbolizes sin, and Christ healed both the physical and spiritual disease. In his healing ministry he told lepers to go to the priest who served as a medical inspector.

Healing leprosy is an accomplishment of our lifetime. For thousands of years this bacteria-caused disease was incurable. Even in 1950 when Mother Teresa began her work in India, leprosy was widespread, and she built leper cities. Multi-Drug-Therapy began in the early 1980s, and patients could be treated over a twelve-month period. Now there is a single dose treatment. In the past 20 years 15 million people have been cured.

For us, the instruction on how to be cured from the difficulties of spiritual, emotional, and physical illnesses can be practical. The wisdom of a counselor who can listen and advise, learning to enter into prayer in our solitude, and finding the loving support of a community are all integral to our healing.

Today our equivalents to the leprosy of Jesus' day include cancer, Alzheimer's, immune diseases, and others where we are still seeking cures. Even though these ancient priests did not have antibiotics, they used best practices to cure including loving care and cleanliness. Healing the sick is not far fetched today; we use our best practices, our prayer and most of all, our love.

Do I confidently pray with those who are ill and offer a loving presence?

The Healing Process—Leviticus 14, Matthew 8:4



Rembrandt van Rijn, Christ healing a leper

Christ affirmed the process outlined in this chapter to prove the cure. It is possible to see in these steps some possible analogies to the spiritual cure from sin that Christ provides us. In this chapter we have both the purification of a person and then the purification of places.

The details of the rituals surrounding demonstrating that leprosy had been healed can be instructive for healing experiences for us. The first step was one-on-one interaction between the priest and the patient. In personal pastoral care the priests would offer a sacrifice, sprinkle blood on the leper repeatedly and then pronounce them clean. For us we can see that it is Christ's blood that purifies us, that we are healed and purified in him. One detail of the ritual was that a living bird would be let loose, a symbol of freedom. Clothing would be washed, reminding us of the fact that what people can now see in the one healed is righteousness and holiness. The washing of the body reminds us of baptism and all the symbolism surrounding that.

The second step was a week of personal reflection and solitude for the healed person, much like a retreat. They would stay outside their tent, engage in more washing, and then on the eighth day, the day of new creation, take lambs, flour and oil for sacrifice. Once more we are reminded of Christ's sacrifice and the ongoing celebration of Eucharist.

The final step was reintegration to the worship patterns of the community. At the tabernacle they would be re-presented to the community, a lamb presented as a public acknowledgement that sins were forgiven, and the blood placed on different parts of the body as a symbol of dedication of every part of the healed body. Sins were forgiven in another sin offering, and they were affirmed to be completely well.

This is a prolonged spiritual process to make profound changes, and it serves as a lesson that we also must expect our spiritual purification and transformation to be a process. There are deep places in us that have been affected by the disease of sin, and it takes time and effort for the healing needed. But the end-result of the process is complete restoration to normal community life. I notice that healing fittingly comes on the eighth day, a day foreshadowing the resurrection.

Am I willing to see my own spiritual healing and that of others as a careful process?

Washing — Leviticus 15, John 13:8



Spagnuolo Crespi, Woman washing dishes

Cleansing from contamination on a physical level parallels the cleansing Christ brings on a spiritual level. In this chapter “wash clothes” and “bathe” are each repeated eight times. Water for cleansing our bodies prefigures the water of baptism for cleaning our hearts.

Hand-washing is nowhere in the Torah, and it had become ritualized in Pharisaic Judaism as an extension of the commands here. Jesus challenged this by saying that eating with unwashed hands did not make people unholy.

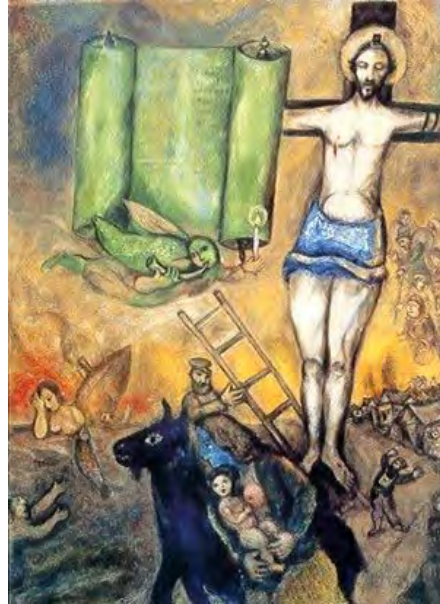
Nevertheless, there was something deeply right about the culture of cleanliness that the Law helped create. Washing clothes and bathing, cleaning linens, cleaning the house, and even washing hands are necessary for good health. World Health Organization campaigns encourage hand-washing, finding that it eliminates many diseases, and has more impact than many more complex health interventions. Keeping our homes, our clothes, ourselves, our hair, our teeth, our dishes, and our possessions clean is an image of order that coordinates with the holiness to which we are called. John Wesley coined the phrase, “Cleanliness is indeed next to godliness.”

On the eighth day, once cleansed, people brought an offering to show their purification. “Eighth day” is repeated nine times in the book and marks the same day the Resurrected Christ appeared to his disciples. Each reference completes a call to holiness, prefiguring resurrection. In addition to purification, priests began their work, children were marked as part of the community, healing was demonstrated, celebration was completed, and rest was complete.

Brother Lawrence, the medieval monastic whose advice in *The Practice of the Presence of God* is so wise, had it right: “Lord of all pots and pans and things, make me a saint by getting meals and washing up the plates!” We need to see the spirituality in washing dishes, doing laundry, taking care of ourselves, and cleaning our houses. We want to do every small and trivial task, conscious of God’s presence, offering these things to his glory.

Do I do the chores of cleanliness with a consciousness of their deeper meaning?

Yom Kippur — Leviticus 16, Hebrews 9:7-8



Marc Chagall, Yellow Crucifixion

Details of the holy day Yom Kippur symbolize Christ's death and our resulting freedom from sin. On this day the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place. God, the one who forgives, is presented here.

After temple sacrifices ceased and the ceremony could no longer be carried out, Yom Kippur became a day of prayer and fasting, actually preceded by ten days of repentance beginning with Rosh Hashanah. This is how most Jews observe this holiday in our time. A song from this 10-day period is the *Avina Malkeinu*, a beautiful prayer. Music for the service includes the *Kol Nidrei*. Max Bruch wrote a particularly beautiful cello/piano version. Beethoven used the theme in his Quartet in C Sharp Minor.

This is a beautiful day to celebrate the Christ, our "scapegoat" who carried all our sins far away to a desolate place. We are clean and guiltless because of him. The Hebrew word for atonement can mean "covering" which comforts us that our sin is covered. It can mean "reconciliation" which deepens our appreciation of what happened at the cross.

I am struck by the humility of an annual corporate day of repentance, a time of recognizing that no matter how much we desire to follow God, we so often fall short. Our American-style optimistic "God is on my side" Christianity perhaps needs some balance with the humble recognition that we are not always on his side, even when we vociferously suppose that is so. Our corporate life would doubtless benefit from more poverty of spirit. May it be so.

Do I confess the sins of my community in my community?

Life — Leviticus 17, John 6:53-56



Bernini, Blood of Christ

Christ, in instituting the new covenant, clearly linked his own blood to the blood of sacrifices for forgiveness of sins. Blood is an important theme in scripture, occurring 277 times with 71 instances in the New Testament. Leviticus outstrips other books with 58 references. God's miracle of life is in our blood.

Blood was not to be drunk from animals as a sign of respect for life. In contrast, we must symbolically drink Christ's blood to receive his life. When Christ said this his disciples responded that this was a very difficult concept. Christ acknowledged that they were offended, and it sounds strange to us as well. The metaphor of his death being the means of our life is made very clear by the metaphor of life in the blood.

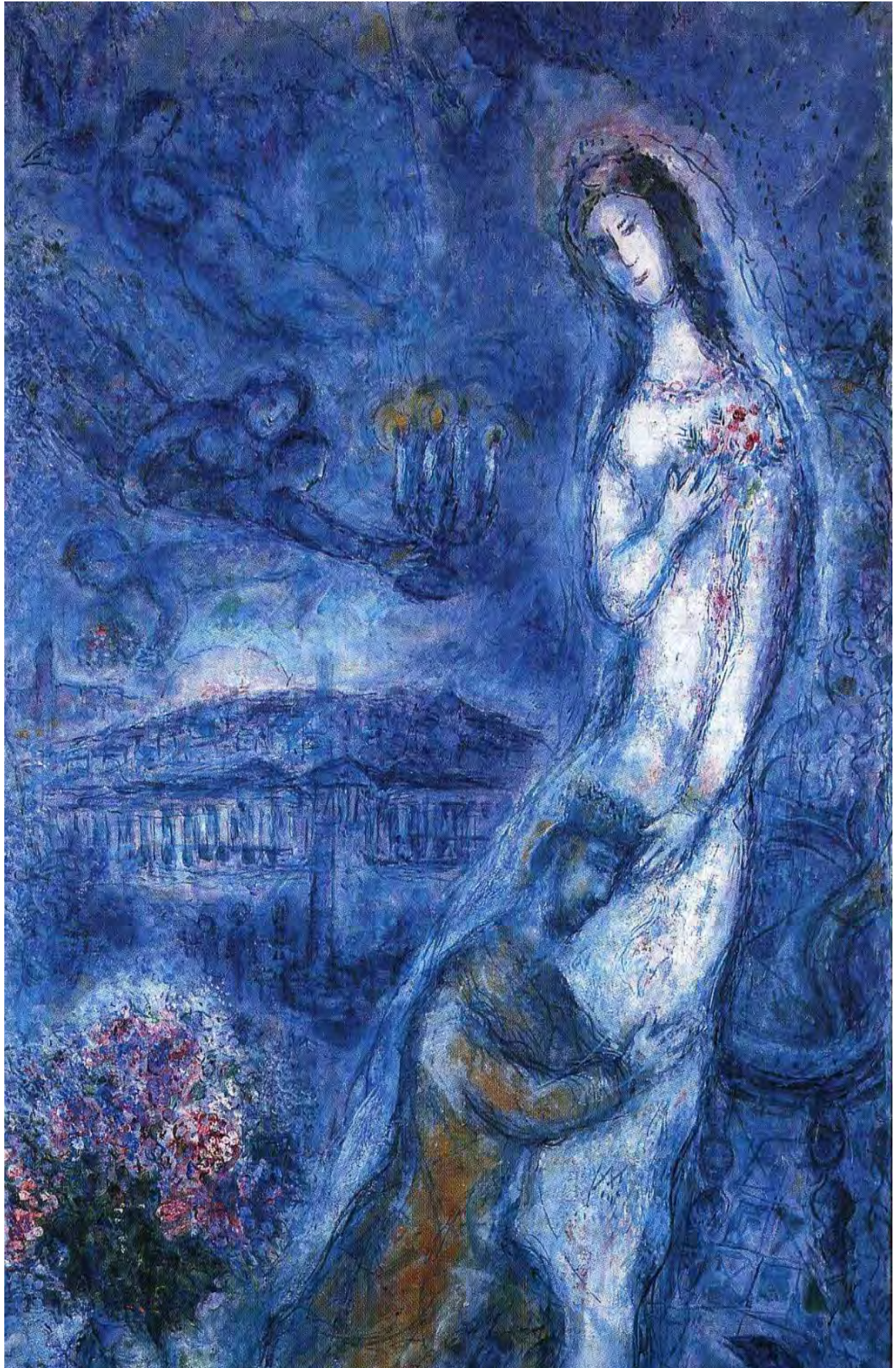
Science tells us that blood carries necessary nutrients and oxygen to cells, removes waste, fights infections, carries messages about damaged tissue, transports

hormones. It regulates body temperature, which, if too cold or too hot, causes death. With five liters of blood in adult bodies, the loss of two liters brings death. In bypass or transplant surgery blood is temporarily diverted and does not flow to the heart which becomes dull and inert. Restoring blood, the muscle contracts, beats, and keeps us alive. Life really is in the blood.

The imagery in the Levitical sacrifices was that the blood served as a way of cleansing the people to make them able to stand fearlessly before a holy God. We have that same image in Christ's blood cleaning us up and allowing us a place before God, making us holy. A continuing return to this, daily even, changes who we are.

Do I see transformative power in Christ's blood "shed for me?"

Sexual conduct — Leviticus 18, I Thessalonians 4:3-6



Marc Chagall, David and Bathsheba

In this chapter we see that violated sexual boundaries can be redeemed in Christ. A litany of inappropriate sexual relations reminds us of Christ's ancestors and other heroes of the faith. God's positive, connecting gift of sexuality is to be enjoyed within limits.

- Abraham married his half-sister Sarah, a forbidden relationship (18:9)
- The relationship between Judah and Tamar, his daughter-in-law, is defined as wrong, but is part of the line of Christ. (18:15)
- Jacob is the classic example of the rivalry that comes from marrying two sisters. Wrong, but also in the line of Christ. (18:18)
- King David committed adultery with his friend's wife, Bathsheba, and yet their child was in Christ's line. (18:20)

Christ redeems every one of these boundary violations in his incarnation.

Other prominent violations include:

- Moses' parents crossing a line, since his mother was her husband's aunt. (Exodus 6:20, Leviticus 18:12)
- Lot had incestuous relations with his daughters, also forbidden. (Leviticus 18:17)

Characters with multiple wives loved God. However, Christ affirmed the ideal of a man leaving father and mother and being united to his wife. Our culture accepts these boundaries, but is debating homosexuality. The relationship is forbidden here, mentioned four more times in scripture, and occurs in two stories.

Perhaps the lesson of boundary breaking in the line of Christ is that sexuality must be dealt with in charity. Sexuality has enough pitfalls that it can be a troubled area in our lives, and so needs the wisdom, grace, and kindness that are in Christ. We have slowly learned to be less judgmental about divorce, or even adultery, while perhaps being unhappy about the problem, but caring about the people involved. It is an area where it is so easy to feel condemned or to be condemning of others, and therefore important to remember redemption and Christ's charity toward fallen women.

Do I promote charity in the area of sexuality?

Love your Neighbor — Leviticus 19, Matthew 22:36-40



Van Gogh, The Good Samaritan

Christ's call to love God and neighbor summarizes the teaching of this chapter which contains the line "love your neighbor as yourself." Practical details on how to love your neighbor include: judging them fairly, not showing preference for rich or poor, not gossiping, not getting ahead at your neighbor's expense, not nursing hatred in your heart, confronting wrong directly, and never seeking revenge. God's love develops healthy community.

Rabbi Simlai in the 3rd century compiled a list of 613 laws from the Torah. Maimonides in the 12th century codified a standard list. At least 134 of these rules are things that Christians still must do, such as loving and worshiping God. Another 56 are good principles that seem valid to us today in our social life. Another 303 are fulfilled by Jesus in his death and resurrection. The other 120 laws seem culturally conditioned to the time of Israel as a nation, though we can find analogies for our actions today. This chapter has examples of all of these categories.

Christ made it clear in the scripture above that the overarching principle for all of these requirements is love for God and love for neighbor. We Christians are not off

the hook as far as needing to show that love, and the principles in the law can help guide us to see what the loving course of action might be.

Christ drew from this chapter when telling the story of the Good Samaritan. Not only is this where we are told to love our neighbors, verse 16 commands us not to stand idly by when a neighbor's life is in danger. Because the word "blood" is used in the original, one could translate it "don't stand idly by when your neighbor is bleeding to death" the very scenario Christ created in his story. How could the presumably law-obeying priest and Levite justify walking by? Perhaps they thought, "he is not one of ours, so he's not my neighbor." Christ challenged this exclusive in-group focus that can still trip us up today. Religious people broke the very law they revered with their lack of compassion, something that can happen today.

Am I meditating often on how I can love my neighbor?

The death penalty — Leviticus 20, John 8:5-9



Mikhalý Munkacsy, Christ before Pilate

The death penalty prefigured Christ's cross, and the judgment we are under for sin. Only God truly has the power of life and death. Christ's response to a woman brought to him for stoning emphasizes mercy and the ways our own sins disqualify us from imposing a death penalty. Nevertheless, God requires that community standards must be upheld.

The Ten Commandments are followed by exposition of the details of the law, many of which include restitution. For lying or bearing false witness, the correction is to tell the truth. For stealing, it is to give back the stolen article plus two to five times its value. Other sins are liable to death—idolatry, dishonoring God, dishonoring parents, adultery, and murder.

We have stories where the death penalty was carried out for blasphemy, and Sabbath-breaking. Religious leaders used these precedents to accuse Christ (falsely) of blasphemy and Sabbath-breaking as the reason he deserved the death-penalty. In contrast, we are reminded of Christ's mercy on the woman brought to him when caught in adultery. The leaders wanted him to condone the death penalty, but instead he challenged their right as sinful people to impose it.

As a result of Christ's example, the early church opposed the death penalty. In our time movements against this have made the compelling argument that we have too often erroneously condemned people to death, and numerous exonerations have rescued death row inmates. In desiring justice and mercy, may we err on the side of mercy.

Am I reaching out to those touched by the death penalty?

Priesthood — Leviticus 21,22, Revelation 5:9-10



Yoram Raanan, The Priestly Blessing

The priesthood in Israel prefigured Christ's priestly role. The thread of Kingdom imagery and expectation is reinforced here and connects to the first question for Moses at Mount Sinai: Are the people willing to become a kingdom of priests? Once again there is an emphasis on being holy to be qualified to serve God, something that still applies to us. God has high standards for those who represent him.

The chapters on priestly responsibility remind us that the people are all to take on this role and live a life of holiness, even if certain ones are selected for the tasks to be done. Included in the instructions are the things a priest needs: robes of righteousness, cleansing by the blood (of Christ), anointing of oil (the Holy Spirit), and consecration to a life of service.

Christ acknowledged his own priestly role. The prayer He taught begins "Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name" which he may have drawn from verse 32 which uses "hallows" in older translations.

The priests were to be people who could connect people to heaven. We also have this same mysterious role, and as the nature of Christ grows in us through the work of the Spirit, hopefully all our interactions advance this connection between heaven and earth. A continuous return to holiness is required.

Am I intent on living a holy life?

Celebrations — Leviticus 23, Luke 24:27



Lynne Feldman, The Time of our Joy

The annual celebrations are an important part of current Jewish culture, and each one reflects an important aspect of Christ's life:

Pesach—Passover: The details of the celebration beautifully describe sacrifice, liberation and victory over evil in the cross and resurrection.

Feast of Unleavened Bread—Christ equated unleavened bread with pure teaching. A theme of purification thus surrounds Passover (crucifixion) and First Fruits (resurrection) for a symbolic seven days.

Sfirat Haomer—On the day after the Sabbath in Passover week, they lifted up newly harvested grain. This serves as a fitting image for resurrection as does the name Early First Fruits and the timing, Sunday after the passion.

Shavuot—Latter First Fruits: Pentecost, 50 days after the resurrection celebrates the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Rosh HaShanah—New Year comes in the 7th month, in September or October. Perhaps the time of the start of Jesus' ministry, that included a call to repentance. The sound of the trumpet reminds us of the return of Christ.

Yom Kippur—Day of Atonement: The most holy day 10 days after Rosh HaShanah. The high priest entered the Holy of Holies to make atonement prefiguring both the crucifixion and final judgment. Today this is a day of fasting and repentance.

Sukkot—Feast of Tabernacles: Eight days of camping out recall the wilderness journey and celebrate the fall harvest in October. Some think that this may be the time of Christ's birth. Beautiful candlelight in the valley of Jerusalem shining from the booths at night, and light in the Temple foreshadow Christ.

The corporate experience of these celebrations was, and continues to be integral to the religious experience of the faithful. For Christians, Christmas and Easter have become our central celebrations, but I have derived great pleasure and insight from the opportunity to be part of Messianic Jewish celebrations of these festivals and highly recommend seeking out such opportunities.

Are religious festivals in community an important part of my life as they were (and are) for the Jewish people?

March 31

The Blasphemer — Leviticus 24, Matthew 26:65-66



Gerard von Honthorst, Christ before the High Priest

In this chapter the determination was made that blasphemy was worthy of death, and the penalty was carried out. It is this precedent that was used as a means of condemning Christ to death. Christ was repeatedly accused of blasphemy: for forgiving sins, since the implication was that he was God, and for claiming to be the Messiah as proven by his miracles. He was condemned to death when he claimed to be the Son of Man at God's right hand.

Christ also referred back to this chapter when he referred to an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but called his people to go further in forgiveness and meekness. His kingdom demand is for us to be willing to suffer rather than obtain justice.

Earlier in the chapter we see candlelight and bread, images that Christ applied to himself. The lamp in the tabernacle is to be alight at all times, and the bread is to be continually renewed and eaten by the priests. Christ's opponents could not see that he was the Messiah, the fulfillment of the images of light and bread, and therefore they were the ones guilty of blasphemy, accusing him falsely. We are ever in danger of not seeing him in our lives and, even as believers, dare we say it, thereby teeter into blasphemy.

Today we would not dream of the death penalty for blasphemy, though it is not unknown. But perhaps we have not learned enough from the false accusation of Christ. When we are concerned about what someone is saying we can use our gifts of discernment, but Christ warned us not to condemn lest we be condemned. May we be people of charity.

Am I strident and angry like Christ's accusers when convinced others are in the wrong?

Economics — Leviticus 25, Luke 6:20-21



Yoram Raanan, The Jubilee Year

The call to economic justice is part of the Kingdom of God where Christ reigns and everyone flourishes. Through tithes for those who have become poor all needs are met. The system included the year of Jubilee every Sabbath of Sabbaths (49 years) when slaves were freed, debts were forgiven, and land was returned to the original owners. Jesus' first sermon drew on Isaiah's Messianic prophecy of freeing the oppressed and bringing the year of Jubilee. He identified this as his work, and his radical economic vision included his own example of owning nothing. .

The Sabbath was an important part of the system as a reminder that all we have comes from God, that we are to rest, relax and trust his provision. Every seven years a Sabbatical allowed Israelites additional rest and reflectivity. Ideally, everyone was to be middle-class, with their own property, freedom to do their own work, and generous when crisis affected someone in their community. We learn that God desires us to rest, that it honors him when we do it consistently.

Today it is easy to give money to great causes and to share time and money with those living on the edge. Creative simple living enables us to share more generously and so become more like Christ. Today we Christians need to understand that sharing poverty is cross-bearing work that extends the Kingdom. However we choose to do it, we see in this chapter that God wants us to work for economic justice.

What is my part in increasing economic justice?

Blessing or Cursing — Leviticus 26, Galatians 3:13



Norman Rockwell, *Four Freedoms*

Christ brings blessing to us, particularly that of God's presence. In this set of promises the blessings include agricultural abundance, births, and peace. We are reminded that God gives us free will and we can choose to obey or disobey and our choices have consequences.

The curses are prophesied for not listening and obeying God and fulfilling his desire to bless the world through Israel by making them a kingdom of priests. The six escalating curses in this chapter accurately describe Israel's history from the time of the divided kingdom when idolatrous worship was institutionalized until the exile and return. It begins with terror and political instability, then drought, wild animals killing children, famine, cannibalism, destruction and exile and suffering in exile. Elijah, for example, proclaimed drought. Wild animals, famine and cannibalism occurred in the time of Elisha, and were specific signs to sound a warning and call people back to God.

In Deuteronomy Moses repeated the theme of falling under curses for turning from God. In the promised land Joshua read the law including all the blessings and curses and the people re-committed themselves to obedience. After the return from exile the people resolved to accept God's curse if they failed.

God knew that if they failed, he would come and transfigure the story by taking the curses on himself at the climactic moment, which he did on the cross. In Christ we are called to love, even our enemies, and we are exhorted to bless, not to curse, those who harm us. In the end, we are told in Revelation that God will remove all curses in heaven. Those who live in the Kingdom now are not only part of blessing the world, suffering has a new meaning: it is part of obedience that is transforming the world, not the result of a curse.

In Christ we are showered with these promised blessings: abundance, security, God's favor, more than we need, God's presence and respect, and freedom and dignity. The tender promises of relationship touch me. God says "I will live among you", "I will not despise you", "I will walk among you", "I will be your God", and "you will be my people."

Am I obeying and seeking to live under God's blessing?

Redemption — Leviticus 27, Matthew 27:9-10



Marc Chagall, Crucifixion

Christ was dedicated to God, just as people, animals, and land could be dedicated. The result could be death, priesthood, or a redemption payment each of which foreshadowed his life. The firstborn had to be redeemed. The values in silver were: 50 for a man, 30 for a woman, 20 for a boy, 10 for a girl, 5 for a baby boy, 3 for a baby girl, 15 for a man over 60, 10 for a woman over 60. Lawsuits today make similar calculations for loss of earnings due to death or injury.

Christ's redemption value at his betrayal was that of a woman or slave. (Exodus 21:32). He fulfilled a prophecy that a person specially set apart by the Lord for destruction cannot be redeemed and must die. By making himself worth little, he made us valuable to God.

The redemption of firstborn sons is still observed among Jews, including in Messianic congregations, where its connection to Christ as our redeemer is made explicit. It is a service of dedication for the child, occurring a month after the birth with godparents present.

As far as commitment to the point of death, estimates go as high as 70 million people who have been martyred since the resurrection of Christ. Even if we live a comfortable, relatively easy life, the idea is that our commitment is to be as intense as that of one willing to die. This gives us a motivation to take any suffering in our life and ask that it be used to bring the Kingdom in some way, thus giving it a meaning and purpose it would otherwise not have.

Am I grateful for Christ's humility in dying as a slave? Am I willing to make the same commitment?