

Why did God, in the Old Testament, forbid people with physical disabilities from serving at His altar?

QUESTION:

Why did God, in the Old Testament, forbid people with physical disabilities from serving at His altar? If God shows no favoritism, why did He give such a command?

Leviticus 21:16–24 explains that anyone from the priestly line of Aaron who had a physical defect—such as blindness, lameness, deformities, or skin conditions—was not allowed to approach the altar or offer sacrifices, although they could still partake in the sacred offerings.

ANSWER:

The Old Testament served as a physical representation or shadow of the spiritual realities that would be revealed later through the New Covenant (Colossians 2:17). The ceremonial laws and practices of the Old Testament, including dietary laws, festivals, and Sabbaths, were not the ultimate reality but rather a foreshadowing of something greater. This concept is echoed in Hebrews 10:1, where the law is described as a shadow of the good things to come, not the realities themselves.

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Because the Old Covenant was physical, many of its laws and instructions were meant to help people understand deeper spiritual truths. These physical examples made it easier for people to grasp the spiritual meanings that would later be revealed in Christ. However, those physical laws weren't God's final or complete plan.

Think of it like teaching a child math. You don't just tell them "1 + 3 = 4." Instead, you give them sticks to count. You give them one stick, then three more, and help them count to four. At that stage, they think math is about sticks. But as they grow, they realize that the sticks were just tools to help them understand the concept. Real math is in the mind, not in the sticks.

In the same way, when God first began revealing His plan, He used physical laws to teach spiritual truths. For example, Israelites were forbidden to eat pigs—not because pigs are dirty, but because pigs don't chew the cud. Spiritually, this was a symbol. Animals that chew the cud (like cows) bring up what they've eaten, chew it again, and swallow it. Spiritually, this symbolizes remembering and meditating on what God has done or taught us. People who don't reflect like this are like pigs—they forget God's past faithfulness.

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The Israelites showed this kind of spiritual “uncleanness” after crossing the Red Sea. They quickly forgot God’s miracles and complained about food. But David, when facing Goliath, remembered how God had saved him from lions and bears. That gave him faith and strength. He “chewed the cud,” spiritually speaking—he reflected on God’s faithfulness.

Now let’s go back to the question about physical disabilities and the altar.

Only Levites—the descendants of the tribe of Levi—were allowed to serve in the temple. No one from any other tribe, no matter how devoted or gifted, could serve. Even among the Levites, if someone had a physical defect, they were not allowed to offer sacrifices. So it wasn’t just people with disabilities who were restricted—many others were as well.

Why did God do this?

Because He was painting a spiritual picture: those who serve at His altar should be spiritually whole—without defect in heart or character. God wasn’t rejecting people with physical disabilities; He was using this as a symbol to teach that His servants must be

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spiritually mature and pure.

That's why, when we move into the New Testament, we see Jesus welcoming the blind, the lame, and the sick. He heals them, dines with them, and loves them (Mark 14:3). God isn't concerned with physical limitations—He's concerned with the heart. A spiritually broken or defiled heart is what makes someone unclean before Him.

Have you found healing for the spiritual “leprosy” or “widowhood” within you?

(These are symbols of spiritual separation or uncleanness.)

There are many people with physical disabilities whom God has allowed to remain that way for a reason. Some serve God in powerful ways—healing others, sharing the gospel, and performing miracles. You might wonder, “Why doesn't God heal them?” But remember: God's thoughts are not like ours. For example, the prophet Elisha died from an illness, but his bones still brought a dead man back to life!

Check out this testimony:

>>> Testimony of Ricky (*a reference to an inspiring story of*

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someone serving God powerfully despite disability)

All of this teaches us that today, in God's eyes, there is no male or female, no slave or free, no able-bodied or disabled—we are all priests through Jesus Christ. His sacrifice gives all believers access to God's presence.

Hallelujah! His love for us is beyond words.

Shalom.

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