

February 25

Leviticus 12, 14, 15 and Numbers 19

So today, we continue down the road of "freaky stuff in Leviticus". I am going to focus in on two freaky subjects you may have never thought were so interesting "- Leprosy and the Red Heifer.

Leprosy

I bet that some of you never knew before that there was a section of Scripture that might be classified as a medical manual! We have just read one. By the way, the Hebrew word translated "infectious skin disease" in the New International Version is more commonly translated as "leprosy" in older English versions.

Leprosy (its modern name is Hansen's disease) was one of the most dreaded diseases in the ancient world, and real leprosy was incurable, progressive and highly contagious. That is the reason that anyone who had symptoms that might possibly be associated with the early stages of leprosy was immediately isolated from the healthy portion of society. The problem with the system, of course, is that rashes and skin anomalies can be caused by a myriad of other causes as well. That is why the instructions we read today include reexamination and even necessary steps to take if and when the symptoms disappear.

All through the Old Testament period, I am sure, many Israelites who for a short time found themselves in isolation because of allergies, skin rashes or temporary infections, were restored to their families and clans by presenting themselves to the priests for examination and then undergoing the rituals related to cleansing and restoration. What I want to say to you, however, is that all through the Old Testament no one who truly had leprosy would have been cleansed and gone through the ceremony. Leprosy was incurable. Once you knew for certain that you had it, all hope was gone. You were an outcast for the remainder of your life. The only notable exception to that rule in the Old Testament was the Syrian general Naaman, who was healed at the word of the prophet Elisha.

It is because of the regulations laid out before us this morning that when Jesus healed a man with leprosy early in His ministry, a miracle recorded by three of the Gospels, He commanded Him not to tell anyone but simply to go and show himself to a priest. He was following the prescription of the Mosaic Law. If the man reported to a priest in his home town, as surely he would have to do, and the priest knew of his long-standing condition of leprosy, it would have created quite a stir because everyone knew that leprosy was incurable. Jesus did the same thing later on when He healed the ten lepers, a story recounted for us in the Gospel of Luke.

The second thing that I want to remind you of today is that leprosy was always understood to be symbolic of sin. That is why the punishment for open rebellion against God was often that the sinner was stricken with leprosy. You will remember that this was the fate of Isaiah's King Uzziah, and of Elisha's disobedient servant

Gehezai. It also befell Miriam - the sister of Moses - when she joined in the spirit of rebellion against the Lord and against her brother, the servant of the Lord. You will remember, of course, that after Moses' prayer on her behalf, she was healed.

The characteristics that I have already noted make it a symbol of sin. It was incurable. Once you had it, apart from a miracle of God, there was no way to help you. It was terminal - it always led (eventually) to the death of its victims. It was progressive - it killed you piece by piece, bringing death and dismemberment to every portion of the body in such a way that its victims became increasingly horrible to look upon. It was highly contagious. It infected other people who got too close to you. There is no question about the fact that in a spiritual sense, sin is like that too.

The uncleanness that came from leprosy or a temporary infection that resembled it made its victim a social and religious outcast. Because he was out of and isolated from normal society, it was obviously impossible to go to the Temple. And, if you could not go to the Temple, you could not offer sacrifices. And, if you could not offer sacrifices, then you could not worship God. In this sense also, the "type" holds, for sin cuts us off from the fellowship of the saints, but much more alarmingly, it cuts us off from fellowship with God Himself.

Purification concerning death

I'm pretty sure that you did not linger over Numbers 19 for too many minutes. But, there was another ritual for cleansing that I wanted to discuss with you. Because human corpses were the most serious kind of pollution in the Mosaic Law, they contaminated everyone who came near. Anyone who had contact with the dead had to stay away from the sanctuary and undergo cleansing. This type of cleansing involved a red heifer - a young cow. I am guessing this one probably did not grab your attention or your heart strings and hold them hostage until your mind probed all of the significance of the matter. Am I right? You read it, said 'uh-h - another sacrifice' and went on to chapter 20 without delay.

The "red heifer" ritual described in chapter 19 is very unusual. The animal is to be "*without defect or blemish*" - by now that is a phrase with which we have become very familiar. But then things start sounding a little strange. To begin with, this is not really a sacrifice. In fact, the word used to describe the killing of this animal is not the normal word for sacrifice. The word used here is 'slaughter.' It is a cow - not a bull or an ox - and it is to be killed outside the camp, not at the holy altar. The blood is burned with the animal - that is absolutely unique - it was never done in any other sacrifice - and though the priest is present, he does not lay hands on the animal to identify with it. Cedar wood, hyssop and wool - all things associated in the Old Testament with cleansing - are thrown onto the fire until only ashes are left. These ashes then become the focal point in a cleansing process. Mixed with water, the concoction is to be sprinkled on anyone who has become ceremonially unclean so that the sanctuary of the Lord is not defiled.

The ESV study Bible offered some more insight into the recipe that was used to make this cleansing ash.

“From the verse “A red heifer without defect...on which a yoke would never come” We understand this – Its youth shows its fullness of life, while its redness speaks of blood, the most effective agent of atonement. The redness of cedar wood and scarlet may also be significant. Hyssop is also used for cleansing. The same ingredients are used in the cleansing of the leper. The ashes are described as a sin offering, an offering designed to cleanse both the sanctuary and the worshipper. Those engaged in making the cleansing ash paradoxically incur a mild uncleanness themselves.” (ESV pg. 295)

I love the picture we see here of cleansing ritual once again foreshadowing Christ. Like the red heifer, perfect without blemish, that was to be slaughtered “outside the camp” so was Christ, perfect without blemish was taken “outside the camp” of Jerusalem to be sacrificed. The red heifer ashes were used to cleanse those who had been contaminated by death. Jesus’ blood and broken body was used to purify all of us who were once contaminated by the death of sin.