

The Leper's Cleansing

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[0 : 0 0] Now this chapter that we read from in Leviticus 14 deals with the cleansing or the rituals to be gone through for the official sanctifying or cleansing of those healed of leprosy.

Now leprosy was a much misunderstood disease. It was life-threatening ultimately. It was certainly a wasting disease and one that caused widespread fear and panic, such as I'm sure most of you are aware.

Those who contracted it were compelled to live out with the ordinary compound, the ordinary community, and live in leper colonies just with other lepers. And people or family would come and bring them food and leave it at a distance or whatever they needed.

And then they'd retreat and the leper would come and get it and then go away. In medieval times they had to have bells around their neck whenever they had to shout, unclean as they came through the streets because it was fear that the least contact with them might transmit the disease.

It's only in the 20th century that research and investigation done again largely, as is so often the case, through missionary work and hospitals and study of the illness of those suffering from it, that it was discovered to be not so much a skin disease as such, but a disease of the nerves, nerve endings, which as these deadened, the subject of the victim was unable to feel pain.

[1 : 2 8] So they damaged their bodies or broke their digits or fingers or toes or they got rubbed raw with being dragged because they couldn't feel the hand or the foot dragging on the ground or being hit or hurt or burned.

And because of the damage that was done then to the body or to the skin, infection would get in and that was often what caused the kind of suppurating sores or the damage to the skin as well as the damage to the body itself, of course.

But it was originally a deadening, it is always a deadening of the nerves, which means the subject cannot feel pain in those places that are infected. Now, we would tend to think perhaps glibly, oh, wouldn't it be great not to feel pain?

But we don't realise just how much pain is the body's own warning symbol. If you burn yourself and take your hand away, if the leper burns himself, he doesn't feel that his hand is being burned.

He doesn't move it until he sees something's wrong, the flesh is burning, but he doesn't feel a thing. So the skin gets all burned and the flesh gets all destroyed and deformed and that in turn brings in infection and so on.

[2 : 3 2] So there's different varieties of leprosy, of course. In the Old Testament, they didn't know all these medical details, but the Lord gave particular laws as to not so much how lepers were to be treated or banished or whatever, but how in the event of them being recovered, how they were to be received back in.

And the very presence of these laws and ordinances, such as we have here in chapter 14, indicates that leprosy or the different things that were covered under the head of leprosy, the description of leprosy, though it was, of course, a horrendous disease, must have been, in many an instance, recoverable.

We don't know how a person would recover from leprosy. We don't know the circumstances under which, but clearly it must have happened. And the Lord must have anticipated that it would happen, not simply through his son coming and healing lepers in due course, as he did, but also that it would be a process of recovery and what was to be done when that happened.

So we read verses 2 and 3. This shall be the law. The leper in the day is cleansing. He shall be brought unto the priest. And the priest shall go forth out of the camp and so on. So the leper must go to the priest.

But, of course, as it says, he must be brought to the priest. He cannot go himself. The leper is not allowed to come into the compound, into the camp, or much less the tabernacle, because he is himself unclean.

[4 : 01] He cannot himself go. It says in verse 3, the priest shall go forth out of the camp, and the priest shall look and behold, if the plague of leprosy be healed, and the leper then all the things that were to be done.

So he cannot come himself. I'm saying he, of course, would apply equally for a female victim of the leprosy. But it's a he that's described in the example given.

So he is unable to come himself. So the priest must go to him. And likewise, of course, as everything in Scripture is ultimately pointing us to Christ, to our relationship with the Lord, we are taught, we are encouraged to come to the Lord.

Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest, is the Lord. Believe in the Lord your God, or taught elsewhere. But in truth, though we do, as we are taught to respond to the Lord, we see that we ourselves could not and cannot come to God, except we be brought by some mediator or intercessor.

And likewise, at the same time, that he must come to us. We cannot go to God. He must come to us. And such is God's mercy that just as the priest must go to the leper.

[5 : 19] So likewise, the Lord himself came down to us, to where we were in our lost and fallen condition, and met with us, and ministered to us, and looked upon our needs.

And of course, as we know, Jesus, in the days of his flesh, he physically healed lepers. But we suffer, of course, from a far more fatal disease than leprosy, and that is the disease of sin. And leprosy may end up, eventually, with all the infections it causes, may end up taking somebody's physical life.

Sin will end up taking your life eternally. If it is not dealt with, it is not addressed. We cannot go to God. He must come to us, just as the priest must come to the leper.

In the midst of his apparent infection, when the word comes that he is perhaps cleansed, the priest must go and verify that. And if we seek forgiveness, if we seek to be right with God, the Lord himself must come to us.

And he must determine whether or not we are cleansed. And it is only by his blood, of course, that we will ever be cleansed. Then shall the priest command to take for him that is to be cleansed two birds, alive and clean, and cedar wood, and scarlet, and thistle.

[6 : 29] And the priest shall command that one of the birds be killed in an earthen vessel over running water, and so on. Two birds, literally, in the original, it's translated two sparrows. It's what it literally means in the original Hebrew.

Alive and clean is what it says. Now, clean as in fit to be eaten. If a creature, if an animal or a bird was clean, that meant you could eat it with a clear conscience.

And that is what we find if we look, for example, back in chapter 11, down a couple of pages back, and you'll have a list of animals that are unclean and clean and so on. So sparrows are not listed amongst the unclean, and therefore they must be able to be eaten.

Of course, there's not much eating in a sparrow. But we'd have to take it that because it specifies that they are to be clean, and sparrows will automatically be clean anyway, then we take it as being genetically for all kinds of small birds.

It's very small birds that we're looking at here. So sparrows, small birds, alive and clean, cedar wood. Now, this law is obviously given whilst the Israelites are in the wilderness or in the desert.

[7 : 36] And at that time, they would not have access to cedar wood anywhere. Cedars really flourished in Lebanon, to the north of the Holy Land. They wouldn't have access to that in the wilderness or in the Sinai Peninsula at all.

So this law is clearly looking ahead to when they would be in the Holy Land. But in the meantime, what would they use in the meantime? Well, almost certainly they would have to make do with juniper wood or juniper bushes, of which there would be abundance in the rocks and clefts of the Sinai Mountains.

Cedar wood probably symbolize the restoring of the leper to strength and soundness of flesh, because cedar is a type of wood which is apparently not apt to putrefy.

It doesn't rot so readily. So one of the wood that is resistant to putrefying, resistant to rotting, cedar wood then taken as being perhaps symptomatic of the leper being restored to soundness and strength of flesh.

And this taken together with isop. Isop, of course, being a sort of bushy kind of shrub, was sometimes taken as an applicator, a means by which, you know, blood or whatever was smeared, or a doorpost that passed over or was sprinkled by which it was used, almost like a brush sort of thing.

[9 : 03] But it was also thought by some to symbolize taking away the unpleasant odor of the disease. Rotting flesh will not be a pleasant smell.

But the function partly of the hisop is thought through its particular fragrance to sort of take away some of the smell that there would be of flesh that had rotted in the past.

That's one possible understanding of it. But also, as we said, a normal applicator, like almost like a brush, the sort of bushy shrub that it was. But in this instance, knowing that it's mentioned with hyssop and cedar, so the two are mentioned together, it may be that they are both being used here as an indication of how the greatest and the least are equal in the sight of the Lord.

Cedar was taken as being almost like the king of trees. They didn't have so much in the way of, you know, we tend to think in terms of, in the British House, oak as being sort of the ultimate strong tree.

Now, they did have oaks in the Holy Land, but cedar was taken as being this sort of the creme de la creme of sort of wood in the Holy Land. And that would be sort of top of the range, and hyssop sort of being a kind of shrugging little kind of plant that would grow out the clefts of the rock, taken as being the bottom end of the scale.

[10 : 25] I mean, we've got, take it, for example, 1 Kings chapter 4, verse 33, talks about the proverbs that Solomon spoke, said, So you've got the contrast in what seems to be the top end of the spectrum, the cedar tree that grows in Lebanon, and the hyssop that springs out of the wall.

It's a real sort of dog end of the kind of, of the tree spectrum, or the wood spectrum. And here they are both mentioned together. Take cedar wood and you take the hyssop as well.

The top and the bottom end of the spectrum, all equal in the sight of God. As they are both of use in his service. They are both being used here by the Lord in this process, in this ritual for the cleansing of the leper.

And the implication, perhaps, is taking one end of the spectrum all the way through to the other. Scarlet, of course, is taken by some to be a reference to the normal color, returning with the restored flow of blood.

If you've got the restored flow of blood, so the nerve endings are operating again because the disease is healed, then this is what the scarlet is taken by some to be, obviously pointing ultimately to the blood of the perfect sacrifice of Christ, binding together the greatest, the cedar, and the least in his service.

[11 : 56] It's thought that the scarlet twine would be binding together the hyssop and the sea of wood. Remember, of course, in Joshua 2, verse 18, that's the means by which we have let down the spies.

And they said to him, you know, When we come into the land, I shall bind this line of scarlet thread in the window, which that has led us down by. I shall bring thy father, thy mother, thy brethren, thy father's household home unto thee.

Where they saw the scarlet thread bound in the window, anybody in that house was saved. Just like if you think about the blood in the Passover, when the angel of death came, saw the blood, he would pass over.

When the Israelites would see the scarlet thread in the window, and they would ignore that house and just kill everybody else. So they would be spared because they were under cover of the scar.

The blood of Christ likewise covers us, protects us, keeps us. Verse 5, The priest shall command that one of the birds be killed in an earthen vessel over running water.

[12 : 59] Now running water obviously symbolize life, you know, as opposed to stagnant water, which could often be diseased. And it symbolized life. It also may perhaps, as the drops of blood would fall into the water, it may symbolize the dilution of water and blood together.

That means there's an inadequate supply of blood on its own. If it's a very small bird, not much blood, need to be diluted, what have you. But certainly in the New Testament you've got this readiness with which the water and the blood likewise witness, testify, Jesus says, remember, in Nicodemus, he said you brought water and the spirit.

And you've got in 1 John chapter 5, of course, verse 6, This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ, not by water only, but by water and blood.

And it is the spirit that bear witness, because the spirit is truth. In verse 8, there are three that bear witness on earth, the spirit and the water and the blood. And these three agree in 1. So you've got your running water and you've got the blood as well.

And the living bird is dipped in the blood of the other. Now it must be dipped in such a way, not its head or its wings or whatever, maybe just its tail, but dipped in such a way that the blood applied to it is not going to hinder its flight when it is actually let go.

[14 : 21] It's dipped in such a way that the hyssop or the cedar or juniper, rucus that are used, and the tip of the tail might be dipped in, but not the wings, nothing that would hinder its flight when it is let loose.

He shall sprinkle upon him that is to be cleansed from the leprosy seven times, and shall pronounce him queen, and shall let the living bird loose into the open field.

All the elements in the bundle, the cedar, the hesap, the scarlet, must touch the blood just as all the ordinances of religion that are practiced.

Whether it's this cleansing of the leprosy, whether it's the sacrifice of the Old Testament, whether it's circumcision in the Old Testament, whether it's now everything that we do at the Lord's Supper or baptism or the sent preaching forth of God's word, it is of effect only if it is sanctified by what Christ has done.

Everything that we do, we do, as it were, under cover of the blood, having been, as it were, dipped in the blood, because the preaching of God's word is of no effect if it is not the death and resurrection of Christ that we are preaching.

[15 : 27] If it is not Christ's death upon the cross and is rising again, if it is not covered, as it were, by the blood, then there is no gospel to preach. If we are not baptized into his death and resurrection, there is no baptism to give.

If we do not remember the Lord's death until he comes, you know, what's the Lord's death? Unless his death on the cross has purchased life for us, and likewise his resurrection, the victory over there.

Everything is touched by the blood, just as everything here in this ritual that is being gone through for the cleansing of the leper, everything must touch the blood.

All the ordinances of religion are of effect only if sanctified through the blood of Christ. So he is to sprinkle upon the leper seven times, we read in verse seven.

Seven, of course, was the number for completeness, for perfection. Remember that Naaman the Syrian in 2 Kings, in chapter five, was told to go and dip himself in the Jordan seven times.

[16 : 27] The divine number, the perfect number. And he was to be pronounced clean with the solemnity and dignity. One bird bloodstained but released. The two birds, one dead, one freed, taken no doubt as an illustration, an allegory we might say to signify death and resurrection.

The one bird is dead. The other is bloodstained but it's free. And it is set free just as Christ having died once for our sins, likewise rose again for our justification.

And it's all pointing us to death. Likewise, we might say the bird is set free as a token of the leper's release from quality, release from the, you know, confined within the leper's colony.

And as the bird, where's the bird going to go if the priest lets it go? It's not just like crawling around in the ground or just flying around at six inches off the ground. It's going to go up. The bird is going to soar heavenwards.

It's been bound. It's been dipped in his blood. It's been probably terrified half out of its mind by what was going to happen. It will have seemed that the other bird has been killed. So it's going to go as high up as it possibly can as its flight will be toward heaven.

[17 : 38] So it should indicate to the leper likewise that he has not been cleansed from his illness or from his disease simply to go and live to himself in the world and in the flesh or to indulge in worldliness.

But that as his cleansing is wrought of God, so his life should now be to the glory of God and not to self. He has meant spiritually to soar heavenwards.

He is set free not just for himself. He is set free to soar heavenwards to the Lord. Now, the name of leper would stick to it, you know, to the end of his life because having been a leper, you know, that's something people will remember about you well and truly as an identity tag.

If you think in the New Testament, remember, where it says that Jesus went to have a meal in the house of Simon the leper. Now, there's no way that he could have people in his house if he was still a leper.

It means that he was one who had formerly been a leper but was now cleansed of it. And perhaps that particular individual, if we are to take the different instances of the woman anointing Jesus and weeping over him as being one incident, whether told in Luke's account or in Matthew and Mark's account, whether these separate accounts, some people would say, are in fact the same incident, then this Simon the leper is likewise a Pharisee.

[19 : 05] He's the Pharisee that invited Jesus to his house for the meal when a woman anointed him and wept over him and so on. Now, if that's the case, then perhaps he thought that the best way that he could show God his gratitude was to become a Pharisee and to bring every aspect of his life under the laws and commandments of God.

And that was maybe his response to his cleansing. Best possible gratitude to God that anyone could give, he would have thought up to that point. And verse 8 then would be that he is to wash his clothes and shave off all his hair and wash himself with water that he may be clean.

And after that, he would come into the camp and shall tarry abroad out of his tent seven days. He could wash his clothes, shave his hair, wash his flesh and water. He could come into the camp, but still outside of his tent.

He's not allowed to just lodge back. It's the sort of halfway house stage. He's not out in the leper colony, but not is he just back as he was before. He's not quite there.

And we have to wonder, is this perhaps the state that some people find themselves in when they know that they are desiring to be cleansed, when they know that Christ has done something in their lives, when they see that God has been at work, but they're not quite completely at home yet in the Lord.

[20 : 25] They're sort of within the outskirts of the camp, they're within the camp, but they're not at home in the camp yet. That's sort of betwixt and between stage in the camp, but not quite able to come home just yet.

Is this perhaps the state that some people are in? The Lord's people not yet tabernacling with them, as it were, not yet at home, but still within the outward confines.

Well, it's better to be in the outward confines than away in the leper colony. It's better to have come so far, as long as we do complete the process. The leper at this stage is cleansed so far, but he's not completed the process.

There is more to be done. Verses 9 and 10, we need to have him to shave again, his head and his beard, even his eyebrows, and then there are more sacrifices to be offered. One, he lamb for a trespass offering, as we see in verse 12.

Another, he lamb for a sin offering, verse 19. And then a hew lamb for a burnt offering, verse 20. All of these sacrifices, now of course, that's not cheap.

[21 : 34] If you're going to get all these lambs and offer them up as sacrifices, somebody's going to purchase the lambs for you. Almost certainly your extended family would do that for you. But that's an awful lot to literally go up and smoke.

And not everybody could afford it. And this is one reason why the latter part of the chapter is given over to the way in which if you can't afford that much, you could do one lamb instead of three, and then two turtle doves or two young pigeons.

Instead, to offer up the same sacrifice, but the poor man's sacrifice. But the thing we should notice is that whether or not people are offering the poor man's sacrifice, you know, the two turtle doves or two young pigeons, which remember is the sacrifice, not for leprosy, but for a different thing, which Jesus' parents brought to the temple, you know, when he was, when Mary was ritually purified, as it were, after the childbirth of Jesus.

And they brought two, kind of turtle doves and two young pigeons. It was the poor man's sacrifice that they brought. They were not well-to-do. They were not wealthy people.

They brought the poor man's sacrifice. But the thing is that the poor man's sacrifice is counted just as much with the Lord as the richer persons. If you haven't got all the lambs or the oxen or the sheep and all the different sacrifices, there's always the poor man's option.

[22 : 56] And in God's eyes, that is accepted and received just as much as the rich man's. Because it's not about what we may have. God already owns the heavens and the earth.

He's not about to be impressed by whatever we can bring to him. And what he's looking for instead is obedience, is faithfulness. 2 Corinthians chapter 8 verse 12 tells us, For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not.

And it says in verse 9 of that same chapter, For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich.

It was a poor man's sacrifice that Jesus' parents brought. They weren't being cleansed from leprosy, but they were going through the obedience to the law and other things. And this poor man's option is throughout most of the sacrifices.

It is the option for those who don't have so much. But we're still rich in faith toward God. Another thing we should notice here, verse 14, where the priest applies, takes some of the blood of the trespass offering, the priest shall put it, upon the tip of the right ear of him that is to be cleansed, upon the thumb of his right hand, and upon the great toe of his right foot.

[24 : 18] It is the extremities of the body encompassing the whole for what they hear, what they physically do, and how they walk by the wayside, and so on. It was meant to encompass the whole body, just as we might say, for example, if you go from Land's End to John O'Groats, or vice versa.

We don't just mean start at Land's End and then do a helicopter jump to John O'Groats. We mean the whole length of that part of Great Britain when we talk about the extremities of it, Land's End and John O'Groats.

So when you talk about the ear and the thumb and the great toe, always of the right hand, the right side was considered more honourable than the left in that culture and time.

And likewise, this is the same ritual as was gone through for the priests. If we look, for example, in Exodus 19, we see at verse 6, he shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel. A holy nation. Peter, of course, makes the same point. A peculiar people, a royal priesthood, and so on.

[25 : 23] And if we are to look, for example, in chapter 8 of Leviticus, we'll see that when the priests are consecrated, when Aaron and his sons are consecrated, we see at verse 23, he slew it, the sacrifice, Moses took of the blood of it, put it upon the tip of Aaron's right ear, upon the thumb of his right hand, upon the great toe of his right foot.

He brought Aaron's sons and Moses put the blood upon the tip of their right ear, upon the thumbs of their right hands, upon the great toes of their right feet. It's the same ritual for the priests as it is for the ordinary people.

When somebody is cleansed from their leprosy, cleansed from this disease, this life-threatening disease, they are put through the same process as the consecrated priests.

I put through the ear, the thumb, the great toe. We are to be the equal of the priests of God. We are to be, as Moses said, you know, in Exodus 19, a kingdom of priests.

As Peter says, a royal priesthood, a peculiar, that is unique, people dedicated to the Lord. We have, then, the blood that signifies forgiveness.

[26 : 32] we have the oil that signifies, perhaps, on the one hand, the balm of healing, but, more importantly, signifies the spirit. To be anointed with the oil, whether for kings or priests or prophets or for the cleansing ritual, was a symbol of being anointed with the spirit of God.

So the oil was a symbol of the spirit, the blood, a symbol of forgiveness. Just as we have, now we understand that in the New Testament, we have the blood of Christ which justifies us.

We are justified by what Christ has done upon the cross. And justification, when it is applied to somebody's life, is immediate. If we are justified, we're justified once and for all.

And that's us made right with God. But the spirit that works in our lives and gradually causes us, as it's applied to our hearts, to become more and more like Christ, this is that which sanctifies.

And if we mix these two up, then we get into all sorts of problems. The blood of Christ justifies. We're forgiven for our sin, that's us, made right with God. But we're not content just saying, well that's it, fine, I don't have to do anything else.

[27 : 45] If we have truly been changed by Christ and saved by Christ, then our desire is to become more like him. And that we can only do as his spirit works in our hearts and works away and it embeds itself like a seed planted there and begins to grow more and more and squeeze out the old self and worldliness that is there.

So the process of sanctification goes on as a work of the spirit. You know, there's that question in the catechism, of course, the larger catechism, which I wouldn't attempt to do word for word, but you know, the question played into the justification and sanctification differ.

And although they are similar one to another, you know, justification is once and for all, sanctification is the work of God's spirit, it's ongoing, it's gradual work, it's not equal in everybody, but it's working up, perfecting the person through the course of their life.

Justification is once and for all and it's equal in all those who are saved. So we have this, the blood that signifies us being justified once and for all and you put the spirit which signifies, the oil that signifies the spirit, the ongoing work of sanctification.

The water, remember that the bird is killed over running water, must have blood in it. The oil must, which is on the ear and the thumb and the right toe, must have blood under it.

[29 : 13] Notice the order which are put on. First of all, the blood is put on. The blood is applied to the ear, the thumb, the toe. And then the oil is applied. The oil must have blood under it.

Likewise, all graces and comforts of the spirit, all his purifying and dignifying influences are owing to the death of Christ.

It is alone by his blood that we are saved. In one sense, you can't have the one without the other. And the work of the one will be ineffectual if the other has not happened first.

It is alone by the blood of Christ that we are saved. The water, remember, must have blood in it. The oil must have blood under it.

The spirit and the blood working together. The sacrifice of Christ that justifies, that saves us, the spirit that ultimately works this sanctifying process and cleanses us.

[30 : 14] This is one reason probably why the work of the cleansing of the leper. It is both immediate in a sense because the priest shall pronounce and clean verse 7 and yet there is still a process to go through.

There is more still to be done and if we are saved by Christ then we are saved by Christ but there is more still to be done. There is an ongoing process of cleansing and we may only have the poor man's sacrifice and we may not have much to bring but as Corinthians said, if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what a man hath and not according to what he hath not.

God does not expect you to bring them stuff you don't have. He doesn't expect you to have gifts that he's not endowed you with. He doesn't expect you to lay down at his feet what he has never given you in the first place.

What we offer to the Lord we offer only that which he has first given us and if he hasn't given us it then we can't give it back to him. I can't give to God great athletic ability or skill on the sports field or I can't compose music or translate other languages.

These are gifts the Lord just has not given me. No doubt some of these things I could learn and apply but I don't have that. But other people will have these kind of gifts or different gifts that the Lord has given them.

[31 : 33] And nobody of those some people do say the cross can say oh I don't have any gifts at all. You may have to think about it. things that the Lord has given you that you have that other people don't have.

You may deprecate the gifts you got. Oh that's not very important. That's not much. But just think of it if all the people with that gift were taken out of the world. Where would we be there?

everything that the Lord has given us. He has given us to use. He has given us to work for his service and glory. We lay at his feet that which he has first given us.

It is to be sanctified. It is to be made holy to the Lord all of our lives. The leper is not cleansed just so that he can indulge himself to the end of his days.

He is cleansed in order to be set free like the bird that soars heavenwards that he might give himself to the Lord. And if we have been redeemed by Christ from the deadly disease of sin that would destroy us eternally it is not so that we can just sit on our hands and do nothing.

[32 : 43] It is so that we may serve the Lord with all that we are and all that we have and all that he has given us. The just sanctification may be instant but the sanctification is ongoing.

It is a work that is both now and also not yet complete. When will it be complete? It will be complete when the Lord pronounces it so. And he will pronounce it so when he finally takes his child, his son or daughter from time into eternity.

On that day he will effectively be saying there is no more work to do. There is no more cleansing to be gone through. They are now perfected for glory.

And that is the greatest compliment we can have from the Lord. When he comes to take us, if we are his, it is because he has pronounced us ready.

Until that day we go on in the process of cleansing. We go on in the process of serving. We go on in the process of being sanctified and made more like Christ.

[33 : 48] water will have blood in it. The life is sanctified by the blood of Christ. The oil will have blood under it. The work of the spirit is built upon the sacrifice of Christ.

So is all that we undertake because if we are cleansed, we are cleansed only in him. As you can see, I fine.

The way the righteousness of