

Numbers Chapter 19

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[0 : 00] I'm going to read the whole chapter. Verse 1. The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, This is a requirement of the law that the Lord has commanded.

Tell the Israelites to bring you a red heifer, without defect or blemish, and that has never been under a yoke. Give it to Eliezer, the priest.

It is to be taken outside the camp and slaughtered in his presence. Then Eliezer, the priest, is to take some of its blood on his finger and sprinkle it seven times towards the front of the tent of meeting.

While he watches, the heifer is to be burned, its hide, flesh, blood, and intestines. The priest is to take some cedarwood, hyssop, and scarlet wool and throw them onto the burning heifer.

After that, the priest must wash his clothes and bathe himself with water. He may then come into the camp, but he will be ceremonially unclean till evening. The man who burns it must also wash his clothes and bathe with water, and he too will be unclean till evening.

[1 : 10] A man who is clean shall gather up the ashes of the heifer, put them in a ceremonially clean place outside the camp, though to be kept by the Israelite community for use in the water of cleansing.

It is for purification from sin. The man who gathers up the ashes of the heifer must also wash his clothes, and he too will be unclean till evening. This will be a lasting ordinance both for the Israelites and for the foreigners residing among them.

Whoever touches a human corpse will be unclean for seven days. They must purify themselves with the water on the third day and on the seventh day, then they will be clean.

But if they do not purify themselves on the third and seventh days, they will not be clean. If they fail to purify themselves after touching a human corpse, they defile the Lord's tabernacle.

They must be cut off from Israel because the water of cleansing has not been sprinkled on them.

They are unclean. Their uncleanness remains on them. This is the law that applies when a person dies in a tent.

[2 : 14] Anyone who enters the tent and anyone who is in it will be unclean for seven days. And every open container without a lid fastened on it will be unclean. Anyone out in the open who touches someone who has been killed with a sword or someone who has died a natural death or anyone who touches a human bone or a grave will be unclean for seven days.

For the unclean person, put some ashes from the burned purification offering into a jar and pour fresh water over them. Then a man who is so manly clean is to take some hyssop, dip it in the water and sprinkle the tent and all the furnishings and the people who were there.

You must also sprinkle anyone who has touched a human bone or a grave or anyone who has been killed or anyone who has died a natural death. The man who is clean is to sprinkle those who are unclean on the third and seventh days.

And on the seventh day he is to purify them. Those who are being cleansed must wash their clothes and bathe with water. That evening they will be clean. But if those who are unclean do not purify themselves, they must be cut off from the community because they have defiled the sanctuary of the Lord.

The water of cleansing has not been sprinkled on them. They are unclean. This is a lasting ordinance for them. The man who sprinkles the water of cleansing must also wash his clothes.

[3 : 38] And anyone who touches the water of cleansing will be unclean till evening. Anything that an unclean person touches becomes unclean. And anyone who touches it becomes unclean till evening.

Well, what is the Lord going to say to us there? It's his word. And that we trust that he is the author of it and the one who proclaims it to him. And we'll come to his word in a moment or two.

Let's turn then back to Numbers 19. And God's word. As he has spoken it there.

I'm sure you'll agree with me when I say that there's many things that we take for granted today in our society. Many things that we enjoy. Many things that we have which, well, we just take for granted.

Which perhaps our forefathers didn't have. And certainly many other parts of the world don't enjoy. I mean, one of them particularly might think of is access to clean water.

[4 : 42] Incredible, isn't it? That we only have to go to the tap. And most of us have more than one tap in our houses. I remember when my parents moved into their first house in Guernsey. And it had one cold tap.

And I'm sure many of you could remember that yourselves. Perhaps even having to go out to the tap in the yard or wherever it may be. Or the pump. But we are so fortunate.

We just have there, on tap as it were, fresh water to drink, to wash, etc. Free from all disease or sickness or bugs and so on. We know, of course, when we see on the TV that many people around the world, parts of Africa and elsewhere, have to drink polluted water if they can even get water. Many have to walk many miles to get water, which itself is often not very good for them. And often when we look at that, I hope that when we see people less blessed, as it were, disadvantaged, we begin to appreciate.

But so often we don't. We take for granted so much of what we have. It's been many years in this country, I think, since we've had a drought, where we've had to realize how precious water is.

[5 : 50] Or had to go into the street for a standpipe. Right? We don't seem to have those times anymore. Now, as Christians, we can also take many things for granted.

Many of the blessings that we enjoy and partake of regularly. Sometimes we don't realize just how precious they are. Sometimes we don't really think how privileged we are.

And realize just how many people do not have the privileges and blessings that we have. I think that's why Psalm, even Psalm 103, verse 2, the psalmist there is, in one sense, speaking to himself, surely.

But he's speaking to us as well. And he's saying, don't forget God's blessings. We can take them for granted. We can forget just how good he's been to us and all the blessings that we have. And particularly when we come to the Old Testament, of course, we begin to see that the believers in the Old Testament, they had many blessings indeed, but they came much more with greater difficulty than the blessings we have.

The things that we take for granted and we enjoy and we think about, they couldn't enjoy and have in the same degree that we have today in Christ.

[7 : 03] They had the shadow. We have the reality. They had the sort of looking forward. We have the actual accomplishment. And so perhaps when I read through chapter 19, and you've read it before, and other parts of scripture like it, you might think, well, this is irrelevant.

It's got very little to do with me. There's nothing here to help me or instruct me as someone who now lives in the light of Christ's coming. But I think that we'd be mistaken.

Indeed, there are several passages in the Old Testament, particularly Leviticus and Numbers and parts of Deuteronomy as well, where they speak about Old Testament instructions from God, commandments from God about how he's to be worshipped or related to, and of the religious rituals that would be carried out and so on and so forth.

And I believe that they're very useful for us. They're part of God's word. God has included them, not just for the benefit of his people in the Old Testament, but for us as well. And particularly, I think, when we come to passages like this, I think, as I say, we are made to appreciate the blessings we have in Christ, blessings that we take for granted so often.

Now, before we attempt to apply some of these things to us, let's just go through this passage. Let's seek to understand it in its original context. That's always important. Before we apply a passage on the Old Testament, or wherever it may be, it's important that we understand what it meant to those who it was given to, what it meant to those for whom it was written.

[8 : 35] Now, if you can cast your mind back to when we were last studying Numbers, you'll know the setting. The people of God have come out of Egypt, where they were for 400 years in slavery, and they were now traveling through the desert on their way to the land that God had promised Abraham, their forefather, a land of Canaan that would be a homeland for them, and for Abraham's

descendants.

Sadly, these Israelites, this present generation of Israelites, as we read through Numbers, refused to enter God's promised land through unbelief.

And so it would be another 40 years of traipsing through the wilderness before their children and their grandchildren would instead enjoy the wonderful blessings that God had for them.

They missed out. They were all going to die in the next 40 years, that generation who were 20 years old and above. And so this book of Numbers records not only the events during those 40 years, but it also God's preparation for the people as they are looking forward to living in the land of Canaan. And so as we've gone through Numbers, we've had times where we've had these mixture of stories and events, people rebelling against Moseph or falling into sin and so on, the manner, God's provision, and we've had these sections of commandments and teachings about sacrifices, priesthood, and so on.

[10:01] And when we come to chapter 19, we're coming to a section which has been talking about in chapters 18 and 19 about God's instructions.

God's instructions which would be carried out, not just in the desert, but even as they got into the promised land, into that place that God had in store for them. And you'll notice there at the end of verse 11, this will be a lasting ordinance both for the Israelites, for the foreigners residing among them.

It was something to continue. It wasn't just for a time. And again, later on, verse 21, this is a lasting ordinance for them. So what is it that God's commanding here?

What does he want his people to do? Well, the whole of the chapter, as I'm sure you see, is concerned about something called the water of cleansing. Not just because the NIV has put that in bold at the beginning of the chapter, but as you go through again and again on four occasions, the Lord refers to the water of cleansing.

In verses 9, 13, 20, and 21. This water of cleansing was a specific solution that was to be sprinkled upon those Israelites who'd become unclean because they'd become contaminated from touching dead bodies, dead human bodies.

[11:21] There, verse 11, whoever touches a human corpse will be unclean for seven days and other places too. Without this water of cleansing being sprinkled upon the person, that person would remain unclean and would therefore be cut off from the community of God's people and therefore from God himself.

Verse 13, if they fail to purify themselves after touching a human corpse, they defile the Lord's tabernacle, they must be cut off from Israel. And again in verse 20, very much the same thing. If those who are unclean do not purify themselves, they'll be cut off from the community. So this is a serious matter as far as God's concerned. Not a trivial matter.

A serious matter. This water of cleansing that he gives instructions concerning. And the process of producing this water of cleansing was quite a long drawn out affair.

Quite intricate, but also extremely unusual. And unusual in a number of ways. If you go back to verse 2, first of all, they were to sacrifice a heifer.

[12:31] Now, most of us are pretty countryfied. In Whitby, we know what a heifer is. A heifer is a female cow that has not yet bred or produced a calf. Okay? So it's a female cow.

Well, all the other sacrifices, every other animal, whether it be a lamb or a goat or whatever it may be or a bull, had to be male. The only place when there's a female animal.

And we notice that it has to be a red heifer. Now, again, there's no stipulation for any other animals of their color. So if you bought a sheep that had black and blue spots or whatever it had on it or a cow, it didn't matter what breed it was or color it was as long as it was without impurity.

Then we read as well that this particular animal was to be sacrificed, notice, not in the temple, not on the altar, and not by a priest. But we're told that it is to be taken, verse 3, outside the camp and slaughtered in the presence of the priest.

Now, that never happened. It was always the priest who did the slaughtering. It always took place in the tabernacle. And here, it's to be taken outside and it seems very clearly that though the priest is present, he's not doing the slaughtering.

[13:43] Somebody else is to do it. A layman, we might say. Then we read as well that it is to be burnt in its entirety. Verse 5, after a little bit of the blood is taken and sprinkled towards the tent, while he watches, verse 5, the heifer is to be burned.

Hide, flesh, blood, testings. Now again, that was not something that took place in the other sacrifices. The blood would be drained and the animal would be burnt.

Part of it, not all of it, would be burnt. Some of it would be used for other things as well. Some of it would be given to the priest as part of his payment and his food, as it were, allowance. But here, the whole thing, every part, is to be completely burnt.

Then one more thing that's unusual about it is in verse 6, the priest has to take cedarwood, hyssop, and scarlet wool and throw them onto the burning heifer. So as this animal is being burnt, these other ingredients, as it were, are to be added.

Again, something quite unusual. Though those three ingredients, cedarwood, hyssop, and scarlet wool, were used when cleansing a leper. They were mixed in water.

[14:54] Not with ashes, not burnt, for the cleansing of a leper. And then, when this solution is there, this mound, as it were, of ash is collected, it's put into a very special, safe place where it's kept clean.

When it was needed, it was put into a jar with some fresh water and sprinkled on the person. Because of that, that person would ultimately be cleansed.

So what's all that about? It's very intricate. As I say, it's quite complicated. It's labor intensive. I'm not sure how, how long a mound of heifer ash lasts.

Because if you had to use it quite a lot, you'd have to be doing this quite a number of times. So what's the point? What's the point God's making in this drawn out process? How do we better appreciate the blessings that we have in Christ because of it?

Well, I think there's three things, three blessings or three certainties that we can better appreciate for ourselves who are in Christ from this passage. The first is this. We need to appreciate the blessing of fellowship with God or how easy we can have fellowship with God.

[16:09] See, to be unclean was to be out of fellowship with God. To be unclean was to be, for that time, to be separated from God, to be out of his presence.

Somebody who was unclean couldn't go to worship God in the tabernacle or the temple. They couldn't bring an offering. In fact, most of the time they had to stay separate away even from their own family. And that separation we see there, how it's symbolized by they're being cut off from the community of Israel.

Verse 13, they must be cut off from Israel. And later on in verse 20 as well, they must be cut off from the community because they've defiled the sanctuary of the Lord.

Because they were not willing to get clean, their uncleanness stayed with them. Being cut off from the community was to be cut off from God because he was in the midst of the people.

That's why we're told there about they defile the Lord's tabernacle. Throughout the Old Testament, to be unclean meant that God was unwilling to fellowship with you.

[17:16] Be unclean meant that in some way you were no longer living in that right daily fellowship relationship with God. Isaiah, as he prophesied in Isaiah in chapter 46, talks about how this uncleanness affects the people.

He says in Isaiah 46 and verse 49, I think it meant to be, and I put 46, isn't it? Well, what a terrible person I am.

There's one part and I've lost it now, which is where the, the, the, that, oh, I haven't found it.

Where, the apostle, where, where the prophet says all our, all our uncleanness, all our uncleanness has hidden your face from us, is it says?

And I've lost where it is exactly. Forgive me for that. All your, our uncleanness has, has, has, has turned your face away from us.

[18:27] You see, the Old Testament believer was not able to enter God's presence easily. He couldn't just come into the tabernacle, he couldn't come into the Holy of Holies and, and just sort of approach God. In fact, the Holy of Holies where the Ark was kept, that symbol of, of the Lord God himself and his presence could only be entered once a year by the high priest, the only person.

Though there was a fellowship with God, though he was part of God's people, though the person who, who was, who was an Israelite knew that God was their God, there wasn't that ease of fellowship that we have to come into the very presence of God, to the Holy of Holies.

So, in one sense, when a person was unclean, they needed to be clean that they might have again that assurance that God was with them and on their side. Now, dear friends, we take for granted that we can draw near to God whenever we like.

We don't just draw near to God in this building. I know that sometimes chapels and churches are called tabernacles, or even temples, but they aren't the same as the Old Testament tabernacle temple.

We have a freedom to enter into the presence of God and fellowship with him, which is by a very, very special and unique route.

[19 : 49] Hebrews 10 and verse 19, therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place, or the Holy of Holies, by the blood of Jesus, by a new living way, open for us through the curtain that is his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart, with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, having our bodies washed with pure water.

We can come into the presence of God with confidence. We can fellowship with God, and dear friends, it's something that we need to take, not for granted, but realize there's an incredible thing that God's people couldn't do in the Old Testament, and even for them to be cleansed and be right with God was something that could only happen through a great deal of rigmarole.

I wonder if we count this blessing of being in God's presence as being something important and special, or do we count it insignificant, is it for that reason perhaps we've become so familiar with it that we no longer seek to be in the presence of God, or consider ourselves in the presence of God? Why is that, I wonder? Well, again, I think one of the things that we learn from Numbers 14 is not only how amazing it is that we can enter the very presence of God, but also we take for granted, I believe, one of the greatest blessings, things which is the forgiveness we have from God, forgiveness from God.

The people needed this water of cleansing to take away their sin and its uncleanness. That's why the Lord says to Moses, they are to be kept by the Israelite community for use in the water of cleansing, it is for purification from sin.

[21 : 49] To be unclean was to be contaminated with sin. Now, you might say, well, that's a bit tough because we're talking about people touching dead bodies, either by accident or because they died in their tent and needed to take them out and bury them, or for some other reason.

These aren't the sins that God speaks against in the commandments of you shall not kill and you shall not lie and you shall not steal and so on. This isn't rebellious sin or wicked sin that we might think needs forgiveness.

This is just, as it were, sin by association with things that are dead. Dear friends, the reality is that sin is sin.

As far as God is concerned, sin is sin. We categorize sin and there is, to a certain degree, there's something right about that but there's also something wrong about it because we see big sins and little sins and usually, of course, other people have big sins and we have smaller sins.

But sin cannot be cleansed, sin cannot be forgiven unless there is sacrifice. So back in Hebrews chapter 9, 22, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood.

[23 : 08] Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. This process of cleansing from sin here in Numbers 19 was just one of many different ways. The sacrifices and offerings have to be brought and rituals carried out to secure forgiveness for sin.

But today, dear friends, you and I have full, complete, eternal, total forgiveness for all our sins. And we don't have to go through some elaborate process of washing and sprinkling.

Yes, we should be baptized once in our lifetimes as that symbol of God's promise, as that action of faith in the promises of God to wash and cleanse us.

But not every time we sin do we have to go through all this rigmarole. Well, dear friends, today you'll forgive him. And that forgiveness was won for us at great sacrifice.

That forgiveness was accomplished at a great price. Ephesians tells us, Paul, in him, in Christ, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace.

[24 : 18] It was the blood of Christ that was shed for you and for me to make it possible for God to forgive us. And that water of cleansing which is applied to the believers in the Old Testament was to assure them that they were forgiven by God, to assure them that their conscience was cleansed before God.

And so it is with Jesus' blood. He not only cleanses us from the power of sin, as it were, the guilt of sin, the condemnation of sin, but also death, but also